

Little Sufferings

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Abstract

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Relationships with mothers and daughters are fraught. I know this. “Little Sufferings” is a collection of short, somewhat repetitive personal essays written under seven themes—Faith, Femininity, Family, Vigilance, Body, Self, and Competence. It includes photographs of my mother throughout her life, though primarily in adolescence, as well as one of myself and my sisters. This project was discovered primarily in discussion with my sisters, discussions we’ve been having all our lives about our mother and the little— sometimes big— things about her, her personality and self-presentation, that just drive us bananas.

On “Little Sufferings”:

A discussion of mothers, emotional spelunking, and the legacy of self

“Little Sufferings” is a collection of short, somewhat repetitive personal essays written under seven themes—Faith, Femininity, Family, Vigilance, Body, Self, and Competence. It includes photographs of my mother throughout her life, though primarily in adolescence, as well as one of myself and my sisters. This project was discovered primarily in discussion with my sisters, discussions we’ve been having all our lives about our mother and the little— sometimes big— things about her, her personality and self-presentation, that just drive us bananas. When I wrote the original draft of this piece in Professor Heuving’s class last year, I was fresh off a fight with my mom about how I was terrible and unfair and unkind to my sister-in-law who had recently imploded our relationship with a letter—a story for a different project, perhaps.

Heuving had given us a prompt of questions that week, taken from Bhanu Kapil’s work *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, from which I chose these three to explore: Who are you and whom do you love? Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother? If your silence could speak, what would it say?

From these questions, I just started rambling, writing without forethought— maybe the least polished work I’d ever recorded like that. I remember sitting on the couch, the TV playing something like *Psych* or *Big Mouth*, and just *writing*. I was still living with my sister at that time, we were eating dinner together like usual, and I was totally unprepared to put any real effort or thought into this assignment. And I remember reading that first question—who *are* you—and all I could think about was my mom. Am I my mom.

The questions that this MFA program have forced me to ask, to *answer*, have scared me. They have encouraged me to be vulnerable in a way that I never imagined for myself, to engage with my peers in a way that I never wanted to, with the intention to be truly seen. And if I allow myself to be seen, I am allowing my fears to be seen.

I hadn't really intended to write about my mom at all, one of my greatest fears. I was just trying to get something on the page because it was quickly approaching midnight and I've never been good at deadlines. And I felt so flat and useless, I let this writing feel flat and useless, too. "If my silence could speak, I'm sure she would laugh at me." And then it kind of grew from there. There had been such a positive, detailed response to this work within the cohort that I felt like I couldn't leave it there, like doing so would ruin my chances of ever being successful in this program. This was my one shot, the thing I'd *finally* found that had come naturally and felt so cathartic in writing, the thing that others could really connect with. Unfortunately, I can never let my family read it—it would cause such a flurry of offense. Offense at being included or *not* included, offense that I would air such dirty laundry or that I would write about how hard *my* life has been, when by all accounts I had it easy. I should be grateful, and I *am* grateful, but my siblings, my parents, my grandparents would never read between the lines in this way.

I think most of all, though, my mom would be hurt by the fact that I am so critical of her, her parenting and her presentation, so much so that she would never be able to sift through the hurt and find the love. The love that I hope is apparent to any future readers.

Is it terrible that I'm critical of this aspect of my mother, too? *I guess I'm just a terrible mom.* And I guess I'm just a terrible daughter.

I kept developing the project for my final in that course, titling it "Little Sufferings." In the expanded draft I added pictures. Pictures were necessary to show that my mom had grown up in such a different time, such a different world from me. They were to prove that she was like me, anyway, even for all that we have been worlds apart. Even today, she told me, "I don't understand these choices you're making. But we all have to make our own." I got my sister to sneakily take scans of photos my grandmother had gifted my mom years ago, all from her childhood but many of her siblings, Sandy and Donnie. She sent me every single picture with my mom in it, and it was far fewer than expected. I scattered them throughout the work. I think they're working.

Sometimes I find myself just staring at this picture of my mom sitting on the floor, looking at a small dark object in her hand and I wonder what it was like to be her.

I read Danielle Geller's *Dog Flowers*, her memoir of seeking her mother through artifacts, primarily photos that she'd left behind after passing, and I thought that *this* is what I want my photos to do—show the parts of my mother that I never got to know. For me, for my mom, they're the parts of her that I'm not sure if even she remembers. The unnamable things that die when you forget to water them.

I had grand ideas to write seven short pieces, essays I guess, each focusing on an aspect of my mother's personality, or maybe something that she finds fault with in me. I was trying to be poetic and smart in finding seven to represent her seven children, me being the lucky seventh, as well as reflecting the fact that she converted to the Seventh-day Adventist faith when I was two. It felt important but also a massive undertaking for a ten-week course, so I quickly set the idea of seven on the backburner and wrote instead one-to-two-page pieces on Femininity, Faith, Family, and Vigilance.

Femininity—the way that my mother both rejects and performs it—came first. Or maybe not. It doesn't really matter now, but femininity feels like an important basis on which all of these other themes seem to rest. My mom's attitude on what it means to be a woman shaped the way that I understand her perspectives on safety, God, motherhood. All of it stems from this complicated thing that is being a woman—the discomfort, the desire, the overall unsettled presence. I have struggled so much with the idea of being a woman, how to be the right *kind* of woman that will make her mother happy but also not be a doormat but also how could I achieve both of those things when my mother is *my* mother? It felt like a necessary wrestling and I'm not quite sure where it lands now.

Vigilance is sort of an offshoot of Femininity. My mother has always been afraid in raising her daughters, afraid of what the world holds for them, good and bad. I had an especially hard time with the form in these pieces. I wanted them to feel oppressive in a way, as my mom's paranoia has felt oppressive, so I focused more on short structure, overbearing language. I wanted my reader to feel the panic rising.

Faith was an easy one. My mother was raised Baptist but converted to Adventism when I was too young to remember, but most of my siblings remember the life before stripples (fake bacon), grillers (fake burgers), and Special K loaf (don't ask). Being SDA has been so present in my relationship with my

mom, in my own identity, although I don't really practice anymore and never really bothered to read the Bible or learn too much about Ellen White, the cofounder and alleged prophet. All my life, even to this day, however, I have listened to my mom discuss biblical themes, sing hymns quietly to herself while cleaning, and I have gotten many a side-eye for saying "Oh my God" in her presence. I believe that my mother's faith is truly her source of strength, and church has consistently provided friendship and community for herself and her children.

Family was originally only meant to focus on my mom's childhood and the sort of family environment in which she was raised—extremely dysfunctional—to sort of contextualize her attitudes and experiences in the other pieces. It quickly grew into an expression of what family means to *me*, how I perceive my family changing and growing, and how that relates to my mom's family, how she created these opportunities for growth and love. Where the desire to do so may have started. In writing about my mother's family, I found myself writing more and more about my own, how it is different every day.

I wanted to capture the double-edged sword of these concepts, the way that they all can help and hurt a person, especially a young girl being raised by a woman who had to grow up too quickly. I eventually went back and added in three more focal points—Competence, Body, and Self—for that nice, round seven. The specifics of these themes came through the writing process itself, sort of peeking through the other four and suggesting I find out more about them.

I wanted from the beginning for the pieces to be kept relatively short, even as I was expected to produce more and more and more, because that's just how my brain works. I wanted the reader to feel like they were jumping from topic to topic and back again, the way that I often think through my problems, but I also wanted to create visual space to allow time to rest, to pause, reflect. There are pages with only a few sentences, broken into lines to allow room for breath, for patience. There is a page with only four words. I hope those words hit my reader like a fist.

Or maybe I wanted to remind them to give their mom a hug if they're able, if they got a good one. Did I get a good one?

I wanted to investigate the ways that I have learned to metabolize these ideas, the ways that I reject and accept my mother's views. I say that now, but I'm not sure how true that statement is when reflecting on the early stages of the project. I think I was maybe just bullshitting at first, but now it all feels very much a part of me. I have grown up through writing this, and I have healed some components of myself, my relationship to my mom. I'm really grateful.

