

One

“All parents damage their children. It cannot be helped. Youth, like pristine glass, absorbs the prints of its handlers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter childhoods completely into jagged little pieces, beyond repair.”

—Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*

What we seek in life rises with us from the crucible of childhood. Early experiences etch themselves like fingerprints, sometimes not so delicately, on our soul. Throughout our life, for good or for ill, they call to other people and conditions. It is not without effort that we interrupt their effect.

At thirteen I already know this.

Perhaps it is my mother who taught me: a vivacious, intelligent woman with negligible awareness of her own fingerprints and a “do as I say, not as I do” approach to parenting. She tells me that her first husband was charismatic like her Irish father, but her second husband, my father, was a man she knew would never hurt her, gentle like her mother. What she doesn’t understand, or doesn’t want to see, is how her etchings, in turn, etch me and my sister. I see what she doesn’t.

My mother knows that we are safe from the alcoholic rages she endured as a child, shaking under her bed until her father had spent himself. Their shadowy echoes in her quiet but steady drinking are easy to miss. Only her artful substitution of yellow coffee mug for whiskey shot glass suggests the nature of her dependence. The acrid stench gives her away, and so, too, does her cut-glass decanter of Ernest and Julio Gallo shimmering in the cold white light of the garage refrigerator, next to the open can of dog food.

“Don’t upset Daddy” ruled my mother’s childhood home; they lived in fear of his drinking. Our version is “Don’t upset Mommy”; we live in fear of a nervous breakdown. My mother has had two, the last one shattering enough for three inpatient weeks of electroshock therapy. She came home, but she never came back.

“Lighten up,” she chafes, wanting me to be the happy, silly girl that distracts her from herself.

Instead I am the intense, unsmiling sort who reflects her sadness, the pain she has been unwilling to face and that triggers her brusqueness toward me. I see this, too. Part inherent gift and part survival instinct, I understand her better than she understands me.

My mother dislikes not me but the part of herself she sees in me, a truth that would set me free but for the imprint of her early rejection, the knot of fear squeezed down deep inside me that she is right; I am unlikeable. My own most enduring fingerprint is thereby etched in polarized grooves of supreme self-confidence and inescapable self-doubt. One will carry me through everything about to happen while the other will eat at my core, whispering that smiling faces tell lies, that I am alone.

Steady in the background is my father: tall, dark, and handsome, a virtual teetotaler, whose pattern complements my mother’s like perfectly hewn puzzle pieces. His deaf mother, taciturn father, and much older sister, gone by the time he was three, etched the fingerprints that match my mother’s lack of intimacy. He rarely speaks. I have never heard him use her first name, and I never see them touch.

Together they create a home that is admirably disciplined and thoroughly middle class: weekly church attendance, piano lessons, exchange students from Europe, and expectations of

college. It is devoid of warmth, conversation, and physical affection; a polite, cultured, two-and-a-half-dimensional world.

It is no surprise that I turn elsewhere.

Behavior is as much opportunity as motive, and both for me until now have been weak. Like all children, I think my family standard issue, completely normative parents who laugh together once a year, over half a dozen years, in half a dozen pine-tree-scented campgrounds, over half a dozen family vacations. Notorious optimists, children find the pony in any pile of metaphorical manure; they cling past all reasonable hope that parental attention is coming. Both the realization that it isn't and the arrival of new options tend to show up as a set.

Independent by nature, I am nonetheless designed like all humans for connection, a tiny green shoot struggling up through the thinnest crack of rock toward the sun. I am about to find it, glorious in its heat and life-giving properties, terrible in its ability to shrivel and burn.

Her name is Libby. I don't even like her at first.

I can't afford to like Libby. In the dog-eat-dog world of adolescent girls, she is the outlier, the weird one, the one who doesn't flirt with mascara and boys. Conformity is everything in 1976 San Diego, the hall pass to group acceptance, and Libby is the nail that sticks out.

No Dittos jeans with saddleback yokes or feathered Farrah Fawcett hair for her. She wears a crumpled driving cap on her short blonde hair, thin and crunchy green from the swim team, and gingham bell-bottoms, a maroon-white pair one day, a blue-white pair the next. With a chipmunk face and thunder thighs, also thanks to the swim team, specifically the breaststroke, Libby is indifferent to popularity and the social moves that garner it. I've known her since the fifth grade and have never talked to her.

Three months before ninth grade begins, Libby shows up in my summer school typing class, the only person I know in the room. Teenage jungle aside, she is my best option, better than sitting next to a stranger or, worse yet, alone.

“Hi,” I say, approaching her at a shiny black table set up with two Smith Coronas.

Early morning sun streams in the big louvered windows, and part cat, I angle my seat toward Libby so that the rays warm my back.

“Hi,” she grins the first time we ever interact, apparently the forgiving type.

“Why are you taking a typing class?” I ask.

“My mom is making me. She thinks it’ll help me get a job later.”

