

The Other and The One

It's been four months already, but I still can't help but count the last five.

I wonder how long this lasts. I wonder if my grandmother did the same.

When my mother turned twenty, did my grandmother count and think, "The Other would have been twenty-four." When my Aunt Lyn bought a prom dress, did she think, "We could have just let it out a bit and it'd have been perfect for The Other." What if every year on the anniversary of her abortion, she thought of what she might have named it. But I'm counting on the fact that this kind of counting just can't last that long.

If it does, I'll go insane.

I'd love to ask my grandmother about this, but Mary Elizabeth Irving has been dead since I was three. I wonder if she knew what it would have been, The Other. I'm convinced mine would have been a girl, but you don't admit that at the time. It's an 'It,' a 'Zygote Problem', an 'Other,' or for me, 'The One.'

I don't think I'll have anymore.

Abortions weren't legal in Canada until 1969, the summer of love, ironically, but my grandmother had hers somewhere in between 1949 and 53. No one knows for sure.

By 1950, Mary Elizabeth Irving was married to John Haig Hamlin, whom everyone called Jack, and they had two lovely children. Lyn, who would grow up to be a divorced aerobics instructor living in the rich suburbs of Vancouver, and John, who is still together with his high school sweetheart, who is also named John. When they winter in Mexico, the waiters on the beach call them "Two for Juan," and it's a funny family joke.

In the early years of the 1950's, however, there was not much for Mary to joke about. Lyn and John were only fourteen months apart, and John/Jack had just been promoted again. They moved from Winnipeg to Calgary, John/Jack leaving a month before them for business purposes, while Mary Elizabeth Hamlin (nee Irving) stayed behind and made arrangements.

How easy that sounds. Arrangements.

As if she could pick up the phone while getting her hair styled and arrange for a new life, new house, boxes, movers, closing deals and dinners. New nannies, friends, social obligations and dresses. Not to mention new towns with new rules and old rules to remember, such as 'Obey thy husband.'

She didn't know it, but she was a cliché. Textbook. Typical. She was shy, she was beautiful. She married a business man and they both drank. They say she drank to cope, but perhaps he did as well. Perhaps it was just how they did it then, but I gotta tell you, Grandma... It's how we do it now too.

We might have more in common than just a nose.

John/Jack started working for Imperial Oil in Calgary. In Calgary, Mary Elizabeth Hamlin (nee Irving) found new doctors, dentists, schools, bridge partners and hairstylists. In Calgary, a few years later, when my Aunt Debbie was born, John/Jack opened his office door to find a note pinned to it from his secretary that read, 'You have a daughter.'

John/Jack might have kept that note in his wallet for years. He might have put it in a safety deposit box with diamonds and pearls. Or, he might have glanced at it once before tossing it in the near empty waste basket by the door.

I don't know what kind of man my grandfather was. I know that the door to my bedroom at the cottage was right beside the kitchen bar, and when I think of him, I hear the delicate, yet violent clink of ice against the sides of his rock glass. I know that if I got up to go to the bathroom, he'd growl a low threat to get back to bed. I know that he let loose the 'Hamlin Howl' right before he dove into the not-so icy waters of Lake Muskoka. He was old. He was crotchety. He was gruff. The welcome mat outside the cottage's front door stated that 'One Nice Person and One Old Grouch' lived there and I had never read a more truthful epitaph.

He might have been kinder then. He surprised his children, when after his death, they discovered scrapbooks upon scrapbooks of clippings, postcards and photographs saved from a life they didn't think he knew about, let alone cared to remember.

But the note announcing the birth of his daughter was not there. Neither was the taxi receipt that would announce the death of The Other.

In between 1949 and 1953, my Uncle John and Aunt Debbie were born. Sometime in between then, they moved from Winnipeg to Calgary. Somewhere in there, my grandfather, John/Jack gave my grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Hamlin (nee Irving) a handful of bills, called her a cab and sent her on her way.

They were well off then. Better than middle class, but not so much that my mother, the youngest, was spoiled or aware.

"Did we live in the rich part of town?" she asked her sister fifty odd years later.

"Oh yes," her sister replied.

