



NANCY DREW AND THE CASE OF THE HIDDEN CHILDHOOD

Martha Stewart was born in New Jersey in August 1941, the second of six children. Her father was a self-absorbed narcissist named Edward Kostyra, who escaped the draft, and, blaming the world for never allowing him to live up to his own expectations of himself, wound up a high school gym coach and after that a salesman. Nonetheless, he had the artistic sensibility of an aesthete, and that—combined with the mercurial temper of a bad drinker—made him the most powerful force in Martha's life, setting standards of excellence and intolerance that became in time dominant characteristics of her own personality as well.

Those who knew Eddie Kostyra recall him as a braggart and a bully, who couldn't hold a job, who drank too much, and who would stagger around the house yelling at anyone who came near him. He puts one in mind of the character in the rhyme by Hilaire Belloc:

*Godolphin Horne was nobly born,
He held the human race in scorn.*

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"My father was super critical," said Martha's oldest brother, Eric, now a dentist living in Buffalo, New York. "And Martha is very demanding. It's the family curse."

By contrast, Martha's mother, for whom she was named, was a coldly disengaged housewife, whose family was shocked and upset when she married Eddie because both families were Catholic and the marriage was the end result of an unintended pregnancy. Together, the two made a perfect couple for a lifetime of abuse: Eddie, the aggressive, stern husband angry at the world and ever on the lookout for a dog to kick . . . and Martha Sr., the resentful, sullen peasantlike wife, willing to suffer the abuse, mixed with sudden rages in which she'd shriek back in anger—in Polish.

There are early pictures of Martha Sr. that hint at happier moments. There is a yellowing black-and-white photograph, snapped, one would imagine, by Eddie. It shows his wife and daughter—the two Marthas—in the bow of a rowboat on what appears to be Central Park Lake. They are wearing coats and bonnets, which suggests that the picture was taken in the spring. Because the child appears to be between three and four years of age, the outing might have been on Easter Sunday of 1945.

The face of the child shows a pouty expression, but the mother seems relaxed and is smiling, as if enjoying herself on an afternoon in New York. Perhaps the family had come over from New Jersey for the Easter Day parade and decided to take a boat ride on Central Park Lake.

Eddie is not visible, presumably because he was behind the camera in the stern of the rowboat, snapping the picture. But one telltale clue hints at what lay ahead for all of them—if it wasn't part of their lives already: Sitting on the deck of the rowboat, with a Dixie cup atop it, can be seen what looks to be an opened bottle of either beer or wine.

As evoked through the haze of her memories, Martha Jr.'s childhood unfolded straight from the pages of *I Remember Mama*. The memories came complete with the happy chirping of children at

holiday time while Mama Kostyra (that would be Martha Sr.) shooed them from underfoot as she went about the eternal rituals of preparing kielbasa and dumplings. All of it has been recalled by Martha Jr. in loving detail on her TV shows, with Mama standing next to her on the set, flour covering the front of her sweater, demonstrating the long-lost art of making hand-rolled pastries.

Yet there was another side to being the mother of six in a working-class neighborhood in northern New Jersey; and this side, too, comes to us through the recollections of Martha . . . though only in bits and pieces, over many years. It trickles forth, a detail at a time, in her newspaper and magazine columns. It is the life the Kostyras really lived—day in and day out—as a working-class family in New Jersey, in the 1940s and 1950s. Shorn of the lace and filigree, Martha Sr. appears not as her daughter would want us to see her, but instead as almost any such person from that era and demographic slice of life would appear—a woman who spent most of her time cooking, washing, and cleaning for a family of eight. And when she wasn't doing that, she seems often to have been found sitting at the kitchen table in a housedress with her girlfriends . . . smoking cigarettes, playing cards, gossiping, and drinking beer.

The Kostyra family seems to have inhabited a rather joyless world revolving around Eddie, the father, in a seeming state of perpetual anger at his wife for placing the limitations of parenthood on his life. There was fighting, quarreling, and relentless bickering over money, of which there was apparently never enough. At the end of such scenes we may imagine Eddie retreating to the basement, where he'd rigged up a photographer's darkroom, to spend hour after hour studying photographs he'd taken, while dreaming about a life more fulfilling than the one he was living upstairs.

