

## Vanity

I sit at my dark wood dressing table. Or *vanity*, as my mother would've called it. I found it at a flea market last Sunday and managed to get it up the back stairs into my apartment. It's angled in the corner of my bedroom so that the light from the large paned window reflects in its mirror's surface. Lately, I've found myself sitting here a lot.

My walls are somewhere between apple green and jade and always give my skin a yellow pallor. I knew this would be the case even as I flipped through swatches at Home Depot. But I wanted something that would cause initial cringing. My hope was that curiosity at the effect of the color would follow the initial distaste and that, eventually, endearment would develop. I've come to believe that instant satisfaction with something, or someone for that matter, almost always breeds eventual dislike. I'm a bit of a pessimist that way. I am twenty-nine years old. A year older than my mother was the last time I saw her. I've taped a picture of her to the mirror. It was taken three months before she left.

I am vain in my determination to remain unbothered with my appearance. I wear linen pants with drawstring waists and shape-masking shirts in muddy hues such as taupe and sand. I air-dry my hair and the most makeup I can be imposed upon to wear is a swath of plum lipstick and maybe a hurried brush of mascara on special occasions. I stare forward and press my fingers into my cheeks, distorting my face momentarily into something, someone, I don't recognize. This calms me. I pull at the skin around my eyes trying to smooth out the little pile of crows feet. For many women my age, being told they look young is the highest form of flattery. For me, all I want is to not resemble the woman standing behind my mother in that photo taped to the mirror in front of me.

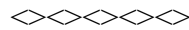
I look at the picture with a critically assessing eye. Carol: my mother, with sandy brown hair, shapely cheekbones, full lips and a gap-toothed smile. Her arms hang like pendulums from her narrow shoulders. Collarbones, like bridges, lead to nowhere. My mother stands beneath a tulip tree, her older sister, Kathryn, just behind her. They both smile, but my aunt eyes the camera uncomfortably, her shoulders rounded but ridged, angled away from my mother. She knows what the camera sees: sisters, one prettier than the other; noticeably so. In the photo, there is something in my Aunt Kathryn's stance that conveys she is questioning her presence; looking for a way out. Despite her pudginess (or perhaps *in spite of it*), she holds herself as though trying not to take up space. I stand between them, my hair and dress and smile all belonging to my mother; my face belonging to Aunt Kathryn. I try to remember who had taken the photo. It must've been Uncle Charlie. I notice the color of our dresses. It must've been the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Carol, my mother, is frozen at twenty-eight. In the photo as well as my memories of her. In the photo, Aunt Kathryn is forty-one. But when I think of her, she's fifty, face etched and grooved, screaming something as I throw my bags into the backseat of a dirty cab and let myself be driven far away.

Kathryn was thirteen when my grandmother left them. Aunt Kathryn told me it had been that way for generations, a family curse of sorts: two sisters born many years apart, the mother leaving as soon as the eldest daughter was old enough to manage on her own. Kathryn used this personal history to try and convince me that my mother's abandonment shouldn't bother me. She told me, "It's to be expected. She was one who couldn't cope with reality." When grandmother had left, Aunt Kathryn was old enough

to take on the roll of mother. Yet she was too young to realize responsibility's addictive qualities; too young to see it was a disease that would eat slowly away at her if she let it, leaving nothing but bitterness behind.

I bite the thinness of my lips to bring a flush of pink to their surface. Creases at the edges of my mouth spread like paint in water and I find myself feeling more forty-one than twenty-nine. I have no sister to be older or younger than. There was simply me and, alone, finding definition proves difficult. Perspective remains skewed. I feel I don't know how to be someone modern, someone who is just me. I feel trapped in the old-fashioned poses of the photo tapped to my mirror. It serves as a reminder of the woman I lost and the woman I seem destined to become.



Despite the pounding of rain, when the phone rang late in the afternoon, I jumped.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Amy?” It was a woman.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Kathryn. Kathryn Shale.”

I felt like a child caught in the act of stealing a cookie. Only, the cookie was disappearing for the past ten years and the child was a twenty-nine year old me being finally found by my aging Aunt Kathryn.

