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Ordinary Lives

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Ordinary Lives · *May Stevens*

My mother did not finish elementary school; my father finished a vocational high school. But art meant something to them somehow. My mother was married in a grey dress, accordion-pleated, fanning out over the shoulders like a shawl. She liked my being an artist.

My father painted and papered our house. I helped him slap the wallpaper paste on the back of the long strips that we carefully placed on the wall to match the pattern. I helped him cut the stencils to make a trim for the kitchen wall; he showed me how.

My father hated “garish” color. I bought a tweed suit at Peck and Peck in burnt orange. He called it “shit brindle.” I bought him socks in the same color but he wouldn’t wear them.

Rosa Bonheur’s *Horse Fair* hung over our living room sofa—on the patterned wallpaper.

We also sang in my family. Not with good voices but we sang anyway—in the car on long trips or coming back at night: Irish songs, Scottish songs, “There’s a long, long trail a-winding into the land of my dreams . . .” and hymns and carols.

My father really liked poetry. He cut it out or copied it in a scrapbook. He liked “Into the valley of death rode the six hundred . . .” and other things of an adventurous, moral nature. I was shocked when I found in his scrapbook: “I know there are no errors in the Great Eternal Plan / And that all things work together for the final good of man.” For he was a pipe fitter living in a 4-room house with 2 children and a wife going mad.

He wanted me to be an artist, too.