

Paula Carter

Almost Mother

When James calls me, to tell me he has again married, I am already a new woman. I'm living in a new city, with a new job, and new friends, most of whom don't know him or understand that I was almost a mother. I wear zippy clothes—money in my pocket—and frequent all the coffee shops in my neighborhood—time on my hands. But a few days later, when it is his youngest son's tenth birthday, I wonder again how it is I am this new woman.

Where is the other one? She is still here. Sometimes I see her, peeking out, watching me laugh with my new friends. She hovers over my bent head and brushes back the hair from my temple—unsure of whom else to care for.

Like a ghost that can't cross over, she stands beside me in line at the grocery store when I buy Lean Cuisine and blueberries and yogurt. She stands beside me while this girl at the gym explains how her son is wetting the bed. We hold our tongue thinking of the time James and I bought that used washer and dryer because of his oldest son and how we then had to move it from house to house.

This is before. It is the summer after my first year of graduate school. I am a student assistant at the Lilly Library, where in the stacks—accessible to staff only—live the letters of Sylvia Plath and the first English edition of *Pinocchio*. My job is to sit in the reading room and keep watch, make sure none of the scholars that travel here from Philadelphia and U.C. Davis bend down the corner of a gilded page or pocket a miniature book the size of my thumbnail. Mostly I stare out the windows past the long green curtains like something from *The Sound of Music*. Outside, the hopeful spring leaves of southern Indiana are playing in a warm wind and the smell of sycamore moves through campus. I keep notes with a pencil—pens are not allowed in the reading room—of words that strike me as sounding good in succession. Pink king yellow hat. Tiny icky yucky black.

I am twenty-six. In the slanting sunlight I see dust hovering in the air. Perhaps it is from the manuscripts that once sat on the desk of Gordon Lish. I am breathing gold. The world is perched atop my index finger, when into the room walks a man whose sleeves are rolled up and hair is pulled into a ponytail. He is wearing black leather shoes and is skinny like a bean pole. A smile passes between us. We will discuss that smile for years to come. It will become a part of our mythology. I ask him what he is studying and learn he is a young photography professor. His name is James.

A friend will say to me, "Sometimes it is like your heart recognizes someone you are going to spend a lot of time with before you've spent any of that time."

It is weeks before I find out he has children.

When James told me he had kids, over the phone, after our first date, I cried. He wanted me to meet them right away. But I said no, I wasn't ready. I wanted to hold onto my fantasy a little longer—the fantasy of young love. They say resistance to what is is the root of all unhappiness. Well, I guess here is where the seed begins to germinate.

We are going to see the bats. We are three, James, his youngest son, and me. The bats will appear at dusk, swooping low among the trees at Bryan Park. They are easy to miss because at first they look like swallows. But, if you look closely, you'll see that they move differently—less of a glide and more of a dance. I say this to Alex as we walk, thinking he will find it interesting. Alex is looking down into the grass, scouting, and he tells me that his class went on a field trip to a cave filled with thousands and thousands of bats and so he already knows. Alex is wearing a sleeveless tank top that shows his plump, four-year-old arms and I am tempted to squeeze them, but it is safer to take James's hand in my own. James leans over and kisses my head. Ahead of us, Alex spies something and calls out, "Dad!" staccato, breathless. James goes to him and squats down and the two of them look at a family of mushrooms growing under a fledgling tree.

When we get to the bench in the middle of the park, James lies down to look at the sky but Alex is restless. He asks me if I'll play tag. I make a sudden move and he takes off running. His motor skills are still developing and his legs kick out on either side as he runs. I feel silly careening after him, unsure of what I'll do once I catch him. The sky is getting darker, turning purple, and I hear James call to us, "I see one, guys. I see a bat," but we are a ways away now. The lights from the tennis courts pop on, throwing shadows all over the park.

I am close to Alex, only a few feet away, when he turns and says, “I bet you can’t kiss me.” I am startled but say, “Bet I can.” We are moving farther away from James and I wonder if he is worried. I gain on Alex easily and when I am close enough I lift him up into my arms and I can hear him giggling a low, heavy giggle, which vibrates through me like a hymn. I flip him over so he is lying in my arms. He is still giggling when I lean down and carefully kiss his forehead. It is a humid night and his skin is coated in a soft layer of moisture. He smells like the grass. When I raise my head and look at him, he is quiet. He is looking at me hard. He is looking for something. I think to smile, to say something like you would to a small child, but I just stare back. Finally his eyes dart from mine and he points to the sky and says, “Is that one?” And in the next instant James calls to us, “Guys, come here, you’re missing it.”

