Child A

How exactly do we become our parents? We get our eyes, our bone structure, our curly hair, and our crooked toes from them, but that's not it. We get our mannerisms too. The way she turned her head chin first, the way he stood with one shoulder slightly lower, that nervous way she tapped her right foot in public. We catch ourselves in the mirror raising our eyebrows as he did, pulling on our earlobes like her. We deny it, laugh it off, but our children's children laugh back at us in the mirror.

My mother slept with Ted Bundy. It was 1972 and she was a student at the University of Washington. She met him where she worked, in the library. He had tripped in the stacks (in the Feminist Literature section she would say, as if that were significant) and she had picked up his books for him.

They went out to dinner, had a great time. He was charming, complimented her on the way she wore her hair. When she reached for the bread, he touched her hand. He slid his foot between hers under the table.

He walked her home, kissed her, gently. Brushed a strand of hair out of her face with his finger and kissed her again. She invited him in, and when he left the next morning, he told her he would call.

Whenever she told this story, as she did often throughout my childhood, she would shake her head, laugh a bit too loudly, and say, "Blown off by Ted Bundy! I'm the luckiest woman alive."

Our father left when I was three. They had just bought a small house in Southern Indiana to be near my Aunt Debbie, but after only a few months he moved out, went to the other side of town, closer to the distillery where he worked. A year later he was killed in a late night run-in with a train. I only have a few pictures of him, but it's clear I have his eyebrows. Stephie is fair-haired like Mom, but I have hair everywhere and it's dark and coarse. Before my first co-ed pool party, Mom made me put on her bikini, even though I was planning to wear my Ramones t-shirt the whole time, and while I stood with my arms and legs spread apart in the bathroom trying not to cry, she used her electric razor to shave off all hair that could be seen.

"Can't have my girl looking like a Yeti," she said.

Stephie watched from the doorway.

Aunt Debbie said my father was a dreamer. She said he fell in love with Mom fast and hard.

She told me Dad played the saxophone in a blues band in Seattle, that they had a record deal in the works when he met Mom. They met at a club and by the end of the night he was in love. Two weeks later they were married. That's how it was with her, Aunt Debbie said.

Mom never talked to us about him. I never even knew he was a musician.

"I don't think he meant to do it," she said as I stared at a picture of him with his band, his head tilted just to the side as if he had heard something in the distance.

Didn't mean to kill himself, or didn't mean to fall in love with Mom? I thought of asking. But I already knew that there was no difference.

We knew Mom was different for as long as we knew anything. It wasn't her moods or her disappearances or her drinking or that she broke things and laughed too loudly, or that she only ate bananas if they had been blended and refused to allow us to wear the color green, that sometimes she locked us out of the house—those things were just the Mom we knew, the Mom normal. Yes, she was different than our friends' moms, but she wasn't different than our mom.

On Wednesday nights we had picnics in her bedroom. She would pack a basket and lay out a blanket on the floor and we would eat tuna sandwiches with our pinkies in the air, laughing at Mom's British accent.

Once she sewed tags in all of our shirts, so no one but us could see them. They said *I am here*. In every shirt. I still have one in the back of my sock drawer.

When one of us was sad, Mom would climb into bed with us and sing the fish song.

Down in the meadow in a little bitty pool
Swam two little fishies and a mama fishie too.
"Swim" said the mama fishie, "Swim if you can,"
And they swam and they swam right over the dam!

She always started soft, and then each repetition was a little bit louder, and a little bit louder, until we were all bouncing on the bed, collapsing in a pile when the fish swam right over the edge.

(A few years ago, Stephie called me crying late at night.

"It's a real song," she sobbed. "It's a real song, and there were three little fishies, and she didn't make it up." I didn't know why this was making her so upset.

"And it's *all over* the dam," she almost yelled through the phone, "not *right over* the dam!")

All of that was normal, the loud and the soft and the crying and the laughing, and the knowing when it was time to call Aunt Debbie.

But it was the way other people, mostly our friends' parents, looked at us when we weren't with Mom that wasn't normal. It was the quiet questions, whispered to us in the grocery store or outside of the school or at friends' houses:

"How you doing, honey?"

"Sweet things. You'll let me know if you need anything, right?"

"Be strong, baby."

Most of my friends know who they will become by looking at their parents. They see how their eyes will age, how they will lose an inch to bad posture, how they will settle into their bodies, become sturdier first, then frailer. They have models, maybe not perfect, but rough prototypes to help them plan or prepare or push against. I am now older than my parents ever were. I am the model, the one they could have become had life been very different.

