

Family Videos

I.

Strange to see you—fuzzy VHS tape static—hair, strands of black, eyebrows thick as mine—you smile at the camera— “that’s your smile”—I wish I knew this for truth

High white walls, eyes of painted saints, dusty organ in the corner—there is hope humming in the vaulted ceilings as you hold a sleeping newborn gently against your breast

You kiss a wispy child forehead, soft, stand on tiptoe to kiss my father, eyes adoring—your voice is dainty, feminine, music, stirs memory out of fog—bedtime stories, stranger danger, whispered prayers—what was the last thing you said to me?

I am getting ahead of myself.

Preserved in Mylar and iron oxide, inorganic—your body now carbon below—stamped in light and shadow, you walk as in dream across the screen—rest your head on your husband’s shoulder—the scene is normal and holds no hospital beds

You linger in the corner, you do not notice you are in frame—a blessing—a glimpse of you without mask, of true soul—a treasure—you are watching me from across the room—oh forgotten maternal love

You brush my baby hair as Father Vargas intones—with you gone my father took over combing my curls and his hands were rough and painful—I later cut mine off to imitate your shade of ill—I cannot speak

a red velvet dress resting scandalously above your knees in church—a candle in your hand—did you pray for our salvation, the seven holy sacraments we did not complete—they exorcised my brother at his baptism and yet he still holds demons inside him—I took holy communion, now I don’t eat meat

Anoint baby head with oil, murmur promises to God for a child’s soul—I stopped believing in a just God when I learned too young, only eight years old, that lives can sometimes be left unfinished—a scarf begun to be knit, forgotten in a corner—threads loose and hanging off the chair.

II

Mother,

I can no longer tell

If you are truth or

legend

Mother,

My baby molars have fallen

I still have my wisdom teeth

And a space on my neck waiting for you to hold me

Mother

I have your thighs and your lust

For words, a honeycomb spun

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cool washcloth tongue

Mother,
My dark hair curls down the side of my head
I have thick, dark whiskers that I pluck
your Italian skin

Mother,
I wish you could tell me
If this lead in my veins
Is hereditary

Mother,
There was blood crawling down my leg
Cotton underwear red with puberty
There was no one to tell me I was woman.

Mother,
I live in fear of my own cells
That each mitosis will yield malignancy
Survival of the fittest

Mother,
I will not bear any children
I've sacrificed my lineage
So I may end the cycle of pain

Mother,
I hope your last words to me were meaningful
I hope I told you I loved you as I left the room
You must remember, you told me you would be okay

Mother,
Why did no one tell me you were dying?

Mother,
I prayed to you
Kept a picture of you under my pillow like a saint
But decayed carbon cannot hear

Mother,
God must be a greedy capitalist

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If he takes the youngest and most precious
To adorn his gold-brick streets

III.

Winter now—glass opens wide to catch shot of Pennsylvania country woods, white and grey and weeping, quiet—click—memories of childhood and autumn leaves, bug bites, fireflies, deer in the trees, antique cars, grilled peppers, happy family—shutter opens

Your dark hair is a firm contrast to the snow outside, at seven mine is still changing from dusty blonde to brown—my brother is shorter than me, barely able to stand on toddling legs, hair sticking straight up—he grins at the camera, teeth too big for his small mouth, eyes too bright to be his

Gather round the fireplace, Christmas Eve—burning pine, sugar cookies—it took two years for December to once again be a month of joy and not a reminder of your frankincense perfume—I covered my pillow in your scent each night before bed

Could you feel the riot inside you then mother?

Did you feel your cells turn against you, reject the name you gave them, rise up against the ecosystem of a human body?

How long before you would walk into the hospital with a cough and come out with a death sentence?

On the screen, you are smiling a familiar smile, the one I see on my own face in the mirror—my father's hair is solid black, no grey hairs—my brother is young and shining with possibility—I do not yet know, have not known true sorrow

The next Christmas you will be ten days under the earth, dust to dust, carbon to organic carbon, on a snowy day that seemed to hint at the years of melancholy to come—the church bells echoed about the hole in my chest—I tried to read a eulogy and broke to the floor, my father stepped up to hold me and finished the page

The ground was hard and unyielding, your coffin adorned at the corners by golden Michelangelo's Pieta, cherry wood, deep and bright—my teacher held a black umbrella over my head as I threw flowers— a machine lowered you down—I stepped away when my father picked up the shovel

"We love you Mommy."—your epitaph

IV

Visions of you leap across my eyes—snippets of memory that may have happened, or not—I remember singing The National Anthem for great grandmother when I was four, but your face is blurry—we are playing Chopsticks together on the dusty stand up piano in the pantry, our fingertips almost touching, but when I try to get closer you dance away

Every memory of you is seen with a bird's eye lens, as if in movie—I sit as if a viewer on the couch watching myself grasp your hand, third person, insensitive—I can feel you were there watching my

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soccer games but when I turn to look closer I cannot see you—I remember asking you to wear a shower cap because your shaved hair scared me, but your expression is lost

Mother, do you remember when I was four and I saw you adorning grandmother's jewelry after her funeral—I asked if I would inherit your jewelry when you died and I believe you cried, or I cried, or we cried, premonitions of things to come—I remember the bathroom, the off white sink and the crusty mirror, but where are you? ghost now, an image from a dream that I cannot quite remember when I wake up

There is a wiry, fake Christmas tree with plastic ornaments on the windowsill of your antiseptic room, red and gold and blue, there is a Christmas classics album playing in the background that my father still has but never listens to, it's December 11 and I wonder why we are celebrating Christmas so early this year, the fake tree sits and watches, plastic needles pliable and phony, I remember it so vividly and yet when I turn from the window to look at you, all I see is us posing for your last photo in the hospital room, hair cropped short, cheekbones slicing your skin

I am smiling so brightly it brings tears to my eyes.