In the development of this project, discussions with my advisor and in seeking feedback, I was really looking to dissect a little bit this theme of the Self vs. the Mother. I've never felt very similar to my mom but as I was writing about her it felt as though I was writing about myself, *to myself* like a letter, which does come into play within the narrative. I was highly inspired by Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The novel is written as a letter to a mother who will never read it because she cannot read English, and it serves as almost a diary for the narrator. The deeper into the novel I read, the more my own thoughts were framed around this second-person voice—I was asking question after question, developing a letter of my own, until it was unclear who exactly the letter was addressing. I didn't feel like I was talking to my mom anymore, but myself.

And I think that was the biggest challenge for me. I hate writing with the goal of self-discovery. I'm endlessly intrigued by family dynamics and the effect that these can have on a person's development, their self-expression, but this piece was getting more and more personal with every word. I had set out somehow to write about my mother, my feelings about her and her actions and her attitudes, and yet as mothers often do, she managed to turn it all back around on me like a big old mirror—and she doesn't even know this thesis is about her. *I* am what's left of her actions, I am representative of her and her choices. How do I take agency in this situation where I am simply a product of others?

For months and months, I was thinking always about writing and how much I should be writing but I was having so much trouble writing. So, my advisor advised that I should do some photographing instead, but I couldn't seem to do that either. I was wrapped up in this need to write, this desire to do something, anything, and then feeling guilty and ashamed for being unable to. For not writing. Not taking photos. Activities that were such a large part of my identity, and now I couldn't access either. And so I

wrote about it, about the struggle surrounding it, about the shame and grief and absolute lost feeling. And over time, finding the ability to write my own pitiful experiences and disappearance of self became a way to discover my mother—what happens to your identity when you commit your twenties to raising children and your thirties to working minimum wage jobs to feed those children?

I had this idea of structure, I wanted this piece to look a certain way or at least to feel that way—a little bit empty, a little bit punchy, a little bit like a reader could see my tearstains on the words. A little bit hopeful, maybe.

I am so proud of this work, in a way that I don't think I've ever been proud before— even though I'm at the point where I'd like to set my laptop on fire and never think about my weird relationship with my weird mom ever again. This is the most intentional, thought-out piece that I've ever written, the longest piece I've ever written, and the most structured. I am so excited to feel done, although this is one that I'm not sure will ever truly feel done. When I entered this MFA, the only thing I really wanted to get out of it was a manuscript that felt publishable—and I'm almost there. It just needs a little rest, maybe, and then some reevaluation.

I took on this project mostly because it felt easy at first. I responded to the original prompt in about five minutes of frenzied typing, and the second draft didn't take too much more effort. I continued this project because in the end, it felt necessary and impossible. Writing this has been (almost) as good as therapy for me, and the difficulty in writing it, the utter impossibility of it, really tugged at my pride. I *had* to finish it, and it had to be good.

And now my readers are seeing something *complete*. Something I didn't think I would ever have the guts to write. In writing this, I have found myself more able to discuss my fears with my mom, to ask her questions about her childhood, to call her without texting first. I've seen my mom, too, become a more peaceful version of herself in the last year. Somehow, though, photography remains elusive.

I do hope to publish “Little Sufferings” one day. And when I wrote that it was a letter my mom would never bother to read, I know that I was right. She would absolutely buy seven copies just to put on her bookshelf, but she would never crack the cover. I know that she's proud of *me*, the work that I've put

in, but she's absolutely not interested in understanding or experiencing it. And I think I'm happy with that.

Little Sufferings



Melissa Mae Knopp

Dear Mom,

I love you.

Melissa

I want to lie down in the place I am from: on the street I am from.

Bhanu Kapil

Ban en Banlieue

I'm trying to be what you need me to be but sometimes

it feels like a little

too much of

me

slips through.

And then you get annoyed.

Exasperated.

Not angry but not

not angry.

Certainly not proud.



Who are you and whom do you love?

In my mind I smell like fresh hay and irrigation canals and plain black coffee, but I know it isn't true. In my mind I look like nothing and everything, a blank image in the mirror. I know that I have a mustache like my father and moles like my mother. Eczema and poor eyes like both. Who am I, do I love. Do I love am I capable. Of course of course but I am disconnected now, separate now. My family fills a restaurant any restaurant, overwhelms the café and terrifies the prospectives. I like when they're nervous, I feel better for not feeling.

Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?

Relationships with mothers and daughters are fraught. I know this.

My mom got drunk on Halloween and told me that her mom had cheated on her dad. She was different from her sister and brother, darker and quieter and introverted. This is not proof of an affair, but she makes too-regular jokes about my dad getting a girlfriend. The first time my mom ever drank in front of me was on my twenty-first birthday. She drank her wine and my wine and my beer and her own. Some of Alisson's, too. She cried and asked if she was a bad mom. She laughed the loudest I'd heard in a long time, at jokes I made, like she really thought I was funny. She texted my dad to come to the B&B, a slutty drunk.

When my mom was living in Austin she ate a quart of ice cream for dinner every night. She took me to Weight Watchers meetings as soon as I tipped over seventy pounds. All she says anymore is carbs and keto and heavy—afraid to say fat—and I don't understand why a woman who carried seven children over six pregnancies, who had two cesarians and at one time worked

eighty hours a week to provide swim lessons and scout trips and trombone rental has to worry about her “apron belly.”

If your silence could speak, what would it say?

If my silence could speak, I’m sure she would laugh at me. She would laugh at the ways I refuse to be vulnerable and at the ways I can’t stop myself from pushing too hard, forcing my way into a person’s life with the barest invitation. To what end do I hold myself back from others for days weeks months only to tell them the worst of myself at top volume in a speed-run thirty minutes? Do people enjoy the fact that I’m ice cold until I burn them? It’s not an endearing quality, but I can’t turn it off. I am the world’s worst comedian with the world’s most inexplicable timing.

My silence might even choose to stay silent, ultimately. She might not be interested in knowing me, in finding something worth loving. I have been surrounded by love all my life, even in violent moments, even in lonely moments. Knowing it is not the same as understanding it, accepting it.

My mother was born Lori Jeanne Harmel in the base hospital at Fort Campbell, in Kentucky. I remember when she was applying to nursing school and discovered that she had lost her birth certificate. She reached out to the hospital for reissue, but it had moved some years ago across the state border into Tennessee. I'm not *from* Tennessee, I'm from Kentucky! Her father was stationed at this base to instruct "parachuters" for the war in Vietnam— some 120 men sent overseas that he had trained. She believes that if he'd stayed there any longer, he would have died for certain before she ever really knew him.

My mom grew up with two siblings—Sandy and then Donald Jr., or Donnie. She was close to her aunt Karen, who was a few years younger than her, an oops baby, but her relationship with Sandy is not now spoken of fondly. As the oldest, and as a child closer to her father, I'm not sure my mom was ever just allowed to be a kid— a girl.

She likes to brag that she learned algebra in the second grade, that she was already reading before she went into kindergarten. She likes to talk about riding her bike around base, smashing open coconuts on the back porch, dating a guy with a first generation Mac. But I think she is still very much trapped in that childhood idyll, and adulthood has not kept to script.

She married my dad, Bill, in 1986 when she was just twenty years old. She was already pregnant with my oldest brother. She stayed pregnant for the next eleven years, giving birth to my four brothers and two sisters—Jason (1987), Larissa (1990), Ian and Sean (1992), Alisson (1994), Trevor (1997), and myself in 1998.

What might her life have been.



BODY

I have too many thoughts about body, about my body and her body and what they could look like. It's all I could think about, incessant and impulsive, as long as I can remember. What do I look like if I sit up this way, tilting my pelvis to the left and maybe shift my shoulders just right? Do I look best wearing clothes that are tight on top or on bottom? I certainly can't do both, too skanky. Maybe just wearing everything a few sizes too big is best, to make me look as small as possible. Oh, Missy, don't rest your arm against your torso when having your photo taken, it will balloon out and you'll look so fat!