Rather than the syrupy, escapist world of the early 1950s TV comedy-drama, *Mama*, which Martha would watch avidly each Friday evening when it came on CBS with the words: "I remember the big white house on Elm Street . . ." life in the Kostyra household

seems to have been more like something out of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with the brutish Stanley Kowalski presiding over the trembling inhabitants of Elysian Fields.

The first three years of Martha's life (from August 1941 to autumn 1944) were spent in the walk-up second-floor apartment of a two-family row house in Jersey City, New Jersey, where Eddie's father ran a bar. During this period, Eddie managed to dodge the draft by holding down a job in a shipyard. The job, plus a down payment from his mother, helped him swing a mortgage on a \$7,500 "moving up" home of his own in nearby Nutley, an ethnically mixed (Italians, Poles) working-class town not far from Newark.

The Kostyra home, at 86 Elm Place, was small, on a 45-by-178-foot lot a half block from a commercial through street to downtown. The home's 2,000 square feet of living space were divided into a front parlor, a kitchen, three bedrooms, and a semifinished "sewing room." The house had a single full bath, and two washrooms—one in the basement and the other off the kitchen, where Eddie would shave and relieve himself during mealtimes whether his family liked it or not, suggesting a life for the Kostyras that in retrospect must have seemed rather like growing up next to an economy class washroom on an airplane.

Eventually, eight people occupied the dwelling, meaning there was almost never a time when someone wasn't in someone else's way. There was no room in the house where a footstep taken—or a word spoken—could not be heard in every other room. A fight in the kitchen would reverberate from the attic to the basement.

In the little house on Elm Place, there was simply no escaping the domineering, controlling presence of Eddie. In Martha's columns and remembrances, seldom does her father "ask" for something; he "orders" or "instructs" instead. Eventually, the controlling presence of Dad reached the point at which he rigged up an actual, working intercom system, and began barking orders into it like a bizarre Captain Queeg, ordering the family members to rise for the

day, or whatever. Once assembled in the kitchen for breakfast, the Kostyras would encounter yet more of Dad, as Eddie would emerge from the bathroom that was five feet from the kitchen table, tucking in his shirt while directing the members of his family never to "slice" English muffins but always to "tear" them. Food wasn't simply placed before the children, they were served the food and "forced" to eat it. There is a subtext of aggression and control—authority and submission—in almost every such scene and remembrance. It is not intentional, but it is there nonetheless, unmistakable and strong.

In her columns, Martha has tried to portray these moments as providing her with a lifetime of priceless, warm memories. But on a deeper level, the associations often look to have been hideous. Indeed, the recollections of seeing her mother begin her days from breakfast onward in a housedress—the functional equivalent of appearing in a bathrobe and curlers—seem to have brought Martha such pain that, as an adult, she is said to have banned anyone from wearing a housedress in her house. From Eddie's command, "Don't slice the English muffins" we get Martha's order, "There'll be no housedresses in *my* home!"

This is how Martha Stewart appears to have begun her life, against a backdrop of parental tension and ugliness that would still be pounding in her ears each morning when, at 7:45 A.M., she would step from the front door of her home on Elm Place, turn left at the sidewalk, and take a five-minute walk, often with her cousin from down the street, to her third-grade class at Yantacaw Elementary School.

It was certainly a different time. In those days, at the start of the 1950s, young children could walk without adult supervision to school in Nutley, New Jersey—or indeed almost anywhere else—without parental qualms of any sort. Some fifty-three children of various ages lived on Elm Place when Martha was growing up, and they played in the street and in each other's yards without the slightest fear of the stranger who might be lurking at the corner.

Nevertheless, the Kostyra parents seem to have been ultracasual with their children's well-being in at least one respect. When she was as young as nine years old, Martha traveled by train—alone—to visit her mother's parents in Buffalo, New York, a six-hour journey on the New York Central Railroad.

