IF I WERE TO ASK MY MOTHER

A

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

*If I Were to Ask My Mother* is a collection of personal essays that focuses on the narrator’s attempt to recreate her past through exploring childhood memories and entries of family diaries and other artifacts. In the first essay, the narrator’s childhood diaries are destroyed by her mother, an act seen by the adult narrator as an attempt by the mother to silence her daughter’s voice. The difficult mother/daughter relationship is a theme in the remaining essays as the narrator attempts to recreate the destroyed past by exploring her childhood memories. Diary entries are included in many of the essays in an attempt to compare memories with the stories found in the family diaries. Missing diary entries encourage the narrator to interpret the silences by speculating what might have been written. Sometimes, as the narrator discovers, the artifacts themselves hide the past’s truths.
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This Is How We Were

But first, this is how we are:

A fleeting image—my tired mother surrounded by children, a diaper-clad baby on her hip—and I call my mother and ask for her diaries or family pictures or letters. I don’t describe the remembered image. When I tell her I need artifacts from a specific time period, there is silence on the other end of the phone. She could be taking notes, mentally inventorying her collection, determining which box or closet holds what I am requesting. I wait nervously through her silence: Is this the time that she will deny my request, keep her memories from me? I am made vulnerable by my desire. This anxiety is why I began sending her my diaries. An exchange: my secrets for hers, a form of emotional blackmail based on what I hope she possesses: a sense of obligation to share her memories with her daughter.

I don’t recall seeing her writing in her diaries when I was a child, but while the phone is ringing, I see the cover of the diary I hope she will send. Recently, a package arrived and I opened it and found the diary I had imagined, but didn’t describe to her: the one with the pink cover and the young girl holding a birdcage and near her legs a fuzzy animal, a cross between a dog and a rabbit, wearing a red bow. It is as if she had accessed my memories. Holding it my fleeting images are replaced with childhood memories of summers in Camilla, Georgia, and while memory dwells there, my mother appears and I feel one after the other the warmth of the summer days and her anxiety swirling through the humidity.
I am sitting in our darkened living room with neighborhood children and my three sisters and two brothers. We form a circle around my mother, who is seated in a chair. On her lap is a flat surface, perhaps a board or a stiff piece of cardboard or the top of a card table, covered with a piece of light blue flannel. Her head is tipped forward and she is watching her freckled fingers grasping felt characters and moving them around as she tells Bible stories. I watch my friends and marvel at their quiet respectfulness. Perhaps their thirst and hunger for the promised Kool-Aid and cookies keep them from taunting me as they will when we go outside, away from her, about her Yankee accent, her religious fervor, her determination to share these stories. I lower my head and spend the remaining time staring at the carpet, never allowing myself to look in her direction, never giving them a chance to see my vulnerability. How I longed to be like them, to live in their houses with the constantly playing televisions and air conditioning, with the cigarette-smoking mothers who kick their kids out the door, pushing them in the direction of my house. My mother welcomed them, steered them into a circle and told them stories in the hopes of saving their souls.

I wanted to brag that we too had television, but they’d want to see it. *Let’s go watch,* they’d suggest, wandering off to the other rooms. I’d have to wait for a day when we had gone to the library and checked out a television and videodiscs. After the Bible story, and while we sipped drinks and ate cookies, I would lead them into the living room and nonchalantly point out the stacked discs, but keep them distracted so they wouldn’t realize the television was borrowed and only worked with the discs, that we didn’t actually get television channels.
Some days, as many days as she could afford, Mother took us swimming at the public pool. Seated on a towel spread atop the dry brittle grass near the baby pool, she waved us older kids away and we ran to the edge of the pool and tossed ourselves into the water. Its coldness caused goosebumps and the sucking in of breath and sometimes pool water and the snot from coughing and sneezing and the yellow pee not yet eaten by the chlorine. Throughout the day, whenever I came out of the depths of the pool, I would look over and see her in the baby pool, the straps of her bathing suit tucked under her armpits, her skin beginning to brown. Seeing her and the dark heads of my brothers bobbing near her legs, I would submerge myself deeper and deeper away from the surface and hang there in the quiet until I imagined I felt chlorine penetrating my eyelids, and my held breath began leaking out of my mouth. Then, pushing against the concrete bottom, I shot toward the surface and the screams of laughter and splashing, the whistle of the lifeguards, and Prince on the jukebox.

When we returned to the house it was late afternoon. Mother escorted us into the front living room where each of us took our places, my siblings sprawled on the floor—*quit touching me!*—and me in a chair. She slipped the videodisc into the player and we watched the start of the movie through eyes made scratchy from chlorine. Our dry, sunburned skin felt tight, our hair wiry, our bodies were tired from the heat, the splashing, and swimming. The room darkened as she closed the blinds against the heat. As she turned to leave the room, she walked by me and ran her fingers through my hair, patted my head, and I listened for the click of her bedroom door and the sound of the air conditioner.
* 

There is no key for the pink diary. I open the cover and see that the torn spine has allowed the first several days of January to work their way loose, to go missing. Inside the cover I find in my mother’s handwriting 1979 and 1980 interspersed!! followed by her initials. Here, between the horizontal lines in blue and black ink, and sometimes pencil, could be stories about me when I was ten, eleven, twelve. I am looking for proof, words in her handwriting that describe my memories.

She was anxious about money. Paychecks that barely covered the bills caused her to write: I cried! Poor unspiritual me! Sunday School teacher with all the answers! Woe is me! On the way to the pool, we stopped by the local market and used our food stamps to buy chips, cookies, and pop. Some days she could only afford to pay the twenty-five cents for one or two of us to go to the pool and in her diary we fought over who would go and cried when we were left behind.

She came up with the idea of inviting neighborhood kids inside for Bible stories and snacks. It seemed like a good idea—something me and my siblings could look forward to, and a chance for her to witness. But the night before, she confessed her anxiety: I’m ‘spose to start kids club. I’m kinda scared! . . . Hope response is good. I’m much in prayer and have been for months. After the first session, she wrote the names of the children who attended: Mackey Palmer, Karen, an older girl she asked to assist with the program. I search my memory trying to place names with remembered faces. When I read the name John Cox, I can immediately see his broad, blunt nose made more so by acne scars, his blonde hair, and remember the smell of sweat and dirt and grass. He is the
one I don’t want sitting near me. I don’t want her to have seen us together. I dread reading ahead: she might have read our faces, pieced together our story, and written about her suspicions. Did she ever guess I was hiding something? He and I together in the dark, behind bushes, away from her eyes. We were constantly fighting, my brothers and sisters and the neighborhood kids crowding around to watch. Playing tag, he chased me (or did I lead him?) behind the houses, touching, grabbing at my clothes. When I dodged his clutches, my shirt ripped off my shoulder. Giggling I ran, but not so fast he couldn’t catch me, take me to the ground, and straddle me. He hands roamed while I bucked and clawed, then threw him off, straddled him, and rode.

While my memories of being a part of the circle are vivid, I am missing from her diary entry. Her eye of memory sweeping over the events of the day did not see me: at the pool, she watched my sisters and later wrote of how hard they played in the water. But she didn’t feel my eyes watching her as I tread water. Nor did she know that as my eyes caressed her exposed skin, I, cold and goosebumpy, felt her heat and anxiety. How is it that emotion continues to plague my memories of her? This is not something she shared with me. She seemed determined to maintain distance between her and me, saving her stories for her diary: Just don’t have anyone I can really share with . . . That’s why I like you, diary, but wonder just how much I should spill here, too!! Watching her through my child’s eyes as she lounges by the pool, I want her frame to relax; want to see the sharp lines soften as her bones soak up the heat, turn liquid so that she must lean back against her strong arms. I want her stretched out on her towel, her legs crossed at the ankles, loosely, and when the heat enters her stomach, her head falls back, her face is
raised to the sun. Hypnotized by my childish longings, a suspicion slithers into this imagined scene: relaxed, with her mind shut off to the sights and sounds around her, she longed to be someone else. Behind her closed lids, she dreamed of somewhere else.

I forced myself onto the pages of her diary; my siblings and I invaded her privacy. There are diary pages of scribbles, orange markers, green ink, penciled alphabet practices. My sister’s penciled message: *My bithday I will be 8.* I imagine my mother opening her diary, turning pages to find a place to write, choosing the empty space that follows my young sister’s handwriting. How did her children gain access to something so personal? I search the house in Camilla: the coffee table, the kitchen counter, the table. I enter the darkness of her bedroom and scan the dresser she shared with my father, but find nothing. I have no memory of seeing it in her room or in another place in the house, of stealing away with it, or standing where I was and reaching for a pen she’d left nearby, writing my own message: *Dear Diary, My Mom and Dad are so mean they took my radio and gave it to my stinkin sister! (I don’t like them)*

How did my young mind work? After being scolded, then punished, did I rush to Mother’s room? I must have known about her diary, where to find it. Perhaps as I held the pen and planned my message, I imagined her finding it and showing it to my father. Was I hoping for a response—waking up and finding both of them at my bedside, the pink diary in hand, quietly, patiently seeking me out?

What did she think when she came to that entry and found my anger?
On the page, her handwriting flows around it. She made no modifications; there are no marks that eradicate my feelings. My need to document a moment before I was the keeper of my own diary was preserved. Here is my first diary entry—my name and the year 1979 after the date at the top of the page written in her handwriting—documented and kept by her. She allowed that part of me to remain.

I marvel at what I have forgotten: the letters of my young hand, the curves of my Ds, the dash of my Ys on the page of her diary.

If I have no memory of seeing her with her diary, coming upon her bent over the page. How did I know to stay in the lines? Who taught me to address the diary?

This mother who kept my childish anger is a discovery, but I remember that girl. Her anger triggers memories of a mother and daughter, their harsh words, exploding anger, sulking silences. The mother hissing Where have you been? as she grabbed the daughter’s upper arm.

I search the pink diary for this hissing mother, but she is only in my memories, looming, crowding, leaving little space for the mother I am discovering.

*

At the end of a drive with my sister, as I got out of her car and began to unload my suitcases, I realized I had left my diary on the bedside table in her guest room. “Just pop it in the mail,” I suggested, holding out money.

I am surprised when she nervously reprimands me for being so careless. During my visit, we had spent one night talking about our diaries. I can’t recall how the topic came up, but what has stuck with me was her emotional response to the memory of keeping a
She remembered being taunted by someone when she was a teenager and immediately thinking ahead, of planning how she would write it all down—what happened and what was said. Her diary was her closest confidante.

She told me she still wrote in a diary, but kept it locked away where no one could find, and I imagined it as a neat and tidy volume, leather bound, heavy in her hand, a gold lock to discourage intruders. Ah, no wonder she is nervous. The diary I left at her house was an artist’s notebook filled with my writing and crammed with things I had collected: pictures, letters, my daughter’s dance programs. I imagined its untidiness, how the spine was starting to separate, so that when she would find it, it would open on its own and the items would spill on to the floor. When she bent to retrieve them, would she be tricked into reading a page? Or become curious about an item, a letter, a picture? She wouldn’t be able to stop herself, but would sit on the edge of the bed in her guestroom and read her older sister’s diary.

Still offering her the money, I told her where she could find my diary, and because of what I had imagined, gave her permission to read it.

When it arrived, I pulled it from the package and thumbed through the items taking inventory. Could I sense my sister’s presence on the pages? Probably she didn’t read it, for during my visit, she told me that once, long ago, our mother accused her of something—smoking or drinking, I don’t remember—something she could only have known about if she’d read her daughter’s diary.

Here is the mother I remember. How easy to imagine the scene: my sister standing in our parents’ white kitchen, leaning against the counter where the phone sat. Near her
head is an old family photo—in it she is about eleven or twelve, smiling shyly at the camera. And then there looms the accusatory mother. Was this my sister’s first time? Was she surprised by the accusations? Did her face flush as slowly her mind retraced her steps trying to determine how our mother could have known? Had she been seen, or had a phone conversation been overheard? Had our brothers been asked to watch her? She went through all these possibilities and then her mind caressed the cover of her diary, and she remembered writing page after page, then closing the diary, and putting it away. And that is when, standing before our mother, she felt the heat course through her body, and her face flushed—the telltale sign of guilt.

How did our mother find her diary? Perhaps back then, my sister didn’t keep it locked away. She felt comfortable leaving it out, remembering how she found our mother’s pink diary, a pencil or marker nearby, and writing her name, practicing her letters and numbers.

How familiar her story, but my sister doesn’t know that our mother also searched my room until she found my diary.

When she held it, what about its cover invited her to open it, to read its entries?

* 

I was sitting with a friend when my father called my name. I’d been describing the night before: how I had left the house through the window, and waited at the end of the street until the Jeep arrived. I hinted at what happened next—me and two boys driving
around for hours, the eyes of one and then the other in the rearview mirror watching my head bob rhythmically.

I didn’t have a chance to tell him what happened next: yelling at my mother in the dark, storming off, slamming the door to my bedroom. Hours later I awoke and found my father at the side of my bed. There was something in his hand—his Bible? My green notebook? “What if . . .” he whispered, unable to finish his question.

But I knew what he wanted to know. “No! I’m not pregnant,” I said, then turned my back and relived the scene in the Jeep. Again the thrill as I remembered the boy’s hand tremble as he unbuttoned his jeans, his cockiness gone as he lay sprawled in the back of the Jeep. Pleasure ran along my skin, the prickling of my scalp that I still experience through remembering. The feel of his hand cupping the back of my skull, his palms bracketing my ears, his thumb lightly caressing my temple. And those eyes—the light from the streetlamps reflected in the rearview mirror captured my attention—those eyes looking back at me in the mirror, knowing they were watching as I curved my back and bent my neck to the sprawled body. I had read his anticipation, his willingness to wait until it was his turn.

What if . . . others found out? Ah, he was concerned about my reputation. He had carried his own secret: his daughter, my half sister. I had found out about her years earlier while searching for socks in his dresser drawer. A photograph I had never seen of an older girl who looked like me. Why was she hidden? “Who is she?” I had asked my mother. But all I got was her stony silence and the purse of her lips: “Go ask your father.”
I felt my father leave my bed, heard the door open, then close softly. And then the angry whispers of my mother. She had sent him in to question, to reprimand, to punish, and waited outside the door listening. Hearing her anger, her frustration, I felt that same exhilaration, that sense of power I had experienced in the back of the Jeep. I was becoming someone she couldn’t understand, couldn’t control. Someone worth her notice.

The next day, I vowed to my friend that I would do it again. I had already made plans to sneak out that night—there was a dance I’d been invited to. Then my father’s voice carrying over the neighborhood. I left the swing, my friend’s yard and walked down the road, the hot sand sifting against my bare feet. There wasn’t a warning in my head. I replayed the conversation with my friend, smiled at his astonishment, how his face reddened—all of it was a story to me, something to relive, a chance to watch how others reacted to my stories. A mark on the timeline of my memory; an entry in my green notebook.

When I entered the house I found Mother sitting in the living room. It was summer, but she had a fire going. She had one of my notebooks in her hand.

“Go get your other notebooks,” she said.

I walked through my sisters’ room and then into my room. My green notebook that I had updated that morning was gone. I grabbed what was there, never thinking to hold one back.

Back in the living room I watched her feed each notebook to the flames.

*
The passing years have created enough distance, so that this memory has a cinematic feel. Now when I remember entering that room, it feels emptied of things, as if cleared to set the stage for what was about to happen. There is only my mother sitting with her back to me on a chair placed in the middle of the room. Hearing me enter, and without turning, she makes her demand and I obediently turn. As I watch myself walk toward my room, I am angered by my obedience. But I am stifled by chronology: my too-late warning is hurled at the page, but goes unheard. Even in this reenactment, the action must move forward: I do as she commanded. I return to the room and stand next to her, my hand closing around the top rung of the chair. I watch as she bends over, picks up a notebook and feeds it to the flames.

Once, when this memory was replayed, there was a new sensation—a tingling along the back of my neck—that loosened time’s chronological constraints so that I was able to turn away from the fire and look behind me, and there was my father in the corner of the room, his arms folded across his chest, watching.

But that is as far as I can go. What happened next? Did my mother say something to me? Did she tell me why? Did my father?

And the next day? Over the following weeks and months, how did we maneuver around each other?

I search her diary, but it offers nothing.

I have lived with this memory a long time. My mother’s diaries have been in my possession for years, spread open on my writing table, available at my whim. There is a
fire in the woodstove. How quickly the brittle paper would burn, in just seconds too late for me to rescue them. Does my mother suspect my thoughts? Is that the reason for her pause on the phone, the silence as I wait to hear if she will send more?

But my father’s appearance causes me to pause. Why is he there? His presence seems to indicate his support of my mother’s actions. His crossed arms keep me from seeking his help and comfort. Why didn’t he step in and stop her? Perhaps he knew of the other mother I am discovering in her diary. At night when he came home from work and rescued her from the hot kitchen and, leaving us children behind, walked with her around the block, he listened as she told him what frightened her: I am so bushed too often . . . just too tired all the time. I’m aware of my negativism with Natalie esp. and then I wonder why she acts so badly! I am very sarcastic and the Holy Spirit is longing to make me exemplify patience and love.