I want to think about my body differently. She put me in gymnastics and Irish dance and Weight Watchers, in and out every few months and already dreading it by the time I reached twelve. And it was all for the sake of keeping my body small, a genetic implausibility. Maybe not impossibility. The goal was never to find the movement that felt right because nothing ever felt right. When I tell her now that I went for a walk, joined a gym, tried a new Zumba or yoga video on the internet, she is *so proud*. Proud that I am finally trying to lose this weight, to make myself small enough to be pretty.

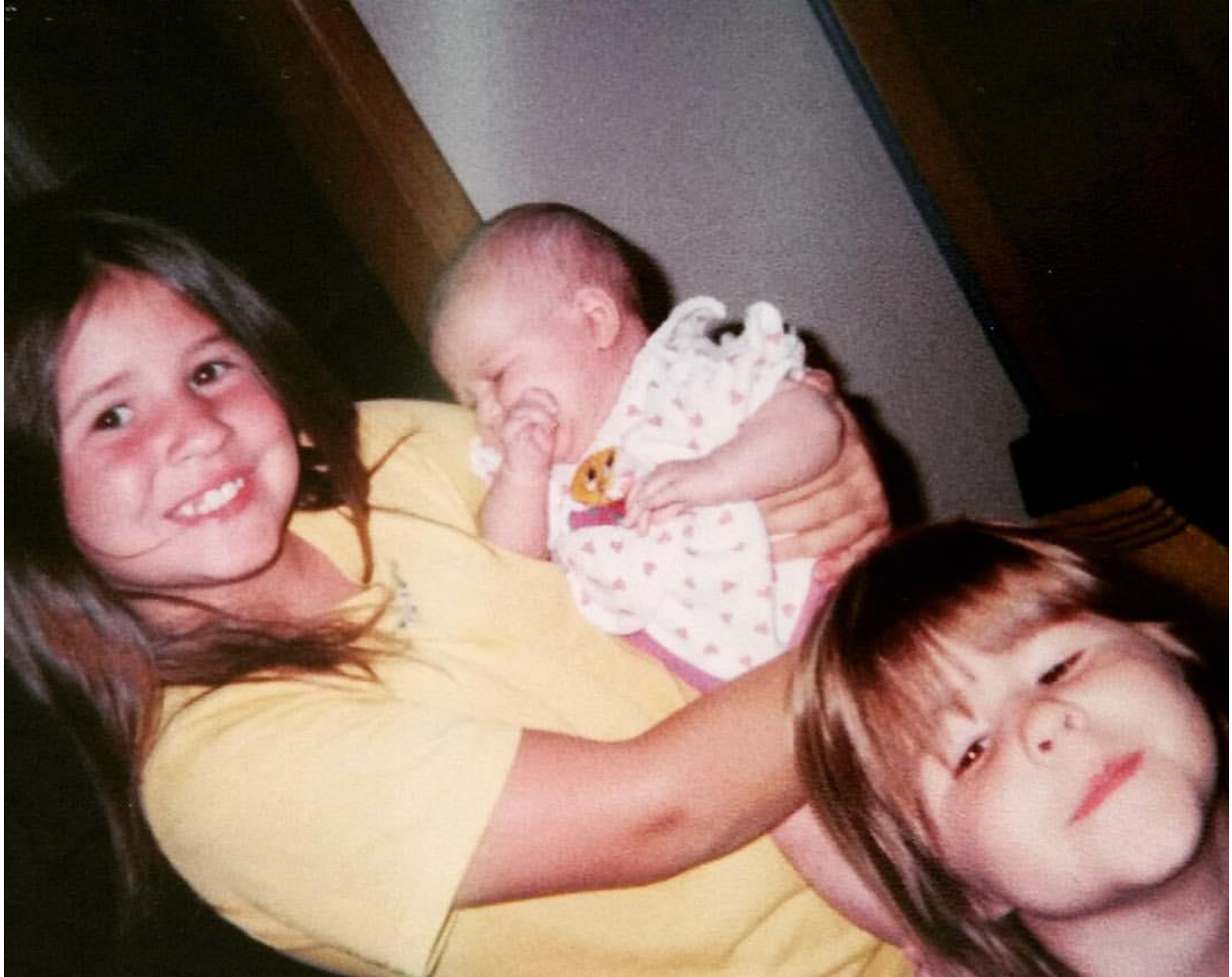
She is so nostalgic for the body she had at seventeen—a twenty-seven-inch waist rivaled only by her father's and her sister's— that she can't understand the one she has at fifty-five. She doesn't even want to try.

She complains that the food she's eating is so bad for her, but it's the same food she is feeding me. She complains that her stomach is a road atlas of scar tissue, but it carried me, my sisters and brothers. She would never complain about the size of her boobs— she's rather happy with those. But she claims to have had them all along. Her teenage body is, in my mind, a thing

conjured by The Commodores. But I've seen the photos and she looks like any normal, healthy kid.

She tells me stories of being a young thing on base, of her father's soldiers hitting on her, offering to buy her drinks, take her home, marry her. She tells me that she was twelve or thirteen when it started, and I can't tell how she feels about that now. I don't think she is flattered. She blames her clothes at the time, cut-off shorts and bikinis and short skirts and cropped shirts— all things that we girls were not allowed to wear as children, that she criticizes us for wearing as adults. Her protection of us. She does not seem to see the men as being wrong, predators. She sees her body as the terrible, alluring thing. She sees girls' bodies as wicked commodity. Traps, maybe. She blames her mother for allowing her to dress that way.

I always liked her body, her stomach, as a child. The pillowy quality of it when I wanted a soft place to rest. The way that there was always room for me next to her and against her. There was always a hug waiting for me if I wanted it and I wanted it often.



FEMININITY

I collect pink things, now, as an adult. Pink bedding, a pink laptop, pink dresses. Even my cat eats from a pink dish. I was encouraged away from pink as a child, into blues and greens and the occasional purple. Pink was, is, too “girly” for my mom, and now my whole life is pink.

And I like it. I like its softness, sweetness, femininity. I like it for the way that it bothers her to like it, the way that it is a rejection. Of her. Not just her preferences but of something that shapes the core of her. The rejection of her own rejection, her fear, her disdain.

Pink is for girls who are not ashamed to be girls. Pink is for girls whose fathers didn't teach them advanced algebra in the second grade, girls who wear makeup and dresses without apology, girls who are not at all like the girl my mother was. Is. Pink is for girls who were allowed a childhood, free of leering eyes or maybe just choosing to ignore them. Pink is for girls with older sisters to keep them safe.

I think pink is everything about me that she hates. It's too soft. It's too joyful, excited, blushing. It's too shy, too bold, too watchful, perhaps. Pink is too inviting, and the people who wear it are too sure.

Dannie Sandy Kovi



VIGILANCE

I have, somehow, a cousin. Wait no, it was an aunt— friend of a friend? A someone.

This someone was, somehow, killed, well, murdered. Erased, anyway.

This someone lived, either in Moses Lake or La Crosse or Austin, maybe.

It's important, always, to be watching, to know who is out there and who they might not be.

You never really know them.

Somehow.

As children we never went to the bathroom in a restaurant alone,

Always taking a sister with us to keep an eye out.

I don't know the woman's name, the one who lives in my mother's attempts at memory,

Attempts at warning.

I need to remember to lock my doors, all doors.

I need to remember that you can never really know someone,

You can never really know a man.

I need to remember to live in darkness, shades drawn tight so no one can ever see in.

I need to remember to always answer on the first ring.

Somehow.



I read somewhere that children don't recognize their mothers as being separate from them, a different thing with a different mind and owned emotions, until they are three, maybe two years old. A mother is an extension of oneself, or maybe vice versa.

