

# Chapter 1 Mamaroneck

It was supposed to be a fairy tale. It certainly looked like one at the start. My parents, Joe and Claudia, seemed like the perfect 1950s couple. And when I was born, one year and a day after their joyous union, things seemed to be moving along nicely in that direction.

We were in the town of Mamaroneck in Westchester County, New York, where rolling lawns sprawled in every direction across the 25-acre parcel we called home. From Orienta Avenue, the long gravel driveway led past our Greek Revival house to a circle on the other side, where two reclining Canova lions flanked the front steps. The old building rose above a backdrop of oaks, beeches, and chestnut trees with an immediate grassy view, all the way to the continuous stone wall which marked the perimeter. Inside the wall, huge azaleas ran its length and in springtime circled the property in a riot of color. The sheer size of the grounds with its mature foliage made it feel more like a park than a private residence.

In one direction, from the bronze sundial at front and center, a path meandered under an arbor of climbing roses and through a formal garden. A lone pillar of marble stood there, a gift to my father from the ambassador of Tunisia. It was carved in a spiral shape, inset with small triangular fragments of colored stone and mirrored glass in a geometric pattern that sparkled in the sunlight. At the other end was a huge stone birdbath with carved cherubs emerging from its center.

I remember my sense of enchantment in that spot, with its rose bushes, bearded iris, and lilies of the valley in a festival of pastels — pink, yellow, violet, and white. The tiny lilies were my favorites, with their frilly white bells and intoxicating scent, a surprise, given how small they were. Farther on were the clay tennis courts where my father played, just to one side of the orchard planted with apples and pears. Beyond the orchard stood a musty old chicken coop, still littered with the feathers of chickens who lived there long ago. In the distance, there was even a small cornfield.

At the other side of the property, the stone wall broke for the entrance to an enormous dark green barn and my grand- mothers' small house across the way. Grandma Morse and Grandma Speciale (pronounced "Special") lived there together, as neither one had a husband anymore. I was taken to see them often along the long and winding pathway that connected one end of the property with the other.

Grandma Morse was a petite woman with surprisingly dark hair for a woman of her age. She was quiet, with a mild manner, and generally kept to herself. When I followed Grandma Speciale into the house, Grandma Morse was either sitting on the porch or reading in the living room. She was always cordial, but most of the time I saw her only briefly as I went somewhere else with my other grandmother.

Grandma Speciale kept a vegetable garden situated at one side of their house, neatly fenced in with chicken wire. The long rows of black earth striped with leafy green produced all sorts of vegetables she would harvest for her dinner table. She understood how things grew and spent hours every day tending her little plot of earth. I will never forget the first carrot I ever saw her pull from the soil. After washing it off under the spigot in the barn, she smiled and handed it to me.

"Go on. *Mangia*," she said, coaxing me to take a bite.

Before then, I had never tasted something directly from the place it had grown. I remember my hesitation to sample this recently dirty thing while my grandmother waited expectantly for my utter surprise when I finally did. This, *this* was a carrot? It was sweet and tenderly crisp, so different from the flat and nearly flavorless orange discs that had been sitting on my dinner plate the night before.

It was only a little ironic that the meaning of the name "Speciale" corresponded exactly with my feelings for her. Whenever we went inside, Grandma Speciale would take up the candy jar and offer me my choice from the collection of pretty sugared gumdrops. The violet ones were my favorites, with the intense and exotic anise flavor made more wonderful by the sugar crystals that

scratched the roof of my mouth and melted down to the smooth chewy thing itself.

I always looked forward to those treats, but inside her house, there was something even more interesting. There, Grandma kept a sparrow which she had raised from infancy. At meals, the tiny thing would flit from chair to chair. Then, settling on the tablecloth, it would hop from plate to plate, sampling our mashed potatoes, as happy and tame as any bird might be. With my grandmother's encouragement, it would tentatively step onto my hand, its tiny warm toes wrapping themselves trustingly around my like-sized finger. Perched as it was, I could feel the tiny talons pressing into my skin, but without pain or malice, while the bird tilted its head back and forth, eyeing me with a curiosity equal to my own. Both of us were small creatures in a world of giants.

"Gentle, gentle," Grandma would say, making sure I understood that this was a fragile being that deserved my protection.

These visits always ended too soon. At some point, Grandma would decide that it had been long enough and, taking the bird onto her finger, she would carry it back upstairs. There in its cage it would have some peace and rest.

I loved being at Grandma's. It was a place where things were simple, and nothing was so fancy that a small child would be scolded for an accidental spill. The house felt homey and comfortable, and the only rule was to be polite and obedient, which was easy for a child like me.

Back at the main house, things were different. There, the opulent furniture and silk rugs required more caution. I learned very early not to climb on any of the fine furniture in the living room, and I never lingered there without supervision. In the billiards room, my father's old oak pool table was covered in a fine fringed leather blanket. Cutwork leather pockets hung below its edge, adding to the mystique. I remember my father allowing me to hold one of the heavy billiard balls in my hands briefly, but as tempting as they were, these were not for children. They had their place on the polished wall shelves next to the inlaid pool

cues in their rack. The pool room and the things it contained were my parents' toys, and I needed to keep a respectful distance.

There were so many intriguing things within reach, but I was warned that these were antiques and might be damaged or stained by small hands. I have a strong memory of a beautiful stone bird that I found nearly irresistible. It was about the size of a small robin carved from translucent quartz with real ruby eyes. Its metal legs were attached to a matching round stand. I recall distinctly how dearly I wanted to pick it up, just to hold it for a moment in my little hands, but I was only allowed to look. That is what good little girls did, and I wanted to be one of those.

