Secrets

In the final years before my grandmother died she started telling me stories about her life before she had met my grandfather, all the way back when she lived in southern California and worked as a nurse and very briefly had been married to a pilot named Donald. This was at the end of the ‘50s; she was twenty-two when they’d met, and she had already been married once before. Her first marriage—to her high school sweetheart, when she was 18—had ended in an annulment, and not long later her father, my great grandfather, lost his family’s fortune in a series of bad real estate investments and very suddenly committed suicide. My grandmother found him hanging by his belt in the living room of the Pacific Heights townhouse she’d grown up in, on Christmas Eve, two days after she had taken the bus all the way from San Diego back to San Francisco for Christmas. Less than a year later she married the pilot at a roadside chapel in Reno.

She described Donald as one of those midwestern Navy boys with a Navy haircut and no sexual adventurousness, which made me laugh more than it shocked me. By then I had long grown accustomed to hearing my grandmother talk openly about her sex life. Sylvia prided herself on what she referred to as her promiscuity: she said she had always been told that she fucked like a man, whatever that meant, and once when a well-known editor she knew socially lost his job at a prominent literary magazine—he had, among other things, asked his young and unpaid interns if they would have anal sex with him—Sylvia rolled her eyes and said that this was not such a big deal. This new generation, she lamented, was even more prude than her own.

Sylvia and Donald started fighting within minutes of their marriage, and they continued fighting for the 18 months they remained together. They endured a disastrous honeymoon in Palm Springs and then moved to Seattle, into a house near the airport that Donald had built from

a kit. He was gone all the time, flying back and forth across the country for United, and the sound of the planes low overhead and the way their rumble shook the china in her cabinets made her feel so lonely and depressed that very briefly she thought about taking her life the same way her father had. The only problem was that she was pregnant. As it turned out, she had become pregnant before her shotgun wedding in Reno and had not even known it when she'd signed the marriage license and sipped cheap champagne out of a flute that was sweating. Just eight months into her marriage to Donald, Sylvia gave birth to a healthy baby boy. This meant that my mother had a half-brother she had never spoken to me about.

I was at the end of my twenties when Sylvia told me all this, living in New York City with a man that I would marry a few years later. Every few weekends I took the train out of the city to have lunch with my grandmother, and then we would walk around the farm that she'd lived on for her entire adult life. The day she told me about Donald and the child she'd left in Seattle was no different than any other one of these lunches: we had a salmon salad and a baguette I'd brought with me from Brooklyn and as we walked slowly through the rolling farmland she pointed out to me different types of wildflower and deer skat, the high-pitched call of a song thrush, the flash of a scarlet tanager that had landed atop one of her sculptures.

It took me most of the afternoon to process the news of Sylvia's abandoned son, partly because it had been delivered to me with such nonchalance, but also because I couldn't understand why suddenly, after so long, she had decided to tell me. It was hard to even know whether this was premeditated or if it just tumbled out of her after two glasses of Sancerre. I had countless follow-up questions, of course, and suddenly felt a rapacious need to know everything else that had happened—whether she'd ever heard from this son, whatever had happened to him, and to the pilot—though as was often the case with Sylvia, after she told me what she'd wanted

to, she changed the subject and allowed little room for conversational retread. And as the afternoon progressed, I sensed my own shock and surprise mutating into something less severe. In fact, I began to feel a sort of selfish satisfaction; unlike my two younger brothers (and much to my own mother's annoyance), I had always been obsessed with family stories, and from the time I was a little girl, asked constantly to hear them. Receiving such a bombshell about Sylvia's previous life filled me with an almost perverse glee, as though this new knowledge of something so salacious at the heart of my own family justified my own curiosity and confirmed to me some suspicion that I'd never known I'd had.

But I also felt angry that my mother had never told me this. What skin was it off of her back, I thought, to tell me about something from her own mother's past, especially when she knew that I possessed such an interest in family history? The only explanation I could muster was that she herself must not have known.

Later that afternoon, as Sylvia kissed me goodbye at her front doorstep as the taxi waited in the drive to take me to the train station, I asked her if she had ever told any of what she'd told me to my mother.

Sylvia responded with an incredulous look. "Of course I've told her," she said. "You think I would have kept such a thing from my daughter?"

"But she's never told me any of this," I said.

Sylvia rolled her eyes and sighed. "Your mother," she said. "There's plenty she's never told you."

Sylvia left Seattle in the middle of the night, during a spell when Donald had a few days home to recover from a string of transcontinental flights he'd done with little rest in between.