How could I burn her diaries? They are sometimes my only access to the secret parts of her.
Here are My Scars, My Memories of Tennessee

I.

I awake in the dark. I am on a bed high off the floor. My father appears and whispers “Happy Birthday!” I am five.

I try to remember what came before: supper the previous evening, the sounds of my sisters shifting in their beds before they fell asleep. What is beyond the darkness of that room? It is as if on the morning of February 11, 1973, the morning I turned five, everything—my family, myself, those bunk beds—was conjured from the darkness that edges what came before.

And what happened after my father whispered his birthday wish? My memory's eye roams and stands on the edge of that darkness, looking to see what was beyond, but there is no birthday scene: a festively lighted room, presents piled on a table, a smiling me in the place of honor while Mother leads my sisters in the singing of the birthday song. Instead, my memory jumps ahead several months: my father and I walk along the sidewalk toward kindergarten. It could be September or October since there is the remembered feel of a coat's sleeves on my arms. We arrive at an intersection and wait for a woman wearing a bright orange vest with slashing lines across the front to signal to us. As we step off the curb to enter the crosswalk, my father reaches down and takes my hand. As I move through this memory, I turn and look at the woman: her whistle is gripped between her lips, her arm raised, her hand holding traffic in place as my father and I move closer to the sidewalk, and I realize that I carry a future memory about her: my parents reading aloud the article about her death in this very spot, when a driver
ignored her whistle, her body’s commands.

And then, my mother and I are in an office; I am being scolded. I am holding something against my ear. I am upset, but must promise that I will never again lean back in my chair. Have I learned my lesson? Yes, I nod, remembering the hitch in my chest when my feet left the floor, the dull ache as my head hit the chair behind, the fascination when I learned there was blood behind my ear from a tiny cut where the skin had split.

II.

I spring from the darkness of what came before on the pages of my Grandmother Sibyl's 1973 diary. I find my name, along with my sister’s, in the year’s third entry: *Girls (Wendy and Natalie) at Carney's . . .*—our names dropped amongst the goings on of the previous day. There is such a sense of familiarity on my grandmother’s part—notice how she drops the name Carney’s without introducing them on the page—I feel I should remember something. After all, I spent the night at their home, and she doesn’t document that my sister or I were upset when we were picked up. I say “the Carneys” aloud, just as she wrote it in the entry, hoping the sound of the name might trigger a remembrance. Were they strangers? Was I upset at being left with them? I don’t remember, and eventually this doesn’t matter for reading my grandmother’s observations, written between January 3, when my name first appears in her handwriting, and February 11, 1973, the morning of my fifth birthday, alters the boundaries of my remembered past. Her observations are signposts that allow my memory’s eye to plumb the darkness of what came before: I am able to shelter my earliest memory within a physical place so
that I awaken in the dark atop my bunk bed in the Chattanooga apartment (that, she observed, had no cupboards or closets) my family had been renting (for $60 a month) since January. And when I read that our apartment was two blocks from school, and even though she never mentioned the name, I imagine my father, having dropped me off at the kindergarten door, walking down the sidewalk toward Tennessee Temple University where he attended classes. And now I remember: we were in Tennessee so my father could attend seminary school.

So, before Chattanooga, my family had been somewhere else. But where? Grandmother never names it, but she alludes to it: while we were moving into the apartment, in those early days of January 1973, my mother announced she was pregnant (and very sick, Grandmother wrote). Here is a process that started before the year began, before my earliest memory. These words allow memory to travel farther back, past the signposts I’ve already explored, searching for scenes, images, scents, emotions—details I might have noticed, but had forgotten. But there are only imagined possibilities: the packing up of our lives in that unnamed place. Did Mother suspect her pregnancy then? Had she missed a period in the days before we left, but assumed it was only the stress of the move? Or had there been a moment, in the midst of packing up the bedding or when reaching to pull bowls from a cupboard, when she paused and the realization crossed her mind—that her next child would be born in Tennessee? And then the dreamy look, a flutter of her hands near her stomach, a moment my much younger self could have caught and tucked away into the recesses of my earliest memory.
III.

My mother has gifted me a much earlier memory. Whenever I look closely at my face and my eyes linger on the spot where the scar is now buried in the deep lines that bracket my mouth, I remember the pain in her voice when she told me how I’d scratched myself. Perhaps I had called her and she had heard her newborn grandson screaming as I told her how I had clipped his nails then sucked on the spot where the clippers bit into his flesh. Still it bled and bled and he screamed and screamed. Perhaps the panic in my voice took her so quickly and immediately back she was reliving my screams and her need to tell me welled up so fast and furious that the story just came out: when I was an infant, she'd noticed how long my nails were, but was afraid to clip them—against my small fingers, the clipper seemed menacing. Plus, touching my nails she'd noticed they were flexible, thin like paper.

I don't remember the sting at the tip of my finger, the soreness of my throat as I screamed. And she has never mentioned the tremble in her arms as she scooped me up and tucked my face into her neck, her skin absorbing my hot tears, her chest the pummels from my legs.

That tiny scar on my face is similar in shape and size to the chicken pox mark that dots my daughter’s nose. Could my mother be wrong about her memory?

When I got the chicken pox, I was sent to the mountain to stay with my great-grandmother and Grandpa Jim in Monteagle, Tennessee. Their place seemed a world away from Chattanooga. A former schoolteacher in the 1920s and 30s, my great-grandmother was determined that I not fall behind on my schoolwork. At night, after
Grandpa Jim had come home from barbering and we'd eaten, we sat at the dining room table and she flashed subtraction and addition cards or we played dominoes and she encouraged me to count and add the dots of each tile. I felt special, the center of attention, a feeling that courses through my body and triggers this memory: I'm on the back porch of their gray house surrounded by people. They are seated in chairs pushed up against the house. There are sounds of people walking back and forth or talking in the kitchen on the other side of the screened door. There aren't distinct, individual family features, but I feel the presence of Grandmother Sibyl and Grandpa Harvey and my mother's numerous cousins and their broods of children, and my siblings sitting behind me or on the grass down below, looking up, watching for me. I loved standing on the edge of that porch and looking out over the yard and the fields behind, and letting my eyes follow the dirt road that snaked between the tall grass and all the way to Great-aunt Mary and Great-uncle Sam’s house, where pigs lay slopping in the yard. And there came that desire to step back until my back was pressed against the wall, then take off running and fling myself into the air. I hung there, my arms opened wide to take it all in, then tucked in my arms and willed myself back to earth.

IV.

This is how I remember: first the sting of the burn that turns into a bone-deep throbbing as I cradled my hand against my chest. Next, my father’s naked back and his frantic voice, “What should I put on it?” And then an image of my grandmother in her nurse’s uniform standing in her kitchen, her phone’s receiver against her ear as she scans
her professional memory and the counter’s surface looking for the right solution.

And then, there is the anticipation that had earlier coursed my body and caused the tingling in my bladder and an almost-escaped giggle that I stifled as I quietly pulled the chair into place behind my father. I search my hand looking for some mark that represents the black and scorched, puffy skin that covered the surface of the hand I tucked close to my chest. My father had been standing at the stove making a bowl of oatmeal. As I quietly climbed onto the chair, I could already see my flight, could feel his body jerk forward against the stove as I landed against his back, laughing into his bare skin, my arms flung around his neck to hold me there. I could feel his arms slipping around to hold me there, the shift of his hips against my thighs when he stepped away from the stove’s hot surface to let me slide down his back until my feet touched the floor. But this time when I was midair, he stepped aside while stirring his cereal. I remember seeing this, remember responding to the realization that I was falling by putting out my arm. My hand stuck to the red burner. My hip banged against the top of the stove.

Looking at my hand, I expect some marker—a patch of discoloration on my palm—that proves this memory. But there is only a thin line on the inside of my second finger that doesn’t remind me of a burn, but of sharp pieces of sticks and rocks.

V.

There is a photo taken of my family: me and four of my siblings crowded together, posed in front of our mother and father. We are barefoot; some of us bare legged in shorts or dresses. The baby slung on our mother’s hip wears a diaper, and the brother
standing in front with his eyes squeezed close wears only white training pants. Our father is still in his work uniform—dark gray work shirt and pants. Our mother is wearing a green dress with white stripes and loafers without socks. One of my sisters looks to the left, as if smiling at someone outside the camera’s view and I’m looking in the opposite direction, my mouth partially open, a bulge behind my lower lip as if my tongue has settled there. Everyone else looks toward the camera. Perhaps our friends stand near the picture taker watching us, waiting for it all to be over, and restless, I made a face at one of them.

I try to cram all eight of us into that small Chattanooga apartment. Impossible. Even though in the picture we are held in place, I feel the energy of that group. I imagine the minutes before we were posed for the camera: my mother inside hurriedly brushing her hair before grabbing up the baby and heading out into the yard. Her voice calls to us, brings us from around the back of the . . . not the Chattanooga apartment, but the gray house on Dower Road in Tiftonia . . . or from the woods across the street.

With the camera’s click we scatter. I take off with my friends, out to the end of the driveway, and across the dirt road, not looking back to see which little ones were following, fearful I’d be told to take the baby or keep an eye on the smaller kids. I run into the woods, ignoring the pain of toes stubbed on rocks, the branches of trees pulling at my clothes and hair, poking and scraping me. Always I was running, my hand rubbing the pain in my side, pushing my body faster. Rejoining the game of hide and seek, knowing kids were scattered throughout the woods, I imagined them lying in wait for me, then jumping out at me, and with the anticipation came a gasping giggle that I tried to
hold in, and the feel of warm urine running down my legs, the sting as it spread across one of my bloody scrapes.

In the tub at night, my mangled toes were scrubbed clean, and my legs, no longer streaked with dirt and dried urine, were covered with newly bleeding sores. On the water’s surface floated fat ticks pulled from my scalp. When my mother turned to add more hot water or position one of the babies, I squished the ticks’ tight bodies and watch their blood mingle with mine.

VI.

There is so much I have been reminded of by reading my great-grandmother’s diary; events not captured in our faces that stare back at the camera:

Thursday, November 10, 1977: A memorable day!! Our Harvey had a bad “black out” in Don’s Drug Store. (im) and I helped Sibby get him to hospital in Alamatont . . . he had the pallor of death, so very, very sick . . . Sibby watched her dear one die all day from 10 a.m. until about 5:00 p.m. He passed away in Dr. Littell’s office on way to diagnostic hospital in Chattanooga.

By the time my family posed for that picture, Grandpa Harvey had been dead for several months and Grandmother had left for Florida.

In a couple turns of the diary’s pages, my family will leave Tennessee and move to Georgia.
VII.

In memory, always the press of my siblings against me. I look at that picture, hear the click of the camera and something else happens: I take the baby from our mother and, leaving the parents held by the camera, walk away. My siblings follow me out of that picture and across time (several months) and geography (the state lines of Tennessee, Alabama, and finally Georgia). Bodies bump against me when I stop. We form a small crowd on the carport of our house in Camilla, Georgia—me, the eldest, pushed forward where I face off with John Cox. The dust is settling around us. He had ridden his bike into our driveway, slammed on his brakes just before he reached the carport, spraying rocks and dirt. He'd called us hillbillies, or white trash, something he'd overheard his parents say as they watched from their house or corner of their yard as we pulled into the driveway and began unloading—shocked as we, all six of us, one after another, slowly emerged from the back of our station wagon. We’d stood around the car as our father cut the ropes that secured the crates of chickens, pheasants, and a pair of peacocks to the top of the station wagon. They had squawked at first, but the heat and the constant wind blowing against the cages had worn them down days before. They were listless. The shit they’d released had dried onto the top of the car, had been smeared on the windows when we rolled them up and down. Now, days later, it didn't matter to John Cox that the birds had been tucked away, out of sight, in the back yard or that I could point to the station wagon and show him that the bird shit that had spattered and dried had been scraped off.

I was still that girl who, days earlier, had sat in the driver's seat of the station wagon parked in the back yard in Tiftonia, watching my father appearing from around the front
of the house carrying wooden crates—making several trips to gather the birds he had kept in the cleared spot across the dirt road. Still fresh in my mind was being part of that crowd of kids that roamed the woods, the junkyard, being one in a pack of bodies rushing back and forth across the yard playing a game of kickball. But now, surrounded by my brothers and sisters, I was the leader. Adrenaline built when I'd heard the words from this boy and felt the anticipation from the crowd around me—the flush of anger caused my skin to become clammy. My memory still resided in that other place, hadn't yet shifted its loyalties to this place where new memories would be created and crowd those that were still fresh enough to pull that wildness and grit I'd developed, so that, gripping the baby tightly, and tightening my jaw I threatened John Cox. “You say that again and I'll knock you off that bike!”

VIII.

I have a scar on my left knee—about two inches long and an inch wide. I got it a few months before we moved; I imagine it was still tender to the touch when we arrived in Georgia. One of the Tennessee boys laid down his challenge, daring me to tie my racing bike to his and ride down the steep road. I hesitated: my bike was too big for me and the brakes were iffy. But I’d been practicing my dismount—jumping clear of the frame so I wouldn’t straddle it and landing well out of its path. Accepting his dare, I tied the rope to my handlebars and then to the back of his bike and we took off out of the driveway and down the hill, picking up speed as we neared the curve. I hooted and hollered, loving the feel of the wind rushing by. But without a signal, the boy turned, and the rope tightened,
then snapped, jerking the bike enough to fling it around and send me over its handlebars.

I can’t bear to have it touched. Used to be that my children wanted to run their fingers over the pink shiny swoosh while asking about my childhood. But I imagine their fingers will punch through, go deep into the gaping hole and find the deep recesses of Tennessee dirt and gravel that was buried beneath the dark thread that stitched the edges together.

IX.

I was seventeen when I first suspected that Grandpa Harvey was not my “real” grandfather. It was hard to grasp at first. When we lived in Tennessee and my parents announced a trip to the mountain, to my grandparents’ house, I imagined the white house with the wrap around porch, and my grandmother at the kitchen counter making bread. When we arrived, we kids stormed into the kitchen for hugs, and pieces of dough, then were shooed out. We left our mother and grandmother talking and ran into the living room where there was the feel of leather under our fingertips and the quieting of carpet under our running feet and the slam of the screen door and the pounding of feet down porch steps and the uumph and boom as one of us, skipping the steps, flew off the porch and landed, then scrambled up to lead the way around the side of the house. Squeals as we tumbled and rolled down the hill to Grandpa Harvey's workshop. Up and down the hill we went, until there was the sound of the telephone ringing inside his workshop and a squeak as Grandpa Harvey left his chair and came to the door. Dinner was ready. He called to us kids, picking up whatever baby was there and telling the rest of us to follow him if we were hungry.
At night there were bonfires and Great-aunt Mary and Great-uncle Sam playing guitars and singing. Me and my cousins and siblings rolled down the hill or chased the flash of fireflies, and ran toward the glow of Grandpa Harvey's cigarette far away from the bonfire and singing.

He seemed to enjoy watching us, as if he preferred us to the adults.

A few days after he died, I gave in to an enormous cry at school, was sent home and Mother allowed me to go to bed to mourn. I cried again at piano lesson when my teacher reprimanded me for not practicing. How easy to dredge up the tears and explain that I hadn’t been able to concentrate or practice since I’d learned of my grandfather’s death. The teacher sent me away, out of the room to wait for my sister’s lesson to finish.

I first heard my Grandfather Harold’s name when I was seventeen and spending the summer with my grandmother in Oregon. Oscar, her third husband, had died, and she’d invited me to be her traveling companion. One day she and I were in the back of my uncle’s car: Grandmother was sitting behind the passenger's seat, behind my aunt, her eldest daughter, and I was sitting behind my uncle who was driving. Out of the blue Grandmother said, “He should have gotten help before he died. If he’d just gotten help it would have been so different.” She was looking out the window, as if something outside had caught her eye and triggered her memory. “Poor Harold, if only he’d gotten help!”

My aunt didn't move, but there was a tightening at the back of her neck that made me sit quietly—something was happening. And then . . . I will never forget how she turned stiffly, as if the effort of holding herself together had caused her neck to tighten, and in a
voice quiet, controlled, my aunt cautioned her mother that she’d said enough! She was never to talk about her father like that again. When my aunt turned away, I sank deeper into the corner of the seat and hoped neither woman would notice me, would forget I was there. If this Harold were my aunt’s father, did that mean he was my mother’s too? There was a familiar tingling in my bladder caused by my nervousness, my expectation—I had been in this situation before, moments in Tennessee when the conversation stopped upon my entrance into a room and I felt something had just been said and that it still floated above the heads of the adults on clouds of memory—an answer that I couldn’t quite grasp.

As the silence grew between mother and daughter, I felt my grandmother’s body slouch and then sag against the seat.

I had been a witness to something . . . but what?

X.

