

Periwinkles



THE SUMMER STRETCHED OUT LONG before us. I think we believed it would go on forever, like the endless line of sea and sand. Our noses pink and strong legs brown, we ran like colts in the surf.

“Elaine! Sammie!” my older sister called. “Periwinkles!” The three of us ran with buckets to scoop up the dainty creatures. We dished and funneled the tiny shellfish from bucket to bucket.

“Violet!”

“Salmon!”

“Blue!” we shouted, as we mined our priceless gems and separated them by color into Styrofoam cups.

As the Atlantic sky greyed in the evening light, the sea became our looking glass; we modeled the ocean’s treasures like mermaids. But our jewelry was temporary, and, with childhood ceremony, we released our periwinkles into the tidal pool. Then Sarah Jane, Sammie and I lounged on our tummies in the long shadows and late waters until Mamma called us in for fried potatoes and snap beans, with canned pears atop mountains of cottage cheese.



"I got the pears at the grocery, Mamma," I called as I plopped the plastic bags onto the kitchen table. I tossed my keys onto the counter and stepped out to the porch.

"Dole?"

"Yes, Mamma."

I leaned over and kissed her cheek. We sat in the stillness of evening and let the waves talk for us. Mamma only weighs ninety-four pounds, but she is still stronger than I am. I said so to Sarah Jane once, and she laughed.

"For Pete's sake, Elaine, Mamma's old."

But Sarah Jane and Mamma don't speak. Sarah Jane married a doctor, moved to a big white house in Atlanta and has two boys at prep school. Sarah Jane forgets what it smells like here.

I miss Sammie; she could always make us laugh.



"Elaine, watch," Sammie said, suppressing a giggle. "Who am I?" She staggered across the porch, leaned against the screen door and took a long swig of her sweet tea, after which she drawled, "My, my, but you do look lovely this evening. I do believe the sunset matches your eyes."

For some reason, the idea of Mamma's eyes matching a sunset sent us all into adolescent hysterics.

"Girls! Pipe down; I can't hear the game!" Mamma's boyfriend, and the subject of Sammie's antics, called from the TV room.

"We're sorry, sir."

Sammie and Sarah Jane just buried their faces in the chaise lounge and laughed harder. I shot them worried looks and waited

to see if Mamma would visit us on the porch. Sure enough, we heard her rise from the divan.

“Let me freshen your drink, darlin.’” Mamma’s voice purred with gin, and on her way to the icebox she hissed through the screen, “Don’t mess with this one. He’s gonna be our ticket out of here. He does business in Miami!”

Sammie rolled her eyes, fluttered her hands like a debutante and whispered, “I didn’t know Prince Charming sold tires.” To which we responded with such a fit of laughter that we ran off the porch and flopped onto the freedom of the dunes.



“Well, are we gonna eat or not?”

“Of course, Mamma. Would you like to eat now?”

“Yes. That woman you have comin’ in can’t cook worth a hill of beans. She’s a Yankee. Can’t fry a potato, keeps fussin’ about cholesterol. I say we all got to die—and fried is the way I want to go.”

That made me laugh, which pleased Mamma. We went into the house, and I pulled out the pan. “I’ve got all of tomorrow left before I go home, Mamma. What would you like to do? Wanna go into town?”

I filled the big skillet halfway up with oil like Mamma likes and went to the crisper for the potatoes.

“I will not go into town and have those ladies talk behind my back and feel sorry for me.”

I cut the milky potatoes into wedges and waited for the oil to heat up. “How about June or Elsie, Mamma? Would you like to visit them?”

“I would not. Do you have enough oil in the pan?”

“Yes, Mamma.”

"Don't cut the potatoes too big."

"No, Mamma."



When I went off to college, I remember feeling like Sammie was the lucky one.

"Sooooo, tell me about your family." Sharon spoke sweetly and curled her blonde hair around her finger. "I mean, we're roomies and all now, practically sisters."

"Well—"

Sharon interrupted. "My daddy was the mayor of Savannah." She paused for effect. "Twice."

"It was just me and my sisters. No mayors, just a tire salesman from Miami that stayed on for a while."

"Oh," Sharon said. "That's nice."

We sat on the edge of our dorm beds and hesitated. Eventually, Sharon recovered.

"So you live with your mother?"

"Uh-huh."

Sharon's Georgian diplomacy served her well. "You have gorgeous skin; I bet your mother is lovely."

"Mamma is beautiful and strong. The only one of us who could ever stand up to her was Sammie."

"Well, beautiful is good. Where is your sister?"

"Which one?"

"Sammie," Sharon said and smiled, certain she had come upon a safe topic.

"Dead," I said. "She killed herself when I was twelve."

The mayor from Savannah got Sharon a new roommate.



“Mamma, where are the little pink dishes?”

I smoothed the summer cloth on the kitchen table.

“I stacked them above the ice-box,” she said with an injured sniff. “I don’t entertain anymore. No one cares to come see me.”

“I do, Mamma,” I corrected her and pulled out the glass dishes to please her. I laid a bed of iceberg on the bottom, then a scoop of cottage cheese with a Dole pear half on top as the crowning glory. Mamma had long believed that individual salad dishes were a mark of high society.

I took the tuna salad out of the fridge, placed the fried potatoes on the table and poured Mamma her Diet Coke. Mamma drinks Diet Coke, now. No more gin, the doctor had said, absolutely no more gin. So Mamma drinks Diet Coke—with a little rum.

