

Two

“Every man has his secret sorrows which the world knows not; and oftentimes we call a man cold when he is only sad.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I may have a low-pitched voice and my father’s masculine underbite, a defect one day to be corrected by reconstructive jaw surgery, but my bedroom is all girl. Decorated entirely by my mother in wishful thinking, the room is a pink-bedecked extravaganza—pink walls, pink ceiling, pink scalloped bedspread, and the tie-it-all-together feature: light-and-dark pink shag carpet.

Unsated by the matchy-matchy bedroom, or perpetually hopeful, she has continued the same theme down the hall into the bathroom with its own pink walls and ceiling, pink toilet seat, pink-tiled shower—relieved only barely around the edges by a tiny row of turquoise—and a thick, pink vinyl shower curtain trimmed in pink fuzzy balls that stretch across the top. It could not be less me.

When Libby sneaks into my room, having slipped into the house with our spare key, I am still under the covers, sleepy and warm, so happy to see her. She tiptoes to the bed as though it’s the noise of her footsteps that might betray us rather than the heavy door creak a moment ago. Teenagers are nothing if not short on logic. She folds one leg underneath her and leans against me in the twin bed, a Sears and Roebuck special with tiny pink roses and gold trim on the ornately carved princess headboard.

Sears had mistakenly delivered a set of mahogany bunk beds, and I had begged my mother to keep them, but her vision for my bedroom was nonnegotiable. The vision my mother is about to see will be nonforgettable.

Libby grins down at me, the same happy grin from typing class. We are in bliss, pure, unadulterated bliss, achingly unaware that it is the last time we will ever smile at each other. A magnetic force pulls the softness of her mouth to mine, as it always does; the pleasure of kissing grown stronger with the deepening of our bond and affection. I wonder dimly if this is what happy babies feel: swaddled, cuddled, nourished, and cherished. There isn't a wish or a need in my whole, deeply satisfied world.

Suddenly I smell Chanel No. 5 and look up. I wish I hadn't. I wish I'd never met Libby. I wish the flooding heat in my brain would burn me mercifully unconscious. Instead, the ferocious vision of spots I blink so furiously to clear away stands motionless in the doorway—my mother in her leopard-print bathrobe. I shove Libby away from me and scrabble frantically to piece together what my mother saw, what she thinks, what she'll do.

“Go home, Libby!” commands the leopard in a voice that leaves no room for doubt. She saw, she knows.

Powdered, rouged, and lipsticked for work, my mother's hair is sculpted in small green curlers set in tight rows along her crown and down each side of her face. I catch only a flash of the queasy set of her mouth as I lock onto the fuzzy blanket, pink of course, around my knees. On the inside, I writhe like Medusa's snakes; on the outside, I study blanket fuzz balls.

Poor Libby thinks my mother has said, “No more,” not, “Go home,” so she sits there, frozen, terrified of what the leopard will do next.

“Go home, Libby!” The shrill ugliness in my mother’s voice clears up any confusion.

Libby flattens past my mother in the doorway and is gone. So is everything else. The full raging storm has hit and will leave nothing standing, not me, not my friendship with Libby, not my ability to connect emotionally to myself or anyone else, not my parents’ marriage.

I will not see Libby again for six months, and by then we will be strangers. She is sent away to private school by her gravelly-voiced mother after a phone call from the leopard. When she returns at the beginning of sophomore year, we will pass each other again and again in the turquoise-lockered halls, eyes averted, graduating without contact of any kind. Behind a face of carefully masked anguish, I will pretend fiercely, as a matter of survival, that I don’t even know her.

Living my lie in the goldfish bowl is meant to spare me the rubbed-raw state of being strafed by so many watchful eyes. The strain scorches my mind’s inner workings, perforating a fragile trapdoor to emotional instability. Like my mother, I will dance at the edges of self-control, self-destruction, and self-doubt. Unlike her, I will never plunge through completely, a nod to my father’s genetic contribution, or the hand of God, or both.

But that is all to come. The storm has only begun to rage, its ragged litter not yet deposited into every cranny of my life. In this moment, I am still face-to-face with the leopard, nothing between us now but a sea of light-and-dark pink shag. Dark anger and even darker disgust cascades off my mother in waves, met by my own sure knowledge that Libby’s affection saved my life. Humans survive. It is what we do, calling it to ourselves in countless instinctive, usually unconscious, often brilliant ways. Because of Libby, I have been nurtured, the vision without which I would perish but with which I will know what to seek from here on.

My mother finally speaks, the ugliness in her voice still present if less shrill. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Nothing,” I mutter, the classic teenage response.