My mother has a scar, a red gash thicker and rougher and longer than any of mine and so deep it will forever mark her back. I try to imagine how it came to be on her back: How does someone fall to get a scar like that? Impossible. It has been there since she had heart surgery at seven; it was there on her back in Tennessee, but it is tied to my memories of Camilla—rising out of the back of her bathing suit as she lay sunning by the pool or when walking away from me. It must have served as a trigger of someone’s much earlier memories—my grandmother would certainly have recognized it. Or Great-grandmother who might have seen it while we were swimming at the lake one of our last
days before we moved. It could have easily been an added detail in that day’s diary entry: *I went to Grundy Co. Lake with Lee and kids. When Lee removed her shirt to go in the water, I saw the scar. My, what that young girl went through! I really had a ball in the water!*

Had she gotten used to seeing it? Perhaps she had memories of when it freshly slashed the tender skin of her granddaughter’s small back, its ugly redness something she worked to put out of her mind.

No one ever asked me, *See that scar on your mother’s back?* I have no memory of my eyes searching my mother’s body until it was stopped by that gash, of a voice saying *She got that when she was a young girl. She was born with a leaky valve in her heart and had to have surgery to fix it. Before the surgery, she had a hard time catching her breath, wasn’t able to play like the other kids. She was always trailing behind, begging them to wait up.* My young self, remembering her own visits to the hospital and the accompanying sigh of her mother, turns away from the scar and toward that voice and asks: *Who took her to the hospital?*

And here again is where what I now know fits into the blank spots of memory and helps me create a possibility: Maybe if this conversation had happened, my great-grandmother would have nonchalantly said, *Your grandmother and grandfather,*” and there would have been an image of Grandpa Harvey. But she might instead have said *her mother and father,* and my young girl self would have turned to her and asked, to keep the story going, *Grandpa Harvey?* And that is when she might have said, *No, your Grandpa Harold.* And *that* would have been the first time I heard his name.
XI.

I almost skipped the scar on my hip. Years ago it was pink, a puckered mark on the smoothness of my skin. Now I am amazed to find it amongst the silvery stretch marks that map my hips. Wasn't it higher when I was younger?

It reminds me of my mother’s sigh when she opened the door to find me bleeding again. There it is—that sound of frustration. How were they going to pay for this hospital visit? Had she given birth to my brother in the back of the station wagon, by this time? Had I received the stitches in my knee, yet? Was this another hospital trip in just a couple of months?

In the bathroom, my resourceful mother eyed my wound, then cleaned off the area, and folded into neat squares an old cloth-diaper that she taped to my hip. She patted it—good as new! Except it wasn’t and when I went to school, it began to bleed through the folded diaper and my clothing. I was sent to the nurse, and stood before her with my skirt pulled up and the seam of my panties pulled aside so she could look. She shook her head when she saw the diaper; I heard her shock, tinged with annoyance, when she muttered, “You should have had stitches!” I remained quiet, remembering my mother’s sigh. After my bicycle accident, when the doctor said I couldn’t get my stitches wet, Mother, when we were camping and I was fussing that I wanted to go swimming, wrapped my knee in plastic bread bags and sent me out into the water. And when we got chest colds, she coated our chests with a mustard plaster and wrapped us tightly in an old towel or diaper. Over all of that, she wrapped plastic bread bags and tied them off at the ends. When we awoke the cloth had soaked up the plaster—it was miserably wet and cold and the
sweating plastic bag caused our skin to itch. But our coughs were gone, our breathing clear.

Something stopped me from bragging to that nurse that we kids were just as resourceful.

The click of that camera and we kids head off and take a left out of the driveway and up the hill to the junkyard. We drag items from the landfill to use in play: stacked up mattresses used as a trampoline. Somehow I slipped, fell off the pile, and landed on the shards of a busted liquor bottle.
Learning To Read In Camilla

Who influenced you?

I remember the heavy feel of books in my arms as I walked across the marbled linoleum floor toward the big desk at the Camilla Public Library. Hours earlier, feelings of familiarity and belonging had coursed my body when I entered the children’s room. I was reading my way through the collection. Each time I returned, I would find the spot where I had last taken books from the shelves and begin there, my finger skimming each spine until artwork or a title caught my interest. That is how I had discovered the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, The Bobbsey Twins, Sherlock Holmes, Caddie Woodlawn, and the Ingalls family.

But that day, while following the curve of the bookcase, I found myself turning the corner and standing at the end of an aisle of unfamiliar shelves. They went on aisle after aisle after aisle and were many shelves taller than my head. It was gloomier in this area, not bright and comforting like the children’s section. Here the line of shelves blocked the light from the window at the far end of the room. I stepped into the aisle and began again to scan the spines. I peeked to the left, down the length of the aisle, then turned and looked at the shelves behind me, and there came such a sense of anticipation—all those books waiting for me.

As I walked toward the big desk, I imagined my afternoon. Which title would I take to the pool, leave behind on my spread-out towel while I plunged into the cold water? Forever Amber or Flowers in the Attic? Which book would be awaiting me, its cover absorbing the heat, the drops of water from my wet hair? Gone with the Wind? Oh
Beulah Land? Glowing with anticipation, I piled the load on the counter in front of the librarian.

In memory she is always seated behind the desk waiting for me, but my remembered anticipation has blurred any physical description—perhaps a woman with dark hair that fit like a cap on her head. Red lipstick. Glasses? Probably, but I’m a librarian and aware of the stereotypes—did she wear them at the end of a chain? I don’t remember a disapproving glance as she restacked my pile of books, but her white hand is there on the top of the pile, and there is the wrinkled skin around her wrists and along the inside of her arm near her elbow.

Had she watched from behind the desk as I left the children’s section and entered the fiction section? Perhaps she had left her chair intending to reach me and ask, as she ushered me out of the aisle and pushed me toward the juvenile area—May I help you find a book to read?—but other patrons arrived and kept her at her desk. So she sat, waiting for me, and then went through the ritual of stacking my books before telling me she would hold them for me until I got permission from my parents to check them out.

In my collection of earliest memories are moments with books: I am sitting in the back of our station wagon. I look up and see the back of my parents’ heads; I feel my siblings and piles of books crowding me on the seat. We’ve been to the flea market and my pile of used books is protectively stacked near my feet on the floor. Excitedly I reach down for a book and begin to read, even though I know it will make me sick. After our last trip to the flea market, I had spent the rest of the afternoon lying on the couch trying to sleep.
Later, my dreams were filled with images from the books, distorted, shimmering, swaying, causing my stomach to roil and my skin to become clammy.

Our mother read to us in the early afternoons. She called me and my sisters, scrubbed our hands and faces, then led us to her bedroom where we climbed onto her bed and she sat in a nearby chair. She read *Light From Heaven* with the saintly mother who prays for her children and her sinful husband who drank and terrorized his family. We cried about the drunk and angry father beating his son Joseph, and were horrified when Joseph and his siblings received a lump of coal for Christmas. But Mother’s voice remained steady and finally we fell silent, on the verge of sleep. At the end of the chapter, she closed the book, checked and smoothed our blankets, then tiptoed out, closing the door quietly behind her.

Memory skips years and there is that moment in the Camilla Public Library. Someone must have granted permission, for when I remember my younger self leaving the building her arms are filled with books, and the days that spread in front of her are filled with quiet afternoons tucked away in her room reading. I didn’t share a room; my own room was something Mother thought I should have as the oldest child and a soon-to-be teenager. I stayed in there for hours, reveling in the fulfillment of my desire to be alone.

When it was my turn with the porn novel that Jess brought to school, I rode the bus home with the book hidden in my stack of school books and planned my afternoon: I would enter the house and greet my mother, spend the appropriate amount of time talking about my day, quickly do my chores, and then announce that I had homework, and quietly fade into my room. I had been anticipating this moment ever since word spread
amongst us sixth graders that Jess was willing to let anyone interested borrow his
brother’s pornographic novel. Perhaps I should have feigned indifference, acted grossed
out and horrified like some of the other girls. But I had discovered romance novels over
the summer, had spent hours in my bedroom poring over the love scenes trying to
understand the flowery descriptions that caused my face to flush, my breasts to tighten. I
craved specifics: what went where? Shut away in my room, I read the porn novel over
and over until my eyes hurt and my mind was exhausted, sexually battered—penises,
pussies, titties, asses, fingers and tongues—finally, words not hidden in the flowery
details. Finally, fingers inserted in slick orifices, squirming hips that created a pleasant
friction, the smacking sounds of wet lips.

When called out of my room to perform some chore or to watch my younger siblings,
I took a few minutes to clear my mind of the images, to hide my flushed cheeks, the
arousal in my eyes. (Mother once told me she could read my thought by looking into my
eyes.) I hid the pornography under my mattress. And that’s where I began my searches
when I babysat or spent the night with a friend. I became expert at locating other
people’s pornography: under their mattresses, in their nightstands, behind the toilet.
While babysitting, I took the magazines to a spot in the house where I could hear the
parents’ return, and when the headlights flashed against the wall, I hurriedly tucked my
panties back into place and ran to replace the stash where I had found it. When they
entered the house, they found me sleeping on the couch with a library book spread across
my chest, my breathing deep and regular.
My girlfriend’s brother didn’t bother hiding his magazines. When I spent the night with his sister, we would grab a couple off his bedroom floor and take them to her room where we read them leisurely while sitting on her bed with her big pillows behind our backs, and her bedroom door closed. The fantasy letters were our favorite. Since I was the better reader she encouraged me to read them aloud, until my voice cracked and, letting the magazine slip from my hand, our mouths and fingers began to stray on each other.

I don’t know how my father felt about my reading, and Mother and I never discussed books. They never asked what I was doing in my room. Still, there was always my Sunday morning guilt. I sat in the pew at church and offered my own prayer: I know what I did was wrong; cleanse my soul, take away my impure thoughts. Lead me, guide me . . . amen. After church and our Sunday dinner, I went to my room and read, not the romance novels or the porn, but the Christian novels of my childhood, trying to recapture the innocence when I was young and scrubbed clean and sat on my mother’s bed. For an afternoon, I could forget my guilt over reading sex stuff that caused me to touch myself, that caused me to search through the private belongings of others. There was passion in the Christian novels, but it was purer, based on cleanliness of spirit. I liked to imagine I was the virginal daughter in Papa’s Wife being pursued by a man attracted to her innocence. But the virginal heroines reminded me of my mother. I felt her presence outside my closed door, knew that she was cleaning house or baking bread or watching my brothers. When I left my room, my mind was filled with stories about young women
who went to college and had careers. Who met men that they were sexually attracted to and had sex with before they married. I hadn’t heard much about my parents’ romance, except that my mother was a virgin and that my father wasn’t. He was the experienced one, had already fathered a child. Like the males in the Christian novels, he needed her virginity to purify his soul.

Some of my girlfriends wished for nothing more than marrying their high school sweetheart, getting a job with the company or the city where one of their parents worked, and buying farm land out near Newton. But for me, an imagined future in Camilla had me working long shifts at Cagle’s Foods, the local chicken processing factory, my hair tucked into a hairnet. At the end of my shifts, I would go home to my double-wide trailer with concrete blocks for steps and a bare patch of dirt for a yard where I would sit in a lawn chair after work in my housedress and slippers and watch the child (a bastard child born while I was in high school) play with the dog that was chained to a nearby tree.

I dreamed of running away to the big city, and living on the streets like Debbie or Sherri or Kari or Patti in John Benton’s Young Adult Christian novels. Always practical, I wondered how I would support myself. Turn tricks like Patti? Steal cars like Sherri? Since I didn’t know much about stealing cars, I decided on prostitution—getting paid for sex seemed better than dealing drugs or stealing.

Benton’s novels didn’t hide the dangers of street living. I imagined myself hungry and desperate, afraid. I could imagine a moment when I longed for the quiet of my former small town life. But all that danger was forgotten when the story’s heroine was
rescued by the earnest young minister (I always imagined Pat Boone who played the young, handsome minister in the movie *The Cross and the Switchblade*), who works amongst them with only his convictions as protection. He wants to show these girls the path to salvation and restore their spiritual virginity. With breathless anticipation, I imagined the rescuer entering a room and noticing a young, attractive woman. At first he takes her as a visitor, but when she raises her head and looks at him, there is something familiar. She walks forward shyly, her hand held out to take his in gratitude, and he is struck dumb when he realizes it is . . . Suzie the former drug addict or Tammy the stripper or Clarice who has been released from jail for forgery. She has been made beautiful and eventually they fall in love and she joins her new husband in his ministry to help others like her.

These stories held such possibilities for my future. I imagined that as long as I wasn’t killed by my pimp or sent to prison to serve a long-term sentence, I could have that moment. Perhaps on a rainy, cold night I will stumble to the opened door of a church and slip inside. Hearing singing, I find my way to a pew, and sit. But only a few minutes—my spirit is moved by old memories and I stumble to the front of the church to be rescued. What a celebration when I’m brought before the congregation to tell my story—the tears, the shouts of “amen” and “hallelujah.” I would be welcomed back into the fold. And always misty eyed when I imagined the joyful reunion with my parents who I had deserted years earlier, leaving only a note as I slipped out the window and into a waiting car.
I could join the ministry. I could take my story on the road, travel with an international ministry organization. Why not? Mission work was part of my heritage: my mother’s cousins were missionaries for New Tribes Missions and their work was often described in the organization’s magazine, *Brown Gold*. In the 1950s, my great-grandmother and Grandpa Jim went to seminary school, and moved to Alaska to teach in the villages. My father is a graduate of seminary school. I could go to missionary school, then travel overseas to teach The Word. I could write about my experiences. Become famous, a well-known Christian celebrity. Get out of Georgia.

What is the career path to becoming a prostitute? How about being a tease in high school? At school, I spread the word about my availability, hinted at my skills: using the language and themes I’d read in the fantasy letters in the pornography magazines, I pointed at my wide mouth, alluded to my advanced gag reflex, my physical endurance—did they think I ran only because it was good for me?

A note passed in class from N and D described what they wanted. They watched as I read it, saw me roll my eyes. I waited until after class when the halls were filled and there were other boys, N and D’s football teammates, near their lockers, then sauntered over and explained that their desires were juvenile, that I had already gone beyond their expectations. I would be wasting my skills on them. Did they really think they could handle it? I timed my delivery perfectly, more pleased by the reaction of the other boys—the jostling, the shoulder slapping, the “Daaaaammmnnn boys, what you gonna’ do with that?”—and the red, embarrassed looks of N and D.
That weekend they called me and laid down their own challenge: Now was the time to quit being a tease—either I put out that afternoon, or I shut up at school.

It was an opportunity to practice: I lay on the bed and took N first. He was good looking and self-assured, but at that moment he was a project, a test. I needed to experience sex as an act—sort of like brushing my teeth. I offered my body much as I would have offered my already used toothbrush. I don’t remember the sex, but the room’s details: white filmy curtains at the windowed door, and near the bed a door ajar so that I remember the corner of the sink, a trash can on the floor.

I waited for my next trick to enter. Always less confident than N, D was hesitant. He fumbled out of his shorts before jumping quickly onto the bed next to me. He probed his way into me, apologizing with each jab. His nervousness was distracting; I couldn’t concentrate. Was it okay if I just lay there, or did he want me to move a certain way? I wondered. Did he prefer me being quiet? If I was noisy, would it take his mind off his nervousness? Soon bored with the experiment, I lost my focus and found myself thinking instead of my sister hissing when I told her where I was going. “Don’t shame yourself,” she’d said, as if she already knew what was going to happen. “Had my reputation reached her ears? Or had her boyfriend been in the crowd of football players that heard my challenge to N and D, and he’d told her? I’d been surprised by her response, but only shrugged before I walked out of the house and drove to the designated place. Was she, I wondered, sitting in the living room waiting for me to get home? Would she be interested in knowing that N hadn’t been a surprise, he’d approached sex as he did everything else in life, expecting that he would get what he wanted? But poor D had
been a mess. There’d been a slight hitch in his breathing when he finished, and since N hadn’t made any noise, I looked over, wondering if I’d find him crying. But he kept his back to me as he dressed and left the room.

I had no shame when it came to my sexuality, and as I drove home, I realized I’d given them both something to talk about in the locker room the next day. And if either boy left that room thinking that telling what had happened would ruin my reputation or cause me shame, then I had successfully tricked them into playing a role in my plan. I’d given them a story they could spread, and when it reached the ears of my sister, and she accosted me, told me I was ruining her life, that she just wished I would go away, I could only respond with surprised silence. Didn’t she feel trapped? Didn’t she long to be banished from Camilla? And my ruined reputation . . . wouldn’t that enhance my salvation story?

*

I had read about foreign places in *Brown Gold*, had admired their exotic people on the magazine’s covers. The congregation of Southside Baptist Church, where my family worshiped, prayed for and financially supported foreign missionaries—whenever they were on furlough, they stopped by the church to show slides and tell their stories. Foreigners were familiar to me—they were the people I longed to save.