This is what the boys were like . . .

We were making cookies and Alex kept eating the cookie dough. His father, trying to be smart, told him it was fine. In fact, he could eat as much of it as he wanted. I nodded, knowing exactly where James was going with this. We sat across from Alex at the secondhand kitchen table and followed every mouthful. Waiting. Alex kept eating. Another bite. A pound at least. He never did get sick. It was a bust. Somehow that kid would always beat the rules.

Caleb, on the other hand, stood on the edge of a brand new playground that had just been completed, right outside the caution tape, while his father and Alex played on the new equipment. James called to him, told him to come on, it was fine. They wouldn’t get in trouble. But still, Caleb stood there, watching them swing and slide. He couldn’t cross that boundary.

That’s just the way they were.

One day, when we were still getting to know each other, we all four rode our bikes to the farmers market and then over to the football stadium and then back to James’s.

When I got back to my own home, I had to take a nap. It was so exhausting. There were so many questions, so many needs and problems that the boys couldn’t solve themselves. The littlest thing—a drink of water—was the biggest thing. I just wanted to sit down somewhere with a book.

The truth is, I was a little afraid of them. They could be so loud and unpredictable or manipulative. Also, I was terrified of what it would mean to have them (and their mother) in my life long-term. It was a lot.

I told my therapist about this and she said, “Well, maybe don’t move in together anytime soon.” What is soon? How do you better prepare to live with two children who are not your own?

Each time we go to his ex-wife’s house, I recognize something else from his life with her. The rugs are the same ancient indigo rugs he has in your house. On the wall is a small painting he has done. A larger one, reminiscent of his style, he assures me was done by a colleague—someone who once was a friend of both of theirs. When I meet these friends, they smile at me. They are glad to see him with someone and they tell him that, sometimes in private, sometimes while I am standing there. But I can see that I confuse them. I am the new woman. I am not the boys’ mother. I am young. One woman announces that she asked the boys if they liked me—my motives suspect, she goes to the source. She is happy to report they said yes.

The dishes are the same, probably from their wedding, split after the divorce. The albums—Richard Buckner, John Prine. It is eerie. It seems to me—because I did not see them divide—that these duplicate items have just shown up in both of their houses, as if they should be on one of those shows about long-lost twins who when discovered turn out to both be dentists and wear plaid. As if they are each, still, one half of the other.

One day I open up a photo album sitting on her coffee table and am shocked to see a photo of them and her in the delivery room moments after the birth of their second son. They both look so happy.

At night, in bed, I ask God to make me a bigger person.

I didn’t want it to be true. I wanted him to have sprung forth from the earth, like a Greek god, fully formed with no past to speak of. And at first, I tried to make that so. Once, I bullied him into telling me he had never loved his ex-wife. Afterward, I felt sick and satisfied.

I told myself he had made a mistake. He had gotten impatient, waiting for me, and had gone and married the wrong person. It was a character flaw, but we would overcome that.

I have this book on narcissists. The first defining characteristic is an exaggerated sense of self-importance. Another is a belief that one is special and unique and can only be understood by other special people. A third is a tendency to be envious. I bought this book because I believed James to be a narcissist. It is called *Help! I’m in Love with a Narcissist*.

Caleb and I are sitting on the couch watching tv when, without looking, without thinking, he reaches out and takes hold of my hand. An eight-

year-old child and a twenty-eight-year-old woman. I don't look at our hands, or at him, afraid of breaking the spell.

It is as it once was with his father. The same quickening of my heart, my hand becoming sweaty, except this time it is my hand that covers his small, slim fingers. Has he held hands with other girls? At school, at recess? Or is it just me?

We move to Kentucky because James is offered a lectureship at the university there. I will be adjuncting at the same university. The boys stay behind with their mother, three hours away.

We pull up in a moving van and our neighbors greet us as we unload the truck. We have chosen a small bungalow on a quaint street—the only rental. Right away they say how glad they are that we are moving in, glad to have a nice, young couple in the house and both of us working down at the university. It is like they have won the lottery.