Perhaps the better half of society didn't have to resort to horrible back alleys. Perhaps they were spared the folding tables, obnoxious tonics and doctors who took advantage of girls in trouble. Perhaps because she was respectably married she was saved from the embarrassment and shame that drowned other women not so lucky.

Sixty years later, I studied the other unfortunates sharing the waiting room with me. Women who were there with their guilty-looking boyfriends. High school students who were there with their worried-looking mothers and girls like me who came with a giggling best friend, but no one was there alone. It wasn't allowed. Not only is abortion legal now, but they make sure you have company for at least twenty-four hours afterwards. It's a rule. Another is, 'No Drinking.'

My grandmother did not go with a friend, unless you count the cab driver who waited outside. She might not have even told anyone it had happened. If she was anything like the stories told about her, then I imagine she went alone, came home alone, cried a few angry tears before she slapped her face, fixed a drink and then went out to supervise dinner. The giggling best friend I went with didn't turn out to be much of a friend... I would have preferred angry tears and a drink.

The funny thing about feeling numb is that after a while you need to force yourself to feel it.

I didn't tell my parents I was pregnant until I no longer was. I didn't want them to worry. Hell, I wasn't worried, I wasn't scared!

... I was terrified. But had I admitted that then, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I wouldn't have been able to go to work, I wouldn't have been able to joke about the Dickbaby who lived inside me and fucked my shit up, but joke I did, worry I did not. Not till after.

I wasn't sure I would ever tell my parents, but one day, five days after the (euphemistically worded) procedure, my mother innocently asked the guilty question.

“So, how are you?”

And I couldn't hold it in.

“Ma, I had an abortion on Friday.”

There was a second of eternal silence, then finally,

“Are you ok?”

And I answered that the way I had rehearsed it for the past two months, ten days, thirteen hours and fifty-four minutes.

“Oh ya, totally fine...”

I don't know how she believed me, but she must have for her next words were,

“Oh... Your grandmother had one of those!”

Shocked out of my own suspenseful confession, a million questions drowned my guilt. Unfortunately for this unfortunate, my mother had very little other information to offer. In fact, when she 'came to think of it,' she couldn't be certain that it wasn't a dream she'd had where her mother sat her down and admitted that she could have been the last of five instead of the last of four.

It was only three weeks ago, after my niece's baby shower, doped up on emotions and wine that I was able to sit down with my mom and Aunt Debbie and ask the questions that had been circling

my own answers. I know what it's like, but what was it like for her? The two youngest daughters of Mary had scattered memories that fit together like a dyslexic jigsaw puzzle. Muddled facts, from age and the erosion of moments,

How does one know if a memory is true or if it has been told so many times it becomes remembered? Sometimes I reveal a memory only to hear, "Oh, you couldn't possibly remember that, you were too young." And maybe I don't remember it. Maybe it was a dream, maybe I'm a liar, or perhaps someone repeated it just enough and now it's engrained.

Maybe my mother said more than just,

"Are you ok?"

Before she revealed her mother's secret. Maybe she cried with me, maybe she gave so much loving and warm sympathy over the phone that radio towers melted.

But this is how I remember it, so now this is so.

A quick question followed by someone else's confession.

It was the best thing she could have said, really. One, I felt I did not deserve sympathy, especially from the woman whose granddaughter I had just disposed of, and two, envisioning that pristine portrait of my pearly grandmother, and her illegal abortion took my mind off my own problems.

My mom thought it was late at night when her mother told her. Debbie would like to think that Lyn was there and that they were all at the cottage and there was a storm outside displaying the grief within. They both agreed that it explained her vulnerability, her relationship with my grandfather and her resentment over the years. They both concluded,

"I never realized how much Mum drank."

Listening to them go back and forth was amazing. Watching them open up and sometimes even giggle as the wine and memories poured out was beautiful.

I don't feel particularly close to my extended family. We're more of a 'weddings and funerals' kind of people, but I love them. I hear my mother's voice in her sisters and I'm sure they see my face in hers, and hearing them share their lives opened something up for me. It also made me sad to think that The One I might have shared our family's history with had been shipped off to an incinerator somewhere. 'Disposed of safely and respectfully,' the pamphlet said. It told me exactly how it was going to happen and how they were going to deal with the aftermath. (Afterbirth?)