When I turned sixteen and began driving, at first I followed the familiar route to the library: past church, then a left on Harney, then a right into the library’s parking lot. One day I didn’t turn on Harney. Curious and able to map my own route, I kept going for a couple of blocks, as if I were driving toward my father’s work or the ball field where we
spent our summer evenings, my sisters, mother, and I on softball teams, my father watching our games, my brothers playing in the dirt. But instead of driving across the track to the ball field, I turned when I noticed a road, was curious to see if I could get to the library that way. I turned and found myself in a neighborhood unfamiliar to me, even though I had lived in Camilla for six years, had all those years attended a church a couple of blocks away. This became my route to the library. I began driving slowly, looking for familiar faces, slowing when I recognized two black boys from school. Eventually they came to recognize my parents’ car; eventually they flagged me down. I sat in the car with the window rolled down and talked with M and S. Where do you live? I asked. But they deflected my questions, began laughing and talking with people passing by.

When, I wonder, did my younger self notice that she had never seen a black person at the library? Or that when she imagines her afternoon at the pool all of the swimmers splashing around her are white? Did it come to her as she lay stretched out on her towel, her body lazy from the heat, but her mind engaged with whatever she was reading that the concession workers, the lifeguards sitting around the pool, and the mothers on their towels watching their children in the baby pool—everyone around her and inside the chain linked fence was white. Even the person standing at the gate who had taken her money then nodded her through the entrance.

And all those times she had walked out of church after service and mingled with the congregation. Just moments earlier they had all sat enthralled as the lights were dimmed and scenes of foreign places played across the screen. And when the lights came on, there were tears on faces, and the rustling of purses and pants pockets as change and bills were
dropped into the passing donation plate. Her father followed suit, putting in his hard
earned money. But outside the church, she became confused. The congregation mingled
and talked to the missionaries, while she stood on the steps and looked to the left, a
couple of blocks where she had secretly been during the week, and realized she didn’t
know where they went to church.

Their world was a world I knew very little about. I went to school with them, but never was
invited over. There were a couple of nights when I slipped into the dark cars that were
parked outside my neighborhood that drove me out to the darkened buildings where
music boomed. Dances at night—hemmed in by hot bodies, by the darkness, by what I
couldn't see. And the next day, even though I had lived there most of my life, I could not
retrace the route, could not figure out where the dance had been held, how to get back
there the next weekend. I had to rely on them—could only enter with their permission.

To our neighbors my family was Yankee. Our arrival from Tennessee was
immediately overlooked whenever someone heard my mother speak—even though she’d
lived most of her life in southern towns, she’d been able to maintain her Oregonian no-
accent, which made her identifiable as someone who didn’t share their history, which she
wasn’t ashamed of—she was proud that we weren’t southern. She was a cultural critic on
the ways of Camilla for her West Coast and Northern relatives. I overheard her tell the
following story many times: When she had returned from attending a church conference
up North, she excitedly told Janet, a young woman who attended our church, that there
had been a beautiful black woman, a singer whose beauty and poise and singing voice
reminded my mother of Janet. I don’t know what my mother expected, but Janet’s
reaction surprised my mother. “I was giving her a compliment,” my mother explained, “but you would have thought I had called her a dirty word!”

And this story about my grandmother that my mother first told me in Camilla, which I took to be a reminder that we came from somewhere else. Working as a nurse in West Virginia in the 1960s, she was asked, What if one of your daughters fell in love with a black man? And her answer was that as long as his heart was white, his skin made no difference to her. It was about his goodness, religion, and not about race. Did her stories mean that we didn’t have to abide by southern rules?

And yet, that look of uncertainty when I asked permission for Dawn to spend the night, a hesitation before she granted permission. Was my mother imagining a silence when Dawn followed me onto the school bus? And when we stepped off at my house, had she watched from the kitchen window, craned her neck to see if the neighbors were watching?

At lunch the following Monday, when Dawn was asked what she’d done that weekend, I waited with anticipation, expecting her to tell them she’d spent the night at my house. I wanted to see their eyes widen when they looked at me, wanted to read in their eyes: Did you really invite a black girl to your house? I had planned to tell Cheryl, in the most casual way, “Did you call Friday night? I couldn’t have come over anyway; Dawn spent the night and we were busy.” I had hoped that she would ask me with surprise what it had been like and would my parents let me do it again.

But Dawn never mentioned spending the night at my house and it only happened that once. Mother never wondered why Dawn never returned, never questioned why I wasn’t
invited to Dawn’s house. I don’t remember anything overtly happening to make Dawn feel unwelcome. I do remember watching with fascination as Dawn placed a shower cap over her glistening curls so, I imagined, the oil wouldn’t stain the pillow cases. Me, her white friend curiously staring, watching her every move. My sniffs, inhales as I took in the chemical smell of her hair. The folded towel handed her that she dutifully accepted, folded and placed under her head.

I could imagine the embarrassment that must have flooded Janet’s face when she grasped the meaning of my mother’s compliment. Janet had told her sister Becky and me about her experience when she was a student at the local public school. That she’d attended public school surprised me. For all the years I’d known them, Janet and Becky were boastfully proud that they attended the private school. But before the private school was built, Janet had attended my school. Once when Janet’s class was at recess, a black male student did something “inappropriate.” She never explained what had happened, just said that word and looked at us, knowingly. I tried to imagine the scene: the dirt ball field right outside the windows of our classroom where my class gathered for recess. I imagined Janet in a group of kids playing kickball. Perhaps when she’d walked toward the kicker’s box a voice hollered out from the back of the field, “Here come that fine white gal! Let’s get her on first!” I could remember the look of revulsion Janet gave Becky when she asked if the boy had touched her. Whatever details Janet told her father later that night were enough. She was immediately enrolled in the private school.
Janet was five or six years older than Becky and me, and hearing her story, I was immediately surprised by how things had changed. Kickball was still the game of choice at recess for my class, but we only lasted a couple innings before the boys began chasing the girls around the playground. Once we were on the other side of the building, away from the eyes at the window, they pulled on our shirts, stretching the material until our bra straps showed. Those of us fortunate enough to wear bras in fifth grade became targets. When we were caught, they wrestled us to the ground, straddled our backs and tried to pop the clasps of our bras. I remembered the feel of hands pulling on my shirt and the sound of tearing as I struggled. I looked behind me at the laughing boys slapping hands in congratulations, and now remembering, see that they were all white. And my girlfriends who quickly followed me and attached themselves to my side to block the eyes of the boys were also white. I couldn’t imagine a black boy ever deliberately acting inappropriately. Had the black boys ever been part of the tag team? Had the white boys ever chased the black girls?

I never told Becky about my forays into the other side of town. Being the only white in that other neighborhood made me aware when they entered ours. Some nights when Becky and I went walking in our neighborhood, we would hear them first—their pounding radios, then the dark cars, windows tinted, they drove slowly past my house. What are they doing here? Becky would hiss. And I, turning my head away, so they wouldn’t see me and stop, explained that they were probably going to the chicken processing plant. Watching their progress, I would make up a reason to go home and,
waiting a few minutes until I was sure Becky had left, drive to the store, planning it just right so that I met them as they picked up a friend or relative from the processing plant across the street.

When I entered the store, they saw me and tipped their head in my direction. We shared a glance, a smile, and I joined them in the aisle and we talked.

When the white workers showed up, I lowered my eyes and tried not to smile too noticeably, not to laugh too loudly.

“We’ll call you,” my black friends said.

When? I had to get the specific time so I could be near the phone, be the one to answer so no one else heard their voices, began to ask questions.

I was like all the other white girls—like them, I never dreamed of getting knocked up by a black boy. That bastard child in my nightmare of never leaving Camilla was always white, never mixed. If I got pregnant with a white boy’s child, it would be bad, but I would still be a white woman in the south.

I had no examples of mixed relationships to follow. In the fiction I created, when I taunted the white boys at school, it never crossed my mind that the black boys ever considered themselves recipients of my attention. And in the fiction I was reading, John Benton’s heroines were always white, and if their pimps and dealers were black or hispanic, they were never saved, so could never be pastors, the rescuers, and therefore appropriate mates. When I discovered pornographic pictures of black males and white females, I cringed as I tried to imagine the petite white body taking the hefty penetration
of the overdeveloped black penis. Closing the magazine, I stared at the cover—the thick, shiny, blacker-than-black skin against her thin, translucent whiteness would leave marks, dark bruises that would never fade. When I was spotted at the dances, the lone white girl flanked by blacks, it was assumed I would fuck anyone. (White girls fucked black boys—they certainly didn’t “make love.”) Finding these pictures elicited a new feeling of discovery—I had uncovered something taboo, the kinkiest form of pornography.

I did leave Camilla, not as a prostitute, or a missionary. The summer I was seventeen, my grandmother invited me to stay with her in Washington. We traveled, staying with relatives in Oregon and California. It was my first time on the West Coast, but it didn’t take me long before I was trying to figure out a way to stay. When my mother called to ask me when I was coming back, I told her I wasn’t—her sister and brother-in-law had offered to let me live with them while I finished high school.

I got a job that fall at Meier & Frank Dept. Store in Portland. During my breaks, I would call Dawn. At first, I was lonely and missed her friendship. I also wanted to share with her my new experiences: over the phone, I tried to describe how race wasn’t an issue at Milwaukie High School. She laughed when I told her I was treated as a foreign exchange student: “But you’re white,” she said. But my accent made me different enough to be treated like a foreigner. When I said I was from Georgia, no one seemed to know where that was.
She and Horse were together. She caught me up on their relationship and what was happening at my former school. And always, at the end of the conversation, “When you coming back? You’re going to graduate with me, right?”

It was becoming harder and harder for me to imagine leaving Oregon.

When she told me she was pregnant and that Horse was excited, that old fear of being stuck came back. But, she didn’t share my fear: she was going to stay in school, graduate. She and Horse might get married. After that, our conversations changed: she wanted to talk about her pregnancy, wasn’t interested in my new friends.

I went back to Camilla after graduation. My fear of getting stuck was gone: I had gotten out. I had a return ticket to Oregon. I had been accepted to Canyonview Bible College in Silverton, Oregon. I would become pure, chaste, would change my ways once I was enrolled, taking classes, living on campus. That summer, I worked in the Piggly Wiggly deli. I had careless, unprotected sex with the grocery manager. There were no visits to the library; I didn’t drive around looking for M and S. I never saw Dawn’s baby.
Prayer Used as Birth Control

Three of us are picking blueberries when my friend announces her sister's pregnancy. I prepare to shout out my condolences, for with her news comes that sense of panic I felt when, at the age of twenty-two, the clinic aide patted my arm and offered me her congratulations then stopped and asked, “This is good news, right?” But my friend is excited to be an aunt—has already gone out and bought baby things—underlying her excitement is a tone of relief. Married for several years and in her mid-thirties, the sister had been trying to get pregnant, but after suffering a miscarriage her family wondered if it would ever happen.

When my friends casually mention they are ready to have children, now that they are past the age of thirty, when they talk about their birth control methods or their money-saving plans for invitro procedures, I remember all the times I prayed for my period to start. Praying as if I were in church and the altar call had been made and it was my turn to stumble into the aisle, to hurry to the front and confess, at first only the petty things: the fights with my sister and yelling at my parents, and then sneaking out of my bedroom to meet the neighbor boy in the dark field behind the private school, having quick sex, so that I was home before anyone had time to wonder if I was still in my room. I rarely answered the altar call. I watched as others in the congregation responded; looked closely for that moment when their heads began shaking as if their transgressions had just been whispered in their ear and they were disgusted by what they’d learned, were trying to shake loose the images. I wanted to join them as they moved down the aisle, not in answer to the call, but to put my head to theirs and ask in a whisper about the scenes that
were passing through their memory. I wanted them to tell me about the sins they were about to confess. But I stayed where I was offering my confession over and over, hoping that my prayerful promise would get through: *Lord, if in the next few days my period starts, I promise to wait until I’m married to have sex again. I rededicate my body and soul to your purpose. Please direct and lead me as you will, but please, please start the flow of blood.*

I am thousands of miles and many years away from those moments, but still they haunt me. They filled the silence that stretched between my daughter and me, a silence soon filled with the sounds of her sobs. We were in the truck, parked in the grocery store parking lot waiting for her father. Sitting in the front seat, I waited patiently for her to quiet down. I had done that; I had made her cry.

Moments earlier she and a friend had sat in the back of the truck playing a game:

“What would you do if . . .”

“If I got pregnant,” they’d said, “I would . . .”

My daughter would give the baby up for adoption, but her friend was not so sure. “I would keep it,” she’d finally said, confidently.

I had listened as they nonchalantly discussed their options as if they were choosing between multiple invites to a party. “What about abortion?” I’d asked.

No! At fourteen neither one of them could imagine going through *that* procedure.

I didn’t turn and look at my daughter. Had she forgotten asking her father and me, “What would you do if I got pregnant?”

“We’d strongly advise you get an abortion,” I’d said.
“No,” her father had cut in, “We’d schedule an appointment and take you for your abortion.”

She had looked to me after he responded, and seeing that I agreed with him, began arguing: “It’s my body . . . You can’t force me . . . It’s my choice!”

Had she forgotten that conversation?

I asked my daughter and her friend how they would support themselves and a baby. Who did they think would help them? From the back my daughter stated that she assumed we would help her.

I couldn’t help myself; I turned and looked at her incredulously. “Really? You honestly expect I would?”

They both became quiet, would no longer answer me. Both of them looked away.

I realized I don’t want my daughter hanging out with this girl. The day before, when my daughter and I had picked her up at her apartment and the three of us were driving toward our house, the friend announced her older, twenty-something sister was “accidentally” pregnant for the second time. I was proud (and relieved) when my daughter said, “Geez, doesn’t she know about birth control?”

“Oh,” her friend said, “She was on the Pill when she got pregnant. Obviously it didn’t work for her.” And then, “When I have sex, I’m not going to use it! It probably wouldn't work for me either.”

The next morning, I reminded my daughter of this conversation as soon as her friend left the truck. I told her what I suspected, but hadn’t said: The sister was lazy. She
probably didn’t take the Pill as she was supposed to. “You have to take it every day, religiously,” I warned her.

In her most patient tone my daughter replied, “Yes, I know. We’ve been through all of this before.”

But I didn’t let up. I reminded her of my sister pregnant at fifteen. And my daughter reminded me that my sister kept the baby and raised her daughter—that everything worked out.

“Yes, because my parents helped.”

“You and Dad had to get married! You had to move in with MeMaw and Grumps!”

“Yes, but we were in college.”

I raised my voice to make sure I was heard: “Let’s get one thing straight. I will not support you while you decide whether or not you want to give a baby up for adoption.”

And that’s when she clammed up, wouldn’t speak until we were parked and her father left the truck, and then through her tears she wondered why I was so angry with her for something she hadn't done, wasn’t planning to do for a long time. She knows what could happen.

I had thought being honest about birth control and sexual responsibility would keep us from the silent struggle that had consumed my mother and me. My mother never spoke of the physical changes I was experiencing. When I was ten or eleven, I awoke and found blood on the sheets. I didn't panic: I was a rough, brutal tomboy. Lying there, I thought back over the day before, but couldn't remember falling off the trampoline or skidding across gravel. Eventually the blood's stickiness between my legs sent me
looking for my mother. When I described the blood on the sheet and between my legs, she pointed me to the bathroom, then followed me inside. She handed me a menstrual pad and a cloth-and-elastic contraption to keep it in place, then left. I finally figured out how to install it, but she never checked to make sure I understood what was happening. That summer when I started my period while we were camping, she handed me a tampon. In the public bathroom, after I removed the bulky pad I'd put on in my tent and unwrapped the tampon, I placed it on the liner of my bathing suit, then pulled my suit up and adjusted the crotch so the tampon would stay in place. I left the bathroom and ran toward the water. Somehow my mother noticed my error—perhaps I kept adjusting my swimsuit as I walked toward her, or she noticed the white string dangling—laughing, she pulled me aside and explained that I should have inserted the tampon inside me. Inside my vagina? How?

My mother had assumed I’d learned these details in a health class or during talks with my girlfriends. Her mother hadn’t talked to her either, but she’d had older sisters who’d explained. I was my mother's first born daughter, and all these years later, I wonder if she assumed I had talked with my sisters. When my fifteen-year-old sister admitted that she hadn’t realized having sex was what caused her pregnancy, I wondered if Mother hadn't said anything because she assumed I had. But what would I have told her? I knew very little myself—only that sex before marriage was a sin. And my mother was a virgin when she married. But birth control was never discussed. Why talk about it before I was married? Feeling lustful urges? God answers prayers! Just take it to the Lord in prayer!

*
I have never explained to my daughter how she can become a Christian. Have I told her my salvation story? I was six or seven; it was during a Sunday service. Minutes before I answered the altar call, I had been lying across my mother’s lap, my thumb in my mouth. Her fingers played in my hair: She scooped long strands away from my face, tucked them behind my ear; her finger lightly traced its outline. But when I heard the call for repentance, I joined my sister on the edge of the pew and watched those who left their seats and walked or stumbled down the aisle. Noticing us, Mother placed a hand over our eyes to remind us we should be praying.

Then I stood as if called to attention.