A child cries and a mother is meant to fix it, to feed or to hold. A mother is meant to ameliorate. A child cries and a mother's cortisol levels shoot up to her eyeballs and a mother shakes, can't stop from shaking. Instinct. And you listened to a child crying for the entirety of your early adult life.

Will you ever stop shaking.



And I wonder how much of me is mimicry. How much of me is shaking because you have shaken, how much of me is screaming for your screams. I am one of you, accept me, bring me into your home. I am alone and crying into the night for someone—not someone but *you*—to hear me and want me and love me.

How much of this questioning is echoed in you, reverberating and ringing and escaping. Slipping past your lips on an angry shout, a tearful “I feel so alone.” How much of you is mimicking me or your mother or my sisters. An animal trying to trick another into acceptance.

I just remember being so vilified for crying but you cry too. I’m afraid that my future is prescribed in the wetness on your cheek, the red of your eye.



I will try to be more specific:

A smallish, black-line rose tattoo on the inner curve of a right, maybe, boob—I don't really remember, but I remember showering with it as a child and watching that small inch of skin, implying to me that this might have used to be someone different. It is blurry and greened with age, a relic.

Perfect, daintily carved ankles, regardless of weight at any given age. The only time they ever looked less than lovely was after tripping in a pothole out at the paper mill, leaving the left sprained and swollen and mottled. It never healed quite right and attempts to walk through the pain usually ended in terse, tight expression.

Short, straight eyebrows sat over dark, shining eyes. I remember seeing the bright blue rim of contacts for most of my childhood, but nights of sleeping in lenses finally caught up. Dry eye, like mine, poorly managed. A thick fan of lashes. Years of smiles commemorated in wrinkles.

Red Delicious cheeks, a defined chin, pierced but unadorned ears. Thin lips with a strong cupid's bow. Brown hair dark enough to look black, kept long in childhood and above the shoulders as a nurse.

A long, straight nose, now missing its large green-gray mole. Everyone thought it was a piercing. *I'm a cool mom, I have a nose piercing.* But its texture changed and that, too, had to go.

A hip overworked to the point of bone grinding bone, now titanium and plastic. Yelling through the pain, frustrated by the clear, apparent hurt. It couldn't be hidden.

Fingernails perpetually bitten down to the quick, an inescapable habit passed down to children and grandchildren alike.

A laugh that remains so bright and sharp, peeling, bursting. At once mortifying and
delightful.

FAMILY

When I was a kid, if Dad was mad at you, you'd really fucked up. If Mom was mad at you, it was a regular Tuesday afternoon. If you forgot to pull the chicken from the freezer, you got spanked. If you didn't come when called, you got spanked. If she came home in a bad mood from work, or was overly tired, you got spanked.

Mom had this plastic yellow pipe—my sister tells me it was from a kids' toy—that she used for spankings. I saw less of it than my siblings, I think mostly because I cried whenever it was pulled out. I cried if I got yelled at, or if I didn't get yelled at. I'll-give-you-something-to-cry-about eventually became I-don't-want-to-see-your-face-go-to-your-room. She always gave a tearful apology in the next hour. She always said she was a bad mom and I always had to tell her that she wasn't. She wouldn't let me go again without giving her a hug and a kiss.

I don't know if she did that for the others



There are so many parts of me that reflect you mimic you. I am afraid to become you.

FAMILY

Seventh-day Adventism found my mother shortly after she'd had her seventh child— me.

Seven children seven testaments to your misery, your lost youth—your fear. Seven is a biblical number. It feels significant in a way I can't define, can't quite pinpoint. I'm not sure I want to dig that far—are we the days of creation, the seven seals, the seven heads of Revelation's beast. I read that seven is representative of completion, fullness. A thing fully finished. Your faith feels a calling, your children feel a confirmation that God intended something for you—something in this that still can't be found.

I can't understand the grief of a mother but I can understand that of a daughter. I pray to God that I never understand what it feels like to survive three natural births and three cesarians. I can't know the guilt of a mother but I know the guilt of a daughter—I have ruined another woman, made her confront the things within herself that scare her and frustrate her and wound her. And it's satisfying, in a way.

BODY

Sometimes I think about her, and I think about me, and I think about all of the ways our bodies might actually be quite similar, but neither of us can really see it. I think about her and about my sisters and I will never really know what it feels like to live in their bodies, the way that a mother's words remain branded, black and steaming, on the worst parts of us.

I think of how skinny her legs are and how her skin hangs from the pounds and pounds she's lost and regained from the last thirty years of yo-yo diets. I think about her neck and her crooked teeth and her thin ears. I think about the way she jokingly calls herself beautiful and how I can never tell if she *is* joking, if she believes in her beauty. I think of how she calls herself fat in the same breath, laments all of the carbs that have ever entered her mouth.

I think of the pounds I could certainly stand to lose now, but how I don't want to hear her congratulate me for becoming skinny, small, special. I think of how I want to walk, to lift, to something, but I can never seem to find the right motivation, and I don't want anyone to see me trying to improve myself. I don't want to tell myself that my self needs improving. My worth has become so wrapped up in my size but I ignore the fact that I have a body, that others can perceive my body.

Sometimes in the writing of this I feel I'm not being fair, but I must reject fairness, too. It was such a common refrain from my mother's mouth—how is that fair, you aren't fair to me, you girls are so unfair. It was *always* the girls letting her down, treating her badly, being unfair. Not meeting the standard. Not providing the right sort of unwavering support.

I fear I may have reached the point of wanting to cause harm, as I believe mothers and daughters want. I am reduced to my seventeen-year-old self—or maybe my six-year-old, eleven-year-old, twenty-two-year-old self. I'm not sure which iteration of resentment I'm reviving. Maybe all of them.

VIGILANCE

Scott told me for the first time yesterday that he loves me. He acted like he didn't think I would say it back as if I hadn't been holding my breath for the last five months. Trying to not be too much. Trying to be normal. He told me he loves me and then he saw my mom make me cry and I'm just so tired of being vulnerable. I am crying and it reminds me to take my pill.

When he said it we were standing on the trail, watching the Columbia press by, the surface dragging behind deeper currents in long sweeps of fingers. A formation of geese overhead, the world a pale, bleak drizzle. There is perpetual wind there, and the rain comes down at an angle into your eyes. It settles in the bowl of your ear and seeps down the neck of your coat. We were both shivering and he turned and was watching me and I wouldn't meet his eyes because I hate meeting eyes. His eyes are that blue that make you think they're seeing too much of you.



FAMILY

I am just feeling tremendously sentimental. This will be my first Thanksgiving spent away from my family, with a family that is *not mine*, and for all that I won't be alone, anyway, I still can't shake the feeling that I will be lonesome. Scott's parents are so old and his brother makes conversation like we're having a polite in-class discussion, synthesizing various works we've read in preparation. No one just yells because they're excited and they certainly don't talk over each other. What will I say? Will I scream it instead?

I've met them all once, for dinner on Scott's birthday. It was awkward with only just enough people present to all be watching me, listening to me, waiting for me. In my family, if you don't love the conversation you're in, you can just walk away and find a new one. There's one in the kitchen, the living room, the front yard, at each end of the table. There are kids watching a movie or teaching an auntie to play Nintendo Golf. His family is so contained.

FAMILY

What I'm thinking is, what if his dad makes the sweet potato casserole wrong? What if they make sweet potato pie? But worse, what if the *casserole* is just wrong, they make it with fucking marshmallows all over the top of it and now I can't eat it? I'm not allergic, it's just bad. Will Bruce ruin Thanksgiving this way, the way my grandma did when I was like eleven? My family makes it with pecan streusel and I don't want it without. Will they put bacon in things? I know that they're Jewish but I also know that they eat pork, shrimp, things I don't and won't, at least not knowingly. What if Thanksgiving is just wrong?

I don't want to be annoying to you. I know not so deep down that I am so very annoying to you, on your last nerve, not reacting the way you want me to react. No longer willing to hear you tell me everything you hate about my father, my sister, myself. No longer looking for your advice in relationships, no longer coming to you first.

