

Reading Martha Stewart's Lips

[Molly Jong-Fast](#) August 7, 2020, 7:00 am



via [Martha Stewart/Instagram](#) Martha Stewart, East Hampton, Long Island, New York, July 21

In that [Instagram post](#), the seventy-eight-year-old doyenne of the domestic arts, Martha Stewart, was standing in her pool at her home in East Hampton, Long Island, her pouting pink lips oozing sexuality. The image evoked a Slim Aarons photo: the blue swimming pool and the manicured

green trees reminding us that the rich are different from you and me.

The image set off its own minor news cycle. While "Martha" wasn't the celebrity she had been in my youth, the idea of an almost octogenarian advertising her sexuality struck some as a win for feminism. She herself admitted the photo was "definitely a [thirst trap](#)." Then the photo was recreated by Chelsea Handler as an homage to older women's allure, upon which Martha mused that her "pool was a little bit prettier" and that "Chelsea was too young to emulate her." So went the intergenerational scrimmage, but what it recalled for me was the *intragenerational* one I'd grown up hearing so much about.

"Didn't you ruin Martha Stewart's marriage?" I asked my mother. It was a hot Saturday in July, and all of polite society had left Manhattan months earlier as the pandemic first hit the city, but I was sitting in my apartment, at my desk. I could hear my mom likely sitting at her desk, hesitating on the other end of the line, slightly suspicious. I was typing furiously. I wondered if she could hear my fingers smacking at the keys.

"You did have an affair with Martha Stewart's husband?" That had, in fact, always been the family folklore.

"Not really an affair," she ventured. "More like a one-night stand."

"What? Say again." I'm a slow typist.

"What can I tell you? It was the Frankfurt Book Fair and... you know, it's like Las Vegas and you know nothing there counts. "

"Was he still married?"

"Yes, but then I found out later he did that with everyone, so I was not unique."

By now, aged forty-one, I'd had a lot of conversations like this with my mother. All of them sort of awful. I knew I was taking advantage of her, the way a journalist often does with her subject. But I also knew that she knew that. And the story was pretty much out in the world already, so why not write it down? Besides, it was years ago, and there's something to be said for recording for posterity the salacious footnotes in the lives of people who, like my mother, have been public figures.

Mom had paused, as though on the brink of delivering some very important revelation.

"I broke one of my big rules that night," she stopped again, for effect. She gets the vaudeville from my grandpa, who in his youth played percussion in the Catskills. "Never go to bed with a publisher." It was the kind of joke my mother loved, meaning: the publishers were always trying to screw you, one way or the other.

"Were you still married to Dad?"

"Yeah, but we had an open marriage, and I told him."

I laughed nervously. My parents' brief but open marriage was not my favorite subject because of its incredible grossness, but my children did find it endlessly amusing. I [had only learned](#) of its status as "open," which my mom confirms but which my dad is more equivocal about, in the last year or two. Before that, I just thought they'd cheated on each other, which I still sort of believe.

"But it was the 1970s and people thought they could have open marriages in the 1970s, it was a trend... You know, these things go in and out of fashion."

I paused before speaking again, and in the dead air, I heard my daughter, aged twelve in the room off my office. She was listening to her mother talk to *her* mother. Always with these mother–daughter relationships, there's an intense subtext: Will she betray me the way I have betrayed my own mother? In some ways, I find myself hoping so.

I went back to my mother. "Didn't you know Martha, your whole life?"

"We were in the same class in Barnard and she hated me."

This answer surprised me. "Why did she hate you?"

"I don't know."

"But she was on the [cover of *Glamour*](#)," I said, as if being already famous in 1961, as a sophomore in college, would have inoculated Martha from being resentful.

"She was a model and she was much thinner than I was, and in many magazines, and she made a lot of money," my mom said.

Later, I looked up Martha Stewart at Barnard and found something she'd said when she spoke at a college commencement in 2012. "I started modeling as a teenager to pay for college," she said. "I was fortunate to get a scholarship to Barnard College. My scholarship didn't cover everything. My freshman year, I lived in the apartment of two elderly widows for whom I cooked five days a week in return for [room and board](#)."

