

## Less Coughy

There was nowhere else to take me. Mom would be down the coast. Monterey with the grey beaches, the bright grey skies of sea birds. A conference on body image. I asked her what that was and she said:

“Well, sweetie, when you see someone—like me and you talking right now let’s say, right? You have an idea of how I see you. A cutie patootie. And I have an idea of how you see me. A Supermom. But we don’t really know how other people see us. A lot of times, what you think other people see is wrong.”

Because we lived in California, I thought everybody’s great-grandparents, or great-great-grandparents, were cowboys or Sheriffs or outlaws. And so, I found myself imagining middle-aged women in Old West clothes—long-sleeved, dusty dresses with stained petticoats—arguing around plastic foldout tables. Everyone drew each other with reddish-brown color pencils.

“Like for me,” Mom said. “I think people see me with perfect strawberry blonde hair, but then I’ll walk past a window, look at my reflection and see a frizzy yellow mess. What do you think I see when I look at you?”

We drove for three hours in the burgundy Cadillac DeVille—a hand-me-down from Uncle Paul—with the electric windows that didn’t work, and the AC that smelled like old Chesterfields. Mom gripped the wheel as she accelerated. The car rattled below my seat.

Almond orchards bloomed white, a town with quick miles of walnuts followed. Grass grew through railroad tracks, and a crow lay dead on the side of the road, one wing pointing up. Then the freeway, and the cushiony old red leather. And sunny sleep.

I woke up to Mom veering onto a gravel road that curved up a dried hill, past a ruined tree house, four by fours falling from the branches of a blackened oak tree. More things were burnt than weren’t. Yellow patches of grass cleaved to black. Scorched chaparral. Slack barbwire between charred fence posts.

“Wildfires.”

Most of the time Mom knew the question before I asked. We crested the hill, idled at a metal gate with a black keypad. Mom pushed a few buttons and the gate buzzed, the bars falling backward.

“Whoa,” I said. “They have a robot gate?”

“A security gate, yeah,” she corrected. Mom usually stopped talking with a chuckle. Not today.

“Where’s the pool?”

“In the back yard,” she answered. “Sit down!”

We drove up to a two-car garage. A black sports car shimmered on the left. It looked like it could go under water.

“What kind of car does Uncle Paul have, Mom? What kind of car is that?” I slapped the window, pushed the tiny switch back, but it wouldn’t roll down. Something in the door *whirred*.

“It’s an Aston Martin, buddy.” Then she did chuckle. “Like the car James Bond drives.”

“Whoa.”

Uncle Paul’s house was a mystery, even though I’d been there once before. I’d fallen into the pool and almost drowned. Everyone liked to remind me. Mom would tell me every time we were around water:

“You were playing on the couch one minute, the next you were gone. I started looking for you and then I heard a splash.”

I sometimes dreamed of sinking to the bottom of a pool, floating into a glowing tunnel, then black. There was a creased picture of us from that visit, me a milky baby, Mom a lot thinner. My face, even when I was a baby, was different enough for people to say, hey, how old’s your cousin? Mom and Michael had the same grin with pink gums overshadowing perfect teeth. Same eyes like fresh-spread ice. Me, well, one of my front teeth curved over the other like a sash. Eyes the color of poop. Different Dads, different teeth, I guess. My Dad had green eyes though, so I couldn’t say where mine came from.

We walked by the James Bond car, and I slid my fingers along the side. The skin of my fingertips squeaked. Mom whirled and pulled me to the side.

“If he let’s you touch it,” she whispered, kneeling on the red stone path. “Go for it. But just ask first. That’s for everything, ok sweetie? I’m sorry. People can be weird about their stuff. Even family.”

How could they be family if I didn’t remember them? A blue jay skimmed past us, a foot off the ground, chirping close enough to feel the feathers churn. Mom jumped, then forgot about it.

“Remember what we talked about with Michael.”

Her eyes were serious. This meant they went from pale, glacier blue, to the worried color of river water.

“Yeah.”