This is obviously about the troubled relationship I have with you, with my mother. But to me, first and foremost, it's still a love letter. Not still. It always was meant to find and to meet you where you are, in all of your hurt. But I'm not sure how to do that, how to wade through my own shit to find you in yours.

It feels, in my fingers as I type, that I am expressing my love for you, of you, ultimately. It's like, let me show you how fucked up she is, how traumatized, and in doing so I'll show you all of the ways that she is so impossibly strong. All of the ways she has made me strong. All of the ways that I was forced to be better, to drag myself up these stairs of self-esteem when you faltered on the first tier.

And then I think, how amazing this woman is to have done what she's done, but why did she have to bring all of us into it? She has pressed and scraped her way out of bad situation after worse situation to end up—here. Driving with her husband back and forth to Spokane every few weeks as they prepare him for a new heart; working doubles on doubles to make sure his bills are paid and her bills are paid and that her children aren't suffering without food or gas or, sometimes, a full rent payment; a house in disrepair and dead cars piling up around her ears. And still she smiles.

You told me on the phone recently that you'd started therapy, and I congratulated you. Then you told me that your therapist had suggested that you might be depressed, and you said, "Can you believe it? Me? What would *I* have to be depressed about?"

And all I could do was laugh. I feel deeply that all I can do anymore is laugh.



My mom has never actually told me what year Donnie was convicted and went to jail, but I know it must have been sometime in the mid- or late-nineties. I know that he had already finished his army service and moved home, one of the many homes my mom had known as a child. I know that he was drunk and living in Mississippi and that he shot another man dead. Manslaughter, it was ruled. In my mind, it has always been humid and buzzy and dark, in the neon light of some bar sign—the middle of nowhere important or notable or knowable. It has always been less than tragic, somehow, because they must have been both at fault. A moral failing on my part. But only one died, and only my uncle, only Don Jr or Donnie or Little Don or Dumbold— we're not supposed to let him know that Mom still calls him that— went to prison. I don't know how long he served or the actual exact year that he was released. I've only met him once, at my oldest sister's university graduation. He reminded me of my brother Ian—quiet and round and observant. Awkward and alone. I don't remember if my mom talked to him at all.

VIGILANCE

You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. Were you raped, Mom? You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. One in six women is sexually assaulted in America. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. Every sixty-eight seconds a woman is sexually assaulted. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. Were you raped, Mom? You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. One in six women is sexually assaulted in America. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. Every sixty-eight seconds a woman is sexually assaulted. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers. You need to tell me if anyone ever touches you. Even your dad. Even your brothers.



Sabbath mornings as a child were always filled with noise—what day wasn't, though, in our house? It was my mom shouting for each kid to bring their clothes down to the family room to be ironed, my sister telling me to lie on my back so she could squish my opaque tights over each foot and drag them to my knees before telling me to stand again so she could pull them over my stomach. It was 1-2-3-Penguins or Veggie Tales or K-Love on the radio, my dad reading some awful headline from the Herald aloud with a striking laugh before settling in to do the crossword, always with the thin black pen he kept in his shirt pocket.

As I think it, my mom would still be in her ankle-length flannel nightgown, hair wet from the shower and smelling powdery from her lotion. The iron would be huffing with steam each time she set it down to adjust the garment on the board, the smell of hot cotton. She might have bought toaster strudel as a special Sabbath treat, sandwich meat from the deli rather than the Oscar Meyer brand for lunch, and a tray of potluck brownies would be cooling on the counter—the Duncan Hines brand made with one egg only so they would be fudgy and dark and sticky, the way we liked. We only ever took brownies in her giant square Princess House dish, thirteen-by-thirteen, transporting them still hot so whoever had to carry them in the car would emerge with red thighs and a dazed look. A blessing and a curse.

She started as the primary school teacher, upstairs, two doors to the left. She moved to the junior room the year I finally graduated from the kindergarten class. Always a step ahead of me, and I often had to look in all four big-kid classrooms to find her after Sabbath school, asking Patsy or Betty if she'd already gone downstairs.

Service was spent coloring on the floor of the old sanctuary, my mom constantly reaching down to flick my skirt back over to cover my butt. She didn't want me to sit with my friend

Eric's family, but he could come sit with me and Trevor if he wanted. Where she could keep an eye on me.

When I got too tired, she would hold me in her lap and I would fall asleep against her rumbling chest—lots of amens and mhmms and low, almost mournful singing, even when the tune was happy. She's a terrible singer but a loud one, proud to hear her voice in the congregation's, and I think a lot about the tone of that singing, the purring quality in my ear. She always complained that the chorist was going too slow—Baptists just do music better, she'd say. But she'd chosen this singing, this faith, these people for a reason. I'm still not sure what the reason was.

BODY

My body refuses to stop being a body.

It refuses to stop begging for water, food, movement, even as I stifle these urges.

Especially as I try to ignore them, hiding under these soft blankets, attempting to avoid original thought at all costs with my small screen and my big screen and a few in the middle.

I am called to stand and sit and stand and sit and stand and sit and stand and sit an dstand
and sit and dstand and sit and stand aind sitt.

I am trying. I am trying to ignore my body and it is not working and I am panicking because I don't know what to do next. I am eating too little and then too much and I am picking at my cuticles and digging up pimples and I am bleeding and bleeding and bleeding.

My mom was interested in the Seventh-day Adventists, from what I can piece together, even before her baby brother went to prison—having an actual timeline on this would be helpful, but she gets weird and looks away when I ask. I’m guessing it was before, or maybe soon after. Part of her choice, I like to think, was that the Adventists reached out to Donnie in prison, praying with him and over him and for him. I want to believe that she was motivated a little bit by the feeling that her brother wasn’t a complete piece of shit, but a person just like her—ruined by years of abuse from violent alcoholics, the unstable childhood of an army brat, but maybe he could do better with these weird, friendly people at his side. Maybe she could do better, too. I do know that her choice to join came partially from a women’s ministry she attended, filled with matrons of our Kennewick family—Virginia and Patsy and Jennefier and Roxy, the pillar women of my childhood, always present and available. Shirley was probably there, too, in all her papery skin and shiny blue eyes. My mother’s choice to join the church, to be rebaptized in a new faith, formed the core of me.

VIGILANCE

My mom likes to talk about meeting my dad. She uses it as a warning with a little laugh.
Don't get too comfortable being taken care of, you'll end up raising seven children for him.
Don't get too comfortable being taken care of, you'll end up cleaning his beard trimmings every morning. Don't get too comfortable, don't get complacent, don't let him make you too happy too fast.

That's how you end up snared.



So many Sabbath afternoons were spent walking along the Columbia, eating simple food, sleeping. I miss the smell of a true potluck—salty and maybe musty, for all of the fri-chik and Special-K loaf and garlic bread reheating in the oven. All I ever wanted to eat was the lukewarm spaghetti and crudités with ranch, and I spent much of the lunch hour running around in the grass behind the church, waiting for desserts to be put out.

We didn't stay for potluck often, though. Only if we'd remembered to bring our tray of brownies. Usually we went home right after service and changed into jeans and tee shirts and put our hair up and make ourselves sandwiches for lunch. My mom would have bought potato chips and the bread would be defrosting on the counter and my mom would offer to fry up your lunch meat if you wanted. She would take a nap on the couch, Dr. Dino droning on, or maybe a Thin Man movie playing. Something old and simple and funny. The light might be filtering through the curtains in the basement, even in the winter, my skin hot from the sunshine and the cat sleeping on my lap. Everyone had something or nothing to do, and everyone took care of themselves, but somehow each other. Life would just go on and on the way it does in a hotel room—endlessly present. The house *felt* quiet, warm, bright in a way that it didn't, always. Like we were truly being protected from the world.

If the weather was nice, usually too hot, we'd walk along the river at Howard Amon park with Valerie from church. She and my mom would chat about whatever adult women chat about—the nature of breastfeeding and the way it made one boob sag more than the other, how much weight they were trying to lose this month, whether Walmart or Grocery Outlet had better deals on milk, based on what nine-year-old me overheard— and the kids were expected to keep up for the full five miles of wending, paved trail.