Feeling completely ignorant, battered and empty afterwards, I realized, they didn't tell me shit about what was going to happen to me, or how I was supposed to even begin trying to deal with that. I was surprised that with all their knowledge and compassion they actually thought that once the problem was gone, there wouldn't be a problem anymore.

Looking back, I know I shouldn't complain. It was I who felt that way. They offered a hand to hold and goddamn, I crushed that palm, but when I left, I said,

“Oh, I'm fine, thanks very much and goodbye!”

Maybe Mary said this too. To her husband, to her sister, Cath, but most importantly, she must have said it to herself.

*It's important when lying to yourself, to repeat it over and over again.
To erode that cliff and rebuild it with the fortitude and strength
that lies within a better story, a happier ending.*

I thought I would hate my grandfather, John/Jack, after hearing of his role in this. Doling out cab money for abortions as if it were an allowance to buy Macintosh Toffee. If he was anything like the stories told about him, then I can imagine him looking up with disdain, drink in one hand, cigar in the other and simply saying,

“Get rid of it.”

He'd open up his wallet and make a few quiet arrangements. How easy that sounds. Arrangements. Surely one of his buddies at the club had gotten some cheeky tart in trouble, and knew someone who knew someone, but that's not being fair to him.

I wish I had known him better so that I wouldn't be able to imagine this rich man's scene so easily. Perhaps I've seen too many movies. Perhaps I just want someone to blame. Either way, I'm guilty and I'm sorry. It's just hard for me to imagine my Grandmother as anything but the victim. That's what I've just portrayed her as. It's what I've been taught she was. A woman who had something done to her, instead of a woman *doing*.

When I suggested the horrific and perverse Norman Rockwell version of The Others demise to my mother and aunt, they were vehement in its denial. It wasn't all John/Jack's idea, they think it was all around agreed that she couldn't have handled it. A move and two young children in the mix!? Oh no, it was for the best. And though my first thoughts were of denial, that my grandfather must have somehow made her do it, I know her blood runs in me, and there's no way I could do something like this because someone told me to. Two young children, a perhaps unhappy marriage and an uprooting to a different province?! Those are just as good reasons for an abortion as mine. Better even.

I also had an abortion because I couldn't have handled it, and although my situation was less strenuous than hers, it was still stressful. Because she was stable, married and therefore 'secure,' I somehow feel that she could have handled it, but I can't be hypocritical when I think of her decisions. Knowing your own limits should be evidence of strength, not a faulty personality trait.

At the time, I wasn't in a relationship, I was not financially stable. My idea of a good Monday night, let alone Saturday, was some friends, a Yo La Tango album, pack of ciggies and a bottle of wine. A baby could not have lived my life, and I would not have changed my life for it. I was just not ready. But I was not weak.

It took an enormous amount of strength to understand that being pro-choice would not make it any easier to actually make 'The Choice.'

Although I thought I was pregnant almost as soon as it had happened, I was in the bathtub two weeks later when I found out for sure. That test, with its little pink cross, was my confirmation.

I bought the test even though I hadn't yet missed a period. I bought it because, although I'm not usually a planner, there are times in your life where you can't ignore certain schedules and arrangements must be made. But the test was just a formality. I already knew I was pregnant. It was more than just a feeling.

It's hard being right sometimes.

I wasn't embarrassed to buy it. It was as easy as buying milk, easier than buying tampons. Tampons suggest something unclean. "Yes, I'll be bleeding for five days, how do you do?" A pregnancy test purchase could just mean that I'm a wonderful friend. I've bought them for friends before; a friend has bought them for me. It's all assumed that it's never for you. The pressure's off.

I had talked about it that day. Not my fear of actually being pregnant, but just what I was going to buy, mentioned as casually as it was purchased.

"Think I'm gonna buy a pregnancy test."

"Ohh! Call me if you need me," Kate said.

But I couldn't pick up the phone.