Little cacti grew in terra cotta pots on the porch. Mom pushed the doorbell twice, waited, pressed a third time. The door opened like it was on fire. A heavyset woman with saggy cheeks and bags under her eyes stared at us, then smiled. This was Aunt Sabine. Her hair was cut short like a boy's. Plopping underneath a sleeveless green turtleneck were the biggest boobs I'd ever seen. No, *breasts*. Mom said calling them boobs was derogatory to women.

“You've heard of liposuction, right?” Mom had asked on the freeway. I'd shaken my head, figuring it had something to do with lips. “Well, Paul paid for Sabine to have it last year. And she gained it all back. So, don't say anything about how...big she is.” Aunt Sabine's lips looked regular to me though.

“You guys!” She pressed her massive *breasts* against Mom in a hug like a jigsaw puzzle that got left out in the rain. “And *Grady*! How old are you now? Come in you guys. I just took the creminis out. Where's Mike?”

“I'm seven,” I mumbled, but she'd disappeared inside.

We walked through a hallway with polished hardwood floors into a kitchen with high ceilings that narrowed into a skylight. Pale morning shone on gray granite counters. A tall man and a little girl sat at the bar that overlooked the sink and stove.

Uncle Paul was huge. His legs were too long to sit on the barstools; he had to lean on them, butt on the seat but feet on the floor. With a shaved head and paper-white skin that turned pink in an instant, he looked like a chiseled, confident pig in leather loafers and a Tommy Bahama shirt.

My cousin Angela sat next to him, blue-eyed and freckly, dirty blonde ponytail in a yellow scrunchie. She took a bite of a stuffed mushroom and it was like a projectionist spliced in different film. The world got slow. It shone on her and the mushrooms. The girl in the movie of my dreams was my cousin.

I didn't handle the sudden feeling well. I blushed and looked at the skylight, but walked into the kitchen island and hit my head. Angela stuck out her tongue so I could see mushroom pulp.

“There's my late sister.” Uncle Paul's lips pulled back like Mom's and Michael's when he smiled.

“And this is Grady?” He scruffed my hair, popped me lightly in the chest with a heavy knuckle. “Ohh, you're big now, huh? Where's my Mike at?”

Mom shook her head. She'd told me what to say on the ride: Michael went down to Santa Cruz with his friends. When she told this to Uncle Paul he wasn't happy.

“What? I have a present for him...” Uncle Paul frowned. He tossed a stuffed mushroom in his mouth like an M & M. “How’s the Cadillac?”

“Ok,” Mom said. “Overheats sometimes.”

“Mike’s not here?” Sabine was putting fresh mushrooms on a pale platter.

“Michael’s in Santa Cruz this weekend.” Mom said it as if she’d been rehearsing for a week.

Angela ran upstairs while they talked, so I snuck away to a white-carpeted room with leather couches, and a towering big-screen TV. It was off. Mom was telling them Michael and his girlfriend were surfing at Cal’s Cove. Santa Cruz’ learner spot. The girl had the same name as a tree. Birch? They asked. No, Sequoia. They laughed. That’s the old hippy town for you, they said.

I turned the television on. No one noticed. I kneeled, opened the glass doors of the entertainment center, and found Michael’s present: a brand new Super Nintendo. From the decaled storefronts and happy kids Christmas commercials. I felt the slick purple band with the word START on it, and clicked it forward. The screen went black. A chime sounded and Mario started running.

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If sugar was higher than the third ingredient in the Nutrition Facts, Mom wouldn’t buy it. That was for everything, but cereal especially. So, when I opened Uncle Paul’s cabinet on Saturday morning, it was a fantasy: Cocoa Krispies, Lucky Charms, Cap’n Crunch, Fruity Pebbles, Fruit Loops. Other boxes looked like Japanese cereals with cartoon squid on the front. Maybe I was delirious.

Through the dining room window I spied the pool. Sun speckled white on the surface. Michael had told me rattlesnakes crawled down through the chaparral to cool themselves at Uncle Paul’s pool. I expected to fight off one at least, maybe two. If your great-great granddad was an outlaw or a cowboy, rattlers were easy to deal with.