Libby sounds embarrassed, whether by her mother or the idea of a typing job, I can’t tell.

“Why are you?”

“I thought it sounded fun,” I shrug. “And I like school.”

Libby’s blue eyes dance, and she laughs.

“What?” I scowl. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re taking a summer school class for fun!” she says, as though it’s obvious.

“Yeah . . . so what?” I roll my eyes, not getting the joke.

“Nothing.” She stops grinning, but her eyes still dance. “I mean, I guess you’re really smart.”

I check to see if she’s making fun of me, but she seems sincere, a little admiring even. And our friendship is born, the best and worst turn of my young life. Five days a week, for six weeks, we tap out *asdfjkl*; and *Good children can have dessert* and *The forest is very dark and cool*. Between drills, we talk.

With other girls, girls I want to like me, I hide the intense, serious, you-think-too-much parts of myself that my mother says make people uncomfortable. Libby, on the other hand, means nothing to me. This is summer school, and I don't care what she thinks. I'm real for the first time ever because, for the first time ever, I have nothing to lose. Long before my wisdom catches up, the power of living my truth begins to work its magic. Libby likes me. She really likes me. And I like her. She's fun and laid-back, funny and real. Her solitariness intrigues me, a salmon swimming not upstream but in a transverse flow. Before long, we are bike-riding, movie-going, mall-shopping friends.

We race to the beach—green Stingray for me, red Schwinn ten-speed for her—along smooth, wide roads lined with striking homes, emerald lawns, and magenta bougainvillea that will one day be featured in *Architectural Digest* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. The sparkling blue ocean kicks up its salt mist at the edge of fine, white sand where we lay out in baby oil, the SPF of our day.

Summer's highlight, the hours-long and thrillingly patriotic Fourth of July parade, teems with prancing, dancing horses in colorful ribbons to match their riders; military brass and marching bands; and decommissioned tanks and bombers with their wings folded up, too wide at full extension to pass through the crowd.

Libby and I, too, for a time are innocent and untroubled. The storm is not yet on the horizon.

The earth tilts on its axis, bathing us in elongated rays of diffuse, mellow sunshine, San Diego's only hint of fall, and a new school year begins. Sprinkled among the high school's low-slung buildings are offspring of movie stars, war heroes, and ambassadors. Libby and I, more

common-variety offspring, flutter like happy butterflies. It's as close to silly as I get, and I like it. I like Technicolor. I like happy. There's no going back to my flat, black-and-white world.

I've tried so hard to brighten my mother's world, tried so hard to make her happy so that I can be happy. I'm obedient, polite, eat my vegetables, do my chores. For her birthday when I was ten, I made lamb with mint jelly, my first gourmet meal. It didn't work. Nothing I do makes her happy. She doesn't smile or spend time with me. Lonely, I draw more deeply from Libby, her attention an unfamiliar and heady feeling that lifts me out of my no-win situation.

Imperceptibly, the skies begin to darken.

I wear the IZOD shirts and bright white K-Swiss tennis shoes that she does. I cut my hair and join the swim team. We are inseparable. I like her house better, although I don't like her mother, a divorced woman who calls Libby "Missy" in a loud, gravelly voice and bosses her around. I like my mother less; her eyes are hard when she sees Libby, and her smile brittle, only technically polite. Neither house is comfortable, neither mother welcoming. After school and every weekend, we run the gauntlet to our own private world behind the bedroom door.

October in San Diego is hot and dry, the heavy scent of fading roses lifted up on Santa Ana winds that whip in from the desert. On a staticky Friday night, not two months before the death of our friendship, emotional lightning cracks the sky. At Libby's house tonight, our giggles start like every other sleepover. Nothing stands out; nothing prepares us for an end more menacing than cartoons and soggy corn flakes. But something tonight is different, some culmination of the ache for love that overwhelms me, its momentum collapsing the boundary between us with an exhilarating whoosh.

"Why don't you ever kiss me?" I ask, blissfully unaware of religious prohibition,

psychiatric diagnosis, or the oncoming tempest.

Libby, with what must be similar yearning, gently touches her lips to mine: my first kiss. In all the years to come, in all the dizzying variety of physical intimacy I will experience, nothing will erase the feeling of that kiss. It is vulnerable in the way that first kisses are—pure, free from comparison to any other kiss. We flow together easily, satisfaction filling us in deep, humming waves. Golden, soothing tenderness eases into my aching, more powerful than any drug I will ever ingest, the original high I will be chasing in all future substances. The etchings on our souls have found a match.

We break apart just long enough to search each other's face, and, finding only pleasure, touch our lips again. We kiss a long time that night. We kiss even longer the next. Not a word passes between us. For once, I don't need to analyze.

The first before and after of my life has taken place. Libby's eyes, the window to her soul, reflect the change I feel inside myself, an upwelling of strength and confidence. To be wanted is powerful, an impact never undone no matter what the aftermath. Nothing, most especially me, will ever be the same, a blurry truth I grasp like the edges of a dream.