V

Wide-shot of the same Pennsylvania woods, yellow flowers prickling the lush green forest, deer walk the familiar footpath, babies limping clumsily along—the screened in porch sings of laughter and a child's slurred voice, camera turns to close in on a young dusty blonde girl, almond brown eyes squeezed together, grinning, on the lap of a grandmother whose hair has not yet greyed

I throw eggs into colored cups with clumsy three-year-old fingers, screech loudly in glee as we remove a deep purple egg from a yellow cup—my grandmother kisses my hair fondly, jazz music playing in the background—the whole world may turn but this house will remain the same

My father pulls a whole boiled egg out of his mouth while I clap frantically, laughing—the sound of a child's laughter pulls smiles from everyone in the room, though I do not notice—the music swells

You walk in, stomach just starting to bulge with the beginnings of my brother—you look the same, dark hair, fluting voice, the way you say my name holds motherhood—your voice breaks my heart—my father places an arm around you although you only rise up to his shoulder—how tall and beautiful I thought you were then, not knowing that I would fit your shoes and clothes at age nine, press my face into the mothy, old scent of your sweaters and try and remember your smell

You hold my hand as I clamber down from my chair, and erratically point my small body towards the stairs—I run with all the stumbling of a child just learned to walk, headfirst, feet last, the only thing keeping me standing is my own velocity

I can see your eyes, mother, dark and lovely as you. The smile on your lips is gentle and loving, maternal, unwavering love.

Click—and the image fades to black.

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VI

Were you real?

My first technicolor memory of childhood is of my father walking in the basement door while my brother and I watched Scooby Doo. He sat down next to us and finished the episode, listening to us giggle. (I wonder what he thought then, listening to the last joy of our youth, giving us one more moment). He turned.

“Mommy died this morning.” His eyes were red but I do not remember tears falling.

I remember sadness, anger, I remember a book I had read months before about a dog with cancer who was put down, how I had asked you, weeping, if you can die of cancer and you said yes, I remembered your smile and your arms and your lips and your voice for the last time, I do not remember crying but I remember being unable to breathe.

I remember the cranberry juice my grandparents gave me, cold in my hand, sweet and tart in my mouth that I tried to drink as I choked back sobs. “My mom died.” I stated, begging them to tell me differently. The look in their eyes was haunted and mournful, “yes sweetheart we know”. I remember swearing for the first time then, first at God and then the Devil, not knowing who to blame, and I was not reprimanded.

The walls around me seemed to exhale memories of you that I inhaled sharply through my nose, holding hopefully, fleetingly to the presence you were in my life.

When I breathed out, you left and I have eight years of my life mired in fog, and the first memory of childhood, death.

You are gone.

There is no sentence I can write that will articulate my grief

Perhaps this poem can untangle it for you.

VII

Mother, years later I would find the journal you wrote for me—stories of my childhood, our time together, my formative years—seems like a childhood out of a storybook, tales of a girl who is not me—some of the stories float around my head, clouds condensing into what may be a memory—I am two and we pressed autumn leaves between parchment paper—I finished the entirety of the first-grade reading primer while the class was reading the first story—I am careful and caring, and wildly independent—your flowery handwriting describes the childhood I lost—tampered slightly by the adoring eyes of a mother—what a wonderful story—what a wonderful prologue

The last entry of the book is a month before you died—a slow acceptance of mortality, heartbreaking and hopeful— “maybe you will find a cure for cancer so no other little girl has to go through this”— Mother, if only I believed that were possible

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The last words you wrote to me are a vision you had of us together in the future—years after I grew and was grown—a moment of laughter and clarity, celebration and exaltation.

Mother, let me play that video for you now.

VIII

Your hair is still dark, yet combed with grey hairs, crow's feet dance around your bright eyes, as you turn to me, elegant and joyful, a smile on your red, living lips—your hair is long and full and real, it is soft and I have fond memories of playing with it while it grew back, putting it into braids on “pamper nights” when I'd smear nail polish clumsily on your small hands

You are dressed in blue, a light blue reminiscent of the California sky, and your thick hair runs down your slim shoulders—there is music in the background, *I Can't Help Falling in Love with You*—the grass beneath you is bright green, the colors vibrant—a white tent sits in the background and there are others milling about, but the camera follows only you

Your dainty hands, wrinkled now but still elegant, reach out to someone off screen—the camera pans and focuses on a taller image of you, dark hair, eyes, bright smile, straight teeth—I grasp your hands, small in my own, as you spin me around, my white dress swishing around me, parting the grass—as we spin the camera catches my grey-haired father in the background, tears in his eyes but no sorrow—my brother's cowlick still sticks up, though he has learned to style it

Long ago are the days when you were thin and frail—you hold a mother's weight in your belly and your skin is lush and aged—long ago are weeks of staying with relatives while you lay in grey fetid walls—you tucked me in every night until I was eleven and I never complained when you held my hand in public

How many fights did we have when I was 13? When I dyed my hair blue at a friend's house and pierced my nose in the bathroom of the public library—I towered over you when I reached high school, six inches taller—you drove me to buy my first tampons and held my hand when grandfather died—our house was full of books and literature, French lessons, tutoring, the wallpaper always antique and outdated, flowery and garish but it was yours—I never tried a cigarette, I never shaved off my hair

Hand in hand we dance together across the grass on a warm summer afternoon, my throaty alto laughter mixing with your feminine soprano, a sound I haven't forgotten—my smile is pink and full, a tear traces the curve of my lips, your eyes imitate the shade of mine—you pull me in closer, hold me in your arms, I place my forehead onto yours—there are tears but there is no sorrow—you press in and kiss my cheek—

Click.