On the night of my 44th birthday I got more drunk than I'd ever been before. I had made it. I had outlived them all. I had been counting down the years until I could believe I would no longer become them.

Once, when I was ten, Mom, Stephie, and I piled into the Renault, an old blue station wagon Mom had bought from Aunt Debbie's ex-husband and went on a three state hunt for Smartfood popcorn. That's the way she told it later, as if three states was a crazy feat even though we lived in the corner of Indiana, five minutes from Ohio and ten from Kentucky. We bought every bag we could find in every Kroger's or 7/11 until the whole cargo area was full of black and yellow bags, and Stephie was close to buried in the back seat, and it was after midnight when we crossed back into Indiana, over the bridge, singing, laughing, windows down so we could yell into the night. She told us it was good luck to yell into the night, to let it all out for the stars to hear.

"We're the luckiest girls in the world!" She screamed to the stars.

That same night Mom tried to kill herself for the first time. I heard a glass break and found her in the bathroom. I called 911 and the doctors told me I had saved her life. They told me if I had waited just five more minutes she would have died. Just five more minutes, they said, as if I were a hero.

I wrote a report on Ted Bundy my senior year in high school. He was born in a home for unwed mothers in Vermont, raised by family members in Philadelphia, and then moved with his mother to Washington. He dated, went to college, graduated with a degree in psychology. He drove a white VW Beetle. He was accepted at law school, just like I would be years later.

The older I get, the more I look like my mother. Except for the hair. I saw myself in a restaurant window a few weeks ago on my way to the firm, and for just a moment I thought she was there, inside, watching me walk by. We have the same confident posture, the same turn of the head, the same eyes, set deep and just a little too close together. I remember getting ready for a middle school dance in Shelley's basement when Mom showed up. I heard her upstairs, her voice, always a little too loud, asking if she could see me. She ran down the stairs, Stephie in tow, dressed in jeans and a tank top, no bra, her hair beneath a blue bandana and her John Lennon glasses perched on her small nose (Stephie has her nose).

"Josie!" she said, pulling me away from my friends, who stood with make-up brushes in hand, half dressed. "Be a doll and watch your sister, will you?" She put her hands on my shoulders and looked at me without seeing. Then she kissed me on the forehead (high like hers) and ran back up the stairs. Stephie was crying.

She was gone for ten days that time. Stephie and I took care of ourselves for the first few until we ran out of food.

Those eyes, so deep, just like the ones staring back out of the restaurant.

When I was seventeen and my sister was fifteen, she screamed out the window of her room at Aunt Debbie's as I walked away, "At least I know who my father is!"

Stephie is 42. She lives in Cincinnati just across from an indoor farmer's market where she and her boyfriend go every weekend to buy fancy cheese. When she called me to tell me she was pregnant she had been drinking.

"I can't have it," she said.

"Does Mike know?" I asked.

"No. I'll take care of it before he finds out."

"Are you sure?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Josie. Yeah, I'm sure. I'm not doing this. You of all people should understand."

"But maybe it would be okay," I said, taking a beer out of the refrigerator. "There's a chance, you know. There's a good chance you'll be okay." I opened the beer and sat back on the couch.

"Yeah, and there's a chance it skips a generation, in which case this baby is fucked. Both our parents, Josie. Both. Not very good odds. I'm saving everyone time and heartbreak." I pictured her baby, pictured holding it in my arms, watching it breathe, cupping its tiny skull.

We stayed on the phone for hours like we used to in our twenties. After a few beers her voice is so much like Mom's.

The train didn't even stop. It wasn't until kids found his body that they knew there had been an accident. For a while, I wondered how it was possible to hear a train coming and not be able to get out of the way.

One summer when Stephie and I were both back in town for a wedding, we decided to go down to the tracks where Dad was killed. It was late, and we brought a half empty bottle of whiskey. We sat on the hill behind Benny's Gas & Grill, our shoes kicked off, Stephie leaning against me. The grass was damp from late night dew, the air starting to cool. I could smell gasoline, the memory of fried food, and behind that the yeasty odor of the Seagram's distillery. We hadn't been back to town since Mom died, no reason to return. We talked about places we missed, people we hadn't seen since moving to Aunt Debbie's.

We heard the train before we felt it, and we felt it before we saw it.

"Let's see how close we can get," said Stephie, scrambling to her feet.

We ran down the hill until we were ten feet from the track. I grabbed Stephie to keep her from going any closer and we stood, arms locked together. The light cut through the night and the sound grew. We weren't at a crossing, not close enough to town and too late at night for warning horns or flashing lights. Just the sound of metal rushing towards us in the dark. Stephie took my hand, entwining our fingers like we did when we were kids, and we took a step closer.

