

X

The house is quiet at night; there is only the turning of pages and small occasional noises outside such as passing cars or rustling leaves from the mimosa tree. I have a picture. I've stolen it because when people raid this house, and I'm talking about relatives raiding this house, they'll take all the pictures and the figurines and the cutlery and nothing will be left.

The sheets smell clean and feel cool as they always have. My grandma keeps a heavy quilt on top of the sheets, along with an electric blanket, so the cold sheets are not a problem.

A draft blows the dusty pink curtains on the east and north walls and I wonder what it's like out there, to be the neighbors. They have lives that are much the same as they were last week. People get in their cars and go to work, they let their children play outside in a little kiddie pool, they come home, lock up their cars, and turn on their front-room lights. I wish I were the neighbors, but then I wouldn't have the clean cool lilac sheets and the smell of my grandma.

The smell of her is the only presence they will acknowledge. They, meaning relatives and everyone else too. They don't know. They're so used to letting go and making excuses for it all, they just don't know. First, the nursing home. Now, this.

They go through her meager things like they've been waiting for her death. They rummage through her cedar chest, her little notes and stacks of old coins. They toss the red and the blue ribbons to the side. They think nothing of the drawings and the scraps of cloth. It's the little leather

book-looking banks they want. It's the small green stamps. They don't know what ration stamps are worth. The old coins could be worth ten bucks, they could be worth a thousand. What would a family like ours know about worth?

It's my last night in her house and it's critical that she be there. It is everything that she be there, refreshed, recomposed, smell and all. I want to scoot closer, closer to the she I insist lies next to me, but she is not like that, never has been. She likes space as she sleeps, because she is used to it. Her husband—my grandpa, a railroader, a sometimes drunk and philanderer, a builder, a philosopher, a hunter, a veteran of World War II—died over twenty years ago. She likes company, therefore. She doesn't mind my being here, as long as I don't kick or sleep sideways. I'm too old for that now. I'm long and I don't kick, I twitch.

I twitch in the night of exhaustion. I try not to tonight. I know it interferes with her reading and it might keep her from sleeping. She'll draw the back of her wrist from her forehead, where it likes to rest as she reads, and look at me. Stop making a ruckus, is the look she'll give me. So I sit tight. Tight and quiet, except for the twitching, which I can't help. That twitching—it keeps me from sleeping. I'll be just about out and my legs will start twitching with unbearably fine bolts of electricity. Every night it's like that.

And maybe it's worse tonight. Maybe I twitch in guilt. Grandma did not give me the photograph. I'm a pillager too, then. I also stole her rolling pin, her blue ice-cream scoop. But she might understand. We have an understanding, she and I—she practically raised me, for a good long while. She knows what they'll do with her stuff—children, grandchildren, siblings, and the like. They will take all the photos and stuff them in a bottom drawer somewhere. Every so often, when somebody else dies, the pictures will be withdrawn and looked on with feigned or genuine tenderness. It's not the pictures they'll be concerned with right now. No, they're looking for their names scrawled in her shaky hand across possibly valuable packages and boxes. It always happens,

she's said. You leave your stuff without names written on it and everybody argues. Best to be safe, she's said. Best to write everyone's name right on the packages. My name isn't on those packages. It's a formality, I know. I'm a grandchild. Not a child.

I'd gladly share the photo with her, bring it back to her, whatever. It's just that the photo contains these names: *Margaret G., Virginia Kaan, myself. 1915. Burley Ida.* I had to ask almost everyone in our family before I found out who *myself* might be. My mother looked at it, said she didn't know who the people were, one or some of them could be related. "It's one of those inconsequential things," she said. It's Exie, my great-grandmother whose birth certificate identifies her as, simply, X. An aunt recognized Xie's writing.

It's black and white, of course. Or, black and tan. Exie is wearing black or dark. Who's to know the difference? Gray hair, suggesting light brown, chestnut, dark blond—not black. There is carpet and they're in a corner. Exie is standing up, straight, tall, young, maybe in her early twenties. A fan of something, leaves or light, maybe, who's to know, coming in at the side of the picture. There's an older, plump woman in a rocking chair, holding a chubby towheaded baby in a white dress with lace at the neck. The white dress is bright against the other woman's dark heavy dress. These people are strangers, or if they're not, their story hasn't been told.

The eyes are just like mine. It is as if the eyes have been lifted off the photo and placed on my face. There's the heavy crease up top and the puffy dip at the bottom. The thick eyebrows and the broad cheekbones and the chin. I want to ask Grandma a question. Why didn't you tell me I look just like your mother? There are other questions: Did you ever like your mother? Why was she so unhappy? (I know the answer to this one—her father, her husband, her poverty—but maybe there's more.) Did it change the way you felt about me as I grew older and began to look this way?

Of course, she's reading and no one likes to be disturbed in the middle of the kind of books she reads: romances, with a lot of sex in them.