It will take almost three decades and a fair amount of humbling by my own reprehensible behavior, but I will one day find a tender if surprising compassion for my mother in this bedroom scene. I will think back to what must have been her complete unpreparedness to face what was, in her time, a universally acknowledged perversion in her own daughter. No Dr. Phil to help her, no Oprah, no Internet, no support groups.

I will never forget her question to me soon after, almost heartbreaking in its hopefulness: “Do lesbians marry gay men?”

Touched by her need to know, moved by her guilelessness, my voice will be gentle when I answer, “No, Mom, no, they don’t. That’s the point.”

This early morning in my bedroom, she is flying blind, probably a bit inebriated as well, and I am in survival mode—standard operating procedure.

If she is a leopard, I am a crocodile, my eyes closed to mere slits. I intend to slither ever so stealthily through the coming spate of judgments, exposing nothing more of myself. The unfurling trauma that will haunt me the rest of my life takes shape in those first few moments of my mother standing in the doorway, shaking her green plastic curlers in disgust. The humiliating flash that exposed my—to her eyes—depravity, leaves mottled spots of shame behind on my vulnerability, a stain I will never fully expunge.

I stare at my pink ocean and wait.

“Well, no more!” my mother growls. “No more! Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer, relieved that no further discussion will take place.

It is a sickly feeling to be dependent on someone not capable of leading. My mother always said I raised myself, but she thought she was joking. If, in fact, I am raising myself, I’m not doing a very good job. I should be sitting down with myself to have The Talk.

I should say something like, “Honey, these feelings and desires you have for love and intimacy are God-given and beautiful, but there is a right time and a right place to express them.”

Instead, I pretend that nothing has happened. I’m fine, things are fine—a tough act to render but I manage. With Libby’s disappearance from school, the crush at my locker becomes a feeding frenzy.

“Where’s your girlfriend?”

“Did’ya get her pregnant?”

“When’s the baby due?”

“Come on, DOG-na, you can tell us!”

They all high-five each other thinking they are so, so hilarious. The familiar heat flushes up my neck and head. I study my locker combination, pretending I can’t hear them; with the blood roaring in my ears, I really can’t, a tiny tender mercy. I never cry. They never break me. My smooth, steely, outside is indifferent to it all. Inside, the writhing snakes leave me bruised and shaky. I am falling, and there is no one to catch me.

At home, we keep to the code: no personal conversation. Neither my mother nor I ever bring up The Incident, and I assume my father is not aware since his communication toward me, or lack thereof, remains the same. He settles behind his newspaper in the blue velvet chair next

to the bank of living room windows, completely obscured from the knees up—my strongest memory of him—never deviating from his after-work routine or any other routine for that matter.

He makes hot cereal every morning—oatmeal, cream of wheat, or Malt-O-Meal, leaving the pan warming on the stove in a tin pie plate filled with water, the depression-era survivor’s double boiler, until my sister and I are ready for breakfast. He washes the dishes, alone, every night after dinner and then makes our lunches for school: peanut butter and marshmallow cream sandwiches, chips, and only half a fruit pie, whether because he is conserving resources or because I already shop in the chubby department at Sears, I don’t know. Thursday is grocery-shopping day, Saturday is for yard work, and on Sunday, he serves as deacon in our church.

The change in tension, and it is only a matter of degree, comes from my mother who retreats further into her yellow coffee mug, spending more time in her cave of a dark-green bedroom with the shades drawn. The slouchy beanbag chair in the television room, the one that smells of potato chips and loneliness, is my only friend, the only protection from the tension behind me. Every cell in my body is trained in my mother’s direction, waiting for the inevitable explosion. It comes in waves.

“I’m going to take you to Doctor Fader tomorrow,” she says one morning on her way out the door to work.

“Yes, ma’am,” answers the crocodile; no questions, no comments, no provocation. But I have no idea who Dr. Fader is, or why I need him. Dr. Fader, it turns out, is a psychiatrist; the very psychiatrist who, with my father, committed my mother against her will when I was three and administered electroshock therapy. My mother brings me to his stuffy, overheated office in downtown San Diego and waits in the lobby for him to cure me.

I know nothing of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) or its classification of homosexuality as mental illness, the removal of which only three years previously had been met with fierce opposition by numerous psychiatrists, perhaps even Dr. Fader.

Adolescence is an age imbued with the dichotomy of shame and defiance. We can defend almost any behavior while twisting in mortification at the same time. I had known to hide my relationship with Libby, but standing alone on the rubble of my life, I refuse to admit I've done anything wrong.

The weekly sessions with Dr. Fader are not productive, in part because he is not gifted with adolescents. They all run the same course.

Dr. Fader: How are you doing today?