While peeking through my mother’s fingers and watching the figures move along our row, I must have felt something that made me turn and tell her I needed to go. She sighed as she leaned over and in a whisper wondered why I hadn’t gone before the service. This wasn’t a good time. Couldn’t I wait a few minutes? Shaking my head I whispered, “Not the bathroom, the front of the church!”

Did she pause to wonder if I understood the commitment? Did she try to talk me out of making the walk before she reached over and touched my father’s shoulder and, as he leaned over while shifting one of my sisters off his lap, whispered that I wanted to go forward? I remember him turning his body so I could slip past his legs, the feel of his hand lightly touching my waist as he guided me to the end of the pew and directed me toward the front.

At a young age I knew the routine: I waited at the end of the aisle until someone motioned me forward. I was asked some questions; I felt the urge to cry. I was led
through one of the several doors along the wall of the auditorium. I sat on the edge of a chair. A man wearing church pants knelt in front of me with an opened Bible balanced on his knee, his finger stuck between the pages to mark his place whenever he closed the cover. While he spoke earnestly about this commitment, I stared intently at the small groups surrounding me, not alarmed, but naturally curious. People knelt in front of chairs. One person rubbed the shaking shoulders and swaying back of a confessor. The sounds of prayer and rustling pages surrounded me.

* Several years ago my daughter and I traveled to Ohio for a family reunion. I made a special effort to attend this reunion: for several years I had been reading my great-grandmother Gladys's diaries and wanted to be in a place where her descendants were gathered. I sat listening to my mother's sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles reminisce about the past. When one mentioned how blessed our family was, has been, because religion was such a force in our family history, the others nodded in agreement. It all goes back, they reminded each other, to Gladys. I nodded along with them, for in most of her diary entries there is some mention of religion. She had documented weekly visits to chapel, describing the sermon and the impression it had made. Bible study sessions with her daughters, my great-aunt Mary and my grandmother Sibyl, neighbor ladies, and visitors warranted a line or two. And if during the week she and Grandpa Jim missed chapel (or were late) or their time in the Word, she documented her disappointment: *Sunday, February 10, 1946. Late for church. It's a shame. Oh Jesus, how we need to walk closer to you each day!* . . .
My diaries are silent on the issue of religion. I have not spoken that language for many, many years. It takes me awhile, whenever I visit my family, to get used to hearing it again. When it creeps into conversations I am at a loss; I don't know how to respond. And yet, as a child religion was a part of life that I had accepted without question. My parents believed as strongly as my great-grandmother. When we moved to Georgia, Mother held Bible study session in order to get to know the neighbors and become part of the church community. She organized Vacation Bible School classes during the summer, inviting the neighbor kids into our home. Week after week we attended church, and at home before we ate Sunday dinner, my parents rejoiced over those who had gone to the front. The lost, those who remained unsaved, preyed on their minds. And my great-grandmother's. In her diaries she rejoiced over the salvation of others and listed those for whom she was praying:

*Monday, May 22, 1950. A day out at MacDougall’s and I’m so glad to be through there. Lillian Rost, the maid, apparently had been on a bender— cranky and snippy. When I left I told her I was praying for her, and I am! Poor unfortunate soul on the way to Hell.*

She longed for God’s return: *Well, see here—Last day of old ’49 and our Lord is not here yet!*

After I accepted the Lord Jesus into my heart and after my baptism, I began looking for God's return. I fantasized the event: Sitting in the back seat of my parents’ car when we were stopped at a traffic light in downtown Chattanooga near our church, I imagined I was driving—maybe delivering others to church—and in the seconds before the traffic
light turned green, there was the sound of trumpets. In the blink of an eye, I was whisked away, my body floating out of the car, my soul pulled toward heaven. I imagined myself hovering over the scene, watching the chaos that had been left behind. What will happen to the unsaved? Will they be forever stuck in traffic? Even as I imagined my ascension, there was a question that plagued my mind: Had I been a good witness? In the short time that I had been saved and baptized, had I reached the lost so that they too might be saved?

As is typical at every function my family organizes, a morning prayer service was scheduled before the reunion's main events. That day in Ohio was a hot day—the babies and children were restless—but no one suggested we skip the prayer service. When my aunt called to us, we gathered in the pavilion and sat through her introduction of her minister—a young man who stood nervously with his Bible tucked under his arm. The son of my aunt’s former minister, he is, she assured us, practically family. As he stepped forward and thanked my aunt for her introduction, my young niece began to cry. Relieved, I reached for her and carried her out of the pavilion and down the hill, away from the sound of the minister’s earnest voice and my sweating family. I stayed away, until I noticed movement in the pavilion, then scooped up my niece and headed back. I passed her to her father, my brother, and joined a cousin and my youngest brother at a table. When the music began, they sang along with the rest, songs from my past. And as I heard the words, I remembered my great-grandmother at her piano in her living room, her voice singing . . . *Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer! That calls me from a world of care . . .* and my mother’s and grandmother’s and great-aunt’s voices
harmonizing as they joined her at the piano . . . and bids me at my Father’s throne make all my wants and wishes known. In seasons of distress and grief my soul has often found relief, and oft escaped the temptor’s snare, by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

I scanned the singing group until I found my daughter. I watched as she intently studied the mouths of those around her, especially a cousin her age who seemed to know the words of every song. I watched my daughter trying to fit in, mimicking what she saw, mouthing words that meant nothing to her. She lacks the appropriate knowledge and skills because I have buried this part of my past, have made myself an outsider, and in doing so have made her one, too.

*

Other women like my daughter. Some think she’s a good example and like having her hang out with their daughters. She sure does know her mind, they say to me.

I’m proud to be her mother.

I feel a sense of relief, not horror or panic, when I walk by her bedroom and find pinned to the door, next to the bumper sticker that reads Pro-Child/Pro-Choice, condoms still in their wrappers. At the fair, she and her friends visited the Planned Parenthood booth; they made it a contest: who could get the most condoms. I laughed when she showed me the sticker she’d worn taped to her pants while walking around the fair: a fully unrolled condom with the phrase “JUST WEAR IT” in block letters.

This type of behavior makes other mothers nervous. Perhaps she knows too much, too early? the mother of my daughter’s friend wonders. She doesn’t trust my daughter, believing my daughter’s confidence could result in reckless behavior. As a model
mother, this woman must protect her own daughter’s innocence. My daughter senses her uneasiness. She laughingly tells me how she and her friends, the woman’s daughter included, put a “JUST WEAR IT” sticker on her car. When someone pointed at it and exclaimed, “Wow, I’m surprised you have that on your car!” and explained that it was promoting the use of condoms, not clothing, the girls were made to scrape off the sticker. Now, whenever I pick up my daughter’s friend for school, I can still see the sticky residue. Next to it is a bumper sticker promoting a local Christian summer camp.

I found my daughter’s abstinence card while emptying her garbage can. Written across the top was “I’m Worth Waiting For!” followed by “I pledge to wait until marriage to have sex,” and my daughter’s name, and then the cramped, neat letters of “Melanie Johnson,” witness, and the date October 13, 2006. I was angry with this Melanie Johnson. (Some mothers would have felt relief.) Who was she to have this discussion with my daughter? What were her qualifications? Was this Melanie a follower of abstinence herself? I looked closely at my daughter’s signature for clues as to why she would have signed such a pledge. Why did she make a promise she can’t guarantee she’ll keep?

It was in the flair of my daughter’s curved letters, more exaggerated, more loopy when compared to the straight compact letters of Melanie’s, where I sensed that she wasn’t serious about the pledge. Perhaps, like my religious experience as a child, her pledge was something she was expected to do. When I asked her about it, I was still angry that she was put in that situation. Why would a woman demand this from my daughter? But she
didn't understand my anger. She nodded as I gave a recap of the options that were available for safe sex, the availability of contraceptives, the process called abortion.

“Whatever, Mom!” She shrugged, “It wasn’t a big deal!” It was at the end of class and they, she and everyone else in the room, just wanted to get the teacher to quit blabbing on about abstinence, so they all dutifully signed. And then she came home, and while emptying out her school bag, threw the card in the trash.

*

During a Thanksgiving visit to Alabama, where my parents live, my sister and I were shopping at Wal-Mart. We were surprised by the amount of Christmas decorations that covered every surface. It reminded her of a conversation she'd had with my son, and laughing a bit she told me: “He told me that he had to go to school to learn about Jesus being the reason for the season.” I sensed some shock, even dismay, in her voice. She was trying to reserve judgment about how my children are being raised, but she couldn't contain her suspicions. Later, she told me, “I just didn’t know what to expect!” And I understood her to be saying, since he’s being raised without the religious experiences we had growing up, she expected a lack of morality, common decency. But during our visit as she watched him patiently playing with her young son, she shook her head and said, “He’s so patient and kind!”

My son is sixteen, but I don't harangue him about sex and birth control. (Did he sign an abstinence card when he was in middle school?) When I try to talk to him about anything—his slipping school grades, his plans after high school—he is quiet a few
minutes, then jerks away yelling, “Jesus Christ, get off my back! I've got it all under control!”

I didn’t invite him to see the movie Juno when I took his sister and her friend.

In the theater, I sat next to our neighbor Mary and her friends. Before the movie started, Mary leaned over and asked if I was alone and I shook my head and proudly pointed to where my daughter and her friend were sitting. “It’s never too early,” I whispered. “We’ve been talking about these issues for years!” How particularly proud I was that Mary was the one next to me. My mother’s age, but so different: Mary, I imagine, had made birth control available to her teenagers. And now they are on their own and I watch from my front window as she and her friends prepare for bike trips, or hear about her travels when we meet at the mailbox: Costa Rica a few years ago, Cuba recently.

How thrilled I was when Mary nodded, as if to say that she recognized that I was doing my part, as she had done hers.

But during the movie, I watched my daughter and her friend. I imagined them finding the nerdy boyfriend sweet as he sucked down Tic-Tacs, his shorts and athletic socks around his ankles in preparation for sex. I heard their laughter when Juno tried to pee on the pregnancy stick. But when a very pregnant Juno cornered the boyfriend at school, angry because no one knew that he was the father while she was wearing the mark, I thought of my son who will never have to wonder how long he can hide a pregnancy before someone else finds out. And when Juno assured her boyfriend that she would not tell his parents he’s the father, I thought again of my son, and the boyfriends of the
daughters of women I know. These women are my co-workers, friends; I know they told their daughters about birth control, even took them to the clinic to fill their prescriptions. So I was amazed when they announced that their 19-, 20-, and 21-year old daughters were pregnant. When their daughters graduated from high school, I had imagined these women breathing a sigh of relief—they assumed, just as I had, that they had made it, they were done raising children. Now they don’t understand how these “mistakes” happened, but are resigned to the situation: their daughters have decided to keep the babies.

And what about the young men, these fathers of their grandbabies? They became animated when I asked. “I’d warned her about him and she wouldn’t listen,” one of the women said to me. “Thank God, they didn’t get married!” With a hint of pride, they tell me their daughters are raising the babies on their own, and that it is much better the young men are out of the picture. They don’t want their daughters tied down by a man.

My paranoia increases when I remember these women and their shrugs, their sense of responsibility: all of them have modified their lifestyles to help raise their grandbabies.

A few weeks after the movie, I was at Mary’s for a party. She told me she was displeased with how the movie didn’t present abortion as an option, but glamorized the adoption process. (The pregnant Juno decides she can’t have an abortion when she learns, from a teenage classmate who is protesting against abortion outside the clinic, her fetus already has fingernails.) By the end of the movie the baby is adopted and the nerdy boyfriend and Juno have professed their love and commitment to each other. He is able to look forward to having her back slim and artistically inspired by her ordeal.
I told Mary how when the movie was over and as people began filing out of the theater, my daughter sought me out and said in her syrupy sweet, wistful voice: “If I ever get pregnant, that's how I hope it turns out for me!” As if our moment in the truck and all our other conversations about sexual responsibility had never happened. Or they didn't hold her attention very long.

*  

I can't imagine sharing with my son my memories of being sixteen and worried I was pregnant. I would have to catch him in the right mood, when he's home from his job at the restaurant and plops down on the couch for a few minutes before he leaves to go out with friends. How would I broach the subject? I could enter my memory this way: “You know who Madonna is, right?”; slipping into it, so he doesn't immediately realize that I'm trying to have “the talk” with him. Always a Madonna song, “Like a Virgin” or “Borderline,” that starts this memory. But I’ll pause, trying to remember which song, and he’ll lose interest, check his cell phone or wander into the kitchen and look into the refrigerator, then walk back into the living room and stand at the window and watch for his friends.

Joining him at the window will bring back the memory of driving my parents’ car and praying that desperate plea: Lord, don’t let me be pregnant! as I looked at the houses that lined the street. The houses sat high and away from the street and sidewalk, their yards surrounded by wrought-iron fencing and brick retaining walls. Unreachable. How I loved imagining what was going on inside. I had to crane my neck to see them: brick homes, white columns that hinted of an old southern dream, big doors shut to my
wandering gaze. And then the woman at the window. I stopped the car, sat and watched her. What was she thinking? Was she remembering her day—something about work? Or planning her evening? I longed for mundane thoughts of dinner and washing up afterward, and her end of the day routine: walking through the house to lock doors and turn off lights, stepping into a room to close a curtain, tuck an arm under a blanket. How I longed to fast forward through the years of who I was and get to who I might be.

What will my son make of my longing? Perhaps if I shift the focus away from the woman at the window and try to imagine my young lover, an older version, not in the house looking out, but driving, there may be something to pass on to my son. Something outside the car catches the eye, acts as a trigger—he is flooded with a memory of himself when he was younger having sex in the dark behind the school. This memory doesn’t haunt him. He can’t remember the girl’s face or her name, just that he’d had sex with some girl behind the school. Perhaps he’s remembered before. Once as he watched his own son leave the house, he recognized some part of his younger self and experienced a sense of nostalgia, not guilt or embarrassment. Certainly not shame.

*  

I dream I am pregnant and my sleeping body is flooded with emotions. My mind rails against the possibility—it can’t be, it’s not possible—and I jerk awake hot and sweaty, clutching my abdomen searching for the hardness of pregnancy. I peer through the dark for several moments and relive the dream: I am pushing my nephew in his stroller around the neighborhood. He sits up straight, his blonde head positioned forward, his pudgy baby hands gripping the stroller’s padded bar. I tip my head close to his ear
and say aloud, because I had to tell someone and we were alone and I knew I could trust him and the last possible day for my period had come and gone: I am pregnant. I wonder at my abdomen’s flatness, feel the waistband of the gray sweats settle low on my hips as I suck in my stomach in an attempt to convince myself there is no room for a baby. I giggle nervously, grab the handles of the stroller and run as if I can outrun the consequences, the shame I feel.

It takes a few moments, but touching the man lying next to me anchors my mind to the present. For seventeen years he has slept next to me in that same position (dreaming the same dreaded dream? Probably not. A month before our daughter was born he had a vasectomy, to guarantee “mistakes” would not happen again.). When I recognize our bedroom, such a sweet sense of relief when my mind convinces my soul that I am so many years and thousands of miles away from that moment. And following relief, there comes overwhelming happiness, like when I was a teenager, a young woman, and my period appeared. Or now when, having looked for days for something lost, I find it—my car keys in the pocket of my sweats, or I receive a phone call from a stranger who found my checkbook—and that sense of calm that is triggered because I am finally in control.
If I Were to Ask My Mother

I.

I would wait until we were in her kitchen, me on a barstool watching her make bread. I would watch her hands, listen as her nails hit the counter as she scooped up a section of the dough, folded it, spun the mound, and pushed against it to force out the air. When she reached her hand into the white flour bag and scooped out a handful, her mind weighing the flour in her hand before scattering it across the mound and counter, I would get ready. When she reached into the bag a second time for the scoop of flour that she will spread on the wooden rolling pin, when she is distracted, not focused on me, that would be when I would force out my question: “How did you meet my father?”

I imagine she would simply say, huffing as she pushed and prodded, “I met your father at the Big Boy restaurant where I was working.” And I would remember driving by the oversized statue of the pudgy boy in checked bib overalls and brightly black shoes, his round, red cheeks, black hair with its exaggerated swoop above the large forehead, his curved, dimpled elbow, and his hand holding a platter with a hamburger, and her waving in his direction while telling us that that is where she met our father. As a child, I followed the wave of her hand and imagined, because I had seen their wedding picture, the two of them standing next to each other near the counter: her in a white wedding gown and veil and he in a black suit, the white of the collar against his throat. They stand holding each other at the wrists, looking at the preacher as he reads his lines.

What I really want to hear her describe is the spark that led them to the altar. I have never asked for these details, uncomfortable with the silence that could spread between us. But I have imagined my parents meeting: my mother stands in the drive-thru of the
Big Boy, her head tipped slightly to the side, hands on her hips, her left leg extended—a post she adopted in a picture I have found. She is wearing a rust-colored bathing suit with a bright orange sash around her waist, and a bright smile; a Big Boy hat is perched atop her hair. When she opens the window to pass out his order, my father sits in his white convertible. He wears a white t-shirt and a pair of dark sunglasses.