“I gather you're in Washington somewhere? I looked up your area code on the internet.” She sounded old; so much older than I remembered. The thinness of her voice made me think of the clothesline she used to stretch out in the backyard before making me drag out basketfuls of wet underwear to hang. My fingers were always sore

afterwards from pinching so many clothespins. *Four finger-widths apart, Amy Maxine.*  
*You hear me?*

My hands felt clammy, like toes that have been crammed into wet socks on a hot day. I cleared my throat: “Has something happened?” I could only imagine some catastrophe had occurred to suddenly spurn her into finding me. I had changed my last name and not reached out for nearly a decade. She must have gone to some trouble to find me. And the only way she would do that is if something bad had happened. Or was about to. I could feel something knotting inside me.

“It’s your mother.”

“What about her?”

“She’s dead, Amy.”

I swallowed. Three times. I waited for tears to come, but nothing happened. I felt robotic and detached. “When did she pass?”

“About a week ago, I think. Maybe a little longer. It took several days for them to contact me.”

I felt my teeth begin to chatter. I imagined Kathryn’s thick fingers matting my hair in a half-hearted attempt to comfort me. Like she’d done ten years ago. When she was left with me and all I’d had for companionship was her bitterness and I-told-you-so’s.

*Just like Carol to leave you to me. To deal with the things she couldn’t handle;  
the trials she wouldn’t face.*

“Thank you. For finding me. To tell me.”

“I didn’t do this for you, you know. Ten years is a long time, Amy. I did this out of *respect*. Out of *love* for your mother.” I was surprised it had taken almost a full six minutes of talking for Aunt Kathryn’s indignation to make an appearance.

I fought the urge to reply. I pressed my lips together and tried to imagine Kathryn’s face instead. Did she still have the eyes of a bird? Small and dark and hard? Had she swelled and developed jowls? Or had she thinned and creased with age? I remembered the voices, women from my childhood, meaning well as they cooed at me and Kathryn,

*She looks just like you.*

*You have your mother’s eyes.*

Sentencing prophesies disguised as compliments seemed in endless supply after Carol left. Suddenly, I was Kathryn’s daughter and she would never correct false assumptions. It wasn’t polite; unless of course the assumption was insulting. Then, by all means, shove it in their faces. One morning after church a kind older woman approached Aunt Kathryn and congratulated her on her pregnancy. I’d never seen such a withering glare. The older woman apologized profusely for her mistake, but Aunt Kathryn never greeted her after Sunday morning services again. Forgiveness wasn’t her way.

I forced my eyes open and gripped the edge of my small red couch. I forced myself to take several deep breaths. “What happened to her?”

Kathryn sighed. “Carol was living in an apartment building. Somewhere in California. It was something to do with her heart.”

“Who found her? I mean, how did you find out about her?”

“Some man called me. He said he was family.”

“Family? What family?” The phone cord had tangled itself around my ankles and I kicked it off. I despised technology and in revolt insisted on using only my apartment’s landline. It made me feel less vulnerable. It made me think I could never be found, though apparently that assumption was incorrect.

“How would I know that?” Kathryn was terrible at lying. She knew something she didn’t want to say.

“Because you *asked?*”

“I forgot to. Happens to old people, you know.”

“Tell me what he said.”

“He said he was the husband of Carol’s daughter, Susan. That Susan was too worked up about Carol’s passing to come to the phone. That they just thought we should know about her... you know... *accident.*”

“No. That can’t be. It must’ve been someone else. Not mom. Another Carol Janis. They must’ve gotten the wrong number.” My hands felt slick against the plastic of the telephone. “How could she have started another family? Had another daughter?” I fought to keep my rising panic in check. My mind threw itself into the walls of my skull trying to make sense of it all. How does a woman go on a permanent vacation for almost two decades only to reveal through her death the existence of an entirely new family? I thought I was going to be sick.

“Your mother was a complicated woman, Amy. I can’t pretend to understand it. She was not the best at dealing with reality. She was not the best at realizing the

consequences of her actions. Some things were just... more than she could handle.” I sensed there was more that Kathryn wasn’t saying, but I felt suddenly exhausted.