We get an earful about the last renters. Something shady was going on, too many UPS deliveries. And it must be true because one evening there is a knock on the door and it's a police officer asking for some woman. When he is convinced I am not her and that we don't know her, he speaks into a walkie-talkie and his partner comes around from his post in the back. They expected me to make a break for it.

The gay couple has a crush on James. Vegetables just show up on our doorstep. Around the corner is a small market that sells "hot lunch" composed of meatloaf and two sides. We feel we have won the lottery, too, eating homemade mac and cheese from Styrofoam containers.

Except, it is the first time James has ever lived away from his sons. Despite the hot lunch, he can't be happy. He lays silent on the couch for hours, impervious to my pleas, which only makes them louder.

But first I make sure the windows are shut. We want those vegetables to keep coming.

It's lonely. That's something you don't expect. It doesn't seem that if you have a fiancé and two almost step-children that it will be lonely. But it is. Not silent lonely, loud lonely. When the boys were around there was plenty of noise and yelling and talk and energy. But, I was always just a little outside of it. When we played games, the three of them took turns reinforcing their allegiance to each other. I'd get overly competitive, trying to prove my place.

When the boys weren't around, it was silent lonely, James second-guessing all his decisions.

I told James that it was important that in the larger scheme of things our relationship be the primary one, and he agreed that made sense. But that's not how it had been built. For all of them, I would always be secondary, coming into their lives long after their own bond had been solidified. It was like trying to run in a dream. You keep thinking you're going to create some momentum and get somewhere, but there you stand.

Perusing self-help books, I find this in *How to Be a Good Stepmom*, which boasts "over forty hints, tips, and pieces of advice!"

Do: Remember at all times that you are an adult.

Don't: Revert to childish ploys to get attention from your husband and away from the children.

There is probably no single faster way to alienate your husband and the children than to make him choose sides. This is unhealthy for all concerned. Entering into any marriage is for adults only! There is no room in the step-parenting role for game playing, except in your living room with your family—board and dice!¹

The ice is thinning on the small pond in Blue Limestone Park. Alex and I are helping Mother Nature spur on spring. With large rocks we smash through the ice and watch the water bubble up through the hole. Water so cold it could suffocate you.

We have finally made it out of the house. Both misfits. Both home in the middle of the day on a Wednesday. Alex has been asked to take a break from school. He is not expelled or suspended; the teachers just need a break.

He has been labeled "difficult." The evidence: He punched the principle in the stomach (which is where he could reach). He told a kid on the bus that he had a knife, even though he didn't. When the bus driver came back to investigate, Alex stuck to his story, so the police were called along with all the other parents who then had to come pick up their children.

Me? I am without work. We have moved again—to Ohio. This time James has landed the whale: a tenure-track job. We celebrated as if it were our joint career, but I now have little to do. After a lot of trial and error, I have finally come to understand why people like soap operas.

There is a small hole open in the middle of the pond. And while Alex and I watch, two geese fly in and land in perhaps the only open water for miles. We are both silent. The geese preen, swimming small circles around each other. Alex is breathing slowly—I know because I can see the white plume as he exhales.

“I’m thinking of an animal,” he says. “It starts with the letter T.”

“Tiger?” He shakes his head. “Tarantula?” Nope. The geese are bobbing their heads under the water now, looking for food. I know the answer. Alex is thinking of the tapir—an animal he likes to choose to stump us. I guess a few more before bringing up the tapir. At first he says no, that isn’t it. But then slowly he admits I have guessed it. I reach out to tickle him and he in turn jumps on me and we wrestle to the ground. After a while we lay side by side, looking up at the sky, panting. We watch the geese fly on.

Years later, when I am at a zoo and see a tapir—long snout, big droopy eyes, ugly as sin—I am shocked. Honestly, I didn’t think it really existed.

We had our faults. Once, James didn’t talk to me for eight hours on a long car trip. We sat side by side. The reason was unclear. He didn’t say one word. Once, I admonished him over dinner for all the ways I felt he was failing and left him there with his head in his hands, plate untouched, while I went to take a bath. More than once, James outright ignored me. Once, when James was ignoring me, I threw a plastic bowl to get his attention.

We were both Midwesterners; a grave look or a well-placed silence might as well have been a knife held to the throat.