But by the winter of 1950, the main topic on everyone's lips in Nutley, New Jersey, wasn't crime or even communism (though it was much in the news that winter as the espionage trial of Alger Hiss reached its climax). The focus instead was on technology. Marvels seemed to be raining down on the American people in a deluge of unending progress. In New York City, surgeons brought a man back to life on the operating table by massaging his heart after it stopped beating. It seemed a miracle. Indeed, it seemed only slightly less miraculous when, in Detroit that winter, the Cadillac division of General Motors Corporation introduced the world's first passenger car with a wraparound, one-piece windshield of curved glass. Meanwhile in New York, the RCA Corporation introduced the world's first commercially produced color television set. People everywhere gasped in wonder as the company's chairman, David Sarnoff, proclaimed the arrival of "a new era in television—the era of color."

In the Kostyra house, they didn't have a Cadillac. In fact, they didn't yet even own a car. And they didn't have a TV either—black-and-white *or* color until the end of 1950—the last family on Elm Place to acquire one. Martha would be attending Barnard College before her family upgraded to color.

According to Martha, when her father finally broke down and bought a television, he positioned it in the parlor at an angle so that he personally had the best view—from his favorite chair, at one end of the room—whereas the other family members had to squint and strain to see the screen.

Though Eddie had promised his wife to modernize the kitchen at the first opportunity when they bought their house on Elm

Place in 1944, it took twelve full years before he could scrape together enough money to put down a new linoleum floor and add some new cabinets. On the other hand, he never seemed to have trouble coming up with money for expensive clothes for himself or for his own hobbies and pursuits, such as his mysterious basement world of amateur photography. From time to time, he would try to improve conditions around the house through various do-it-yourself projects, but they almost always turned out badly—which Martha would not hesitate to bring to the attention of the world decades later.

You could see her resentment peeking out from her "Remembering" columns in *Martha Stewart Living* a half century later, when time and again, she'd refer to one aspect or another of her family's "meager" circumstances. In one column, she finds a way to bring up a family in the neighborhood known as the "Richies." They were said to be the wealthiest folks on Elm Place and thus enjoyed the services of a maid—which, of course, the Kostyras did not. In another column, she tells of standing in front of her closet Cinderella-like and crying because all the clothes in it were handmade and she lacked suitable jewelry to attend her first real New Year's Eve party. In yet another column, written in 1996, she complains, "When I was growing up, I wasn't one of the lucky ones whose every meal was accompanied by a fine damask napkin in a silver napkin ring. Nor was I fortunate enough to receive a trousseau of heirloom table and bed linens when I married."

On still another occasion, Martha recounted her family's trips to the Jersey Shore for crabbing in the summers—not failing to slip in stiletto-like digs at her father (by then dead for a decade) for not having earned enough money for the family to rent a house at the Shore like the other families had.

The overcompensation in reaction to all this eventually reached the point at which Martha was collecting houses the way the Romanovs collected palaces. A frequent weekend guest at her Westport,

Connecticut, farmhouse estate—Turkey Hill—took to referring to a barn on the property as the “Winter Palace.” And Martha herself would often refer to a nearby chicken coop as the “Palais des Poulets” (Palace of the Chickens).

Eventually her search for grandeur reached the point at which she bought an antique Polish nobleman’s carriage, which she used to squire herself around the countryside like the ghostly wife of King Popiel the Heartless, who was said to covet everything he saw. According to Polish legend, the dreaded king would shoot arrows at his own servants; he insisted that all food on his table be cooked and spiced to perfection—and would fly into horrifying, uncontrollable rages when it was not. The queen was said to be even worse.

The fact of the matter was that the Kostyras were working-class poor, and the man in the hot seat was Eddie. His family blamed him for failing to lift them from poverty, and in the perfect circularity for a lifetime of abuse, he blamed them for dragging him into poverty in the first place.

In later years, Martha recalled her father as a man of great artistic talent, who taught her about gardening and decorating as well as the value of being a perfectionist in one’s pursuits. But on a deeper level, she also found him to be “disappointed in his life” and “not so satisfied with his lot in life.” In fact, Eddie Kostyra blamed those around him—most notably his wife and children—for somehow holding him back, and he was constantly at war within himself over his natural feelings of parental love on the one hand, and his resentful feelings toward those around him on the other.