Was it the way she leaned over to pass out his food, so that the scooped neck of the bathing suit fell slightly forward exposing the expanse of her freckled chest? Was it the cigarette held loosely between his fingers? His car? Or, when looking down from the drive-thru window, she saw his trim figure, the neatness of the belt tucked through the loops of his pants?

She laughed whenever she told us about meeting his family. She seemed amused by herself—the city girl riding out to the West Virginia hills to visit their farm—but she never described how their house looked, or told us anything about his brothers and sisters, parents, what she thought when she met them. Just that she asked about the bathroom and he, out of habit, pointed outside. Did her shock flood her face? I imagine her eyes widening as she followed the direction his finger pointed—the outhouse was outside. Maybe she clenched her thighs, then leaned over and whispered that she could wait. Maybe that’s when it happened—she fell in love. She looked around and imagined how she could shape his country bumpkinness into something other, something better.

*
If I were to ask my mother my questions, there could come the tightening of her mouth, the skin around her eyes, and that old familiar feeling that I am trespassing into secrets. And yet, as if anticipating my unasked questions, she sends packages filled with things. Before I open them I am hoping for specific items, perhaps pictures or mementos from when they were dating. Usually, there are letters and pictures, scraps of paper with notes, and books, none of them related by subject or having a purpose—probably they were found while she was cleaning and tossed haphazardly into a box sitting in the corner of her dining room waiting to be filled then mailed to me. But when I open a package and find their marriage certificate and my baby book, these artifacts together in the same package represent legitimacy, chronology, an order to her life: David Lanuel Postlethwait and LeOla Pearl Hovda were married in West Virginia on October 30, 1965; Natalie Carmella Postlethwait was born February 11, 1968.

Before I have even asked my questions, I have received her answer: first you date, then you marry, then you have children.

Sometimes the answers to my questions are hidden in the artifacts.

When I was ten or eleven, I made a discovery of my own. I went looking for a pair of socks and found a photograph of a young girl. (Since when are photographs kept in sock drawers?) The girl seemed familiar, and looking closely, I realized she looked like me. She was much older in the picture than I was. Who is she? I asked my mother, showing her the picture. The tightening of my mother’s mouth, the skin around her eyes—there came the feeling that she was drawing away from my blatant curiosity.
When my father told me about his real first daughter, I didn’t feel anything. I asked a question and got an answer. But my mother’s response has me circling around that remembered moment. I remember my father’s voice as he told me—quiet, a tinge of sadness, but not shame. But her reaction, and the thrill I experienced, as if I had ferreted out a secret she’d worked hard to keep hidden, still feeds my curiosity. Here’s another moment I wish to ask her about. When did she learn of his illegitimate daughter? Before he signed their marriage certificate? After?

What was her reaction then?

*  

I experience that same thrill when I read my grandmother’s diaries. I am looking for another perspective, details documented by someone who was watching my mother and father before I was able to take up the task.

In an entry dated a year after my parents married, my grandmother wrote: _Lee seems to be settling_. She seems relieved that marriage was having a positive influence on her daughter, but this is my interpretation, based on what my mother has told me. She believed marriage had changed her for the better. When she talked about being a new wife, she described herself as spoiled and having no idea what it meant to be in a relationship. She felt she deserved nice things, and took for granted that her husband had a job and they had their own place. One day she bought a new wool suit and rushed home to try it on, to model it for him when he came home from work. (It is hard for me to imagine my mother as this young woman wanting to be admired by her husband. In my memories, when my father came home from work, he greeted a woman wearing one
of his hand-me-down shirts, sweats or a skirt, and a kerchief to keep her hair back.)

When she heard him at the door, she became delightfully nervous and calmed herself by turning on the lamp and striking a pose. She didn’t get the response she wanted or expected. They began arguing and somehow ended up in the small bathroom where the tub was still filled with water, and my father picked her up and dropped her, wool suit and all, into the tub.

My grandmother’s love for my father is obvious. In the same entry in which she wrote about her daughter, she also wrote, *David . . . is growing in the Lord, more dear to all of us. Has helped out here on the farm so much.* Oh, that’s right, he wasn’t a Christian when he met my mother, and this reminder creates so many questions. What stage of “in love” were my mother and father when my grandmother was told that my father was an unbeliever? And when did my mother tell her mother about his illegitimate daughter? My father has credited my grandmother with his religious conversion, and, having read her diaries, I can imagine how that came about. When my father arrived at the house, my grandmother answered the door and invited him to sit with her before dinner. Soon she encouraged him to speak about his family, especially his religious upbringing. They’re Church of Christ, he hesitantly told her, but she seemed relaxed, so gentle, and her pleasant smile was not judgmental. She began to tell him stories. She confessed that she too has made some bad decisions. (Did she mention leaving her husband in 1959?) But how great her Lord’s capacity for forgiveness. No sin is too great!
Was he familiar with the Bible verse that cautioned against a man and woman being unequally yoked? She quoted it to him. Did he understand? Perhaps he looked around the clean, comfortable room, smelled the meal she was cooking. Before he’d arrived, she’d set on the table a loaf of homemade bread and a round of rolls.

He dropped to kneel at her feet, and she placed her hand on his head and led him through his confession, and he prayed the words she taught him.

*

I wish there were entries about my parents meeting and dating. Entries that go something like:

_A day in 1964: LeOla home around 5:00 p.m. Said they’d been slow at work._

_Only had one customer around 3:00—a young man in a convertible that caught her eye._

Months later:

_LeOla went with David to visit his family. She seemed to have had a good time._

_Appreciated our home in the big city—guess David’s family doesn’t have indoor plumbing. ‘Tis good for my youngest, spoiled girl to see how others live. But I have been much in prayer about this relationship—David is quite a bit older than LeOla and what a life he has lived! How sorry he is for his past mistakes, and how he longs to become a better father to his young girl! I have asked LeOla to search her heart—is there room in it for this child?_

And finally, sometime in 1964 or 1965:

_My Goodness! But LeOla has been moody for many weeks and none of us had any_
idea why! Just stayed out of her way! Surprised when she came home the other night excited—she didn’t say anything, but we noticed she went out of her way to be helpful. Weren’t kept in the dark long—David came for dinner and asked for her hand in marriage. Of course, I gave my blessing! I have been much in prayer about their relationship and know that our Lord also blesses this union. He will grant them the guidance and wisdom they will need.

My, how LeOla’s mood has brightened—busily chatting about their plans!

Being the one to hear my father’s confession and lead him to salvation meant a great deal to my grandmother: David becoming more dear. Once he was saved, she wondered if my mother was good enough to be his wife. Here is the only wedding story my mother has shared: before the wedding ceremony, my grandmother found the time to warn my father that he could change his mind—it wasn’t too late. She would understand.

My mother always laughed when she told that story. But for me, it fed my suspicion that my grandmother and father shared a bond so close it excluded my mother. If my mother ever told my grandmother the story of how my father dumped her into the tub, ruining her new wool suit, I bet Grandmother would have approved, maybe even laughed with admiration.

II.

If my mother were to ask me . . .
I want us in my kitchen, on my turf, thousands of miles from hers, for imagining this scene makes me nervous: my imagined self can’t sit still. She leaves the table to unload the dishwasher or sweep the floor.

But it’s time these matters were discussed.

If my mother were to ask me how I met my husband, I would say that Bob and I met in a Spanish class at Auburn University at Montgomery.

Would she want more details?

Will I ever have the nerve to tell her why I got married?

Seventeen years ago I stood in front of his apartment. It was late morning. There were no sounds in the foyer. I placed my ear against his door—quiet in his place, too.

I had called before I left the clinic, but didn’t tell him where I was, or the results of the pregnancy test. I had only known him a couple months: was it the time we had sex in the kitchen, hurriedly moving clothes aside for quick, unprotected penetration. Or in his bedroom on his bed with the headboard filled with books. As he gripped my hips and plunged over and over, I was distracted by the light coming through the slats in his closet door and the patterns they created on the sheets. Why did he keep a grow light in his closet?

I heard him approach the door, throw back its lock, and turn the doorknob.

He came to the door naked, holding a burning cigarette. He stood there for a moment then let me into the room. I followed him toward the couch, but choose a chair across from him. The bright November sun was at his back, placing his face in shadow, but his lower body was visible. He sat with his knee drawn up to his chest, and his soft penis
drooped toward the couch’s cushion. His hand clutched an ashtray shaped like an erect penis, his fingers wrapped around its shaft, just below its head. I’d seen it before, even laughed when he first showed it to me, and covered my mouth in surprise when he explained it was a gift from his sister. But sitting across from him, I found the ashtray offensive. I looked toward the door; it wasn’t too late. He didn’t have to know.

Here, at this point in the story, I would glance at my mother. Would I admit I’m still not sure why I told him? But that’s not true. As I sat across from him debating with myself, I remembered the sense of relief I’d felt when the clinician gave me the results. I’d finally gotten caught: my mother’s warnings about pre-marital sex had finally come true; this pregnancy was my punishment. But did I want this man in my life?

I told him.

Would I consider an abortion?

No.

We were both silent. And then he wondered if we should get married.

Should we? I wondered to myself. Wouldn’t marriage to a man I hardly know be risky? And a baby on top of all that? The marriage probably wouldn’t last. True, but the months of fighting and unhappiness leading up to the break up, and then the divorce, which would leave me a single mother, probably poor and destitute, would be the perfect punishment.

In his bedroom, we lay on his bed and set our plan in motion. Deciding to marry quickly, we called the courthouse to find out when they opened the next day and what
paperwork we needed for the ceremony. We pooled our money—we had just enough to
pay for the drug tests, and to file for the marriage certificate.

The next morning, as I showered and dressed, I rehearsed our plans: Bob would arrive
around noon and we would drive to the Wetumpka Courthouse to be married. And after
the ceremony, we would drive to his parents’ house for Thanksgiving dinner.

Would we tell them?

Yes, but not until after dinner.

Would we tell mine? Eventually, when the time was right.

Keeping our plans secret was easier than I had thought. When I went downstairs to let
Bob in, there was someone with my mother, a friend, a witness to an event that neither
the friend nor my mother realized was about to happen. They were sitting in the dining
room, and Mother, distracted by the friend’s visit, warmly introduced Bob: This is Bob, a
friend of Natalie’s. We didn’t behave as a newly engaged couple: we didn’t touch each
other; I barely looked at him as he chatted. I nervously watched the clock, walked back
and forth between the dining room and the kitchen, laughed nervously. Why wasn’t she
suspicious?

When she asked our plans, I looked directly at her, mentioned dinner with Bob’s
parents. And she turned immediately back to her friend and continued their conversation.

I wasn’t a teenager; she’d already breathed a sigh of relief when I didn’t get pregnant
before graduating high school. Maybe that’s why I was able to slip by. I was twenty-two
and in my final year of college. I was planning to go to graduate school. I had only just
met Bob; this was her second time seeing us together. He meant nothing to her; she
could afford to be pleasant, polite. More importantly, she had a visitor; she knew how to act.

* 

In our wedding picture, Bob and I stand close together; my shoulder is tucked under his, my head angled toward his chin. In my hand’s grip is the marriage certificate rolled up like a scroll. The wedding band I am wearing was the one Bob’s mother wore the first time his parents were married to each other.

We didn’t plan to invite his parents, but when we arrived at the courthouse, and were told we had to have witnesses, Bob called them.

His mother answered the phone. She had been vacuuming in preparation for our arrival. His dad was watching television.

Did they want to come down to the Wetumpka Courthouse and watch us get married? And could they bring a ring?

His mother thought to bring her camera.

The four of us stood before the judge as Bob and I repeated the vows, just a few blocks from where my mother sat and visited with her guest before she began preparing the Thanksgiving meal.

* 

How Bob and I got married has become one of my favorite stories. When we’re with other couples and the conversation turns to how we met each other, I have to remind myself not to interrupt, to wait quietly and attentively until it is my turn. Their laughter,
and especially their surprised responses, thrills me: You guys knew each other how long?
And you’re still together?

But if I imagine telling my mother, I become tongue-tied, nervous; the story does not
go over as well—there is no surprised laughter, only silence.

When will she ask why she wasn’t invited to the ceremony?

When Bob called his parents and invited them, and after he had hung up, he turned to
me, “Sure you don’t want to call your mom?” I thought about it, imagined her picking up
the phone, and me saying, “Mom, I’m at the Wetumpka Courthouse about to get married.
Do you want to be here?” But the silence that would have followed; I knew I would have
rushed in to fill it, slipped up and told her about the pregnancy. She would have been so
angry. But worse would have been her disappointment. The year before, I’d watched her
as my visibly pregnant sister got married. She put on a good face, but she was
embarrassed. I imagined behind the smile that she showed to the wedding guests a hint
of anger that this had happened to her again: years earlier my fifteen-year-old sister had
given birth to my niece, the flower girl in her aunt’s wedding. Why couldn’t her
daughters get married before they got pregnant, as she did?

I couldn’t imagine her at my wedding ceremony. Anyway, she probably would have
refused to attend.

*

My mother has never asked me about my wedding day, and I must admit I’m relieved.
I compare her response to what I experienced at dinner with my new in-laws moments
after the ceremony: no angry words followed by hurt silences, like I would have expected
from my parents. Bob’s mother assumed I was pregnant, and I was shocked when she teased us about it: “You two are college students. Don’t you know about birth control?” Then she became serious: When was the baby due? What were our plans? And when Bob asked if we could move in until after college, his parents welcomed the idea.

I was fascinated by their reaction. I kept waiting for the yelling and the anger. They never questioned Bob’s decision. They accepted me immediately, even though, he would tell me years later, his mother, after our first introduction and when he called to ask her opinion of me, said she’d found me standoffish and too career driven. “Bobby, do you know she doesn’t want to have kids?”

After dinner with Bob’s parents, he dropped me off at my parents’ house, then went to his apartment. We kept the marriage a secret, resumed our before-marriage routine, seeing each other in class or after work. I was going to wait and tell them when we moved in to his parents’ house. But one night we dropped by my parents’ house so I could pick up some things. They were both in the living room when we walked in, and I left Bob talking with them while I went to my room. When we got ready to go, and she asked when I was coming back, and I said I wasn’t, she hissed her accusations: Was I sleeping with him? I barely knew him!

In his car, as we were leaving the driveway, Bob told me to tell them. We reentered the house, and with no warning, I announced we were married. We have never discussed this night: their stunned silence, the droop of my father’s shoulders, how his hand reached out and touched the mantel as if for support. When my mother fled the room, I followed, and stood outside the bathroom door listening to her cry, “Why? Why?”
I didn’t tell her about the pregnancy. I wasn’t able to joke about it then, as I do now. How I got knocked up and we agreed to marry because Bob’s G.I. Bill was running out and he could get financial aid to finish his degree if he was head of household. Back then, when my mother asked, I leaned against the door and, making sure she heard me, told her he wasn’t a Christian. I thrilled at her sobs. I left my parents’ house that night feeling victorious.

Months later, after I had moved into Bob’s parents’ home, when my pregnancy was very obvious, I asked for their help. My car broke down late one night. I had been on campus all day working and attending my classes. I was tired, my legs and back hurt. Bob was working the late shift at a hotel, and still had several hours until he got off. I called my parents and when my dad answered, explained the situation.

“Could you come get me and could I stay at your house until Bob gets off work?”

My father reminded me that I had a husband; I had made my choice.

* 

“What was she really asking me? Was she wondering if I regretted getting married? Or not inviting her to witness our vows? Do I regret that I kept it a secret, only confessing when I felt I was being wrongly accused?

But all these years later, I can’t imagine it happening any other way.
My mother kept waiting for my father to leave her. She was surprised every time she came home after shopping or visiting her mother to find him there. And then one day, when she was pretty certain he was preparing to go, she told him she was pregnant.

We were in her car when she told me this. She turned to me and said she was pregnant with me, and that when she told him about the pregnancy, she knew he wouldn’t leave her.

She didn’t say anything else, as if she expected me to experience some shock and wanted to give me time to respond. I wasn’t surprised by what she told me. When I was a teenager and she and I were fighting regularly, and my father would appear to separate us, calm us down, I’d storm out of the room with a parting question for him: Why do you stay with her? One night he had come home and found us fighting again. He sent me to my room while he talked with her. Later, he knocked on my bedroom door: Did I want to go for a run? I put on my running clothes and met him outside. He didn’t scold me or ask what had happened. For several blocks we ran without speaking, but finally, I asked him again: Why are you still with her?

I wasn’t expecting an answer. When I’d asked him this before, he hadn’t responded. I was still so angry with my mother; I imagined my father would turn to me and confess his plan to leave her. I wanted to assure him that I wouldn’t blame him if he did. But this time he answered: Because of you kids. It wasn’t the response I expected, but it gave me such pleasure—my father was staying in an unhappy marriage to protect me.

Perhaps remembering my pleasure caused my guilt, made me uncomfortable—shared silences with my mother make me want to spill my guts. Maybe that’s why I turned the
conversation to my marriage. I told her if something ever happened to Bob I would move in with her and my father because I wouldn’t be able to cope with the loss. I laughed nervously—I have never been this honest about my marriage.