I pulled my knees to my chest and buried my face in my lap.

“Amy? Are you there?”

My mouth felt as though I’d just eaten a spoonful of cinnamon, dry as the Sahara. “I’ll call you later, Aunt Kathryn. Thank you again.” I hung up. The fibers of the couch made my skin itch, but I pushed myself as far in between the cushions as I could go, trying to feel anything other than the ice-cold realizations splintering open inside my head. I pulled the throw blanket over me and didn’t move until the next morning.

I was working on a collection for a big exhibit at the time and hadn’t been out much. I woke in the morning, made some tea, ate an English muffin with honey and peanut butter, and went to work. I always worked better when my mind was still, filled only with itself and nothing else.

It had been three days since Aunt Kathryn’s disturbing call. I took a break a few hours into the day and wandered back to my bedroom. I couldn’t remember the last time I had washed my hair and was staring dejectedly at my reflection in the vanity mirror when the phone rang for the first time that morning. I stood very still as though whoever it was might be able to hear me if I moved.

I continued staring into the mirror. The caller was probably the curator from the gallery wondering what my time frame was. Well, she’d just have to wait. Without thinking, I walked down the hall, through the studio and kitchen and made sure the apartment door was bolted shut. Then I picked up the phone and dialed the numerical

sequence I was surprised I even remembered, hoping Aunt Kathryn hadn't decided to change numbers in the past decade.

Kathryn sounded tired when she answered. I asked her for the number that the husband of my mother's supposed daughter Susan had called from. Kathryn pandered, fumbling around with papers, mumbling about random things.

"Kathryn. Just give me the number, please. I know you have it." I was exhausted from three days of trying to pretend I didn't have a new list of infuriating questions that I would never get to ask my mother, the woman who up and disappeared the summer before my tenth birthday. The woman whose temperament swung between bubbly warmth and weeks of tortured silence. The woman who I'd considered my best friend, my protector. The woman who had made me want to turn off every emotion like a faucet once she disappeared.

Kathryn shuffled some more papers. "There's nothing there you won't regret learning after the fact," she warned. "Some things are better left alone." I thought for a moment I could detect a sliver of genuine concern for my current emotional state. "Carol always had her secrets, Amy; there was a darkness in her. She pulled people into her twisted little web and—"

"Stop. Please." I breathed in deeply through my nose. "Please, Kathryn. I don't want to fight. I just... I need to know who she was. Who she became. Without me." I twisted my fingers in the phone cord, trying to will myself closer to the mother I'd barely known, the plastic covered wires an umbilical chord to the information I needed.

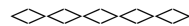
"She didn't care about us, Amy." Kathryn blew her nose noisily. She sounded like a grumpy child who's had their favorite toy taken away. "She left us."



“No. Not *us*, Kathryn. *You*. She left *you*. I *know* who she was to you: the *pretty* one. The one who got all the attention. But wasn’t it enough to have Uncle Charlie? To have the pretty house and the tulip trees and the garden out back? Why did you have to take me too? Why’d you have to run her off?” I sucked in and shut my mouth. I’d done so well. But it felt as though it was all suddenly too much. And I couldn’t hold it in any longer. Silence followed my outburst. My molars pressed into each other, making deeper impressions in the mirroring enamel.

“213-755-8178.” Kathryn’s voice was full of a meaning I couldn’t interpret. She sounded sad and hurt and angry all at once, but I didn’t care.

“Thank you,” I said and before she could say anymore, I hung up the phone, my fingers bloodless and shaking.



I saw a lot of things when I was young, a lot of things that I tricked myself into unseeing. Things that made no sense or made a kind of sense I knew I was too young yet to understand. I sat staring at the telephone number in my hand. I laid down on the red couch and closed my eyes and tried to remember something, anything, that might translate Aunt Kathryn’s cryptic subtext.

