

MY MOTHER, MY SELF

by Felicia C. Sullivan



Felicia C. Sullivan,

author of

The Sky Isn't Visible
from Here



EDITOR'S NOTE: *Growing up with a narcissistic drug-addicted mother who lied to her and kept secrets, including who her real father was, Felicia Sullivan spent her childhood wondering what was true and what wasn't. The*

only thing crystal clear to Sullivan was that she wasn't going to grow up to be like her mother. But sometimes, despite our best resolutions, we can't avoid repeating the mistakes of our parents.

In the spring of 1997, on the eve of my college graduation, my mother disappeared. Over the years, I had grown used to her leaving: a four-day cocaine binge; a wedding at City Hall to which I was not invited; the month she locked herself behind her bedroom door and emerged only to buy cigarettes. I spent the greater part of my life feeling abandoned by my mother. Yet she'd always return—blazing into the kitchen to cook up a holiday feast for ten when a table was set for only three or creeping past us at dawn, red-eyed and sullen, back from Brooklyn, where her drug dealer lived.

On the morning of my graduation, though, dressed in a black gown, I walked the promenade to receive my diploma, scanning the audience. My mother's face didn't appear among the proud applauding parents. I knew then

that she would never return. Her abandonment of me for yet another man (this one had tried to strangle her) marked her death for me. This time, I cut *her* out of *my* life: I collected

photographs, birthday cards—anything that would remind me of her—and sealed them in a box along with a painful past to which I swore I'd never return.

As soon as I entered graduate school, I lived a life of my own invention. I resolved to be no longer the child who took her mother to the hospital when her body convulsed from drugs. Instead I became a woman who hailed from Long Island with a mother who'd quietly passed away and a father who bred horses. This was partially true. As a teenager, I did live in Long Island; my mother, her fiancé (who to this day I call my father), and I occupied a four-room apartment on the South

**THE SKY ISN'T VISIBLE
FROM HERE**

by Felicia C. Sullivan

ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-515-5

Hardcover

Publication: February 2008

Shore. Every day at dawn, Gus drove out to Brookville to break yearlings and raise thoroughbred horses. I became guarded about my past and my previous life, never mentioning that summer we survived on bags of potatoes and butter or the bottles of Bacardi or my mother's violent rages. These memories were locked in a room to which I permitted no entry.

I had been in perpetual chrysalis for much of my life, but in adulthood I became an expert at transformation. I became a walking J.Crew catalog: preened, preppy, and audaciously New England. Like a barnacle, I clung desperately to my affluent Waspy friends, all blondes who owned platinum Rolex watches that cost more than used cars. Unbeknownst to them, they were my teachers on all matters of etiquette, breeding, and style. I mimicked their expressions. I listened to their music and copied their wardrobes. I spent weekend afternoons in hair parlors, where my unruly locks were ironed straight, and I hoarded books on place settings, practicing a proper table on top of my bed. Sometimes my past would come back to me in flashes, horrific storms, and I would shudder and say aloud, *That person, that life, is not you.* And, of course, there were other ways to forget: I'd had my first blackout from alcohol at seventeen and, at twenty-four, my first from cocaine.

Still, I was proud of my creation: a college graduate, a master's candidate, a woman who worked in the most prestigious investment banks, read Sartre and Woolf, and owned a collection of expensive handbags and shoes. Eventually, however, the weight of these two

lives—one perfectly assembled on paper and another lived in incessant fear of being found out—was growing too difficult to bear. There were near heart attacks in taxicabs, blackouts in alleyways, nosebleeds at work, a leave of absence from graduate school, a strained relationship with my father, and friends who avoided my phone calls. And then there was my mother—her loss I never truly mourned—ghosting my waking hours.

In 2004 I was asked to participate in a *New York Times* story about mourning, specifically how I mourned the loss of my mother. I was terrified, unsure if I wanted to open a door to a past I so vigilantly kept locked. I was still hiding my upbringing from even my closest friends. I had overcome a two-year cocaine addiction and was struggling with a decade-long drinking problem, but I wanted some reconciliation with my mother, to let go of all the anger and shame I'd been carrying. I was tired of lying. I wanted an honest life and I decided finally to talk about my past, to make a once-private life public.

When the article hit newsstands, I cowered in my apartment. My friends, peers, and business colleagues would now know *everything*. I feared their judgment and mocking. But a strange thing happened when I checked my e-mails and phone messages. There was understanding, compassion, and support. I was overwhelmed. And grateful.

To them I wasn't the poor abandoned daughter of a drug addict.

I was just me. ■

"I became an expert at transformation. I became a walking J.Crew catalog: preened, preppy, and audaciously New England."

—FELICIA C. SULLIVAN