I remember that once you left the shade of the park there was a two mile stretch with no trees, just rocks and grass and endless sunshine, and my fingers would swell up from dehydration. Something about it felt so biblical and trying to my childish mind, like I was getting a taste of what it meant to be to be one of God's chosen. Adventists like to think of themselves as chosen.

Very rarely do I feel this as an adult. Not the chosen part, but the deep-rooted peace that comes from being expected to do exactly nothing productive for an entire day, the knowledge that this day was made for rest and to do more than that was sinful. There was nothing beyond the brightness of the now.

How can I find this.

FAITH

I've started attending church again for the first time in maybe ten years. Eleven? Today I made brownies for my sister and me and I almost cried because the dress I wanted to wear was wrinkly but I don't own an iron. I listened to my own voice above the congregation's, a sin I would never have committed in my choir days, and Larissa and I both agreed that the chorister should really pick up the tempo. There's just something sad in it.

VIGILANCE

When I told my mom that Scott and I were thinking of moving in together, the first thing she asked was “will you be paying rent?” and the second thing was “will you be on the lease?” And I said yes, Mom, of course I will. And she said “Well that’s stupid of you. Why move in with a man if he’s not paying for everything? If you can’t leave when you need to.”

I think about sitting in that cold, too-pale room, a hard metal folding chair and dangling feet. My feet didn't reach the floor yet and I was attending my first Weight Watchers meeting. My mom didn't want them to weigh me in, so she went behind the curtain and told me to find us both a seat. All of the other women were so old and many were *so* skinny, the kind of skinny I'd only ever really seen at church, sagging arms waving as they spoke. They stayed in the group and continued to strive, to encourage, to long for a new life, perhaps. And they were all so very nice to me and so very welcoming and my mom wanted me to find community with her, within this space intended for adults.

And I think I felt really good there. I think, now, that I was so happy to be brought along and we probably got a sandwich from Carl's Jr or something (she would know the points value off the top of her head, of course) and Mom let me pick out a box of 100-calorie snacks at the meeting and maybe we even went to the gas station to get her a Diet Pepsi and I would be able to choose something for myself, too.

I would have been happy just at the meeting, though. Old women have always loved me, telling me how cute I am and how sweet, polite, quiet, etc. I was. How little attention I brought to myself but how well I accepted what they offered, smiling like I was taught and saying please and thank you and sorry like I was taught. I would have loved the attention and the very adult feeling that comes from being brought into a space like that. Rooms for children are never pale and thin, never cold. Rooms for children should never be filled with conversation about losing just another five pounds, or how bad an adult might have been for eating over her points goal *three days* last week. A mother should not be commended for starting her daughter on this "right path" so early.

How grown up was I, being invited to this sort of place. This place where women lose weight and gain it back to lose it again, berating themselves all the while. A place where a woman might say “I understand, I’ve been there, it’s tough, try filling up on iceberg lettuce before you start in on your Smart Ones teriyaki chicken!”

And that’s the insidious thing about a community that exists only to see you be different.

I am writing this as though it were a letter to you for you. Would you ever bother to read it or just allow it to be tossed in the fire with last year's newspapers, somewhere in the stack that will be fed one by crumpled one into the wood stove in the family room. Maybe you would forget to open the flue or the wood would not have been properly seasoned and my words could come back on the smoke of it and fill your carpet, your mouth, your mind.

I don't know if I want this hypothetical letter to reach you. Maybe it should be lost in the mail and we could all sigh in relief. Maybe it would sit on the banister at the top of the stairs for weeks, months and then someone would find it and assume it was never important—nothing I ever had to say felt very important—and toss it out. Probably I would never have the strength send it.

When my mom was thinking about converting, my great-grandma Knopp warned her against it. I don't know the specifics, maybe she thought it was toxic for women or too encouraging of women. Realistically, she probably had David Koresh on her mind. The Branch Davidian is certainly a cult, all doomsday and fire, and Adventism is cultish but in, like, a *fun*, cliquy way. Sure, there's the idea of the Sunday Law, the plan to run for the fucking hills when the time comes—the time when we are universally persecuted for celebrating Sabbath on Saturday. (Adventist schools are usually built in isolated, defensible locales—and yes, we have our own schools, but who doesn't?) There's also the whole no dancing thing, the whole we are the new chosen thing, the whole modesty thing. There's the health message and Ellen White reading and lots of cocaine going around among the med students.

The thing is, Adventists and their beliefs and practices are just as varied and human as any other faith system.

My mom says that when people are warning you away, you're probably making the right choice, but that never made sense to me. Why would you be attracted to something that others tell you is dangerous? If someone tells me there's a wasp nest in the car, I'm not fucking climbing in. You can't make me. What is it in my mother that makes her so sure of herself, so sure of this choice to follow a new faith, especially when a woman that she respects is telling her to avoid it?

Then again, Grandma Knopp was in a cult, too—the Two-by-Twos, the workers and friends, the Church Without a Name. Maybe it's just a competitive thing.

I keep years' worth of my letters and cards in boxes in the closet—some here in my apartment, several in my old bedroom at home. I don't know why I still call it home when I hope never to come back. I guess because you and dad and the cats are there, but it still feels wrong but I can't stop it. I imagine that one day, when I'm dead and no one remembers my name or my face or my voice, someone will find my letters and cards and believe that I had a lovely, easy life. And I really did, in the big picture.

But how can I write to you and keep a straight face. I don't mean laughter but buckling. Crumpling. How can I write to you when I don't know the words to use. Even what I want to say. When I'm not sure that I should be saying anything, that any of it matters. Because my life has been lovely and easy and who wants to read about that.

I'm sure you don't.

I've cried every night this week writing and rewriting this letter in my mind. And I can never get the words right. And every night I get this headache behind my eye, always my right eye. And I wonder if there's something in there in my brain that can never be fixed. Or maybe it's the dry eye that I always forget to treat.

You've made me hate myself for my body. My sensitivity my interests my vanity. How can a mother hate herself so much that she puts it on her child, that she tries to kill herself in her reflection. Where was your mother when you needed her. Where was mine.



I think maybe I am being dramatic in writing this and then I think that you would agree and then I get angry.

Bit dramatic, don't you think?

Why am I not allowed this drama?

Sandy was perfect, the golden child, the daughter that could do no wrong. Sandy was beautiful and blonde and tall and a model. Sandy was born after Lori but before Donnie.

Sandy was amazing. Sandy had a smile to light up the room. Sandy was desirable. Sandy wore makeup.

Sandy flirted.

Sandy told Mom and Dad that Lori got a tattoo at a party—a small rose on the inner curve of her boob—so that Sandy wouldn't get in trouble for breaking curfew. Sandy had beautiful blue eyes. Sandy and Karen were closer than Lori and Karen. Sandy was slender, lanky even.

Sandy was Lori's nemesis.

Sandy was Lori's only constant, her only friend when Dad was restationed, and they were all trapped in Detroit for two years and Hawai'i for two years and Virginia for two more. Sandy didn't remember Dad being away for three years in Vietnam. Sandy wasn't old enough and Donnie wasn't born yet. Sandy didn't understand what it meant to worry.

Sandy got married, changed her name from Harmel to Blacklock. Sandy lived in Carmel for a few years, New Mexico, or Arizona, maybe, for longer. Sandy was happy, she said she was happy.

Sandy found out that her husband, the father of her two boys, was cheating on her. Sandy's sons told her, walking through the mall one afternoon, said "Daddy's girlfriend lives near here."

Sandy probably cried.

Sandy got drunk, maybe the drunkest she'd ever been. Sandy didn't like using a seatbelt. Sandy's driver was also wasted.