Uncle Paul saw me peeking and chuckled. His mouth smacked, working on bacon that was too chewy for me. I had spat it out into my napkin and hid it under my thigh.

“We’ll go after breakfast, ok? Geez-o, kid, I wouldn’t be so excited. Last time you went under. You remember that, Grady?”

I wanted to tell him no. No, I don’t remember it at all. Honestly, I think all of you made it up. According to Mom, Uncle Paul dove in, shoes and tee shirt and everything, to pluck me from the bottom. Whatever happened, I still couldn’t swim. Mom preferred the drowning story to swimming lessons.

“Kind of,” I mumbled.

“Listen,” he said. He hadn’t heard me. “That Super Nintendo’s for your brother. It’s fine if you play it a little, but it’s his, you know?”

I drank the rest of the milk and rushed to the guest room. I whipped on Michael’s old trunks and felt the mesh underwear scratch my skin.

“He wouldn’t care if I played it,” I said to the empty room. The navy and white stripes didn’t have an opinion. What would Uncle Paul say if I told him where Michael really was?

I sprinted through the kitchen and edged past the sliding glass door onto the patio. I made for the shallow end, but Uncle Paul grabbed me in a bear-hug before I could get any closer. Angela skipped by in a yellow bikini and launched into a cannonball, screaming it in the air.

“You gotta wear these Grady.” He held up floaties. They were pink. Uncle Paul saw my face, and he didn’t like the look of it. “I’m not jumping in after you again. They’re Angie’s old ones and they’re all we’ve got. Put them on.”

“What a loser!” Angela shouted from the pool.

“Angie, shut up!”

“I can hold onto the sides,” I said, sure I could convince him to drop this pink floatie business. He was a guy; he knew I couldn’t put those on.

“No, you can’t. Put them on or you’re going back inside.”

The pink floaties had tan hula girls on them. Angela couldn’t stop giggling, the high-pitched sound echoed off the water. Uncle Paul slid them onto my arms. I’d waited all summer to jump in this pool and no pink floaties were going to stop me.

“Cannonball!” I screamed it too early, ran to the edge, and stumbled off into a cold, plunging slap.

The floaties made it easy to get back up. I barely had to move my arms at all. Angela swam around me in a circle.

“How come you can’t swim?”

I shrugged my head.

“Michael can. He did a backflip last time and it splashed all the way to the window.”

She smiled and whipped her arm. Water flew up my nose and into my eyes. I rushed after her, arms flailing. Even when I tried my hardest to swim it looked like I was drowning. Uncle Paul chuckled from the strappy lounge chair, and lit a cigar. Angela floated on her back and kicked away, singing a song.

“Grady is a gir-rl, in his pink floa-ties! Grady is a gir-rl, in his pink floa-ties!”

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That night I waited for everyone to fall asleep so I could sneak down and play Michael’s Super Nintendo. He wouldn’t care.

I left the blanket messy, figuring if they checked on me it would look like I went to pee. Kneeling on the carpet, I cracked the door open and peeked through, one eye scrunched. The hall was dark with flecks of blue. Picture frames. Light crept under the door across the hall. Angela was still awake.

I shut the door. Waited. Opened the door again—light under her door. It made me antsy so I decided to just sneak past. The carpet was thick and I was always sly.

Most nights, I would sneak around our old cornflower-and-white Victorian, a five-bedroom home split into one-bedroom apartments.

I’d jump over patches of hardwood floor between rugs and dingier rugs, eating Oreos so fast I’d choke. When Mom asked who ate them all the next morning, I’d pretend I had no idea. No, that’s not how it happened. I snuck around in the middle of the night, and one of our roommates—she had long curly black hair, a Marley t-shirt and no pants on—gave me refrigerated Oreos and patted my head. The walls flickered with the light of a TV.

The carpet stuck to my feet. Each step I took sounded like tape being ripped up. The light under the door moved. I froze. Waited. Crept on.

