

Angels in the Architecture

Gertie was always there for me. They say that you have two families in this world—your family of chance and your family of choice. Gertie was my family.

Being fatherless was pretty common at the crisis shelter where we met, twenty years ago. Being an orphan was Gertie's chance.

The first fictionalized father she told me about was a stock broker. She was nine and I had just turned ten, our beds were divided by the length of the room. That first night we pushed them so close together I could hear her whisper. Her father was tall and had a full head of hair, she told me. Her description of her father would change every time we spoke; he was an athlete, an Olympian, or an army general. I did not learn till later, till much later, that Gertie had no father at all. He existed, I'm sure, in a biological sense, somewhere, but he never physically existed in her world. The stories Gertie would weave were stronger than any strand of DNA. I liked the father she created so much that I wanted him for my own.

So few of us at crisis had fathers, or mothers either, for that matter. Those of us who did, didn't have any worth mentioning—of course, if we had, there wouldn't really need for us to be in crisis in the first place. That's why Gertie's stories were always so fascinating to me. I had no imagination at all. Didn't even think that I could invent, create someone for others to admire. I didn't know that lying was a good way to survive. That was the first thing, and probably the most important thing that I learned from Gertie. Lying was an option. I was a slow learner. It took me seven years and ten foster homes to figure it all out. It is a valuable skill to have and I am ever so grateful.

We were fortunate, Gertie and I, because no one wanted us. We stayed in the same town and attended the same school for the entire time we were system kids. Others didn't fair so well. They were shipped off to distant relatives in distant cities, or reunited with dysfunctional family members, once they finished a parenting course of a Detox program or whatever the court ordered. None, that I recall, ever got their happily-ever-after, fairy-tale ending. But of course, I could be wrong about that; I never paid too much attention to the others, unless of course they were pulping my face with their fists, or stealing something of the little I had—like my toothbrush or my dignity.

I am a repeat offender. I pretty much offended all the judges, social workers, juvenile lawyers and system subordinates in the entire county by the time I turned eighteen. I did my first stint in crisis, when I was eight or nine—the details are quite fuzzy because I never read my files and most of my memories are the stories that I was asked to repeat over and over, so many times, that they had a life of their own, and were in no way attached to me. My college sociology instructor, Ms. Chatem, says that society always blames the mother, and applying that knowledge to my case would be too easy, and some might add, obvious. So using the benefit of my college degree, hindsight, and retrospection, I've applied Ms. Chatem's logic to my situation.

Taking into consideration the economic disadvantages of the oppressed, minimum-wage, worker in a competitive society—factoring in the fact that my mother was female in a patriarchy—and allowing for the addition of her loneliness and isolation, I defined my mother. I discovered enough reasons why she would numb herself with alcohol, drugs, and the fleeting affections of a warm, masculine body and created a story I could live with. The story I created about my mother was almost as good as the one Gertie created about her father, a man whose name never even appeared on her birth certificate. My mother was there to make the mistakes. She endured the pains of childbirth and breast-feeding, and foraging for clothes in Goodwill bins. Sure she was an addict, but then again, so am I. I suppose I can live with that.

My father, on the other hand, was stale, boring, and two-dimensional. He wasn't too bright and didn't have much of a personality. As far as I know, I am his only offspring. This was as much a testament to my mother's desperate need, as well as my father's overall, lack of appeal. I met him only twice. The first time, I met him was at my trial—in the system, they refer to them as protective hearings; kids in the system refer to them as trials. My father sweated the entire time he stood before the judge. He was short, nearsighted, and addressed the judge when asked a question. When referring to me, it was as if he weren't sitting in the room with me. "I am only here because I was summoned. I have no interest in raising her." Before he was dismissed from the courtroom, he asked the judge for a reduction in his child support payments because he needed a new, used truck. At least that is how I have reconstructed the events in my head twenty years later. At eight or ten, as I mentioned before, I wasn't really paying attention. Something I probably inherited from my father, and gratefully, eventually outgrew.

The second time I met my father was at my high school graduation. After being passed around from foster home to foster home like a case of head lice, I actually reached the age of majority. That spring, I finished all the courses required to be free. My father decided that that day was a good time to lay eighteen years of paternal advice on the table. We sat in a booth, sipping sodas at an A&W. Squinting, sweating, his right eye twitching, my father started sharing all the wisdom he recently read in the Reader's Digest he had picked up while taking a shit in his pastor's bathroom. It was during this diatribe that I put to use the second most important life skill that Gertie taught me—the power of silence. Sometimes it's just a good idea to keep your mouth shut. And that was one such time. I nodded my head like a slinky—half nods that kept my glasses on my nose and his form out of focus. It was a very effective form of meditation—one I was able to use in many situations later in life, including college lectures by unprepared professors and Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormon missionaries who showed up uninvited at my door. But that second, and last time, I ever saw the man who shared my biology, I just let him say what he needed to say and then I watched him drive away in his new, used truck.