She kissed the baby in the crib and fled to the airport in a taxi with a single suitcase and didn't leave a note. Using some of the money her older brother in San Francisco had given her as an apology for accidentally gifting her and Donald a lemon on their wedding day, she boarded a direct flight to New York City and set out to do with her life what she had come to realize she'd always wanted to do: be an artist.

She lived in an apartment in Greenwich Village and found work as a typist at a magazine, realizing she needed to do something less physical if she was also going to spend her free time on her feet making sculptures. Before long she became part of the abstract expressionist art scene that was taking the city by storm. Her own sculptures were successful in their own right—for many years, the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn kept one of her pieces on display on their quad, and during the years I lived around the corner from the school I would sometimes walk through their campus just to see the piece—but she was more well-known as a collector of the era's true masters, many of whom were her closest friends. Robert Rauschenberg had painted several portraits of her that she spent her later years reluctantly leasing to the world's great museums for their various big retrospectives, and Jasper Johns and Helen Frankenthaler and Larry Rivers, too, all gifted her more artwork than she knew what to do with and were regular attendees at the extravagant dinner parties she liked to throw at her apartment just north of Washington Square Park.

A few years into her life in New York City, she met a wealthy banker at the ballet from an old New York family and married him. They had identical twins: my aunt Lilah and my mother, Eve.

She was such a terrible mom, my mother always said about her, so artsy-fartsy and off in dreamland, such a fundamental space cadet and so selfishly focused on her own work, that I took

it upon myself to be the most type-A, conservative, strait-laced woman imaginable. It was like a sort of inverse rebellion.

This explained to me, or at least had always helped explain, why my mother had married a Republican she'd met in business school and had spent her own life commuting into the city every day from Connecticut to work for a credit card company, while my two younger brothers and I were left to be raised by a live-in nanny from Barbados. And it explained, too, why neither my brothers nor I had ever pursued traditional corporate careers or had any interest in living lives that in any way resembled that of our parents'. In college, an English professor with whom I briefly had an affair told me once that either you wind up becoming exactly like your parents or you do everything you can to become exactly their opposite. I was young and impressionable and found myself hanging on every word this older, married man told me, but this little bit of his wisdom seemed so obviously simplistic and binary that hearing it shattered whatever narrative I'd created of him. Of course I wouldn't just become exactly like my mother, nor would I become her total antithesis. The challenge to me seemed to be figuring out how to deal with the fact that no matter what, I couldn't change who my mother was. And as this occurred to me, so too did the related realization that my mother had surely always felt the same challenge about Sylvia.

After I learned about my mother's estranged half-brother, I thought about all the moments I could have brought it up with her. She and I had spent most of my adult life in varying stages of conflict; she thought my desires to be a photographer were indulgent and childish, and told me on multiple occasions, often while reciting to me the expiration date on her credit card so that I could see a new therapist, that I was someone who glorified my own

unhappiness. Years before Sylvia and I had our fateful lunch, when I was 22 and living in Los Angeles, a boy that I had met in college and felt certain I would marry broke up with unexpectedly on Valentine's Day and I spiraled dramatically. I quit my job and stopped eating and told my mother over the phone that I was considering hurting myself. It wasn't that I really intended to do anything life-threateningly dangerous, but that I knew she wouldn't come see me if I told her I was just really sad.

She checked herself into Shutters, a fancy hotel in Santa Monica that looked out over the ocean and made a delicious cobb salad. I stayed with her there for ten days, sleeping in her bed and crying and getting a lot of massages. It seemed so hard to understand how this boy who had seemed so fundamentally good, who sent me flowers every year for Bloomsday and had once driven me through the night to see my youngest brother in the hospital after his first manic episode, would suddenly blindside me as he had and then give no reason for his decision to end our relationship beyond that he needed some time to be alone.

"He's a twenty-two-year-old boy," my mother said at dinner with me on her first night in Los Angeles. "What did you expect was going to happen?"

This was not the sage wisdom I wanted to hear in the aftermath of what at that time had been a terrible moment in my life, and I held on to this anger toward her for much longer than I held onto the anger I felt toward the boy whose casual cruelty toward me had caused her to say such a thing. Surely she had not been so callous and glib when my youngest brother had his breakdown or when my other brother's boyfriend had hit him in a drunken fight. And though I felt some queasy recognition that these were maybe not all equivalent crises, my feeling was that she let my brothers off the hook in all the ways she criticized me.

