

A Perfect Mother's Day

A Mother's Day Story by Nicholas Gordon



Until they get older, Mother's Day is for the children, Giulia thought grimly as she endured breakfast in bed.

When Kevin hit three he decided that breakfast in bed was the quintessential expression of Mother's Day, and so he and Todd (and now Amy) made pancakes and sausage while Giulia "slept in," to be awakened joyously by the three of them parading in a breakfast tray loaded with hot, sticky food and liquid, all to be balanced on the rumpled bed while she did her best to consume it without ruining the mattress.

Of course they used the good china, so another worry was their doing the dishes while she got dressed. With all the shouts and giggling coming from the kitchen, Giulia expected to hear the crash of an irreplaceable creamer or sugar bowl, but so far the cleanups had gone without incident.

Since Amy was only three, there were many more years of this ahead, but thank God it was now too late for another! A third child would have driven her out of her mind. Especially now, when she had already gotten a job for September and was planning at last to re-enter the world.

Then, of course, there were the presents. For the first time Kevin had gotten her his own present, bought with his own money -- a box of cheap drugstore chocolates (the last thing she needed, but to please him she'd have to eat it). She opened the box immediately to share some of it, getting rid of a few unwanted pieces while reinforcing a lesson that little Amy was having some trouble with.

"But Mommy, they're for you!" Kevin objected, obviously hankering for a piece, and for a moment Giulia felt his love as tears starting to her eyes.

"I know, Kevin, sweet. But it makes me happy to share them with you. That's what I want to do with them. Sharing is fun" (with a glance towards Amy), "isn't it?"

With a mouth full of chocolate, Amy could hardly object to this oft-repeated nostrum. Kevin seemed unconvinced, but as he popped a piece of chocolate into his mouth, he began slowly to warm to the idea, at least enough to go for a second one, after which the box was put away.

Amy "gave" her a box of bath soaps, and Todd produced a novel she had mentioned she was interested in and a standard Mother's Day card from the three of them.

Then came lunch with Nana. When Kevin was an infant, that would have been lunch at Nana's, but Giulia's mother was now living in a tiny studio in an assisted living residence and was just barely capable of occasionally preparing a meal for herself.

Which meant lunch at a restaurant on Mother's Day, perhaps an even greater ordeal than breakfast in bed.

They had to wait an inordinate time to be seated, of course, which entailed dragging a chair into the packed space in front of the reservation desk so that her mother could sit down. Then the odyssey through the crowded dining room with a walker, the constant "Excuse me's" and "Could you please move in just a bit more's," the getting seated around a tiny table, the boredom of the children as the meal dragged on and on, the testiness of her mother over the dim lighting in the dining room, the unavailability of clams casino, the prospect of Giulia's going back to work in September (of which her mother vehemently and quite vocally disapproved), the inability of her mother to hear the conversation over the hubbub -- all of which made lunch more a trial than a celebration.

Giulia was pleased with the way the children had behaved and praised them for it once Nana had been deposited back in her room, her watch reset, her pills gone over, her missing glasses found, the clothes she had worn during the week rehung in the closet or collected for the wash. Giulia wished her children had known her mother when she was more of a person, when she could have read to them or sang to them, perhaps had put them to bed or babysat for them. But she and Todd, late children themselves, had left having their own children until the last minute, and so both their mothers were almost at the care-needing, rather than care-giving, stage of life by the time the grandchildren had been born.

Then it was off to the nursing home to visit Grandma, Todd's mother, who had graduated from assisted living to the next level of deterioration. It was in fact questionable whether Grandma knew who her grandchildren were, but she was always delighted to see them, smiling at the exuberant sunshine that came noisily into her room.

At least, unlike Nana, Grandma wasn't testy or constantly complaining and disapproving. On the contrary, she was almost always in a good mood. It was just a little creepy to think that you could have been almost anybody to get the same reaction. And

she lost interest very quickly, retreating into mantras that she kept repeating, like "Give me, Give me, Give me, Give me," or "You do it, You do it, You do it, You do it," or whatever phrase that, swimming by like a fish, she caught in her net and plopped into the little transparent bowl of her brain.

Kevin and Amy, of course, were soon begging to go home. So Giulia took a deck of cards out of her pocketbook and began playing "War" with them on the floor while Todd held his mother's hand, which always seemed to soothe her, and talked of this and that about his days, just a drone that, while meaningless to her, she seemed to find comforting. And then, after a decent amount of time had passed, they were finally able to leave.

They went home to a quick supper of soup and sandwiches, after which it was time to put Kevin and Amy to bed. In honor of Mother's Day, Todd took this on by himself, the one luxury Giulia actually enjoyed on what was supposedly her day.

When the children were finally asleep, Todd came in with another card, this time a wife card, with his handwritten inscription, "To the best mother of all: Happy Mother's Day!" above "With all my love, Todd."

Giulia kissed him and said, "Do you really mean that? The best mother of all?"

"The best mother of all," he repeated, kissing the side of her neck and giving her a squeeze. "Not only to the children. To me and to both our mothers. What a day!"

"You noticed," Giulia said with a laugh.

"Of course. What a perfect Mother's Day! Give, give, give!"

"That's what mothers do."

"Don't think I don't appreciate it."

"I'm not sure what it's all for," she said, feeling as though she had stepped off a precipice, and all that was beneath her was night.

"What do you mean?" Todd asked, reddening.

"I mean us, squeezed in between our parents and children, giving like crazy on both sides. What's it for? By the time we're finished, we'll be the ones in the nursing home or assisted living, not positive which end is up. And Kevin and Amy will be dragging their children over to see us on an action-packed Mother's Day."

"Hopefully," Todd said.

"Is that what there is?"

"Yes. You've got a problem with it?"

He laughed, and she began to cry.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I know this is hard on you. I didn't mean to make light of it."

"What's it for?" she said again, sobbing. "If I only knew what it was for! Will this be all there is for Amy? For Kevin? Who are we sacrificing for?"

"There, there," Todd said, taking her in his arms. "There, there."

And he rocked her until she was finally able to stop crying.