At the end of the hall, there was a framed photograph of Uncle Paul and Michael on a sailboat. My brother held up a silvery fish.

“What are you doing?” a voice whispered.

Angela stood in the hall.

“Going to the bathroom,” I lied.

“Just use mine.”

“No, it’s okay—

“Come on,” she insisted.

Her room was yellow and white. White bedframe, yellow blankets and pillowcases with flowers embroidered in white. Posters of the Spice Girls and Leonardo DiCaprio hung on the walls.

Her bathroom was also yellow and white. Tiles, towels, a painting of a yellow lily with vague leaves. I stood over the toilet for a long time, but no pee came. I flushed it anyways, and ran the water for a minute before I came out.

“Wanna watch TV with me?” she asked, piling pillows in front of her bed.

“Sure.”

A small TV played music videos on top of her pale dresser. A woman banged on a piano, singing on a busy sidewalk. The living room and the big screen and Mario himself must have been asking each other where I was. Why is she being nice to me? I sat next to her on the pillows.

Guys with bleached hair sang and played guitar on an abandoned boardwalk. Seagulls flew up and away.

“Do you like our house?” she asked.

“I guess so. Yeah. I like the pool,” I said. Who wouldn’t like this house?

“But you can’t even swim.”

“I know. I still like it.”

“What do you have down there?” she asked me, eyebrows rising. She pointed at my pajama pants.

“What?”

“I saw you, you didn’t close the door all the way. Do you touch it with your hands?” She looked again. Phlegm bubbled in my throat.

“Y-yes. Yeah, I have to.” Maybe she wanted me to ask how she peed. “Do you stand?”

“No. I sit down. I have to wipe after.”

“Oh.”

We sat. Candy bars broke in half, caramel poured out and swirled. All the people wore black and white, the whole screen was black and white. But not like the Old West. All the pictures of Old West people were reddish-brown.

“Do you want to see mine?” she asked me.

“Ok,” I said. Should I say no? Maybe that would hurt her feelings.

She pulled her pants down before I could change my mind. I looked, wasn't sure what it was. I looked again. Girls had smaller butts in front?

“Now you,” she said.

I pulled my pajama pants down, but the waistband was tight so I held it forward, not sure what else to do. Angela's face wrinkled. She stared, and then looked up at me. I blushed. She giggled.

“That's weird...that's what you hold?”

“Yes,” I said. The waistband slipped, snapped down on my balls. My stomach churned.

A black woman with long ringlets and a white dress sang. Dark water fell behind her. Angela picked up the remote and turned the TV off.

“I'm gonna go to bed.” She stood up and started tossing the pillows on top of her quilt.

“Goodnight,” I said, and rushed out.

The door shut behind me before I got to the guest room. The carpet under her door was dark.

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I played Mario all Sunday morning. A bowl of Lucky Charms and a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. Uncle Paul frowned at me a couple times, but didn't say anything. Mom would be picking me up soon. This *was* a dream. Aunt Sabine's voice interrupted the sound of coins clinking from the TV.

“Steph's always late,” she complained, voice like mayonnaise being scooped. “It's not hard, there's no southbound traffic on Sundays.”

“She's just one of those people. I don't know.” Uncle Paul, on the other hand, sounded like he was in plastic Tupperware.

I focused, jumped to a vine, climbed to a cloud. I ran through coins as big as I was and they clinked again and again, happy to disappear.



“You should pack up, buddy,” Uncle Paul called. I guided the Mario figure on the map, reached the new level and hit A. I could keep playing. Like they said my Mom was always late. But Uncle Paul got up from the couch, crouched down and turned it off.

“Let’s go.”

In the guest room, I wondered what would happen if Mom never came back. What *would* they do if she died in an accident or something? They’d have to take me. Michael would soften the deal. He’d look out for me, and we’d be like two Fresh Princes of Bel-Air. New clothes and pools and TVs and rattlesnakes trying to make the pool *their* pool. I was an Old West boy, I could kill a rattler.

I walked down to the living room and sat with Uncle Paul, who watched tanks move across a desert on the big screen.