Donna: This is a waste of my father's money. I didn't do anything wrong.

Dr. Fader: (Various questions.)

Donna: (Silence to all questions.)

Dr. Fader: Our time is up.

Donna: Do I have to come back?

One week, finally, he says, "No."

What findings Dr. Fader is able to obtain come from my mother's data alone. She is quick to report his diagnosis: negative self-image causing patient to turn to a woman. She doesn't mention whether he places any of the responsibility on her or my father, or the lack of relating, let alone nurturing, in our home. I feel like a dreamer screaming without sound.

While the baby-bear wave of the explosion rolls on, the mama-bear wave begins. My father, still crisp in his white shirt and tie from work, comes to my bedroom one night before

Christmas. No matter how long my father stays dressed after work, he never loosens his tie or rolls up his sleeves. He awkwardly lowers his six-foot-three frame to the studio couch beside my desk where my bright-yellow lamp, the only other color in the room, shines a neat round circle onto my Algebra textbook.

My father in my bedroom with something to say is surreal. It would be exciting but for the fist in my gut that tells me something awful is coming. I know already that it is about me and Libby.

“I’m going to be moving out,” he says in his deep voice that embarrasses me when he sings at church because it’s so much lower than everyone else’s.

A sharp nausea rips through my stomach, and I stare at my homework. His words hang in the two-and-a-half-dimensional space. *I’m going to be moving out.* Inside the lamp’s warm circle, I make small dots on my book with a pencil. If I don’t look at him, maybe he will take it back. When I don’t speak, he continues.

“Mommy blames me for what happened with Libby. She says I wasn’t affectionate enough with you when you were growing up. She doesn’t want me to do the same thing to your sister that I did to you.”

My dark brown eyes seek his own. I’m so confused. How can he go back and fix what he’s done to my sister when she’s already eleven? I look down again, humiliated that my father knows about my degenerate needs for affection. Then a horrible, terrible, awful thought presents itself. My mind closes on a picture of me alone with my mother. I rush up toward his face again.

“Can I come with you?”

The plaintive sound of my voice makes me feel small. He won't leave me alone with her, will he? Somehow I already know that he will. The expression on his face is unreadable.

"Please, Daddy?" My heart shudders, but still he doesn't answer. "Daddy?"

It's getting hard to breathe. Hot, salty tears slip into my mouth. When he speaks, it is classic Daddy, no emotion.

"No, you stay here." He looks down at his hands.

"I don't want to stay here!" I yelp, scalded.

My father's eyes flash quickly in the direction of my mother's bedroom.

"You stay here," he repeats quietly, looking again down the hallway.

"Why? Why do I have to stay? I don't want to stay!"

I can see my train leaving the station, can see that I won't make it, but I keep running anyway. I run even though I know he can't take me with him. He can't afford to upset my mother. He knows better than anyone how fragile she is. He stands up, crisp as ever, our only meaningful interaction in fourteen years at an end.

"You need to stay here."

Then he is gone, too. I make more pencil dots on my book. Keep it together, I tell myself, keep it together, keep it together. Somehow I do. I always do.

The papa-bear wave is the worst. I am setting the table for dinner a week later, only three places now, when my father opens the sliding glass door from the patio into the kitchen, as handsome as ever. My mother, a secretary, still striking at forty-seven, is dressed in her work clothes, a pumpkin-colored skirt set that brings out her blue eyes and dark hair. She hates

cooking, hates having to think of what to cook, and stands at the stove irritably clanging pots.

When she sees my father, she erupts.

“What do *you* want?”

“I need some shirts,” he answers meekly.

“You said you took everything you needed! You can’t just show up here when you feel like it!”

My mother slams a lid on the counter and turns back to the stove. My father holds still, waiting in the well-worn what-will-upset-her-least pose.

She whips around again.

“What are you waiting for? Go get your shirts!”

Dark splotches break out on her face, the same hue as her suit.

Head down, my father strides quickly to what had been their bedroom for seventeen years. I assume the crocodile position, as invisible as possible, finishing the table as quietly as possible. My mother clangs and slams and mutters in rising agitation the longer my father is gone. With his first step back into the kitchen, his arms full of shirts, she launches at me like a tightly wound spring suddenly shot from its coil. She stops abruptly just inches from my face; the alcohol on her breath barrels into me. My throat seizes up, and I can’t look away. Her eyes radiate a dark, crazy heat. She leans in even closer.

“And *you!*” She puts so much dripping disgust on the “you,” I think she might spit. “You make me *sick!*”

Lightening quick, the crocodile strikes and slaps my mother’s face. No thought goes into my instinctive defense; it is pure fight or flight. She rears back, and I clap my horrified hands to

my mouth, echoes of the slap fading in the shock between us. I feel the warm softness of her cheek on the hand that stings from how hard I hit her. She looks, surprisingly, calmer, but I am ablaze with panic.