James teaches me the name of the Pink Lady’s Slipper—a delicate flower growing in the ditch. Just a tiny puff of pink. Look fast, or you’ll miss it. The flower is an anomaly among the ditch weeds; its whole life is a surprise.

The week the Lady’s Slipper blooms is not a good week. I feel like I am being broken open from the inside, like the threads of fungus that push their way inside the flower’s seeds until they burst are growing in me. Every time I leave the house to run some errand I see the pink standing stalwart and I think of James saying, offhanded, “That’s rare,” which leads to me thinking about other things he’s said that are harder to stomach.

At one point I am driving off to the grocery store and I see the Lady’s Slipper and it makes me feel desperate, like I will die if I don’t hear him tell me one more time about the flower. So I call him at his studio and simply say, “I just passed the Lady’s Slipper,” and he does not realize it is an offering, a plea, a last attempt. He doesn’t say any of the things I want him to say. He says, “Oh, Paula.”

This is the week I tell a friend that I am afraid I might be one of those brides who just doesn’t show up on the day of her wedding and the friend says, “You know, you don’t *have* to get married.” Somehow, that is the

permission I need. We decide to postpone the wedding. It seems everyone besides us knows what that really means.

After that week, the Pink Lady's Slipper is gone, back into the earth.

Four cupcakes. Vanilla and chocolate with frosting like the sea and little pink orchids laid carefully afloat on the top. They look like miniature wedding cakes. Alex—nearly nine—says he wants the chocolate one. His brother—nearly eleven—shoots him a look and his mother instructs him to let me choose first. He obliges without complaint. I choose the vanilla.

When I take the first bite, my tongue wants to expel the sugary cake so thick with butter it is like pure fat. But I don't. Instead, I take another bite. It is important that this be a significant moment, and eating the cupcake that Caleb and Alex have chosen for me on the occasion of my departure is part of that.

I think of them all standing together at the bakery counter, on their way home from school, picking out the cupcakes. I know the boys insisted on the delicate ones, the girly ones, because I am a girl. Once, James let the boys choose what to get me for my birthday: a purse or a bike. Under ten years old and they went with the purse.

James's ex-wife is making a gesture. She is doing her job as the mother. Who would have thought this too would fall to her? She is bearing it with grace.

My car is waiting right outside. It is late afternoon, just like the many times I have made this long drive to pick up the boys for the weekend. Perhaps we will all three get in the car and head home. Most likely we will all get carsick from the sweet cake and have to stop on the side of the road like the time I let them get ice cream from Bruster's.

When I leave, alone, I realize that this is probably the last time I will see them for a long time. I am heading off in the other direction to a place miles away.

I do not think it is the last time I will ever see them.

There is no term for what I am or any instructions on how I am supposed to act toward Caleb and Alex. We have landed on the moon of relationships. My category is somewhere over there with gelding and born-again Jew. There is no way to make sense of it.

After I left, I called sometimes and sent gifts on holidays and birthdays. From miles away Alex said my name with a question: "Paula?" He said he was thinking of an animal that started with an S, and then he said Caleb wanted to talk.

Caleb was playing on his PSP and narrated the game to me before saying he should probably go. He asked if I wanted to talk to his dad. I said no, I had called to talk to him.

I hung up the phone and listened to the silence in my apartment in Chicago—a silence I had often craved when the boys were in the house.

Time as a child moves slowly. A year passes and it is like traveling to a distant star. The last time I talked to Caleb he said, “I haven’t talked to you in *forever*.” It had been a few months. To me it didn’t seem so long. I wondered if I should call more often. But, I knew that I wouldn’t.

After a while a friend suggested that maybe it would be better for everyone if I just stopped. And so I did.

“Were you relieved when you left or did you miss them?” The woman who asks me this is a mother of two children. She seems enamored with the prospect of just walking away. I say that I missed them. “But weren’t you also relieved?” she asks. The truth is, I was. All that worry and negotiation, gone. Poof. No longer my concern. Like letting my fingers slip from the edge.

The woman has graying hair. Her two children are in their twenties. We have met briefly at a writing residency where she has the room next to mine. Through the walls, I can hear her talking on the phone to her husband. Later, she tells me he sang to her “You Are My Sunshine.” They have a bond like that established between survivors of a kidnapping. At one point she describes her daughter as “a terror,” although the daughter is doing better now.

Then the woman looks at me and says, “There are benefits to not having children. Real benefits.”