Soon my nervousness turned to anger: She was surprised by the depths of my feelings, even though Bob and I had been married many years by then, and she had watched our marriage survive many struggles. Still, she had assumed our marriage wouldn’t work.

We’d been here before. Four years earlier she came to Arizona to stay with me when Bob left for graduate school in Alaska. One night while we walked to the park with my children, I shared my worries: Would I be able to work and be a single mother while Bob was gone? Would our marriage survive the separation? But she harbored other worries: How could I remain married to someone who wasn’t a Christian? When our life really became difficult did I honestly believe that he would stick around? Why would he? Without a belief in Christ, he didn’t have the faith needed for absolute commitment.

While I was stunned by her conviction, there was also a sense of relief: finally, she had made her challenge. She wanted me to admit that she was right, that I’d made a mistake, and if I did, she would gladly help me get out of the relationship. But while we were stopped, waiting for the traffic light to change, I found the courage to make my own challenge: If she wanted to be part of my life, she was never to pass judgment on my marriage again.

And she never did, until this moment five years later. I realized she had hung on to her belief that without a Christian foundation, my marriage was doomed to fail. As if she’d been telling herself, *Just give it time. Natalie will realize her mistake.*
What will it take to convince her I had made the right decision?

But before I could ask, she explained. She was surprised by what I’d said because she *could* imagine life without my father.
In the Eye of the Beholder

I look at a photograph my mother took while she and my father were visiting this summer. It came with other photos and a birthday card for my son; as he read the card and exclaimed over the amount of his birthday check, I flipped through the pile of photos until I came to this one and my body flushed with that prickling feeling of embarrassment that I get whenever I caught an unflattering glimpse of myself. I threw the pile onto the counter and walked away. Later, when my son brought the picture to me, pointing at something else, I nodded, acted like I was listening while my eyes flew to my image: maybe if I’d sat at a different angle at the table, not worn that stretched out shirt that emphasized the sagging of my breasts, the roundness of my shoulders.

A few days later, I showed my friend the photo. I told her that my mother sent it, and that it is the worst image of me I can recall ever being taken. Before her fingers touched the photo’s edge, she was giggling. I watched as her eyes scanned the image, nodded my head in agreement when she gasped and placed her hand over her mouth to stifle her response. I poked fun at myself: look at my hair, how greasy and gray, and my red, splotchy complexion.

I asked my friend what I had been wondering: Why would my mother send such a horrible picture? I can see her seated at her dining room table with all of the pictures from her and my father’s summer trip to Alaska spread in front of her as she picked which ones to send to family and friends. Perhaps when she spotted this photo she ecstatically whooped, for she had successfully captured her daughter and grandson, two
individuals uncomfortable in front of a camera, who turn their heads or run away and hide.

But I can only see flaws: my mouth hangs open and my chin is tipped just enough to form a layer of neck flab.

My daughter brings me a photograph of her father and me a few days after we married. We were in our early twenties, but look much younger: Bob has shaggy hair with heavy bangs that brush against the frames of his glasses. The picture was taken while we were kidding around: wearing a quizzical look, he has snaked his arm behind my shoulders, and his fingers are in a V behind my head, but I know it is there: my arm is stretched up so that my hand is holding his wrist. I am looking directly at the camera, smirking.

When my daughter angrily points at my image—look how skinny, how cute—she is surprised I was once that attractive. I hand her the photo my mother sent and point out the differences: me younger and slender versus me puffy and gray-haired. But it is my younger self she compares herself to and uses to point out the features in herself she hates: big breasts, her dad’s thick legs, big feet, and broad shoulders. She looks at the photograph her Nana sent, follows my finger as I again point out my flaws. But her eyes are caught by the image of her brother and she wails, “Why did he inherit all the good genes?” before fleeing the room.

When my parents arrived for their visit, my daughter watched her Nana as she, after hugging her and exclaiming over how much she’d grown, reached for her brother and
pointed out his good looks. There was such longing in my daughter’s whisper: “I wish I had Nana’s genes.” I want to call her back and make her laugh, to nudge her out of her funk. I could tell her that I too watched her Nana, but I was looking for the young woman in the Polaroid pasted on the refrigerator. She is posed behind my father, and I am the baby in his arms. My young mother and father are breathtakingly beautiful. I’ve had the photo long enough to have gotten used to that, but in the set of my father’s head and my mother’s possessively satisfied smile is confidence. They are aware of their youth and beauty. But more than that, they believe in its permanence. And why not?

Years later the photo found its way to my refrigerator, and their captured good looks lure my eyes from my tasks, so that I find, whenever I pass a glass storefront I am examining my reflection for some aspect of their beauty. But my young mother’s smile and eyes remind me of my sister. And my brother has the prominent ears and confident tilt of our father’s head. When I look at my smiling son, I see my father’s smile and dimples.

Beauty and youth’s permanence are fantasies. As I hugged my mother when they first arrived, I looked over her shoulder and saw my father. The effects of Parkinson’s were obvious: his white hair and haggard, lined face made him look older, and the arms that reached for me trembled. As I helped him up the porch steps, I noticed his stooped frame, was surprised when I stepped into his embrace and my chin rested on his shoulder.

Watching him walk with halting steps, seeing the tremors that wracked his body, it was hard to remember that this was the father who loved to challenge us kids to try and knock him down. And as we flung ourselves at him, he caught us, flipped us over his
back onto the couch. I became impatient with his slowed movements: once in my car, he sat in the passenger’s seat and I watched as he slowly pulled the seatbelt over his stomach and leaned over to guide the metal part into the catch, but his body’s tremors caused his arm to jerk. I couldn’t bear to watch, turned away and looked out the window so he couldn’t see my frustration. Finally the click, and then the rustles as he adjusted his body in the seat. He didn’t look at me, didn’t seem to sense my impatience, but straightened and looked forward out the window.

I watched my mother get impatient. They joked and kidded around with each other, but I could sense a change in their relationship: she, who once was the young woman in the Polaroid standing behind her husband and tucking her shoulder behind his, now scolds him. And even though he yells back, the balance of power has changed: she could take him, wrestle him to the floor. He showed me the remote that controls his implants and told me that he relies on her to send the currents that charge his brain, and I imagined her holding him down, switching him off, keeping him an invalid. I didn’t joke about my thoughts, but he laughed, as if acknowledging that he has considered everything I have imagined.

When he told me, in front of her, that he thought she had a boyfriend, I didn’t know how to respond. He noticed changes, overheard her giggling and whispering into the phone, and noticed she was dressing up whenever she went out to meet the caller. Mother rolled her eyes, waved her hand dismissively. This was a new aspect of their relationship: his jealousy, insecurity, worries; her confident independence. His joking turns to whispers when she leaves the room. He leans closer and points out that she’s still
a good-looking woman. She doesn’t look fifty-nine. (My eyes are drawn to the photo on the refrigerator.) He straightens and then tells me, “When we go out, people think I’m her father.” I hear in his tone surprise, the realization that he is in her shadow.

My father and I are alike, both of us watching her.

In an early memory I follow my mother down the aisle of the church toward the front door. I notice the way the men, about to step out into the aisle, pull back abruptly when they see my mother, so she and me and my siblings trailing behind can pass. I watch their eyes linger on the set of her shoulders, and the sway of her hips. In line waiting to exit, I watch with discomfort as my mother is handed around: hugged first by the pastor, she leaves the church and starts down the steps, stopping regularly to return the embrace of one man and another. Outside the church’s entrance, she is pulled close and I imagine the contact with her soft breasts, the strength of her shoulders under their hands—they angle their body so they can settle against the wide expanse of her hips. As they inhale, do they catch the sweet and sour smell of breast milk? Watching, my mouth fills with the metallic taste of birthing blood and on my tongue there is the stickiness of the dough that she formed, scooped, punched, and rolled between her hands to make the loaves of bread she baked for us.

Following in her wake, I felt engulfed by her presence. Did their eyes linger on me, looking for her attributes in my thin frame? I kept my back straight, a barrier to shield me from their thoughts. She saw my discomfort. She laughingly explained me to her friends, looking in my direction and using her hand to show the ramrod straightness of
my back whenever arms and hands would reach for me, attempt to pull me close. My skin prickled as I heard her. I flushed as I remembered following her out of the door of the church and down the steps where I stopped at the bottom and watched as she was called to the side of old man Timmons in his wheelchair. He held up his arms and my smiling mother slipped between them, her proud back melting into a welcoming curve so that she placed her face next to his.

I watched eyes follow my mother as she shepherded my brothers and sisters across the parking lot and to the car. She never seemed to notice them. She turned, not to give them a chance to see her body in a difference pose, but to call to me “Natalie, are you coming?”

I was always watching for a glimpse of her: my eyes peeking around the bathroom door caught a glimpse of her wriggling her hips into a pair of pantyhose and tugging and pulling until the seam was a black line between her naked buttocks. My eyes were drawn to the ropy, red scar that laced her back. When I searched her dresser drawers, my hand skimmed nylon and cotton, and I recalled catching sight of functional panties frayed with holes, the elastic having given up its snap, and wide-panel nursing bras worn long after she’d weaned a child, the straps kept together with diaper pins.

I can’t recall ever, as a young girl, sitting near her at the mirror watching her apply her makeup, my hand reaching over and playing with the containers, her encouraging me to experiment, to try it on. (I did secretly use her lipstick once, painting red circles around my nipples in the bathroom, darkening them into bull’s-eyes that I showed my girlfriend as my small hand at the back of her head urged her closer. Her lips red when
she pulled away from my naked chest.) She never shared her beauty secrets, but appeared right before we were to walk out of the door with light strokes of color under her cheekbones, her eyelashes and lips darker. Standing in the bathroom she had just left, I tried to piece together her beauty routine in the traces of color on the tissues she dropped into the trash can.

I kept my ears alert, eavesdropped on conversations: my father warned her, before they got in the car and she drove him to work, that one day the car would break down and she’d be stranded, caught wearing only her housedress and flip-flops or a pair of his shoes. I remembered his warning the morning she laughingly reported that the car did break down and she had walked the remainder of the way home. I imagined her passing by the just lighted houses clutching the front of her housedress to keep her breasts from swaying, and neighbors standing at their bedroom windows or front doors watching as she shuffled by.

Some days she never made it out of her green housedress and captured her unwashed hair under a scarf or bandana.

*  

There is so much hidden in the photographs. I would direct my daughter’s eyes to the photo of her father and me and point to my thin waist cinched by a belt and assure her that I didn’t stay that skinny, for I was pregnant. And our playful posturing—the possessiveness of her father’s arm around my shoulders, my hand grasping his wrist, but especially my smirk—captured, made permanent, hides the reality: we had met each other a few months earlier. The way I angled my body so that my hip possessively
touches his almost causes me to forget that I wondered if I’d made the right decision.

Did this marriage have a chance?

It all happened so fast: the pregnancy, the marriage.

The twinkle of the borrowed wedding ring I wore. In our hurry to get to the courthouse and married before we changed our minds, we never thought to buy one. It’s a symbolic piece of jewelry: it was the one my mother-in-law wore the first time she and my father-in-law married each other. In the picture, I wear it as if assured the man next to me was the one for me, when months earlier I had thought myself involved with someone else, a nice, southern boy with a clubfoot. But when he realized I was falling for him, he confessed that I wasn’t his perfect woman. His fantasy woman had long hair (he was aware of his receding hairline); he preferred a brunette to a blonde. She was tall (a few inches taller than him); slim (he was portly); but not athletic: with his clubfoot, he didn’t want a runner or a fast walker, but a woman who wore sandals and enjoyed walking along the beach holding his hand (while he limped to keep up, his heavy shoe dragging through the sand).

I thought of all the women in his life and tried to figure out which one his fantasy woman was based on. There was Suann, our middle-aged supervisor at the media center at Auburn University at Montgomery, the girls and women he saw at church every Sunday, and his mother. He particularly appreciated Suann and how she looked after him by asking if pushing the televisions on their stands across campus was too much physical effort. Was he ever embarrassed? Did he feel people were watching him? Would he
rather work in the back room? The church girls were like the sisters he never had and he very much appreciated how the church women looked after his widowed mother.

But I was the woman he spent large amounts of time with, the one he’d taken home to meet his mother. I introduced him to Anita Baker and he introduced me to Randy Travis. We found humor in similar situations.

One night I took particular care when getting ready for one of our outings—he never would call them dates. I admired myself in the mirror: my short hair bleached during long afternoon runs and sporting its natural wave looked startlingly blonde against my tanned face, which was scrubbed clean and moisturized with a light sheen of Vaseline. I wore a pair of pants found in the giveaway pile outside my sister’s door—they hugged my trim hips and strong legs—and a short-sleeved sweater found in my mother’s closet that left bare my shoulders and arms. My bare feet were slipped into low-heeled pumps.

When he opened his apartment door, there was a glimmer of something as his eyes scanned me from head to toe. I don’t remember where we went, but later that night we lay on the floor and listened to music. At one point, we looked at one another and this time he didn’t turn away but returned my stare, then said in a voice filled with amazement, “You really are attractive once a person gets to know you.”

Don’t young girls want to know about their mother’s disappointments in love? Is thirteen too young to hear about your young mother’s desire to have sex with a friend, and how she’d hoped that he would finally wake up and recognize what she was offering? But I wasn’t who he’d imagined he’d have sex with the first time. He didn’t want to hurt my feelings, but he was saving himself for that someone special.
“Maybe we should stop seeing each other until you’ve had some time,” he said, and that was the last time we saw each other. Just months later, I met Bob in a summer Spanish class, and we had sex several times, and I got pregnant, and then we married.

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I am drawn to the tight fit of the three of us in the center of the old Polaroid: the way my mother has tightly tucked her shoulder behind my father’s; how closely I am held, my father’s hand against my stomach presses me to his chest. There is no reason for anyone to question that we belong together. But the darkened doorway behind my mother’s shoulder draws my attention and reminds me that I have no memory of this moment, of the white dresses the mother and child are wearing, or the blue of the father’s shirt. What else have I forgotten?

When I was growing up I was the spittin’ image of a Postlethwait. When my siblings and I were paraded out and lined up to be introduced to visiting relatives, the comments about which family member each of us looked like traveled up the line. All of us had inherited our father’s eyes, but I had inherited the long legs of my father’s sisters, and the set of my shoulders, the way I held myself was all “Postlethwait.” I was thrilled to hear about these connections to my father’s side, people I rarely saw or heard about. People who were secrets. My half-sister. Knowing about her, my eyes are drawn to the tight fit between my parents. She is who I am searching for in the darkened doorway. Why was she hidden in the drawer, not kept in the photo albums brought out and looked over whenever relatives visited? The thrill of discovering her overshadowed any thoughts of betrayal, disappointment, even scandal I might have felt toward my father. Instead, and
for reasons I am still struggling to understand, I felt betrayed and disappointed to realize that my mother had been the holder of secrets and was capable—no, was willing—to deliberately withhold parts of herself from me.

* 

After my parents returned home, I found things they left: a bottle of perfume on my dresser. I sniff the lid and there is my mother’s scent. Since the scent if applied to my skin would cause a headache, I spray a handkerchief before placing it in my dresser, burying it beneath my underwear and bras. I keep a pair of Mother’s cropped pants and wear them when I run. But my favorite finds are a pair of my father’s jeans that fit, and a T-shirt that reads *This is What a Cool Grandpa Looks Like.*

People who had seen my mother and me together commented on how much we looked alike. Oh really? How? And always there was a pause as if they were recalling the two of us together, their eyes moving from her face to mine, but lingering on hers. As I waited for their response, I remembered Mother on one of our walks: she wore a baseball cap and under the bill her face was tan, the skin taut across high cheekbones. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail that she worked through the cap’s clasp, so that its tip bounced and swayed against her neck. Gold earrings dangled from her ears. At first she matched her stride with mine, but eventually, her body leaning forward, her arms pumping rhythmically, she increased her pace and I settled in behind her and watched her ponytail and gold earrings swing against her neck, her elbows pump against her hips. I am disappointed when my question is waved aside—mostly they are surprised by how young she looked. Too young to be my mother.
I sat behind her after we had returned from our walk and watched as she ran her fingers through her hair—a movement from my memory, something she did when her mind was occupied, distracted, or she was relaxed. If she were to turn and look at me, who would she see?

Sometimes when I heard my mother talking about me, knowing that she was watching me caused my body to tingle with pleasure, as if her hands caressed my skin, my hair. Even now that I am older, a mother myself. She told my children, in a voice filled with pride and humor, that I rarely allowed anyone to touch me, to alter my appearance, to “mess with me.” She tried once, when I was fifteen or sixteen. Proud of my good hair, thick with natural body, she took me to her friend’s to have it permed. She was excited during the process, anxious to get her hands on me. Back home, we must have sat in the bathroom as she sectioned my head, ran the heavy locks through a hot curling iron, then brushed them out, and used her fingers to force the placement of a curl. She decorated me, draped a sweater around my shoulders and posed me in front of a flowering bush. My hair is blond where the sun reaches it through the branches, waves of curls frame my face. I can hear her saying, “Ok, Natalie, look this way,” telling me how beautiful it is, my hair, the bush, the sun—my head is tilted, chin tucked, my eyes are looking toward the camera, but focused over her shoulder.