Sandy died in a traumatic car accident in October of 1994. Sandy's funeral was closed casket, but Lori saw her anyway. Lori had only the month before given birth to her fifth child, the one with the too-hard head. Lori probably cried. If a person asked about Sandy today, all Lori would say was that Sandy thought she was very special, that Mom and Daddy never saw her for what she was. Lori would certainly cry.

I'm trying to write about photography and how I can't seem to do it anymore. But I can't seem to write about it either. I keep thinking I should sit down now and just write—or maybe, I should get out now and just shoot some fucking photos because it's not that deep and it's never felt this difficult before. I used to take my camera everywhere, just in case. I used to spend my days with people, though, and I kind of don't anymore. It's like all I do is wake up exhausted, keep a two-year-old from dying for seven hours, go home, and zone out until past my bedtime. My boyfriend lives too far (twenty minutes) and my sisters live too far (two hours) and my friends live too far (seventeen hours—driving) that it feels impossible to just see them, to just be out with them for coffee or dinner or saying hello.

And I think I'm lonely.

Anyway. So I've been taking nudes with my heavy DSLR, kind of boudoir-ish things without the artful posing or editing. Just nudes. And I've been thinking about how scandalized and terrified you would be if you knew that nude photographs of me existed, if you knew that I had sent them to my boyfriend, if you knew that they were in a password protected file on Google Photos. You should never take photos that you wouldn't want to be leaked, you know.

And so, by the time you were about my age, you had pretty much entirely stopped having—allowing—your photo taken. By the time you were my age you'd had two children and were pregnant with twins. By the time you were my age you had decided you were irredeemably fat and disgusting and not worth recording. And even as a young child, your baby child, I knew that.

I knew what my mother thought of herself and what must she have thought of me? What must you think of me now. How terrible to have a daughter who makes such similar mistakes to

you but doesn't say sorry for them. How terrible to have a daughter who wants to be seen and remembered not for her contribution of children, but for her own self. How terrible to have a daughter who is not afraid to tell you how she feels, how your words and your actions make her feel, how her place in this world makes her feel, how her body makes her feel, how the weather makes her feel. How terrible to have a daughter.



COMPETENCE

I am trying to think of the moments when I was amazed. Proud. Driving home from Everett in the Cobalt that night it was storming in the pass, your hips grinding every time you changed gears. Watching you receive your pin when you got your RN, wearing those bright white scrubs. The day that you connected with a therapist, very recent to the writing of this paragraph.

Every time I tell someone about all you've had to go through to be the person you are.

I am trying to think of the moments when I knew that *you* were proud. Of *me*. And I can't remember any.



Is this what we do.

Miscommunicate because we refuse to be patient.

We don't want to be kind to each other.

COMPETENCE

I think about my first ever solo in choir, and how you couldn't just say good job. I think about my performance in Les Mis in high school, all of the solo and ensemble festivals, the jazz nights, singing and just wanting to be heard, and your tight smile but never just a word of encouragement. Why is your smile so uncomfortable. The usual, "I'm surprised your voice didn't crack!" or "why don't you choose something lower, faster, more fun?" Competence has always been the lowest expectation. Doing poorly was not an option, at least not for your girls.

You like to complain that your mother never taught you to cook or bake, that she handed you a book and expected you to learn. You say it jokingly but not quite, like you expect people to laugh but you really thought she was cruel for doing so. But I remember the first cake I ever made—a carrot cake from the box. I was seven, maybe, and I didn't ask for help and you certainly didn't offer any and we had carrot cake for dessert that night. And maybe there is something to say for being forced to just figure it the fuck out. The most important thing is to be able to read the recipe and understand how to use it.

I'm feeling quite angry writing this, unexpectedly.

You have been so supremely unhelpful to me, but I feel now that it has infused me with an ability to do literally anything I want to. The solution has always been to look it up, to measure twice before cutting in basically every aspect of my life. My photography is fine enough, my paintings are serviceable, my writing has gotten me this far. I changed my car's serpentine belt and replaced my own shower head and taught myself embroidery because admitting I can't do something might be worse than dying.

I have to do it myself and I have to do it perfectly, the first time.

That cake was perfect.

I remain in competition with the idea of me that lives in you.

When I was sixteen or seventeen, you complained to me that I cry too easy. You accused me of making you feel guilty on purpose, guilty for your anger and reaction to it. All it took was one wrong look, a raised voice or slammed cupboard, and I was nearly inconsolable. You wanted to yell, to take your incomplete and underdeveloped feelings out on me, your child, your Sabbath child. Your baby. I didn't toughen up like I should have, like I was expected to. My whole life has been crying.

But that doesn't mean I can't do the thing I intend to. I am crying, writing this, but I am writing it.

FAMILY

I am looking always for more photos—more opportunities, more history of *us* and I can't seem to find the ones I need. I want photos of us, a proof that we are family, that we love and are loved, and I am not finding many. I can't find a single one from my childhood. You were always hiding behind the camera, making sure the kids were taken care of but where are you in this family? Always behind the scenes, filling stockings at Christmas and dying the milk green in March and leaving little boxes of chocolate in our backpacks at Valentine's Day. Making the magic happen, and I wonder if the magic ever happened for you?

Scott's mom is so bad at decorating cakes, but she tries again and again, laughing her way through. I think of how you have to be perfect at everything, your cakes need to be *right* and so you took the Wilton classes and you buy pans— Winnie the Pooh, a racecar, the Teletubbies— so that your kids would have the most perfect birthdays at home because parties out were too expensive. I remember licking buttercream from the stomach of Barbie dolls who wore Funfetti skirts and I remember watching you carefully place each pastel M&M on Alisson's butterfly cake, the year she got a piñata. I remember you with your hair tied in a sloppy, barely-holding-on ponytail, Crisco and powdered sugar smeared on your oversized tee shirt because you were too ashamed to dress in clothes that fit. But then you were too ashamed to be seen in these clothes that didn't.

And now I am hiding behind my camera, a camera that I cannot seem to make work anymore. I am living in this struggle between being myself and being comfortable. I'm so used to being comfortable now, never truly thinking or trying or caring. Where does the questioning end when do I get to be a person again?



VIGILANCE

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

tell me

SELF

You ask for Scott's number so you can reach me if need be, and I refuse, of course. But sometimes I think you should have it. Statistically, he'll be the one to murder me, right. He hates it when I bring it up to him but you and I both know it's true. I think you should have more information about me, us, where I am, but then I don't want you to know me this way. I think you should have to earn it, somehow, but how do you earn that if you haven't by now. Have you, by now. Are you a safe place for me to lie down. Are you a safe resting place, in the end.

I'm not sure exactly what it was about Sandy that my mom hated—hates—so much, but I know that there is some of it in me. She's told me as much. My mom wasn't even thirty years old when she lost her little sister, but she'd lived a lifetime raising her own children, and I don't think she ever forgave Sandy.

I don't think my mom forgave her for her vivacity, the attention she got from others. I don't think she forgave Sandy for marrying that man, for their parents actually contributing to the wedding when they hadn't given my mom and dad anything, for allowing herself to get killed the way she did. I don't think she'll ever forgive her sister because in her mind she is still Sandy's protector, keeping her safe from GIs on base, her own silliness, everything.

All that is left of my mother's regard for her sister is resentment. Sandy was set up for success in a way that my mom was not. Her wedding was paid for, when my mom got married in a weird community center basement in Spokane. Sandy received an allowance while at school, was offered modelling contracts in distant countries, got away with every small infraction. My mom can't stay mad at her parents because they have grown up.

Sandy never got the chance to. My mom will never forgive her for that.

I've been thinking of the ways that your apparent attempts to help me have ended up hurting—Carmex and New-Skin and spanking. I can feel their sting and smell the odd chemical compound of liquid bandage. You have spent years questioning my choices in where to study, what to study, whom to love, where to live. Why California, why writing, why not something better, more lucrative? But then you turn around and encourage me to become an animator, a singer, a something incredible. I don't want to be incredible I want to be happy.

You demand phone calls and selfies to show who I'm with, what I'm doing, that I'm alive still. You want me to be perpetually available to you, to soothe your own anxieties and yet I don't hear from you sometimes for weeks.