I am in another dream now, a dream where I've slapped my own mother. This can't be real. I look to my father for something, anything, but he stands fixed in the doorway, as silent after my slap as he was after her explosion. The trapdoor in my mind beckons. How easy it would be to let myself slip through, leaving my overwhelming reality behind.

Flight takes over, and I break for the sliding glass door, so heavy I need both hands to pull it open. I run to the white patio gate with its peekaboo slats and try frantically to lift it over years of Podocarpus tree roots that have buckled the concrete. Bracing every second for an angry hand on my neck, I struggle until adrenaline finally bests the gate.

I fly down the driveway in my K-Swiss, past the quiet ramblers on our street where happy families hug and play games. I run even though there is nowhere to go—no friends, no neighbors, no relatives, no teachers, no pastor, no therapist, no sibling, no parent I can trust. I have no idea what to do. The thought ricochets through my frenzied brain. I don't know how to fix this. Nearly hysterical, the thought sears me. I have nowhere to go. I can't go back. I race through the gathering dark, trying to outrun my panic, trying not to fall through the perforated door in my mind.

Eventually, more out of exhaustion than resolution, I circle back in an aimless, miserable walk. Streetlamps pour yellow cones of light into the jasmine-scented evening, and through the shadows, I'm stunned to see my father heading toward me. I can't imagine why. When I was six, he taught me to ride a bike; once he hit some tennis balls with me; and a week ago he told me he

was moving out. That's it. Those are the only times I can remember him talking to me in my entire life. I stop and wait, watching to see what he will do.

When he reaches me, his face is tight, his jaw is set, and he doesn't meet my eyes. He takes my arm firmly, and without speaking, leads me back to my mother's house. I let him, defeated. His shiny shoes make regular tap tap tap sounds on the sidewalk next to my silent, shamed K-Swiss. At the top of the driveway, he guides me through the still wide-open patio gate and through the sliding glass door into the kitchen. I close my eyes knowing the hell I'm about to catch. And deserve.

My mother stands at the counter, her back to both of us, chopping carrots so violently that the blade sticks in the cutting board with each strike. She jerks it out and slams it down, jerks it out, slams it down. I wait for her to turn around, to cry, to yell, to punish me. She never does. She doesn't speak. She doesn't look at me. I look at my father to see that he, too, is watching her. It dawns on me that we are all going to pretend it didn't happen. The Incident, like all incidents, will be denied conversation and healing.

Until the day I move out three and a half years later, we will not speak, my mother and I, except to pass the salt, accomplish chores, or negotiate school supplies, clothes, and paperwork. She and her coffee mug will live in her bedroom cave. I and my junk food will live in the beanbag chair watching *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*; *Charlie's Angels*; *One Day at a Time*; *Welcome Back, Kotter*; *The Love Boat*; *Mork & Mindy*; *The Bob Newhart Show*; *The Six Million Dollar Man*; *The Waltons*; *Dallas*; *I Love Lucy*; *The Carol Burnett Show*; *Sonny & Cher*; and *Donny & Marie*.

At school I hide, or think I do, behind a chinkless exterior. From K-Swiss and IZOD shirts, I switch hastily to stiletto Candie's, pencil skirts with long slits, and blue mascara. Like extreme pressure on carbon turns it into diamond, the crush on my insides turns me sparkly on the outside. I glitter with half a dozen AP classes, a silver medal for backstroke in the Junior Olympics, piano recitals, advancement to the county spelling bee, three part-time jobs at once, the California Honor Society, and, ultimately, acceptance to UC Berkeley.

The new, more glamorous me produces no real results to speak of. The one time a boy asks me out—my mother lets a senior take me to his prom while I am still a freshman—is not long after Libby leaves, and he is clearly titillated by the rumors. Four years older and fifty pounds heavier, he pushes for certain extras during the night that I am unwilling to provide. Luckily for me, he accepts my refusal and brings me home early. I never hear from him again.

An interminable series of days, weeks, months, and years crawl by as I harden, dead from the neck down. I keep everyone at arm's length. Although some seem sincere in their friendship, I can't trust it, always wondering what they know and what they think. I don my Ray-Bans, flip my hair, and drink my Tab.

As sunrise dawns on my post-graduation life, I fly toward it on wings of hope that things will be different. In the innocence of youth, I think that to leave something behind means to be done with it forever. In the wisdom of age, I will realize that those delicate and jagged etchings on my soul were flying with me.