One thus never knew, with Eddie Kostyra, which face of Janus was in control at any moment, which meant that no one could ever be sure when a pleasant family activity or outing would suddenly veer into a scolding, belittling lecture from Eddie—a put-down from Dad for the perceived failings of his family members to achieve the levels of perfection he had failed to achieve in himself. In time, it became a pattern that would manifest itself over and



over again in Martha's own life and relationships. As the years went by, she simply read more and more from the first "relationship script" she had ever learned—the one in which the authority figure maintains control by yelling the loudest and oppressing the most harshly, while insisting on undifferentiated and blind obedience as the expression of true love.



By the time Martha graduated from Nutley High School in 1959, powerful forces were at work to change, irreversibly, the structure and culture of the American family. The focus of that change was American youth, who were cleaved into two worlds by a chasm that ran straight through the class of 1959. Those who came before grew old before their time; those who came after had trouble growing up at all. Eventually, Martha found the message that resonated with them all: Never mind politics, forget about culture—just do what Big Sister says.

When Martha was growing up, everybody's young brother and sister had already developed the secret language that defined pop culture. DAs weren't District Attorneys, they were Duck's Ass haircuts; JDs weren't Juris Doctor degrees from law schools, they were juvenile delinquents. When you "chopped" a car, you didn't turn it into liver pâté, you turned it into a hot rod. In this world, Martha Stewart was the emissary from authority-land—that mythic place where the parents still ruled and a voice on the radio could send the nation marching off to war.

Martha and her high school contemporaries were only three years older than the oldest of the baby boomers who were born at the end of World War II, but they actually had little in common. The Class of 1959—Martha's class—was, in many respects, the last reinforcement from the land of the past, as if the social changes that were sweeping through American life hadn't yet discovered the ordinary little working-class backwater just outside Newark.

Martha's world still validated the role of the American housewife with an ideology of domesticity, and a heavy contribution to that faith was an inventor named Earl Tupper. In the 1940s, he had created Tupperware—a plastic, molded dishware with airtight lids. By the 1950s, Tupperware had developed into an entire subeconomy in the United States, with a moral value system that infiltrated countless households at “Tupperware parties.”

Tupperware was big in the Kostyra household, where Martha Sr. would fill several of the plastic bowls with macaroni salad and potato salad, cookies, and maybe even a layer cake, then snap the airtight lids shut, place them in a picnic hamper, place the hamper in the trunk of the car, and the family would head for Asbury Park or Sandy Hook, or some other nearby shoreline, for a summer outing. The children would drink lemonade and iced tea; Eddie would be well-stocked with his personal stash of beer, from which Martha Sr. would eventually begin sipping as well.

Earl Tupper not only invented the most famous food storage system of the twentieth century but almost the entire toolbox of the post-war domestic female: His inventions included a flour sifter, dish rack, tampon case, easy-to-clip-on garter hooks, eyebrow dyeing shields, egg-peeling clamps, color-coordinated knitting needles, and much more.

In 1950, an impoverished Detroit housewife and single mother, Brownie Wise, hit on a way to make some badly needed money out of all this: She'd invite some friends over and see if she could sell them some of Mr. Tupper's plastic dishware. It was the first Tupperware party, and by 1954 she was on the cover of *BusinessWeek* magazine as the emblem of the new world of womanhood. Alas for Brownie Wise, who eventually became Tupperware's vice president for home marketing and wound up presiding over an enterprise that many thought would soon eclipse even Sears Roebuck, she eventually tiptoed beyond the barrier of the kitchen door and published her autobiography. Like an early Martha Stewart, she filled her book with syrupy recollections of her grandparents and held



forth her life as an example of how far women could go by capitalizing on "feminine knowledge." Earl Tupper was furious and instantly fired her.



These were the circumstances in which Martha and her classmates grew up, becoming in a way, a transgenerational age group with their feet planted in two worlds—the received value system and authority structures of prewar Americans, and the self-expressive, youth-centered world that began to emerge after the war's end.