“Well,” Mamma began, “have you found a man yet?”

“Oh, Mamma, don’t start.”

Mamma sniffed again and took a sip of her Diet Coke. “I don’t see how you can live in New York City and not be able to find a man.”

“I’m not looking, Mamma.”

“Good grief! Of course you are,” she said. “You’re over forty.”

I waited, hoping the conversation was over. Sammie would have walked out onto the porch and lit a cigarette. Sarah Jane had just stopped coming. I sat there.

“Maybe if you lost a little weight or did your nails or something. Men like that, you know.”

“Yes, Mamma, I know.”

I lacked the courage to tell her that was precisely why I didn’t starve myself or get my nails done weekly. I looked over as she examined her last remaining beauty—red lacquered nails. They were too bright against her blue-veined hand, but they were Mamma. She really had been beautiful. She certainly received the attention of many men. My father was just not one of them.



“Okay, girls, we’re going into town!”

Mamma gathered the three of us together and waved a ten dollar bill. “Everyone gets ice cream and a new bottle of nail polish!”

We all squealed in delight and tumbled into the back of the blue Ford like puppies. Mamma had us singing and laughing all the way to the drugstore. Mr. Johnson chuckled as we chose our nail color and licked our cones. We were bouncing home and singing another chorus of “Oh, Susanna” when Mamma blurted out between verses, “Your father is gone.”

I decided then that I would never wear nail polish.



I left Mamma dozing in front of the news and went for a walk on the beach. The July breeze was almost too warm, but the sun was sinking; it was my favorite time of day. I wet my toes in the edge of the sea and looked for periwinkles. There were none. I walked all the way to the jetty and sat on the rocks and watched the sunset turn my skin the shellfish colors of my childhood. The smell of the sea and the summer heat were too much; I closed my eyes and breathed. I allowed the memory.



Mamma and the tire salesman were drinking martinis in the living room. Sarah Jane had gone back to college. Sammie had argued with Mamma and gone out, puffing on a Marlboro. I was sleeping on the porch because my room was hot.

A truck pulled up, and Sammie hopped out laughing. The pick-up honked and drove away. I pretended to be asleep and hoped that Mamma and her salesman had gone to bed, but I could hear Johnny Carson through the screen door. Sammie was not even trying to be quiet. Her high heels tapped across the porch, and she sang a disco song and swiveled her hips because she could. She was beautiful like Mamma, and so alive.

Mamma lay passed out on the divan, and I thought for a minute that we would all escape, but the tire salesman got up and came out on the porch.

“Who do you think you are, you little tramp? How dare you storm out of here and have the nerve to come back at this hour?” His attempt at whispering was thwarted by the weekend martinis. I shut my eyes tighter, but I couldn’t make him go away.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Sammie said and stood taller. The salesman and I both knew she wasn’t.

I watched from my Girl Scout sleeping bag as the salesman snorted and reached for the doorway to steady himself. I prayed he would pass out. Instead, he grabbed Sammie. I was afraid he would beat her, and I couldn’t move, but the salesman didn’t beat her.

“I’ll teach you,” he said, and he shoved her onto the chaise lounge and pulled up her summer skirt as he fell on top of her. She started to scream, but he hit her hard across the face with the back of his hand. His foot was at an odd angle, giving him leverage as he fumbled with his trousers and ripped off Sammie’s panties. Mamma must have heard the commotion because she came out to the porch just as her salesman entered Sammie. Mamma just stood there, stuck to the porch floor like the salesman’s thick foot. Finally, he stood and buckled his pants. Mamma and the salesman went to bed.

After I saw Mamma’s light go out, I crept out of my sleeping bag and went over to Sammie. She was trying so hard not to cry. I reached out to stroke her head, but she flinched at my touch.

"It's just me, Sammie . . . Elaine." She didn't move, but she let me smooth her hair. I tried to fix her skirt and button her blouse, but she was bigger than me by two years and unable to help. I sat with her for a long time on that chaise lounge, but she wouldn't talk or even look at me. My eyes got heavier and heavier.

I didn't mean to leave you alone, Sammie.

I woke up in the morning on the chaise lounge, and Sammie was gone. Her panties were on the floor in a lacy heap, and there was blood on the cushion. Mamma was frying potatoes for the salesman. They burned. Mamma forgot the oil.

They found Sammie three days later down by the jetty; her body was so bloated from the sea that we had to keep the casket closed. Sarah Jane came home from college for the funeral and spoke to Mamma for the last time.

"How did Sammie die?" Sarah Jane asked.

"She drowned," was all that Mamma would say. I had to tell Sarah Jane the rest when Mamma wasn't listening.

The salesman went back to Miami. He had been with us for two years.

I looked out at the sea and remembered three little sisters running in the summer sun. I remembered Sarah Jane and periwinkles and Sammie before the salesman. I remembered Mamma before gin; how she could laugh like music and how we all wanted to be like her. I inhaled the irony with the salt air.

Leaving the jetty for the sand, I discovered the tide had brought periwinkles. I followed their translucent colors back to the house and stood on the porch until the sunset faded. Tomorrow night I would be back in Manhattan where the smell of the sea couldn't reach me. I would call Sarah Jane from my apartment, and we would cry.

"Come on, Mamma." I turned off Jay Leno. "Let's go to bed."