It matters because I don't look like anybody. Until today. My parents are dark. Dark Dutch and dark who's to know. Grandma had white hair as long as I could remember, but photos reveal her to be a brunette. Everyone is dark and short, with rich black round eyes. And of course I had to wonder. Me, looking different, looking alien, looking like a Halloween pumpkin. And I wondered if it had to do with that feeling of aloneness, which sometimes is good but not always.

Aloneness and togetherness in combination is how it is between Grandma and me. That's why we have such peace between us. In the morning I'll crawl out of bed and she'll already be awake. She'll be drinking a cup of coffee at the dining-room table with only one small yellowish lamp on. She'll be writing lists and such. She'll tell me how long she's been awake—since four or five in the morning. Then I'll just lie there on the worn soft carpet and watch her drink her coffee and write, or drink her coffee and stare. There will be a look of contentment and thinking on her face, with only passing sheets of anxiety, and I'll try to imagine what she's thinking about.

Maybe she'll be thinking of the time her mom and dad tried to drop her off, to let her go, so they could leave Utah to homestead in Idaho. She always said how her dad loved her. Exie was not usually mentioned. But she ran to her dad, the favorite daughter of five ran to her dad and jumped in his arms and begged him not to let her go. She was the only one, then, who went. So she knows how it is to be claimed then not claimed then claimed. Then, maybe, later, after living in a lean-to in one place, after living in a dugout in another, settling in a cabin alongside a sweet-smelling, grass-banked river in Utah, after living there long enough to find a sweetheart who also was a fugitive of a certain kind of morality and marrying him at sixteen, after there were children and he went to war and he died, of cancer, of desire, of regret, of whiskey, after all that, she knew how it was to be not claimed again.

But that's the way of our family. We take a kind of pride in being in exile. The Mormon church, it was everywhere. It cut us off for alcoholism, for adultery, for gambling, for love. All those

reasons and the main reason—we didn't belong. We did not belong in those stark pews, confronted by the uniformity of floral dresses and dark blue suits. We were not inspired by Joseph Smith kneeling in a bed of leaves, hearing voices. That's because we knew about hearing voices. We knew all about that. Was no electric-shock therapy for Joseph, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have got it, had he stuck around. Had he been relegated to the state hospital. Let me tell you about the voices. No, let's not. Suffice it to say, we—my family and I, in strange unity—we will not go back.

This woman who did not belong, who was beaten by her husband, this is Exie, this woman wearing black or dark, who's to know, and she was mean. That's what they say. Grandma says it all the time. And yet there is this face (that is mine) and this gentle slant of her head, her head sort of falls sideways (that is mine) and small hands (which are not). All this and her hip jutting out. I can't picture her screaming at her husband or turning a deaf ear to her children. Or her hands coming down, coming hard. I can't imagine that face angry, though I know what it feels to be angry.

Exie wasn't always not wanted. She was given away (she was never named) to strangers and they took her in and they thought something of her, surely, because they paid to have this photograph taken of her with them. Of a mother and a baby and Exie, who did not belong. She wasn't family, she wasn't blood, but she was included, which is more than being included for blood. There could have been a picture of mother and baby, which makes sense. The expense could have gone toward a simple, loving image, mama/baby, and who's to question all that? And I wonder, is a copy of this photo in someone else's house? In this replacement family—this family I don't know and haven't known, whose story isn't told—do they keep the photo and do their children try to make sense of it? On the back, do they read, "*Xie, baby, and myself. 1915. Burley, Ida*"? Or did they know her then as X?

I'll bet she wondered why she was being beaten. It probably occurred to her that she had been given up, but then she was taken in, she was documented. Then she was given away to marriage.

I know what it's like to be beaten. There is the taking away, the feeling small, the feeling dark. The feeling of coming down, descending, coming dark. The sharp feeling of undeniable, unforeseeable pain. The feeling that stays. It's becoming less, it's slipping under, it's sometimes disappearing.

I want to ask: Why is this the first time I've seen her photograph?

She is, despite the resemblance, prettier than I am. The cartilage between my nostrils extends lower than the rest of my nose. My ears are bigger and my lips are thinner. I wear glasses. But I have to admit, when I looked at the picture for the first time, I felt less like a pumpkin and more like a woman, with presence. I felt standing up. I felt sort of beautiful.

I want to ask: Why would a mother name her baby X? I have asked this question before, and I have been given different answers. "Things were different then—babies didn't always live," or "Documentation was a problem," or "God only knows." But I want a reason—a thought behind the two strokes that make up the inky X. As I try to form the question in my mouth, my breath stops me cold. No reason could possibly be a comforting one.

I wonder, when Grandma sits at the side of her bed tomorrow morning, with her big silky white underwear on, reaching for her Tuesday blue blouse (I will get her the polyester pants), I wonder if she wonders, Why are they all going through my things? I fear the terrible pain as she watches each of her five children fight over this and that. When they guess that the worth of one package is less than another, and they compare that worth to one another, renegotiating the spoils among them. Already they have begun. So-and-so contributed lawn mowing, the building of an extra

bathroom. He should get the buffalo nickels. So-and-so never paid back his loan. Maybe he should only get the letters from the war and back. Hell, give him the newspaper clippings.