Looking back on the class of 1959 from the perspective of a new century, only a few of its members seem to have sensed the opportunities that awaited them. Most—Martha included—present themselves to us uncertainly, clinging to the worlds of their parents as if the received wisdom of prewar America were driftwood from a shipwrecked culture.

"We were a close-knit group," recalls Vinny Cina, one of Martha's classmates, whose favorite pastime was watching the TV series *77 Sunset Strip*. "Not a lot of the outside world had touched us yet. There were drugs and alcohol out there somewhere, but we didn't know about it. We were just naive, you could say. We were focused on our studies."

The girls in Martha's class all seemed to be frozen in aspic from an earlier time, when their mothers were themselves young women. In their high-school yearbook, a surprising number listed gardening, cooking, and homemaking—the skills that Martha would later turn into a billion-dollar business—as their main interests in life.

Strikingly, the girls of the Class of 1959 looked old before their years, like late adolescent 35-year-olds, with serious expressions and tightly curled and rolled permanents. Mostly they were Catholics—Irish, Polish, Italian. For their graduation photographs, each and every one of them wore personality-suppressing sweaters and necklaces of pearls—even Linda Jackson, Marion Butler, and Olivia Flemming, the only three Black girls in the class of 276 students (which also included just two Black males).

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Most of the faces showed neither joy nor even mischievousness, as if the girls knew full well what the future held: more of what had happened so far. Of them all, only a handful looked distinctive in any way. Eleanor Adam wore her hair in a ponytail (one of only three girls in the class to do so), offering a kind of interested, curious smile that seemed to say, "Don't worry, world, I'm getting out of this place real soon." Pamela Hayford had a similar expression. So did Joyce Menegus, one of just two faces in the class that might readily be pronounced authentically beautiful. The other belonged to Beverly Otis, under whose dazzling, wide smile and large almond eyes is written "Desire is to live in Greenwich Village."

Though you wouldn't have known it from her photograph in the senior class yearbook (in which she too wore pearls, a sweater, and a forced smile), Martha had by now grown so detached from the life of the school that she had wrangled herself a job as a clothing model at Bonwit Teller's department store on Fifth Avenue, and would often leave school early to catch the bus into New York.

Martha belonged to the Nutley High School Honor Society, the Art Committee, and various other committees and groups. But most appear to have been Hamburger Helper to pad out her resume for getting into college. As far as actual impact on her peers was concerned, her presence was hardly felt at all. She wasn't voted "cutest" or "best looking" or "most talented" or "wittiest" or "most athletic" or "friendliest" or "nicest smile" or "most likely to succeed." She was just there, on one committee after the next, staring straight at the camera with a purposeful look in a large and serious face framed by tight bangs and curls that reeked of motherly approval.

In various "Remembering" columns that she pens monthly in her magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, Martha has sometimes claimed to have been an avid reader of the literary classics as a child, but her friends in Nutley have said her favorite reading also included the Nancy Drew detective series. The Nancy Drew character is quoted in the original edition as being "ingenious, alert . . . the daughter of a famous criminal lawyer, and she herself is deeply interested in his

mystery cases. Her interest involves her often in some very dangerous and exciting situations." The *Women's Almanac* describes Nancy as "one in a long line of motherless girls. Her handsome, romantic father treats her more like his wife than his daughter. She is spunky and independent. . . . She flew an airplane, drove her roadster, competed in a golf tournament, fixed her own car, and made her own decisions. She was incredibly superior to everyone around her."

The sentiment under Martha's senior class picture in her high-school yearbook could have been penned by precisely such a person. It reads: "I do what I please, and I do it with ease." She returned to that theme more than thirty years later during an interview with television personality Oprah Winfrey when she declared, "I can almost bend steel with my mind. I can bend anything if I try hard enough. I can make myself do almost anything."

Thus, in the fullness of time, the mantle of notoriety, if not actual greatness, passed over the students voted "most likely to succeed," "cutest," and "most athletic," to fall, instead, on the Nancy Drew-like Martha Stewart.