When Kate eventually called me, I was in the bathtub, naked and crying. (And all of the most beautiful bath bubbles in the world can't take away the patheticness of that sentence.) Perhaps I can make it sound better by admitting that I was not really crying, I had only shed a single tear. Just one. And the tear was not for me. It was for my pregnant sister-in-law, and how my future niece or nephew might have had a cousin. I imagined them making snow forts in snowsuits and the tear fell onto my breast as I sat upright in the tub, holding that little white thermometer that measured my fertility.

I picked up the phone when Kate called and heard her say,

"Hey, how are you!?"

"Pregnant.," I said. "Can I call you back!?"

And I sat back in the tub and felt that single tear evaporate on my swollen and sore right tit.

My bathtub is small. Almost impossible to drown in. Not that I've tried, but it is impossible to become completely submerged. Something is always cold. That day I choose my shoulders.

I didn't even need a bath. I just needed a way to spend five minutes. That's how long it took for that test to tell me what I already knew.

I knew because of my dreams.
Because of the books I was craving.
Not food, dreams and books.

I hungered for these two novels specifically. Spent time on my hands and knees by my bookshelf, searching. Nothing but them would do.

The first was 'The Midwich Cuckoos,' by John Wyndham. A fascinating story of a small town whose female population finds themselves impregnated by an unseen, unseemly force. Once the birthed babes age and make it clear that they will defend themselves at all odds, the townspeople, one in particular, blow them up.

The second book I craved was 'The Handmaids Tale,' by Margaret Atwood. A dystopian story of a future where infertility is as rampant as condoms are now. Women who have proved themselves fertile, even once, are forced to become surrogates to the wealthy and powerful men who control them.

The book I should have craved, but didn't, was 'The Abortion,' by Richard Brautigan. The woman in that story was impregnated by a sensitive and clever librarian who loved her and whom she loved back.

... No wonder I never thought of that one. My impregnating man was a good one, but love never came into it. A single text at 2am led me to his hotel room. I was sneaking my way back to mine by 5.

... I still can't believe I got knocked up in a Holiday Inn..

And my dreams?! I dreamt of swimming. The first dream I had, I wasn't in the water yet, but my friend, Kate, was. She's a loving mother of one beautiful boy and did a giant cannonball into the tumultuous waves. There were whales in the water, and I'm sure they were nice, but all I saw were fins and I was scared for her.

She wasn't. I could hear her laughter and see her somersaults from the shore.

The dreams progressed, almost nightly, and soon I was in the water as well. The whales were always there and sometimes my mother would make an appearance. Being in such deep water with those creatures of the deep, I felt that I should have been terrified. Miraculously, I wasn't. Unfortunately, they turned out to be some of the best dreams I have ever had.

So it wasn't so much the breasts that swelled and grew. It wasn't the nausea that made me dizzy, but never sick. It wasn't even the little pink cross on the twenty dollar home pregnancy test that told me. It was the books and it was the dreams.

It's like feeling that the house you're in is haunted. You pray that you're wrong, but once you see the apparition, once someone has verified it, you can't help but feel happy that you were right.

Now you just have to deal with the ghosts.

It's been almost a year now since I read those books and dreamt those dreams. Dealing with the ghosts has been harder than I thought it would be.

The two months, five days, thirteen hours and fifty four minutes that I was pregnant, I laughed off. I celebrated my twenty-ninth birthday with a self-indulgent, depressing aura of, "It's my birthday and I'm pregnant, so you have to do whatever I say." I couldn't stop making inappropriate jokes. I couldn't stop calling it 'Dickbaby.' Even immediately after the abortion, I still had no tact. As they carried my vacuumed insides away, I asked if it had its father's nose. Asked the nurse through tears and a fake smile if my breasts would always be this firm.

I lost my best friend because of this attitude. She told me less than a month after my abortion that everyone thought it was annoying. (She also called me a drunk slut who deserved what I got, but let's try and focus here.)

She said, 'Annoying.'

... Traffic is annoying.

Rain when you've just straightened your hair, is annoying.