“Grady.” Aunt Sabine stood in the kitchen, spreading soft white cheese on little slices of bread with a tiny knife. “Where did Mike and his buddies go this weekend?”

“Can I have some of that cheese?” I asked. She stared at me, waiting. “They’re in Santa Cruz,” I said. “They got a beach house.”

“Wow, where did they get the money for *that*?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged to sell it. I wasn’t the best liar. And I was getting to the end of things Mom had told me to say.

“Did your Mom pay for it?” She took a Diet Coke from the stainless steel refrigerator.

I shrugged again, higher this time. “Can I have some of that cheese, Aunt Sabine?”

“It’s pronounced *Suh*-bean, not Say-Bean.”

She shuffled around the bar and sat, flipping through a magazine, eating slices of bread. The sound of a car engine—not Mom’s Cadillac, it was less coughy—came from out front, got louder, ran for a second, and cut off.

“Finally.” Aunt Sabine popped the Diet Coke.

Mom came in quietly, no sound of a door closing. Her hair was frizzier than usual, face flushed. I saw bandages on her hand and bolted up.

“There’s my sister, always almost on time,” Uncle Paul called out, staring at the TV.

“Sorry, car had some trouble on the freeway. You ready to go sweetie?”

“Yeah. What happened to your hand?”

“Go use the bathroom before we go, ok?”

I ran up the stairs. Aunt Sabine’s voice followed.

“So, Mike’s staying in a beach house? *That’s fancy.*” I didn’t hear Mom’s answer.

The toilet had a built-in plastic cushion. I thought about the Switch Palaces in Super Mario World, levels where, at the very end, Mario would jump onto a giant yellow switch and remake the whole world. Before, wherever there had been invisible square outlines, now would be Power-Up Boxes. The screen would freeze. Happy music played.

I reached for the toilet paper but there was only the little cardboard thing. I stood for a minute, looking for a spare roll, then sat back down. I tilted, reached my hand down there and wiped with my fingers. It wasn’t as messy as I would’ve thought.

The white walls got smeared reddish-brown. One streak. Another. A circle. A triangle. Just enough for a Power-Up Box, a square with an exclamation point in the middle. I pulled my pants up, washed my hands extra-long.

Mom, Uncle Paul and Aunt Sabine stood around the kitchen island. I grabbed my duffel bag.

“Should we bring the Super Nintendo home for Michael?” I asked.

“Nah,” Uncle Paul said. “He’ll grab it next time he comes. Don’t worry bud, you guys will have a blast playing it.”

We said goodbye.

The house looked smaller from the driveway. In the upstairs window, yellow curtains moved. Angela peeked out for a minute, sneaky, couldn’t see her hair or the rest of her body. Just a pale hand. A perfect, blue-eyed face like an Irish doll. I waved. She disappeared behind the yellow curtains.

Instead of the burgundy Cadillac DeVille, a small, grey Toyota truck was parked next to Uncle Paul’s James Bond car. The door creaked when I opened it.

“Where’s the Cadillac?”

“It overheated. I couldn’t get it to start.” She slid her sunglasses on and took off her jacket. The bandages wrapped up her wrist to the elbow.

“The goddamn engine water splashed all over me,” she said, before I could ask.

“Remember to never, ever, *ever* try to put water into an overheated engine, ok? Just wait

it out, even if you're on the side of the 80, running late to pick up your favorite person in the world."

She grinned at me. I didn't say anything.

"So. I dropped you off, ate that last stuffed mushroom and drove back home. It was gross by the way." She winked at me. "Then what'd you do?"

I started from the top. Kept some things to myself. The road curled around tall, stained walls and onto the freeway. I asked her about Michael.

"He looks a lot like Uncle Paul, huh?"

"I guess."

After a few minutes she said, "You know, when Michael was a baby, I don't know maybe two or three, Paul asked if he could take—"

"What did he ask?"

"Nothing sweetie." Mom sped up and merged into the fast lane. "Just if I needed help. I said no."

"Oh."

Mom turned the radio up. A Gottschalks commercial played.

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