My mother, on the other hand, came from a relatively affluent background. She grew up in a building on Central Park West. Her father, who was a successful importer, made a rule that his three daughters all had to go to college and grad school. And I assume he paid for it all.

That would be enough to create resentment, I could see. Whatever set it in motion, the two women became each other's nemesis. Both blond, both ambitious, intelligent women, both convinced that the other had gotten something *she* deserved. My mother didn't talk about Martha exactly that way, but I knew there had been times when she burned with envy at all Martha had achieved: the wealth, the fame.

My mom continued. "And you know how competitive women can be," she said, then reverting to the Frankfurt incident. "Every time I used to see her at a party, I wanted to go over and say, I'm really sorry. I felt like I should have made amends. It wasn't really an affair and I felt bad about it."

She paused. "Are you writing about this?"

"Yes, Mom."

I could tell she felt bad—about the experience, or about the recounting, or about my writing about it. I couldn't tell which. In any case, it was hard for me to feel too bad writing about it, having grown up in a house where we pathologically wrote about each other all the time.

"It's ancient history," Mom said, as though to draw a line under it.

"I know," I said sympathetically. And then remembered to be a journalist.

"Do you think that Martha blames you for the marriage imploding?"

"Could be, who knows? I think he, the husband, Andy, was very jealous of her success and he would make *her* jealous. And I should have known better than to have gotten involved in other people's issues."

I got off the phone with my mom. I had to call my dad. He lives in Palm Springs.

"Did Martha Stewart offer to cater your wedding to Barbara to get back at Mom?" For years, I had been hearing this story. More of the family folklore.

"No, no, no," my dad said.

"That didn't happen?"

"No," my father said, "that's not what happened."

"Martha came to your grandparents' house in Redding [California]," he went on. "Martha was doing flowers then, but she was still kind of snobby and you know how your Grandma Bette used to snoot people? Your grandma snooted her." She came from Teaneck, New Jersey, the daughter of a mobster named Ike Cohen. But he was successful and she grew up grand. She was my favorite relative.

"And you know, in the book," my father resumed, "Erica writes about having an affair with a guy who has one blue and one brown eye."

"Which book?"

I heard my dad say something to my stepmom, my stepmom say something back to him. "Did you read the book she wrote about *you*, Dad?" I asked. A pathology, as I said.

"Which one? And no," he said. "But everyone in the world knows that the only person who has one brown eye and one blue eye was Andy Stewart. I mean, except for huskies, no one has one brown eye and one blue eye."

I heard my stepmom again in the background. "We had Andy over for a dinner party when we lived on Burr Street," she said.

"Apparently, we had Andy over for dinner," my dad said, as if I couldn't hear

my stepmom.

I heard her again. "We really liked him."

"I didn't like him," my dad said. "Oh, maybe I *did* like him."

"But did Mom ruin Martha Stewart's marriage?" Now I needed to know. After all, I'd used the line often enough at cocktail parties down the years, when people still had cocktail parties: "My mother ruined Martha Stewart's marriage." There'd be a moment of shock and awe: it seemed so daring to dime my own family out like that, but what people didn't know was that in a family like mine, there was no diming out. Everything was copy, for a memoir or a novel or a film script.

"No," my dad said firmly. "It was over before that. We had Thanksgiving with them, but without Martha—though it was a very Martha Stewart Thanksgiving."

"So none of it was true?"

"Well," he paused. "It's not that it wasn't true. It just didn't happen the way you thought it did." My father paused. He was the child of a writer, too, but he didn't chase stuff down the way I did. He let the past dissolve, like a normal person. Did his mom have an affair with Dashiell Hammett? He suspected so but never asked. There was something dignified about not grilling your parents about their affairs. I respected my father for it.

"Maybe it never happens the way we think it does," he offered.

And what about Mom, I thought, who had spent so much time thinking that Martha hated her... maybe none of it happened the way she thought it did.