Things that seemed incapable of dividing are becoming fast divisible. So it is. I could kneel in a pile of leaves and tell you all about it, but some good that'd do.

Sometimes it's for the best to know nothing of worth. Then, when you don't have any, there's something else. Like the quiet house, which, everyone agrees, is worth nothing. Medicaid will take it over. I'll have to get out of the house, my mother says. I'll have to go home tomorrow because the state now owns the house and she wouldn't want anything inappropriate to happen with the house that they could make a fuss about. Anyway we'll all need to clear out entirely before the funeral on Saturday, she says. I said to her once, I said, "Where will she go?" And Mom said, "To a better place," and I called her a liar and such, and she cried, and I felt bad, because this time is a hard time for all of us, it is full of confusion and disagreement. And she has the absence of forty years of knowing and loving and resenting her mother-in-law, who exercised much authority over both my dad and her. Which is a lot more than the fullness of knowing and loving and wondering about the woman beside me.

Grandma sighs. I wait for her to ask me the same old question. "You remember to take your crazy pills?" That's what we call them in my family—crazy pills. But she doesn't. Tonight, she is willing to believe in my sanity, and even in hers. Maybe she's had enough of them herself, having lost her sensibilities in the nursing home. Having stolen every woman resident's purse in the nursing home to check them for guns—guns that she thinks were intended to kill her. She puts the book on the nightstand, lucid now—no far-off stare or grimace of fear. She rolls onto her back, rests the back of her hand on her forehead again. She amazes me that way—the way she can age, get wrinkles, gain a lot of weight, wear glasses, and still have a movement so full of grace and femininity. She used to tell me, "They said I had great legs. They always told me my legs were beautiful." I can't

see that now, but I can see the beauty of her hands, which also, on occasion, twirl her white hair. “I’ve got to go to pot,” she says. She always remembers to go once she’s settled in. And slowly, laboriously, she gets up and goes into the bathroom. The floor creaks and settles. The familiarity fills me with peace and I can’t let go. She’s always noisy about going to the bathroom, which breaks me from the awful nostalgia. She reminds me of what’s funny and gross and unspoken.

In the morning I’ll do her laundry. I have been asked to give away her clothes. I haven’t been good for quite sometime—I have a lot to make up for. When the good will gets her clothes, they’ll smell pretty. Or, they’ll smell of White Shoulders. It was they—her children—who put her in a nursing home, but it was me who told her (I was a kid) she would never go to a nursing home, never, never, not as long as I lived. I would quit my job (if I had one) and live with her and nurse her myself. (I didn’t know—I didn’t understand.) I didn’t understand that even at age twenty-four, I’d be horrified by giant diapers, by faraway looks and smiles that didn’t belong. I didn’t get that I wouldn’t be able to hold her weight as she shifted from bed to chair to bed. I didn’t know how to get her to drink the vitamin stuff, and it would dribble down her mouth, and she would cough and sputter and choke, and I could see the vitamin stuff settling in her lungs, sloshing around in her lungs. And she would look at me, with a face devoid of recognition, and that understanding we had—that understanding that was my comfort, start to finish—lifted its heavy wings and flew into a wall. There was all this...unhappiness and grief and shit I couldn’t wipe, because I didn’t know. Could I get between the folds? Was it humanity to wipe where once she had kept private? It wasn’t my territory. I never would have invaded her privacy, she was a very private person (we had an understanding!). Besides, I knew about being touched between the folds, and it wasn’t pleasant. I was not in a position to touch between the folds.

The big convex bedside clock ticks. It ticks and I breathe. I may need to pillage the clock.

Anyway, she wasn’t much for touching after I was about five. A hug good-bye, a kiss.

I've been loaded with excuses.

She comes back in the room, crawls into bed. "Good night, honey," she says. I lean over her side of the bed, shut off the lamp, and watch the little green arm of the clock go round. "Good night," I say. And I think, Thank god. Thank god it's over. The diapers and the dozen colored pills and the morning mush that would sort of ooze out of the corners of her mouth. Because I love her and I want her and need her, and her smell is back, it's been gone so long, replaced with antiseptic, antibiotic...something, and I can feel the warmth off her body and the bigness of her profile as she lies on her side, away from me, as she always has. The thought slips in of a house being sold and departed and I count so as not to think, I count the steps from my house to hers, afraid I might one day forget how I got here. I picture myself on the street outside the window—got a long walk home, but I can see every step, every block, every tree. I'm watching every line as the sidewalk moves beneath my feet. I'm watching, and watching, and counting, and pretty soon I feel the sinking, the other kind of coming down, the one where I lie down on purpose and breathe out and breathe deep, where I'm alone and together, and there's the silence of the house, the house where I belong, the woman I belong to, and the occasional passing car, the wind through the darkening grass and the long swaying limbs of the mimosa. The long swaying limbs of the mimosa. The long swaying limbs of the mimosa. The long swaying limbs....