I remembered the summer before my mother left. It was an abnormally cool summer. There were weeks and weeks of cloudy, drizzly weather. My mother and I had spent many days inside, reading books and playing hide-n-seek. I remember one day my mother wouldn’t get up. It was a Saturday. It was raining again and Aunt Kathryn had called us down to breakfast. Oatmeal. I was anything but thrilled. I remember complaining about it, stirring it around and around until it got cold and gloppy and Aunt

Kathryn told me I had to eat it and had microwaved it too long so by the time I forced a bite into my mouth, it felt like rubber on my tongue. My mother had finally come down to the table but didn't say anything the whole time. She just sat and stared out the window, her hair limp around her expressionless face, her hands wringing each other raw in her lap.

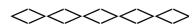
I told her a knock-knock joke to try and make her laugh, but she hadn't replied. She just sat and stared and wrung. Aunt Kathryn looked concerned. Uncle Charlie pretended to read his paper at the end of the table, but he kept glancing over at my mother, taking small sips of coffee and bouncing his left knee up and down. My mother had mumbled something and stood and shuffled slowly from the kitchen. Uncle Charlie got up to follow, but Aunt Kathryn shook her head at him, told him to give her some space.

And hour later a shot rang out. Hard and sharp and metallic. I was doing a puzzle with Aunt Kathryn and I swear the pieces vibrated at the sound, shifting out of their proper places. Aunt Kathryn screamed and so I screamed too and Uncle Charlie upturned his coffee as he sprinted up the stairs. Aunt Kathryn shoved shoes on my feet and jerked me across the street to our neighbor's house, still in our pajamas. I was there for three full days, wearing their daughter's too-small clothes to school and playing monopoly every night after dinner. When Aunt Kathryn came to get me, she said she was sorry but that there had been an accident in the room I shared with my mother and that they had wanted to make it look pretty before I came back.

I remember walking into the room and feeling strange. The walls had been painted pink, the previous light blue only showing through around the edges of the

ceiling. There was a new bedspread too, a pink and yellow quilt with embroidered daisies. Next to the door there was a big stain on the carpet, stiff and dark brown. Aunt Kathryn told me that it was dirt and that they were getting the carpets replaced the next day.

My mother came home a week later in a wheelchair. There were bandages all around her stomach and she winced if she laughed. They told me she'd fallen very hard and had needed some stitches. But that she was fine. That she'd get better. And things were good, we were happy, and Aunt Kathryn started making chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast on Saturdays. But then, the following summer, before my tenth birthday, I came home to find my mother fast asleep on the bed we shared, a brown plastic bottle lying empty beside her. And when they finally woke her up, Aunt Kathryn had her flown away somewhere for a short vacation. And no one ever heard from her again.



I punched in the number hesitantly and held my breath. The phone rang seven times before someone picked up:

“Hello, this is Susan. How may I help you?”

I was taken aback by the calm, automated nature of her voice. “Hi... Susan?”

“Yes?”

“My name is Amy Jones. I mean, Janis. Amy Janis.” It'd been years since I'd used my real name and saying it didn't come naturally.

“Oh god. Oh my god.” She said sounding suddenly human and panicked and very young. There was a scraping sound as something was placed over the mouthpiece. “Joel,

it's *her*... What... I don't know... Umm Amy. Yes... Shit. What should I say?"

trickled through the line. Then she was back: "I'm sorry, Amy?"

"It's ok." I tried to think of something to say. That wouldn't sound stupid or contrived or nose-y or rude. So I told her I was sorry for her loss. I asked her how it happened and if Carol's passing had been slow or quick and painless. As we spoke, things Susan would say, the way she'd give her answers using the inflection of a question, made me think of my mother; made me picture a younger version of her sitting somewhere in California on a barstool in a white kitchen wearing a red dress talking on the phone to me like not a day had passed. Try as I might, I was desperate to know when this other life had come into my mother's and sent mine careening off course. I ached to see Susan's face, to know her age. And so, awkward as it was, I asked how old she was.

"I'm twenty," she said. "Twenty-one in September."

I remembered the weeks before I'd found my mother passed out, how she'd flop back onto the bed, sucking in to button her jeans.

*Stupid dryer must've shrunk 'em.*

"It can't be," I said, not wanting to believe it.

