

Oak Park, Illinois, 1997

I always wanted to be named Elizabeth. Ann is so boring. And since the second grade whenever the teachers called on Dan, Sam, or said “and,” I would startle and usually blurt out an answer. Elizabeth seemed so much more exotic and grown up than Ann. Ann Maura. Bo-ring. My parents told me they considered Elizabeth, but with 14 letters in our surname it just wouldn’t fit. Then how did the younger one get Nora Katherine? Did they change the birth certificate form somewhere between ’81 and ’84? My mother would later explain to me that they considered Elizabeth for my middle name, but monograms were in back then and no daughter of hers was going to walk around with APE on her itchy wool cardigan. If only she knew that even without the scarlet letters, those cardigans made me feel like a primate.

We wore uniforms most days, and you’d think that middle schoolers would look forward to dress down days, but not this brace-faced flat-chested valedictorian. My mom’s idea of the perfect outfit for a 7th grader—khaki pants, an off-white turtleneck with multicolored hearts all over it, and a forest green cardigan. Khaki and forest green??!! My grandma dressed more stylishly than that and she never left the house without a babushka!

All the other girls wore low rise jeans and sometimes I could see a flash of belly button from underneath their Abercrombie t-shirts. The boys would catch them on the playground to snap their bra straps. The boys would catch me on the playground to copy my algebra homework.

I dreamt of something lacy and sweet, but when she finally let me get my first bra it was white and cotton and I might as well have just cut the belly off of one of my dad’s undertanks. I guess it fit pretty well under my dresser full of turtlenecks. Girls who wear underwire bras get to eat popcorn in sleeping bags and watch Dirty Dancing. White cotton trainers are for girls who get sent home from slumber parties because their mother only wants them to watch Disney.

I started shoplifting in the 9th grade and smoking in the 10th. I stopped speaking to her somewhere in between. Or maybe she stopped speaking to me. Cigarettes and tiny tube tops disappeared from hiding places without a peep.

Can I dye my hair?

No.

I hate you. Can I pierce my belly button?

No.

I hate you. Can I wear makeup to school?

No. *Is that boy who keeps calling here your boyfriend?*

None of your business.

Do you want me to take you shopping for a homecoming dress?

No.

Will you be home for dinner tonight?

No. Can I stay out past curfew on Friday to see my favorite band?

No. *Can you watch your sister on Monday afternoon?*

No. Yes. I mean sure, but you're always here when we get home from school.

Monday's note sits on the kitchen table and is written in her perfect type-writer handwriting on the yellow legal pad that holds years of packing lists for family vacations and weekly dinner schedules.

December 7, 1998. We'll be home later. We love you guys.

The phone rings. My mom's teaching partner and sometimes best friend.

Hi Ann, is your mom home?

No she's not, can I take a.....

Oh, she's still at the hospital?

Hospital?

I'm coming over.

She says nothing. Buckles me in the passenger seat of the giant blue van that took me to years of ballet classes and drives. Nine blocks to the hospital and I am running through hallways and waiting rooms until I find my mother in the Oncology unit.

Do you have cancer?

Do you have cancer?

Do you have cancer?

No. The answer has to be no. The answer to everything I've been asking her since I got my first period and I asked if I could use tampons has been no.

I have no idea what her answer was. It probably wasn't yes. It probably was long and convoluted and full of ways she thought she was protecting her teenage daughters and the reason that 17 years later I don't fully understand what killed her. But it wasn't no.