I'm torn on whether these are attempts to know me or to control me. Maybe both or something more. Maybe they're just habit. I worry a lot about dying, like what if I just died, how soon would you know it. Would you just know it, feel it deep in your legs, your fingers. Scott laughs at the suggestion, but I think you might.



FAMILY

I am my parents' seventh and final child. My mom always dreamed of eight kids and a station wagon—she came pretty close, I guess. She told me I was her miracle, her Sabbath child. She beat uterine and cervical cancer over the course of her last two pregnancies. It occurs to me now that I never bothered to ask in what order they occurred—was one first? Simultaneous? I've never asked what treatment was like, did it get to the point of chemo? Just a cutting out of some tissue? I've only ever worried about the fact that I have to get more regular pap smears because of the family history. I never realized I was such a terrible daughter.

Seven children from six pregnancies over eleven years. Mom often jokes that Dad kept her pregnant so that she couldn't go back to work full time, so that she couldn't leave him. ~~I'm~~ ~~horrified for her, and as much I adore my dad, and~~ I wonder how much truth there is in this statement. His mother worked and eventually left his dad, but he was a cheating fucker and I don't see a lot of parallels in the relationships.

But we had the station wagon. It was white with a gray interior. The back seat, the way back, was the best place to be because you could wave at the driver behind you. The sun would roast you through the rear windshield, but it was worth it to see the world move in reverse. Were you moving back in time, sitting in the way back?

That seat, though, only had two seatbelts for the three children that needed to sit back there, but they were the lap kind, so the kid in the middle—usually me—had both seatbelts crisscrossed over their hips. My mom wouldn't move the car until everyone was buckled, kind of like Miss Frizzle, but incredibly angry and traumatized.

Why the station wagon?

My mom had a babysitter in the '70s who had eight kids and a station wagon, and I think my mom saw her life as perfect. This woman always had her family with her, she never yelled from deep in a bottle, she had her hair done so perfectly. She was beautiful and kind and patient. Aspirational.

Even now when my mom talks about her, you can see this babysitter's impact. My mom is besotted even now by just the memory of her, the golden haze of her childhood dreaming. My mom was going to be perfect just like her. She was not going to be like her own mother, no, she would be firm but gentle, she would keep her children close, she would be *happy*.

FAMILY

My grandparents were not nice people. If you met them today, the way they are now, sober and funny and sarcastic and cheerful, you would never guess that my grandpa hit his wife or that he threw bottles at walls or kicked in doors or screamed and loomed over his children while Grandma watched on in drunken stupor. You wouldn't think it.

I think my grandparents are lucky, really, that my mom trusted them to be better. She could have cut them off when she left for college—they weren't supporting her there, anyway, financially or otherwise. She was going to be an architect, an engineer, but instead she met Tony and got a job at the pizza place and then dropped out and then met my dad and then dumped Tony and then got pregnant. A fairytale life at nineteen.

She liked my dad because he wasn't afraid to lose his parking spot like Tony, and he never, ever yelled like her dad. He was shorter than her and balding and he let her talk as much as she wanted. He made her feel heard. He let her be smart and competent and funny. He made her feel worthwhile.



My mom tells me the story with a laugh. All I could see were his eyes, she says. My dad was driving and my mom was in the backseat with her boyfriend, another friend or coworker in the passenger seat. Tony, the boyfriend, was touching her, kissing her, and she was so uncomfortable. Why was he touching her when there were others in the car, when my dad was in the car. It was practically public. Why was she making eye contact with my dad in the rearview mirror every time she looked up from her boyfriend's face. Why was he watching them. Why were my dad's eyes stuck in her mind as she went back to Tony.

Why would he continue to touch her when she was clearly uncomfortable?

I wonder if my dad was just waiting, biding his time maybe. Or if he could sense my mom's discomfort, if he wanted to step in and make Tony stop, make them stop. How crass, anyway, to make out with your boyfriend in front of others. They weren't even drunk. Would that make it better, more palatable.

My mom tells it like a funny little story, but I don't understand why she didn't tell him to stop—either one. Stop staring at me, stop touching me in public. She always taught me that my no was powerful. Did she not realize the power of her own.

VIGILANCE

Were you raped, Mom?

FAMILY

I now know Mom never had chemo, but she had a hysterectomy. She was meant to have a cone biopsy of her cervix, but she was pregnant with Trevor. They found the cervical cancer first. She was meant to have a cone biopsy of her cervix, but she was pregnant with me. What about the cervical cancer?

Months after I was born, they pulled the whole thing out, hormones and all, I guess. Hysterectomies are terrible, and they never put her on artificial hormones. I found out recently that she uses KY jelly daily because her body is so dry and uncomfortable. She joked about sex. After the hysterectomy, they discovered she had had uterine cancer as well. It was at stage three, happily removed from her body. She never got that eighth child.

I feel like I am water stagnating in a puddle and the sun is finally coming out but what does that mean for me. Evaporating. Disappearing. Becoming the thing that no one remembers. You won't even remember me.

And when I write on the self whose self am I writing. Is it you. I thought it was, that it should be you. I am becoming this puddle of memory or the lack thereof and I am having no new experiences and you are all experience now. You are attending all of Dad's appointments and all of Larissa's events and still you are working double after double after double. You are laughing down the line when you call me from work and you are laughing when I call you in the car and you are laughing and I want to laugh, too. I want to laugh like you and I don't want to call you anymore, I don't want to talk on the phone.

I want to be with you.

You were the thing that scared me and you were thing that I wanted to please. You always told me that your job was to be my mother, not my friend. Your job was to make me a good person, whatever it took to do that.

And then you were the thing that I wanted to upset, the thing that I needed attention from. And now. Now you are the thing that I want to be next to.

Are you you? Or are you me. Whose self am I writing.

Don Shirley Lori Dandy



Donnie

Who are you and whom do you love?

I am the smell of cut hay and dirty water and hot coffee and Pine Sol and brownies and freshly ironed cotton. I am toast with cinnamon and sugar and I am spoonfuls of chunky peanut butter. I am the way the Columbia chops and drags in high wind. I am the rumbling in a chest and bull snakes on the trail and the rosacea in my mother's cheeks. I am not the person I was yesterday and I am not the person I was three years ago. I am not as funny as I think I am. I am the Sabbath baby, the miracle baby, the baby of the family. I am my mom's Missy-Mae-full-of-hay-likes-to-play-in-the-rain, which doesn't even rhyme. At some point I think I should learn to love that.

Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?

I'm afraid to ask. I'm afraid it's me. I'm afraid it's the idea of me. I'm afraid it's the knowing of me. I'm afraid it's the disappointment of me. I'm afraid that it's my tattoos, small and unobtrusive and so meaningful to me. I'm afraid that I am not meaningful. I'm afraid it's the way that I write about people that I know. I'm afraid it's the way I never learned to paint right or sing right or work right. I'm afraid it's the fact that she came to France and I wasn't good enough at the language to be worth the twenty thousand I spent to be there. I'm afraid it's the way I lash out when I'm stressed. I'm afraid it's the way I should be. I'm afraid it's the fact that I pick fights. I'm afraid it's the way that I cry when we fight. I'm afraid it's the way that I cry when I'm reprimanded, the way that I cry when a cupboard slams, the way that I cry when I'm writing this. I'm afraid it's the fact that I tease my dad for his baldness. I'm afraid it's the fact that I like tequila. I'm afraid it's the fact that I get my nails done every three weeks. I'm afraid it's the fact that I give her books and socks for her birthday every year. I'm afraid it's the fact that I'm not

married. I'm afraid it's the fact that I said I'm not 100% sold on this whole God thing. I'm afraid it's my face and the way it looks like her face but I complain and roll my eyes when people point that out. I'm afraid it's me. I'm just afraid to ask, though.

If your silence could speak what would it say?

I am so afraid that I will be reduced to your grief by your grief for your grief within your grief.

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