"Well, it is. 1990. That's when I was born."

I remembered Kathryn's snide remarks.

*Carol, your face is looking a bit pudgy. Maybe you should renew that gym membership, huh?*

"1990." My voice cracked and I swallowed. "1990 is the year she left."

"Yes... I—I know. I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry, Amy." Her voice was kind, concerned. It irritated me. I wanted to see her as the imposter who ruined my life, not as

a sister who wanted to lessen my pain. Life doesn't prepare you for such encounters. I don't think anything can. When was I supposed to have learned how to talk to a sister I didn't even know existed when my only example of sibling affection was hysterical yelling matches between Carol and Kathryn? When was I supposed to have learned how to have a family when I felt like I didn't even know the meaning of the word?

"Did you know about me?" I felt twelve again, stumbling through puberty without anyone but my unhappily married aunt to answer my questions. Was I just a segment of my mother's life that she'd wanted to rush quickly through? Run away from and forget?

"I did," Susan said. "She'd talk about you sometimes. Usually after she'd had a couple drinks. Or when it was late and she couldn't sleep." I could hear Susan smile. "She'd come into my room and wake me up and ask if I wanted to know a secret. And she'd tell stories about a girl named Amy who loved climbing trees and painting pictures of birds and fairies."

We were both quiet for several moments. My throat constricted. A rush of warmth, a swell of forgotten love, seeped into numbed corners of my being. Then the ache of missing her encompassed me like a damp wind and the warmth was gone. I shivered.

"I always envied this 'Amy'. Her abilities. Her freedom." Susan said this quietly. "It took me several years to realize that Amy wasn't just a character from a storybook. Mom was out with some friends one night. I must've been thirteen or so at the time. I wanted to paint my nails or something. And I found a box hidden under the bathroom

sink behind a Ziploc of tampons and her make-up case. There were all these letters. Never sent. Addressed to you. And there was a picture..."

I knew which one it was. Mom always kept it in the side pocket of her red pleather purse. I'm six or so, sitting on the front steps of Kathryn and Uncle Charlie's house, my hair in braids, wearing a pink and yellow dress with white bobby socks and Mary-Janes. Mom took the picture. I remember she looked so beautiful that day. It was Easter, I think. Everyone was all dressed up. I remember thinking that mom looked exactly the way I pictured Cinderella looking if she were real. If you look closely at the photo, you can see Kathryn and Uncle Charlie in the background, under the shade of the covered porch behind me. Uncle Charlie is staring straight at the camera, a smile on his face. Kathryn is tucked under his arm, wrists pinned to her sides, like a propped up doll, her eyes focused on Charlie's face.

"Amy? I'm sorry if that upset you." Susan's voice pulled me back.

"No, it's alright." I swallowed. "Thank you. For telling me."

"Of course."

I wanted to say, "You should come visit Seattle sometime," in an attempt to be sisterly. Or friendly at least. I wanted to say, "You could stay with me. I've got a pullout couch. We are sisters, after all." But I didn't. Instead I posed a question I'd been hesitant to ask: "Did you know your father?" I had never known mine. He had passed away when I was too young to remember. Carol had told me he was a brilliant inventor. Kathryn later informed me he had been a high school math teacher before he became too sick to work. His passing had left Carol and I with nothing and so we had moved in with Aunt Kathryn and Uncle Charlie shortly after his death. I felt that if Susan knew her

father, it'd be just one more thing she had that I hadn't. I worried I'd feel jealous or bitter, two emotions I longed to avoid.

“Yes... I didn't really grow *up* with him though. He'd visit every now and then. Come down to LA for business and stay for a long weekend sometimes. He actually moved to Santa Barbara about... seven years ago I guess it's been now. We never really saw him much though. I guess he and mom decided against having much of a relationship. I never called him dad. He was around though. Came to my high school graduation. Mom said they were old friends. Had known each other a long time.”

My head felt like cotton, as though too much information had been stuffed inside and was beginning to push out through my ears and nose and mouth.