In the Mamaroneck house, my bedroom was on the second floor. I remember my white crib, which stood against a wall of dusty rose-colored wallpaper, a trompe l'oeil of upholstery with the image of tiny buttons placed at regular intervals across its "cushioned" surface. The mobile that floated above my crib held a flock of small flat plastic birds, with features printed in bright colors, their wings outstretched as if in flight.

I also remember my sense of accomplishment for climbing out of that crib one evening and holding on to the spindles of the banister one at a time, as I toddled down the big stairs to the sounds of company below. When I neared the bottom, all eyes turned toward me in surprise as I asked for some ginger ale and a piece of toast. My parents seemed charmed and indulged me that night. I recall well the delicious flavor of the warm rye bread, along with the adoring looks I received from everyone there as I ate daintily at a small pink marble table on one side of the room.

The only place in the house solely dedicated to children was the playroom and the adjoining bath on the third floor where Mrs. Gregory, my nurse, would bathe me in the old, deep claw-foot tub. In that room, the walls had yellow wallpaper decorated with cartoonish couples walking poodles alongside ladies carrying parasols and little Eiffel towers. The ceilings were canted with the roofline and the illustrations closed in around me, making it feel like I was wrapped inside a giant children's book. The Palladian window under the eaves gave a faraway view of the goings-on below from a height that prompted Mrs. Gregory to warn me away from standing too close to it. This was in an older part of the house, and the window's strength could not be trusted. The bare bulb fixtures were outdated, too, and sparsely placed, which made the room a relatively dark place to be at bath time. The sun was going

down then, but that was OK. I had Mrs. Gregory with me, and the gathering shadows only served to mark the warm and sleepy approach of bedtime.

During the day, the playroom was bright and appointed with all the necessities. It had a child-sized square table with matching chairs and piles of children's books containing fairy tales and nursery rhymes, many of which my parents delighted in hearing me recite. On the table was a record player housed inside a small cream-colored suitcase with a central red stripe, a red handle, and metal corner caps. It was a prized possession, and I spent many hours playing records on it, one after another. My favorite was a rose colored disk of a young woman singing "A Tisket-a-Tasket." On the flip side, she sang a rendition of "Me and My Teddy Bear." I remember, too, the stack of simple

wooden jigsaw puzzles of Old King Cole, Little Bo Peep, and other nursery themes. At one end of the room was a large and unfussy armchair for Mrs. Gregory, where she could sit and watch over me while I played. Soon, another girl was born, a sister, who would have to try and keep up with me.

It wasn't long before she and I were frolicking together under the watchful eyes of Mrs. Gregory, while my mother happily went out shopping or to the salon to have her hair and nails done. My father worked in Manhattan, often bringing work home with him to go over in his office on the second floor. He worked long hours, but he enjoyed his profession. Sometimes, when he was in the city, my mother would go too, strolling Park Avenue, or visiting the museums while he was busy. Afterward, she would meet him for dinner. It was easy to see they were in love. When Dad wasn't going into the office, the two of them traveled in Europe or cruised up and down the east coast on their boat.

Our days and nights were spent with Mrs. Gregory. We walked the grounds, playing in the chicken coop and gathering chestnuts. On some days, we splashed in the inflatable pool. On others, we stopped over at Grandma's. All the paths meandering among the flowering plants and trees were dappled with the sunlight of unlimited time and happy wandering. The nooks and crannies along the way offered up endless places for exploration and discovery. When it was time for a visit with our parents, we were ready, and hurried in, vying as little entertainers for their adoring glances, eventually ushered away again

for bath time and bed, or simply taken away so the grownups could relax. We relaxed with Mrs. Gregory — but sometimes, we also had a visitor.

Louise was 12 years my senior, a talkative and pixieish girl with a classically beautiful face and shiny dark hair in a stylish pageboy cut. She had a quick sense of humor, and she loved to tease everyone, often laughing at her own cleverness. Some of my earliest memories are of Louise and the neighbor boy, Sam, when they read me stories together. Louise seemed to find me endlessly entertaining, always curious to know what I was doing or thinking. I adored her.

There is an old audiotape of her interviewing me. For Louise, everything was a show, and the new tape recorder was just her latest opportunity to create one. I was two or three, and still speaking in baby-talk when she asked me what I did that day. I told her that I had been to the beach.

“And did you play with the children there?” she asked coyly.

“Uh-huh,” I replied. “An de boys were *frowing* sand in my eyes!” I added indignantly.

“Oh no! That’s terrible!” Louise said, as she attempted to stifle a giggle.

“An I din’ cry,” I assured her in a sing-songy tone.

Charmed by my declaration of bravery, she laughed, and I seemed to get the joke enough to make a retort. I cried, “Wuuumhead!” I cried, calling out to her as I ran around the room.

Louise let out a yelp of mock surprise. “What did you say?” she asked in her sweetest tone, chuckling.

“Wormhead. You’re a *wuuuumheeeeeaaaad!*”

“*That’s* not niice,” she told me, clearly amused. Now her laughter was louder, and I ran away, a tiny free bird, repeating “wormhead” back at her, my voice receding as she giggled.

Everyone enjoyed Louise. Back then, I was too young to understand her relationship to me and it was never mentioned. The fact is, I didn't question it myself for many years to come. This energetic and affectionate girl would simply appear once or twice a year, seemingly out of thin air. I never gave much thought to where she came from or how it was she got there. I just knew she was fun.

In New York, the days embraced us like a soft blanket. There was so much goodness life had to offer. Mamaroneck was all we knew of the world and all we needed to know, but we wouldn't be there forever. I was five years old when the doctors told my father that he needed to spend his winters in a warmer climate for the sake of his health. I don't remember the actual move, but it happened a year later, not long after a third child was born into our family.