I was reminded of my college ex-boyfriend and the messy aftermath because not long after the lunch with Sylvia, I ran into that very same ex-boyfriend on the Brooklyn Heights promenade. It was a windy afternoon at the end of the fall and I was rushing to meet my current boyfriend for dinner. I had not seen this ex since I had stormed out of a wine bar in Silverlake after he had convinced me to meet him, only to then reveal to me that during the month we had broken up and he had begged me to take him back he had also slept with multiple other women. For many years I had kept in touch with this ex's mother via social media, which I think he probably felt weird about—he was the sort of annoying guy my age who in those days very proudly did not have any social media—but I had never once heard from him. For so many years I wondered what it might be like to run into him, or even if we'd ever see each other again, but when I finally did see him—reading on a bench, wearing the same peacoat I'd bought for him for his birthday almost ten years earlier—I felt happy, a little thrilled even, that I had run into him at a time when I finally felt confident and self-assured and at peace with the shape my life was taking. I was done shooting weddings and had had a few small shows of my own, and I had picked up enough teaching work that I felt, with some certainty, that my own artistic ambitions were not entirely misguided. My own imposter syndrome felt at least temporarily at bay.

When the ex saw me, he moved his neck backwards, got very pale, and then laughed and smiled and stood up to deliver a kiss onto my cheek.

"I have always wondered if we'd ever each other," he said.

"Me too," I said.

The ex and I chatted for a few minutes and neither of made any mention of whether we were dating other people. He said I looked well and that he liked my hair shorter, and I told him that I liked his coat and that I'd liked the novel he had published, which both of us knew was a

lie. After we said goodbye and I started back down the Promenade, I remembered how much I'd suffered after our breakup and felt sorry for an early version of myself and how pathetic I'd been. And I felt glad that unlike Sylvia, my generation did not, for the most part, feel the same pressure to marry the people we dated when we were twenty-two.

Sylvia died during the middle of a global pandemic that for two years changed everything and then was never spoken of again. Sometimes it still feels hard to remember that those years really required everyone to stay inside and wear masks all the time. But then I think about everything that's happened since and I feel a sort of nostalgia for how simple wearing a mask and staying at home was, relatively speaking of course.

My mother had wanted to hold Sylvia's memorial service at the farm, but in the time between Sylvia's death and when it became safe for people to meet again in person, my aunt Lilah had gone into overdrive cleaning out the house and getting it ready for the market. Before I'd even had a chance to pay it a final visit, the property sold. Lilah's willingness to spearhead the sale was easy enough to understand as a distraction from her own crumbling life—just before the pandemic began, she had left, finally, the British architect we all hated—but I still felt a shock and a sadness when my mother called me to tell me that someone had put in an offer well above asking price. As it turned out, the new owner was a moderately well-known DJ and musician whose band was the in-house act for one of the late-night shows. And every time I watched this late-night host interview a celebrity, I thought about how strange it was that one of his band members now lived in the house where my grandmother had taught me to draw and take a photograph.

Because of the sale of the house, the service for Sylvia was instead held at an art gallery in the city where for many years she'd shown her work. Most of her famous art-world friends had died or were still too anxious to gather inside with other people, and those that were still alive and were willing to attend were themselves so old that whatever artistic sensibilities they'd affected had long since faded to time. I registered a disappointment when I arrived at the gallery, having flown back from Bend without my husband or two young children, and realized that these legendary figures of the art world, people with Wikipedia pages and books written about them, now just looked like any other octogenarians.

At the service my mother read a piece of writing by Annie Dillard, about living like weasels, which she said had always reminded her of Sylvia. Then my aunt Lilah read an essay Sylvia had written about teaching yourself to draw with what she always called your wrong hand. Hearing her read it, I remembered the summer weekends at Sylvia's house when she would sit with me and instruct me to sketch flower vases and trees and birdfeeders with my right hand. I was a leftie, and even though when I finished these drawings they always looked nothing at all like I wanted them to, Sylvia always told me they were perfect and put them on the cork board in her studio.

After the service ended, we migrated down tenth avenue to a basement wine bar that my mother had rented out. There she re-introduced me and my brothers to several old friends of Sylvia and to some of their adult children and grandchildren. A few people gave short spur-of-the-moment toasts and before long the bar began to empty out. My parents left in a car service to go back to Connecticut, where they still lived, and my brothers, who were both living in Brooklyn neighborhoods I'd never heard of, snuck out and texted me afterward that they were sorry they'd left without saying goodbye.

I decided to have another glass of wine, if only because I suddenly found myself alone in a bar for the first time in longer than I could remember. As I stood waiting to catch the young bartender's attention, a middle-aged man I had not noticed all night approached me and introduced himself. He had soft features and thinning hair and looked slightly unsure of himself in an ill-fitting boxy suit and a dark tie. He said his name was Don.

"I think technically I am your half-uncle," he said. "My father was the pilot."

