A Story About Your Mother

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We all knew who your brother Troy’s father was, that lame man who taught chair caning at the Y. My sister Nell, your mom, said he was a good teacher. He took her to a Jeannie C. Riley concert at the old KRNT theatre, and Troy, Nell said, was just her way of saying thank-you. But we never knew who your dad was, sweetie. Remember when she told a storeclerk that she’d won you pitching pennies at milkbottles at the fair? Hell, maybe she did. Maybe she did.

You know, they tore that old theatre down. In the cornerstone there was a newspaper, and fifty-one cents, and a history of the Shriners with pictures. I wouldn’t give fifty-one cents to save a sinking ship of Shriners. But no matter, honey.

The summer your brother was born we had this picnic. It was the summer of love; that’s what they called it on the radio. Nell was just getting her figure back and she was too damn simple to be decent, kept showing off her stretch marks like they were the stripes of Jesus, and saying that she wasn’t all that sure that she wanted her figure back; her figure’d gotten her into trouble in the first place.

“Look here,” she said, tracing the purple tracks on her belly, “You take the interstate to the Quad Cities, see . . .”

Your Uncle Gus was sitting in the grass with his spooky Mexican wife, Sordita. You wouldn’t remember her, sweetie. “Christ Nell, it’s like showing us your fingernail clippings or something. Isn’t it, Mag?” he says to me.

“You wanna see my fingernail clippings?” Nell asked. “I bury ’em under a tree. I’m tryin’ to grow me a man who keeps his mouth shut.” Your mom was laughing. She was always laughing. She turned a running one hand cartwheel and you clapped.

It was an old-fashioned kind of picnic, covered dishes and silverware with yarn on the handles to keep it all straight.

And Nell was a picture in an aqua blue sweater, with cloth covered buttons as flat and wide as plates, armholes cut big and falling away. And the skin like maybe she had some kind of worm, so pale. Her hair was just the color of oleomargarine. So is yours, hon. So is yours.

And it was the summer of love.

—Jennie VerSteeg