“You'll be happy to know that she was doing better,” Susan said. “The last ten years or so were really good. We found her a wonderful therapist and got her on some good medications that seemed to even everything out. So she was happy in the end.” I didn't respond. My view of everything was becoming more and more skewed by the minute. “I thought you'd like to know.”

“Susan, I'm so sorry, but I have to go. I'll call you later though, okay? Let me know if there are any arrangements I can help with. Thank you for everything.”

I hung up and sat staring at the phone until it was dark, trying to convince my subconscious that it had an overactive imagination.

I worried it was too late, but called anyway.

Kathryn answered on the first ring. “Hello?” She sounded like she'd been sleeping.

“It’s Amy. Did I wake you?”

“Just dosed off for a minute watching TV. What do you need?”

I waited for a moment, trying to find the words. “I forgot to ask the other day: how’s Uncle Charlie doing? You didn’t mention him at all.” Kathryn was quiet. I held my breath waiting for her reply.

“So, you figured it out.” Her tone was harsh.

“Figured what out?” I told myself I had to be wrong.

“Charlie and I separated about seven years ago,” she said, her voice quiet.

“Oh... I’m sorry—I didn’t know...”

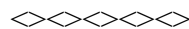
“Now, stop that. What’s done is done. I’ll have none of your pity,” Kathryn snipped.

“I don’t *pity* you. I just wanted to know how he’s been.”

“Well now you know.”

“Well I mean where is he living?”

“Where do you think? Didn’t Susan tell you? Now, I’m quite tired and need to get some sleep. Goodnight.” And with that, she was gone.

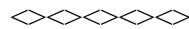


I tried to remember the summer my mother left. I tried to comb back through the moments, seeking out the details that might tell me something. I thought about the games we used to play. Hide-n-seek was all we seemed to do that summer. I had a list of spots to hide, the ones that always took my mother a long time to find. Uncle Charlie’s closet was a good place, beneath the piles of old clothes. I remember finding something one day: a blue satin nightgown. It was short and lacy with thin straps and when I put it on, it



came just past my knees. It was the perfect dress-up gown, even if the chest part poofed out a bit. I remember skipping down the stairs pretending I was a princess. Aunt Kathryn was in the kitchen and asked where I had found it and when I told her, she looked as though I'd kicked her in the stomach. She grabbed my arm then and jerked me out into the backyard where my mother was laying out, getting some sun.

I remember them screaming back and forth. I saw Aunt Kathryn cry for the first time that day. My mother looked guilty and she cried too. Uncle Charlie slept on the couch for a long time after that. And then, a week later, I found my mother asleep on the bed, with the empty plastic bottle, her cheeks and eyelashes damp with tears.



I've been hating the sight of my face in the vanity mirror, tinged yellow-green by the walls. I feel like the Wicked Witch of the West and vow to pick a more complimentary shade next time I muster the energy to paint. I shower and scrub my hair until my scalp feels raw and my fingers are rosy prunes. The forecast says it's 39 degrees out and so I get down on all fours in my towel and rummage under my sink until I find the only blow dryer I own: a pink travel sized one I stole from some Oregon Walmart when I was making my way up the coast back in '98. When my hair is sufficiently dry, I pull on leggings, a flannel shirt, and a pair of black rubber boots. I head to Discovery Park. The damp, saltiness of the air clears my head and makes me thirsty. I close my eyes, wishing I'd thought to bring a water bottle, and listen to the waves slap against the water-smoothed edges of shoreline.

A few minutes later I hear something behind me, the squeak of rubber on wet rock. "Annie! Hey!"

I turn around to see a man in his thirties slipping his way towards me. “Do I know you?” I call to be heard above the waves. I am feeling unusually light. Despite the chilly air, the sun is fueling me, filling me with an unfamiliar sense of hope.

As the man reaches me his expression changes from recognition to embarrassment. “Oh god. I thought you were someone else. My fiancé. Sorry about that!” He scrambles off, making as graceful an exit as one can walking on wet rock.

And I watch him leave, smiling to myself.

Somewhere, there is a woman named Annie who looks like *me*. I touch my cheek and, for the first time, my face feels like my own.