"Oh my God," I said, and not knowing what to do, I hugged him with the arm that wasn't holding my white wine. "You're the—you're Don."

"I'm Don," he said again. He grinned and I saw that he possessed the same dimples as my mother and Sylvia.

"My mother already left," I said. "I'm so sorry she's not here to meet you."

He smiled softly and nodded. "Your mother has never had much of an interest in meeting me," he said. "I knew better than to approach her tonight."

In the years since Sylvia had told me about her life in Seattle, I still had never mentioned it to my mother, though I had the sense that my mother knew that I knew, somehow, and equally inchoately I liked knowing that I had this over her.

"I think that to my mother you wound up representing everything she resented about Sylvia," I said. "Or you became an easy source of projection, maybe. She harbored so much resentment toward Sylvia that I think she probably found it easier to pretend Sylvia didn't also—well, you know. I'm not sure. It all sounds incredibly unsatisfying as I say it out loud."

Don nodded his head, as though these explanations made more sense to him than they had to me. "Families are complicated," he said. "But my sources told me that I might have more luck chatting with you."

I knew that by his sources he had to mean Sylvia because nobody else that knew both of us had any contact with him. What I hadn't realized was that Sylvia had gotten back in touch with Don before she had died.

"We saw each other for many years, actually," he said.

"I had no idea," I said.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be able to entirely forgive her for what she did to my father, and I guess also to me, but it all feels better now, I guess, than if I'd never had a chance to meet her at all."

He sat himself in the barstool next to me and ordered a club soda with a splash of cranberry juice. I resisted the urge to make any assumptions about what that drink order revealed or suggested about this the many possible directions his life had taken. He explained that shortly after Sylvia had left, his father had married a stewardess—"a flight attendant, I guess they're called now now," he said—and had stayed in Seattle. Donald and Marybeth, whom Don referred to as his mother, had three more children and retired to Arizona. Donald had died ten years earlier of colon cancer, but Marybeth still played golf most afternoons at the course near her condo in Scottsdale. Her children, Don's siblings, lived all over the country, in St. Louis and Chicago and Charlotte, but they got together each year with their families for Thanksgiving and took a big summer trip as a family every five years. In a few months, he said, they were going to Siena.

"How wonderful," I said, and told him that this was where husband and I had gone on our honeymoon and, blushing, where I'd gotten pregnant with my twin girls.

As he spoke, I noticed that Don was not wearing a wedding ring. Without my asking he said then that he had never married and had never had children.

“No estranged cousins for you,” he said, smiling wearily, and I felt sad for this relative stranger that such a profound part of human life had missed him. But it was not my responsibility to feel sympathetic for him, I knew. In fact, I didn’t know anything about him.

“I’m sorry that our family shut you out,” I said. “It’s such a shame that it took my grandmother’s death for us to finally meet.”

“Better late than never,” he said.

Don and I made plans to have dinner if he ever came through Bend, then we walked out of the bar together and lingered awkwardly on the street like we’d just been on a first date. Standing there, I realized that in our whole conversation I had never asked him where he lived.

“Here,” he said. “Manhattan. I got into Columbia with an essay about being abandoned by my mother, and once I got here I never left.”

I shook my head and smiled. “You were so close for so long,” I said, and we hugged goodbye right there on the street. As I pulled back, I wiped my eyes. I hadn’t even realized that I had started crying.

I was staying with a friend who lived near the Met but after walking Don to the Eighth Avenue subway I found myself walking south through Chelsea and onward into the Village. It was a clear spring night in lower Manhattan, with a breeze and a crescent moon rising in the sky. Packs of fashionable young twentysomethings wandered in and out of bars with that half-drunken energy only available to those of a certain age and on those first warm nights of a New York City spring. I thought about how my life might have been different if I’d not left the east coast for college, and about all the lives we never get to live. And then I thought about Sylvia first arriving in this neighborhood, having abandoned her husband and child and starting out, yet again, on an entirely new life. She was twenty-three years old in an unfamiliar city on an

unfamiliar coast and somewhere within her she possessed the faith that the choice she made had been the right one. What were any of us if not the secrets we held? I continued walking south until I arrived in Washington Square Park, where I stood beneath the arch for a moment and then hailed a taxi off the street. It wound its way east until we reached the FDR Drive and then took off up the highway. I closed my eyes in the back of the cab and thought about Don, who was probably at home by now. I tried to imagine him in his apartment, making himself a cup of tea or watching television or smoking a cigarette on a balcony, but nothing I conjured felt correct. I couldn't picture him, there or anywhere. Out the window I took a photograph of the lights of Queens and sent it to my husband, then closed my eyes once more. There is so much about each other, I thought, that none of us will ever know.