“You always do that, you always try to force it.” My friend is trying to make sure I don’t make another mistake with my love life. She’s right. There was a lot of trying to make it work.

When I sign up for an online dating site, I give her the password and tell her to do it for me and let me know when she finds Mr. Right. She does, she contacts him, and then he doesn’t respond.

Convinced something must be wrong—this is the guy—she emails the company to see if there is a glitch. They send back a form letter saying, “We know it is hard not to hear back from someone, but remember he might be busy or out of town. Give him time. Meanwhile, we will send him a message saying you are VERY interested in him.” This is what it has come to.

My friend is not sure why this is so hard. Why didn't Steve from Park Ridge write back? She is married, she has two kids, and as we talk on the phone she leans away to explain to the little one that these are his choices, it is this or nothing.

One in five American women will not give birth, compared to one in ten during the 1970s. This is according to Pew. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. I count out my friends. Mid-thirties. None of us with children. Give us another ten years and I bet we can get it down to one in four. We don't talk about it much, even those of us who do want families. What is there to say? It is like holding your hand up to your face during a scary movie and then parting your fingers. Sometimes a friend will say, "We all know our eggs are going bad," as a joke. Sometimes she'll read me something from the *New York Times* about infertility. I tell her I don't want to know. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. At the moment, I can't even find where the bridge is on the map.

Pew goes on to explain that the most educated women—those with master's and doctorate degrees—are the most likely to never have children. Not a huge surprise. These women are busy doing other things. But when I think about it more, it makes me laugh. Read another way, Pew seems to be saying that having no children is the smart choice. One out of five female doctors recommends it.

Aadit knows just the place. A small restaurant with Christmas lights still hung—even though it is January—tucked away among the tall buildings in downtown Chicago. Korean BBQ. The two words I find hard to fit together. But I don't say this to Aadit, whose family is from India, who grew up in New York and wears brown leather shoes that come to a point at the toe. Who opens every door for me. Whose name I have just learned I have been mispronouncing for the last month.

Our fire pit is right in the middle of the table. We order Kobe beef and duck. Shitake mushrooms. But for dessert, I insist on the s'mores—there is a picture on the menu. A few squares of Hershey's chocolate, store brand graham crackers, and two large marshmallows on a plate. The simple beauty of it makes me happy.

But what I'm really thinking about is the time James and I took the boys camping in Kentucky in October and each camper had lugged along elaborate Halloween decorations to spruce up their site. How the boys went off to explore and how moments later James panicked, imagining them kidnapped or falling down a well. He went in search of them, while I

got out hot dogs and the makings of s'mores. Then I sat waiting for the boys to be found and him to return, which was usually the way things were then.

They hadn't gone far and soon they all returned together. Alex ate the marshmallows right out of the bag, while James tried to show Caleb how to rotate his over the fire and I tried not to move, taking in the stillness in the woods around us, not wanting to disrupt the stillness that had finally descended on his heart.

That is what I'm thinking of, roasting marshmallows with a handsome man who carefully helps me remove the hot sugar from the spit and whose apartment, high above the city, I will go to later. There will be a kind of stillness there, too.

In town for other reasons, I drive past the old house. There are trucks in the drive and a spattering of toys on the lawn. A teenage girl swings on a new swing set. I pull my car over to the side of the road and try to imagine each of the rooms within. Have they left the paint the same? The yellow kitchen, the living room a rusty brown? From what I can see, they don't seem to care much for decorating.

I glance down the street to get my bearings, and when I look back I have a memory of James standing in the doorway, his hair falling over one eye, the boys flying out from behind him, coming to greet me or to run around the lawn or both, saying my name with urgency as if they have something they must tell me—which is simply that I am here and they are here. I can see them so clearly. Their silhouettes dance around the lawn, past the girl on the swing.

Perhaps they are tucked away inside and all I must do is ask to see them. Perhaps they will come out and we will play kickball as dusk settles in and James will have to remind me not to try so hard to win—they are only little kids after all.

But of course, that is silly. They are not little kids. Bodies different, faces changed, the children I see dancing on the lawn no longer exist. But for me—perhaps like me—they are stuck here. Singing, sprinting, calling my name, their echo forever marking the day's descent into night: the golden hour.

1. *How to Be a Good Stepmom* by S. T. Casey Celia with "Over 40 hints, tips and pieces of advice!"