"One more!" she yelled over the sound. It was physically difficult to step toward the tracks, as if magnetic fields had formed around our bodies, but we did it, together, dresses blowing, hair swirling. We tipped our heads back and howled into the sky as the train passed, letting it all out for the stars to hear.

And then it was gone, and it was dark, and we stood clutching each other, aware of exactly how close we had been.

In my college biology class we learned about Punnet Squares, a model of inheritance. The professor talked about dominant and recessive genes and made us list some of the most commonly passed down traits:

- Eye color
- Hair color
- Cleft chin
- Widow's peak
- Freckles
- Free and attached earlobes

We looked at photos of mothers and fathers and children. We read about genetic mutations. We made charts to determine the likelihood that Child A would have blue eyes, red hair, a cleft chin.

I can't decide which is worse, to know or not to know. To hear the train coming or to stumble drunk into its path. Is it worse to kill yourself or to kill someone else? Is there a difference?

On January 24, 1989, when I was sixteen years old, Ted Bundy was executed, found guilty of killing somewhere between 30 and 100 women.

I am guilty of killing only one. I was sixteen, just home from school. The door was open, which was not so unusual. Stephie was at band practice and wouldn't be home for at least an hour, and I just assumed Mom had forgotten to close it. Inside, the house smelled of bananas and dish soap. I stood in the entry and breathed, shut the door behind me. Everything was so still.

She was on the kitchen floor. The ceiling fan was on and the afternoon sun coming through the windows cast shadows on the tiles as the fan circled. I watched the shadows cross over her legs, circle around, cross over again, like birds circling a field, slow and steady, determined. I remember thinking it was odd that a circular fan could cast shadows that were oblong. I remember thinking I should be able to figure out why based on angles and diameter. I remember thinking I could use the angle of Mom's leg to calculate circumference.

I remember thinking I should call 911, that it wasn't too late to save her again.

But instead, I cleaned. For the next hour, I put away dishes, emptied the bananas out of the blender, washed it. I threw away the bottles, first the glass one, then the small orange plastic one. I started a load of laundry, picked up the living room, swept the hall. I returned to the kitchen and cleaned up the vomit, took the trash out the back door and into the garage.

I can remember all of that, every detail. I can see it all every time I close my eyes. I remember the door the dishes the bananas the laundry the blender the trash the fan the smell the door the bottles the garage the blender the dishes the garage.

"She's dead," I said when Stephie got home. I was sitting on the porch, my knees tucked under my chin.

Stephie dropped her flute case.

"Real?" she asked. I nodded. Her knees gave way and I caught her. Held her. Told her it was going to be okay.

There's a picture of Ted Bundy I keep in my desk drawer, beneath envelopes and old letters. It's a clipping I found going through Mom's things after she died. It's 1978 and he's standing outside a news conference in Tallahassee. He's in his prison jumpsuit, leaning casually, his right arm against the wall and his left disappearing behind his back. He's looking slightly away from the camera, his eyes focused and his lips set in what's not quite a smile. His chin is smooth. His hair dark, no freckles, attached earlobes, like mine.

Stephie looks so much like Mom that it hurts sometimes to see her. I watch the way she pretends to be brave, the way she smiles all the time, even when she's sad, the way she laughs a little too loudly and tells stories as if they were Homeric epics. I know she drinks too much, like me, loves too hard, sings when she shouldn't, still rolls down her windows and yells at the night.

"Am I like her?" she asked me a few weeks ago. "We were sitting on her couch and she was curled into me like a child. She had just told me she was going to have the baby, that they had decided to take a chance.

"Kind of," I said. "But just the good parts."

"Would you change anything?" She asked. "I mean, if you could go back, would you want it to be different?"

"That's a stupid fucking question," I said, and we laughed.

I would change one thing, I think. I would go back to that day in the kitchen, and I would tell my sixteen-year-old self to give it one more try, that this time would

be different, that this time we would find a way to make everything better. I would tell her to dial 911 like all the other times, and I would watch her fall to her knees again and sob into the phone again that her mother was dying, that they had to come now, that there was no time. I would tell her to shake her mother's body again and yell for the neighbors and beg her again not to leave again. I would tell her to breathe into her mother's mouth again, to ignore the tears and snot and vomit, and I would watch the paramedics pull her off screaming again. I would tell that sixteen-year-old child that maybe this time it would work, that people change, that there is no such thing as destiny.

Or, if I can't have that, if I can't get that chance, then I would go back anyway. And I would watch my sixteen-year-old self brush the hair out of her mother's face, so much like her own, and I would tell her I forgive her.