Me, dealing in a purely me way, with one of the hardest pains of my life, shouldn't have been, but she said, 'If only you had cried more, it would have been so much easier for us to deal with.' She actually wanted me to make my abortion easier for her. Funny enough, by trying not to take it too seriously, I actually thought I was. Who likes the always crying friend?! No one. Who wants to walk on eggshells all the time!? Not me! And consolation!? I didn't want it. Didn't deserve it. I couldn't stand being touched, shown sympathy or regard. I wanted to joke about it when I wanted to joke about it, and forget it when I couldn't joke anymore. And when I cried, I cried in private.

I was in private a lot.

Once, on a trip to the mall to return an impulse buy, I looked at that friend, who would in two days drive me to the abortion clinic, and said,

"Don't judge me, ok!? ... I need to do something."

She got the 'Ohhhh!! We're gonna do something fun' look in her eyes and agreed.

I walked up to the counter and stated that I wished to return the ridiculous dress that I would never have worn, should never have even bought and waited for the sales clerk to ask the nosy, yet necessary question,

“Can I ask why you’re returning this?”

And that was the moment that I was waiting for. That singular moment where I allowed myself the unthinkable. I gave myself that one opportunity to admit that part of me wanted this. That I’d be an amazing mom, and could not wait. I can’t stop touching my belly, and by God, I think I’m glowing. With an effervescent smile that I hoped reached my eyes, I said,

“Welllllll, actually, I just found out that I’m PREGNANT!!!! And it’s not going to fit in a couple of months, soooooo..”

The squeals of delight that followed were exactly what I had expected from that gum-chewing, blond thing in pink, and I ate them up. Like a goddamn cherry cheesecake that I had waited my whole life for and would never have again. The Painfully Delicious Last Supper.

What I didn’t expect, was for Heather to play along. She grabbed my hand and looked adoringly at me and said,

“We’ve been trying for soooo long!”

I was flabbergasted. Usually I was the funny one in the friendship. Not that she’s slow, just that I’m quicker. I was amazed at her speed.

“Honey, stop that!”, was my shocked and almost alarmed reply.

It went on for a few minutes. The sales clerk telling us how happy we looked, how wonderful it all was,

“Would you like to look for something more flow-y?!”

And we bantered back,

“Oh, I’m too hungry!!”

“Anything you want, dear!!”

And, my personal favourite, when I said,

“I’m going to miss Martini Mondays!,”

And she, without missing a beat, replied,

“I’m going to miss taking care of you on Martini Mondays!!!”

We left the store with thirty dollars refunded to my chequing account, holding hands, laughing and dancing as if we were an honest to god lesbian couple who had just landed the ‘Turkey Baster Sperm Donor of the Year’ award.

It was about five minutes before she could regain control of her laughter and I could quell my urge to vomit.

“I’m going to hell.”

Was all I could think.

“I’m going to hell, and I’ll never even get to meet my baby because she’ll be in some special kind of heaven for unwanted babies, and I’ll be in the special kind of hell for women who laughed at sending them there.”

*I think the reason it’s been so hard for me to deal with the ghosts left behind,
is because I created them.*

I don’t have much more to say about my Grandmother. Her story has become mine, interwoven with hundreds of thousands of others. It’s not all the same, circumstances are different, age, race and class all vary. But perhaps we’re all counting. Maybe not so much the ages of our Others or our Ones, but the days until we are finally forgiven. Not by them, of course, but by ourselves. I imagine for some it happened right away. I imagine for others it never stops. I think I’ll be somewhere in the middle, but I think I’ll be alright.

It’s just that I’m still counting.

Authors Note

This has been a remarkable therapy for me, but I'm afraid I went too far. Only at my worst times do I actually think I've murdered something. If anyone else told me I did, I would indignantly cry, "CONSERVATIVE! REPUBLICAN! HOW DARE YOU!" But this is my body, and sometimes these are my feelings. I do want to be a mother, and it hurts to think that she'd be two months old by now, if only I was more responsible and able to care for her. According to others, if I was responsible, this would never have happened to begin with. But that's bullshit. The night I conceived, two types of protection were used, and the dirty hotel sex was respectful, consensual and fucking hot. It's just that sometimes you can't control life.

(...Except for where you can.)