I couldn’t maintain the image she’d created; I never learned to pay attention to or care about my looks. And my mother, distracted by the day-to-day of her life, couldn’t prepare my hair every morning. Days later, before Sunday church service, I washed my hair and let it dry into a mass of curls. When the service was over and I turned to leave
the pew, a friend’s sister pulled me aside and advised, with a passion that could only
mean she had looked at the back of my head during the entire service, if I was going to
have a perm, I should put some effort into styling it.

My mother sees her mother in the set of my shoulders, the way I carry myself. She
told me this once, as I walked toward her, in a tone of awe and pleasure as if the physical
similarities between her daughter and mother both surprised and pleased her. In the
bathroom in front of the mirror with the vanity lights on, I search for my mother, but it is
the image of my white-haired grandmother posing in her nurse’s uniform: her sharp
cheekbones covered by a firm mask of skin and a nose made prominent by her fall from a
hayloft when she was a child. When I imagine myself in my sixties, I have my
grandmother’s features, with my own twist: skin toughened by sun and wind, steel gray
hair gathered and crammed under a fishing hat. I wear my father’s old T-shirt under an
unbuttoned flannel shirt, his jeans with the wide cuffs that flop across the top of an old
pair of tennis shoes.

Not the pair of sunglasses I find in the car. My daughter tells me her Nana left them,
that they once belonged to her cousin. The lenses are large and square, tinted a smoky
pink; the frames are decorated with loops of gold at the top corner, something J-Lo would
wear. I put them on and, standing in my yard in Alaska, imagine my nineteen-year-old
niece wearing them as she leaves the parking lot of a Montgomery mall. She was
attracted to the gold, the tint of pink that ran through the frames. They emphasize her
dark coloring; the smokiness of the lenses matches the sheen of her long, straight hair.
But when another pair attracted her attention, she gave this pair to my mother, who wore them and imagined they emphasized the angles of her face, made her tanned face appear younger, more glamorous. And now, I wear them because they were there when I needed a pair, and they hide my eyes. They allow me to be an observer, to watch the eyes of others as they linger on the stylish eyewear, and in that moment before their eyes falter as they take in my ratty T-shirt, cast-off pair of cropped pants, and flip flops, I am the fulfillment of what I imagine they see—parts of my mother, my grandmother, even my niece.
I Have Not Heard My Father’s Voice For So Long

There are familiar things in the photo my mother sent me: in the far corner of the photo my father and my mother’s brothers, my uncles Kenny and Jerry, are posed under a pair of trees near the edge of my parents’ neighbor’s yard. The heads of the three men are turned toward the camera—probably my father has just pointed out how, in preparation for the casino that will be built on the large property across Highway 231, new businesses are beginning to surround the neighborhood. I imagine they reached this part of his property after a tour of my father’s yard. I have watched him give his tours to other visitors, have myself experienced the walk around the property. They started in the back for a look at his garden, and a description of the projects started, completed, the projects he dreams of doing in the future. At the front of the house, they stood by the porch and looked out over the yard. One of them commented on the house that sits close to his driveway, and they walked that way, my father talking about his neighbor, not complaining about how close their house sits to his property, but instead bragging that proximity brings neighborly habits—my father’s neighbor checks in when my mother is away. They now stand at the edge of my parents’ property, and that is when I imagine my mother stepped out of the kitchen with her camera, called to them, and captured the moment.

There are unfamiliar things in the photo: a black cat facing away from the camera and toward the grassy area, sits between the two trees and to the right of my uncle; the straw hats my uncles wear; and the thick, white gauze wrapped around my father’s head and neck. At first the way the gauze is wrapped—thickly around his head and ears with a
strap under his chin—and the way it bunches at the top reminds me of my children’s heads in their tuques, with their ears tucked under flaps, and under their chin a tied strap, and that pointy ball at the tip top. It’s an inappropriate simile—a hat that protected my children from the cold by trapping and storing the heat generated by their young, busy bodies is vastly different from the white material wrapped thickly around my father’s shaved scalp to give the puckered scars a chance to heal, make them strong enough to hold the skin together to hold in his brain and the recently implanted hardware. The white gauze-like tuque is a protection against further harm caused by my father’s failing body.

In a picture from a magazine, a man models the hardware that was implanted during my father’s surgery to control the effects of Parkinson’s. Using the picture as my guide, I unwrap my father’s bandages, separate the sutures, and peel back the skin: in the center of his brain are two leads (an insulated wire with four electrodes) connected to a neurostimulator by two wires that snake down under the skin of his scalp and are tucked behind each ear, and run across his collar bones. He is wired to make sure messages from his brain are fed to his body’s parts to keep them moving.

I put his head back together, rewrap the bandages.

Like my father, the illustrated man’s hair has receded, is white, but his face has a healthy color with no obvious age lines. His neck rising out of broad naked shoulders reminds me of a photo of my father from the 1990s. Seated in a chair, leaning slightly forward and looking over his shoulder at the camera, he is wearing a red sweatshirt that hugs his shoulders and back. His hair is darker, his face filled out, deep creases caused
by his broad smile bracket his mouth; his skin is smooth. He holds up in his left hand a large russet; on his finger is his gold wedding band.

I remember that day, the activity occurring just outside the photo: a football game on the television; he and my brother and brothers-in-law seated around the living room; my sisters nearby. Grandchildren ran from the living room to the kitchen where Mother organized the preparation of the food. She took a few minutes to check on my father’s progress with peeling potatoes. Are you peeling or watching the game? she asked. When he lifted the potato, she focused the camera and captured his proof.

For years this was the image I clung to whenever I thought of my father. This was the man I was prepared to see whenever I visited. Now I know that by the time the photo was taken he had already experienced the tingling sensations in his arm and fingers and the random loss of feeling on one side of his body. He knew something was wrong—once on a conference call with his supervisor when he was asked a question, he couldn’t respond. He heard the question and his mouth formed his answer, but he couldn’t get the words out. The silence seemed to go on for a long time, and then finally, he was able to speak.

At first, no one could pinpoint the problem. Perhaps he had suffered mini-strokes? He was young, still in his fifties, and in good physical health, still running, so it was possible the strokes weren’t causing much damage. Parkinson’s never crossed their minds—at that time, few people under the age of seventy had been diagnosed.

Since I live far away, it seemed that Parkinson’s ravaged his body so quickly—the quick change of his hair from black to white, his stooped shoulders, and the massive
weight loss caused by the constant tremors. During a visit the summer before his surgery, I sat with him in the swing near the front porch in the shade of a tree, at our feet a box lined with a garbage bag and filled with pecans. I watched as he and my son concentrated on cracking nuts. My son trying to crack as many as his Papa, mimicked his serious concentration. Every now and again I said something to fill the silence, but concentrating on the task, my father didn’t answer. I watched as he grabbed a pecan and held it in his grasp, then patiently waited out his arm’s tremors. His movements reminded me of a planet that had lost its gravitational pull: keeping his eyes trained on the hand cupping the pecan, he tried to bring the arm holding the nutcracker closer, but it kept floating away. I fell silent, worried that I’d break his concentration. Finally, his arm hovered nearer and nearer and he was able to fit the pecan between the grooved teeth of the nutcracker, and with one flex of his hand, he shattered the shell. I looked over at my son watching his Papa closely, waiting patiently for the next step. My father, lips poked out in concentration, examined the pieces in his hand. I knew he would grab the sharp tool and attempt to pry the white flesh away from the bits of shell. But I turned away and looked out over the yard, unwilling to watch the excruciating performance.

After he dumped the pieces in the bowl, he interrupted the silence as if continuing a conversation we had already started. “I have a routine and that makes me feel good,” he said. His head bobbed, his mouth opened and closed, his neck muscles strained like a feeble bird gasping for air. His arm jerked sporadically while his hand curled into a tight fist, opened, closed, opened.
“My routine has kept me going. I get up in the morning, do a bit of reading . . .” again
his neck spasmed while his head bobbed. He fell silent, a few minutes passed. “ . . . then
I walk down to the gas station and get a paper. They know me by now. Sometimes, if
they see me coming (his head bobbed uncontrollably), they’ll leave a paper out so I don’t
have to struggle with the lock. They all know me.”

His mouth clamped shut and he bent at the waist to retrieve another pecan from the
box.

What surprised me the most was his shuffling steps, the hesitation because of his fear
that he would slip and fall. In a very early memory, I am playing in a neighbor’s yard
and look up to see my father running in his cuffed shorts, socks, and tennis shoes. He
had removed his shirt and tucked it into the waistband of his shorts so that it swayed with
the movements of his hips. He ran, not with a long stride, but short steps, keeping his
feet close together, moving them quickly against the surface of the road. He held his
arms at ninety-degree angles, rotating them as if he were holding the ends of two jump
ropes while young girls jumped to the rhythm of songs. He ran after work, when the sun
wasn’t so harsh, but the humidity was high, and a runner’s sweat coated the body, so that
the movement of running mostly felt like wading. Or in the mornings, before work, when
you can imagine the heat has left and that the cool air coats your lungs.

After his diagnosis, he maintained communication as long as he could. Whenever I
telephoned, there would be spurts of words, then long pauses and I would envision his
head bobbing, his mouth opening and closing as his thoughts built up in his brain before
being forced out of his mouth. He took great pleasure in describing his daily routine: when the Dopamine, the medication he was prescribed, was working, he spent most of the day in his garden, but when the medication was off and the spells were particularly bad, he stayed in the house, afraid to venture out. The constant tremors exhausted him; naps were now required and this caused an erratic sleeping schedule. When he could no longer maneuver his stiffened body onto the bed he shared with my mother, he began sleeping on the living room floor.

Eventually whenever I telephoned and he answered, and after we had exchanged news about the weather here in Alaska and there in Alabama, he would say, “Well, here’s your mother,” and then would come his trembling voice calling to her. When I asked, “So, how is he doing?” she’d place the receiver on her shoulder and I would hear his voice as she relayed my question.

I wrote him weekly letters to which he didn’t respond, but Mother told me he enjoyed them. She wrote of sitting on their floor and working on a project while he read aloud one of my letters. And reading her description, I imagined him standing above her, my card gripped by his hands, and his voice strong and steady.

For months I saved the answering machine recording of his quavering voice singing “Happy Birthday.” Maybe I shouldn’t have. Slowly, slowly the sound of his healthy voice began fading from memory. I have to go far back in memory to recapture the moments when he would regale me and my siblings with silly word poems he had to memorize for an elocution class: And they made Rindercella do all the worty dirk while they sat around cheating ocolates and meading radazines. Our squabbling turned to
giggles, then silence as we tried to work the riddle. Sometime he broke into song: *Don’t forsake me, oh, my darling.* . . and this his words trailed off, replaced by his melodic whistling.

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I have a Polaroid of my father and me taken a long time ago. On the back, my mother had written my name and the word “father” and our ages: fourteen months, twenty-six years. In the photo my father crouches in front of a flowering tree, holding me perched on his knee, his arms around my waist, his hands touching in front of my stomach. Back then, my father was a good-looking man with a head full of black hair swept away from his forehead, and I was a tow-headed infant. He’s wearing dark pants and a plaid shirt, its browns and reds blending with the red leaves and brown branches of the tree. But I seem to have absorbed all of the sun’s light, so that my blonde hair, white dress and socks give off a glow.

Here is captured hope—the confidence in my father’s eyes and smile, how the baby fits easily in the loose circle of his arms—an image of a future of great possibilities. But while my eyes linger, there is the gap between my father’s fingers, a missing joint that reminds me a disaster had already happened by the time this picture was taken. Sometime after my birth he’d gotten his finger stuck in a table saw. The doctor pulled the hanging skin tight across the open wound, and sewed it into place, creating a bald finger puppet without eyes, a nose, or mouth. When he posed with my baby self, the loss must have been new to him, something he was getting accustomed to. He once confided that he could sometimes feel the missing joint, as if his finger were whole. I grimace as I
gaze at the finger, imagining the wound is new, that the joint’s severed nerve ends throb under the skin. It mars the fairy tale existence the baby seems to be dressed for. For a moment, that baby’s innocence and the father’s confident smile cause me to forget events not captured by the camera. When my father was diagnosed with Parkinson’s, he wondered if a blow to his head when a teenager could have damaged some of his brain cells, encouraging the onset of his illness. Or it could have been a combination—the blow to the head and the effects of the environment. That young man in the Polaroid doesn’t know about the years ahead when his work in the railroad treating yards would expose him to creosote. And the baby girl in his arms hasn’t yet experienced the stinging smell that will linger on her father’s work clothes, or the black residue that will coat his work shoes.

Neither can imagine a morning thirty years later when the father stood in the daughter’s kitchen waiting patiently for the mother to notice his predicament. When fresh out of the shower, he had tried to put on his shirt, but it stuck to his back, and realizing he needed help, he went to the kitchen, but found his wife making dinner. So he waited. And that was how I found him—his shirt bunched under his armpits, his chest and stomach exposed. He obediently raised his arms when I stepped forward to help him. “Feel them,” he said, encouraging me to run my hands over his scalp and chest to feel the bumps from the implanted mechanisms that keep him upright and able to move. His body swayed as I yanked and tugged at his shirt. I smoothed his shirt into place around his hips and felt the urge to pat his bottom when I was done, using the signal I’d used with my children when helping them dress.
He left the kitchen to get his remote control. I held it as he excitedly explained how it sends electrical currents to his implants. My thumb brushed the surface of the big button; would I see his body jerk as the currents coursed through the wires? The puppet jerked to life. My mother the puppet master. Able to turn him off or on.

Perhaps if I had lived nearby and visited regularly, the changes wouldn’t have been so dramatic. But my sister, who lives near our parents, sent me a letter describing a moment when she was pumping gas. She glanced up and noticed an elderly man hobbling up the road. How wonderful that an elderly person can find the time to get out and exercise, she’d thought. When she looked back at the pump, she realized there was something familiar about the man.

Before I read further, I knew who the man was. The changes I’d seen during my visits, during their visit to my house, were still fresh in my mind.

I place the recent photo my mother sent me next to the old Polaroid—both are brimming with hope. Her hope. It is as if she is sending me a message: See, your uncles standing with your father. They traveled all that way to be with him after his surgery. They're no longer staring at his head; they’ve gotten past the shock of seeing him this way, his white head resembling a thick eraser stuck on his pencil-thin body. See his head, how the white gauze is wrapped, how they made a chin strap to balance the weight of the wrap’s thickness with your father’s slight body, so that he doesn’t topple over. It is a picture of hope, documented proof that my mother believes life goes on, that families
can become closer, stronger. I feel so far away. Days go by and I never think of him, and he seems willing to let our connections falter, die, as if he can’t generate enough will—as if all his energy goes to living with Parkinson’s.

I have forgotten when my father underwent brain surgery. I turn over the photo, but there is no date. I skim the pages of my diary looking for any details. The surgery must have taken place on June 21, for in the next day’s entry, I wrote that my brother called a few hours after the procedure. Our father, he reported, was able to button his shirt and talk without the hesitation we’d gotten used to. Physical changes were obvious: he held his hands out and they were steady. But not everything was corrected: he had problems urinating and had to have a catheter installed. Even so, there was excitement in my brother’s voice as he described how our father pushed away a walker and, tiptoeing on the balls of his feet, his hospital gown open in the back, walked the halls on his own. As my brother talked, I imagined my family gathered at the hospital, their gasp as our father is unveiled: it is the illustrated man, his skin clear, unlined, his shoulders straight, his back no longer stooped, who walks into the arms of those who had experienced this ordeal with him. My brother’s excitement and his confidence that our father is back feeds my imaginations—my mind jumps and there comes an image of him bending to put on running shoes bought to celebrate his recovery. The dexterity in his hands has returned; he adjusts the laces, pulls them tight before tying them. He leaves the house, steps off the porch and begins a slow stride down the driveway. His perfect form has been restored: he lands on his heel, rolls his foot forward. His chest is out, his shoulders in line with his hips, his chin and eyes pointed ahead.
How easy to imagine; I join him, matching my stride with his.

Even imagined hope is fragile, my fantasy broken up by what I now know. Hidden in that picture of my father and my uncles is an unknown future: beneath the turban, dead cells are not responding to the currents coursing through the leads attached to his brain. I can’t maintain my fantasy: I hear his soles scraping the pavement. Looking over my shoulder, I see he’s tired, has lost his form: one side of his body is stiff, frozen, one shoulder drooping, an arm is held tightly against his side, his fingers hang limply. His turban is unwrapping; there are wires poking. He is envisioning the end, concentrating on finishing the run, but he’s losing control over his body.

I glance to the side and see Mother standing along the road. No camera, her arms hanging at her side. Pumping my arms, lengthening my stride, my body surges forward. I no longer check behind me to see if he will make it. I keep running, and leave him behind.