Storm clouds begin to glower darkly above, but, besotted with affection and physical warmth, we don't notice. We know enough to hide it; some things are instinctual. Instinctive, too, are other things, fervently exciting, fervently disconcerting things. The rules meant to constrain girls with boys, the precepts meant to guard if not preserve their innocence, are nonexistent between girls in a bedroom, unsupervised. There is no going back from this either. I tumble in a whirl no thirteen-year-old can process alone.

We need each other to breathe. We get passes from our classes and meet in the girls'

restroom to kiss. The smokers in need of their own hiding place, hard-edged versions of both celebrity and common-variety girls, find us again and again, our faces hot with almost detection.

First a sprinkling, then a cold, steady rain begins to pelt us from all sides; rumors, rough looks, vulgar gestures. I pretend not to notice. Everything is fine, says my solid, determined walk down the turquoise-lockered halls, eyes straight ahead, blood pounding in my ears.

I ignore the snickers, the “Hey, DOG-na, too ugly to get a guy?”

A funnel cloud of rumors touches down a few days after my fourteenth birthday. Mrs. Hinton, our perpetually tan swim team coach, calls me down to her office where she sits at her desk in white shorts and a short-sleeved polo shirt. A peculiar foreshadowing of things to come, she is Mormon, the only adult who ever reaches out to me.

I see Libby inside, and I know it’s going to be bad. A cold wave rolls up my spine, and my chest tightens. My upper lip breaks out in sweat while in my stomach, the clenched fist that will be my constant companion for the next twenty-five years, slowly squeezes the air out of my lungs.

Mrs. Hinton looks back and forth between us as though deciding something. Her voice when she speaks is matter-of-fact but not unkind.

“Girls, you need to make other friends. People are talking about you.”

Burning heat rushes to the top of my scalp. I feel sick, and the air is tight around me. She doesn’t explain why people are talking about us, and we don’t ask, all of us complicit in the conversation that isn’t really conversation. Libby, intensely studying her K-Swiss, says nothing. Survival mode, familiar to me as Sunday dinner, kicks in. I pull a garish slash across my face, meant to be a smile, and try to still my trembling cheeks. If Mrs. Hinton notices, she doesn’t say.

“Thanks, Mrs. Hinton, we will,” I manage, a little breathlessly over the wild thumping in my chest.

I have to drop my gaze as soon as the words are out. The shame I’ve carried for so long, layer upon layer of magical thinking that blames myself for all my unmet needs, is doused in the kerosene of gossip. It is Mrs. Hinton’s unwillingness to name the thing, her tacit inference that it is too shameful to name, that sparks the match. Shame feeds on itself as shame so often does, and pretending everything is fine, that I am fine, hardens into steel. I have no idea, rooted there under the yellowy fluorescent lights, how badly I will need this armor to survive, or the price it will exact.

Mrs. Hinton dismisses us with a nod and a “Good girls.”

I scurry away, face hot, in the opposite direction from Libby, both of us rats on a sinking ship. We do what we’re told. We don’t meet in the restroom anymore. We don’t even look at each other in the hall. I try to make other friends, go back to other friends, but I can’t, weighted down with the slow burning agony of wondering who knows and what they think. What are they saying about me behind my back? It’s a slippery slope. If I’m pretending, maybe they are, too. I don’t trust anyone. I will have a hard time trusting friendships ever again.

The high school rumor mill is as old as the hills and twice as prolific when it comes to sex. Kids I don’t know harass me at my locker. Only a passing acquaintance with truth is required and not even that once the mill is up and running. One of the rumors, a mild bit of swim team truth mingled with the philosophy of romance, is hardest for me to take.

Four girls press around me at my locker.

“Heard you were singing to your girlfriend on the bus,” snickers Ponytail.

I maintain my head-down, eyes-down stance.

“I don’t sing!”

I never sing. I don’t even like to talk. My voice is so low pitched that callers mistake me for my father on the phone. My voice, which will one day be decidedly sultry under the right circumstances, is, to me, ugly and unfeminine. I know that’s why boys have called me *DOG-na* since third grade. The sharp pain is bone deep.

“Yeah,” Ponytail continues, “they said you were singing ‘You Are So Beautiful’ on the way to the swim meet and looking into each other’s eyes.”

“Yeah! You are sooooo beautiful,” one of the other girls sneers, and they all laugh.

My head snaps up.

“I did not!” I practically yell, but they are already walking away.

The rumor is out there, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it, just like all the other rumors, even the true ones. My happiness is gone. Things are still in Technicolor, but I’m living in a goldfish bowl. When we aren’t in school, Libby and I cling to each other more than ever, deflating like a blow-up doll with a slow leak.

In a move that sets the tragic final events in motion, I make the fateful decision to give her a key to our pistachio-green rambler, and ask her to wake me up in the mornings with kisses. My mother might be a drinker, but she is no fool. She catches us the first time Libby lets herself in.