Gertie graduated on the same day I did. Her foster parent's sat in the front row. They were good people—Stan and Sam. Gertie landed on their front stoop when she was fourteen. The best thing about her "final placement" was the two aging hippies, who referred to themselves as "Option Parents," somehow slipped through the cracks in the system and became the greatest gift that Gertie and I ever received. These weren't typical foster parents. They didn't attend church or have some sort of biblical agenda. They were tolerant. They were

patient. They were abstract, but were structured enough to get past the powers that be, who decide who gets to raise all the unwanted kids in this little corner of the world. Gertie thought it was out of sheer desperation that she was placed with these people, the county having more kids than placement homes at the time. And she may have been right, but as I reminded her on numerous visits, who cares how she got there, just be glad that she did.

I was very blatant with my envy. I reminded Gertrude over our vegetarian meals, in her televisionless home, how lucky she was. I began a campaign to become her foster sister, and had convinced Stan and Sam to take me in as well. The system, of course, didn't buy it however, citing the size of Stan and Sam's house and other foster family placement regulations. It was Gertie's theory that the social workers assigned to our cases were afraid of our feminine power and what kind of force that would create if we lived under the same roof. Whatever the reason, I was never allowed to become an official part of their family but Sam said I would always be recognized as family. And I've remained so for all these years.

The energy that flowed between Gertie and me frightened many people. Sometimes it even frightened us. After eight years of sharing, we were bonded—products of the system, with a short hand in the sign language of suffering, and a sense of humor that enabled us to survive. At the time, we didn't know any of this; we just liked hanging out with someone we didn't have to explain things to. "Rat Bastard," for us was shorthand for a court appointed lawyer who processed our paperwork. We shared a common language, our own idioglossia. Having shared the system experience became a stronger adhesive than sharing a limo to the prom. We lived separate from the other students who went to our high school. We learned early on that the majority of people who surrounded us, just didn't get it. Not that they didn't have their own suffering, some of them did, but if they were anything like us, they didn't feel like explaining things to strangers. Gertie and I were survivors of the same sinking ship. Gertie kept me afloat.

Instructors at the college I attended would comment on my comments regarding the Child Protection System. More often than not they would say I was being unfair, or that there were good people in the system and I should be more balanced in my presentation. My only response to that and to them was: "It is easy to have a balanced opinion when you're on the knoll, watching, but when you are on the front line, in the trenches, picking shrapnel out of your butt cheeks, that point of view, is a little more valid, and the only one I know." One would think that I would have grown up to be a social reformer or something, and the truth of the matter is I haven't, that job belongs to someone with more stamina and sense than me. Take it for what it's worth, given my historical perspective and cloudy vision when I was living that life. That's another thing that Gertie taught me—take ownership. And I do.

Gertie was forced to take ownership of many of her actions after high school graduation. I know everyone is looking for the happy ending to our story. Everyone thinks that Gertie and I probably graduated from some Ivy League University, defying the odds in Oscar worthy performances. But that is not the case. I didn't discover college until I was twenty-five and had been through rehab twice. I stayed afloat longer than Gertie did by clinging onto the life raft of Stan and Sam. Gertie, well, let's just say, she thought she could swim.

The first guy she hooked up with right out of high school was a garbage collector who was older than her by more than twenty years. Ms. Chatham would probably say that Gertie was looking for the father she had never known, but if that were true, the guy would have been a stockbroker who joked while jogging and that was certainly not the case with this guy. When you graduate from the system, they set you up in an apartment, feed you food with a debit card, and cut you loose in six months. And then you are on your own, sink or swim.

Gertie and I got an apartment together, in a town seventy-five miles south of the watchful eyes of Stan and Sam. I managed to stay sober for the first six weeks but since I was eager to please and not accustomed to alcohol, I became a drunk pretty quick. Ms. Chatham would say it was in my blood when I was born, and that may be true, but I was one ugly drunk, who thought combing puke out of my hair, the morning after, was cute. It wasn't, but like I said before, I'm a slow learner. Gertie managed to stay sober but she seemed to be drawn to men who were like me, flighty, unpredictable, and prone to self-destruction. Stan and Sam weren't stupid, but they lived seventy-five miles north of us and had no legal rights or legal influence now that Gertie was launched from the system, but emotionally they were there, one hundred and ten percent. They made phone calls, sent Christmas cards and birthday gifts, and visited whenever they were in town. And we spent many a day at their house the first couple of years of our emancipation.

Stan and Sam got a new option kid named Lakota, who didn't have an ounce of Native blood. She was cute and friendly and a little slow, but Gertie and I liked her. We shared our pizza and pop with her when we happened to crash at Stan and Sam's, and we'd sometimes refer to her as our little sister. It was a short-lived attachment though, two years at the most, before Lakota was shipped off to some uncle in Arizona. Gertie and I figured she'd be a lifer like us and included her like she would be around for a while. We were pissed when they shipped her off.

I tied on a good one after that. Gertie and I were living apart by then. I was in my own efficiency and working as a cashier and Gertie had taken up with the second in her line of losers and had moved in with him after a whirlwind courtship—Chevy sex outside a homeless shelter. They ended up sharing a flophouse with other drifters and dreamers. Big mistake, but who was I to say anything. I got so drunk after I got the phone call about Lakota, I borrowed my boss's car and drove it into a telephone pole. Stan and Sam were pretty pissed about that and lectured me like a child before "shipping me off" to rehab. The first trip didn't stick, and I was kind of sorry I disappointed them. The last thing I wanted to become was a woman like my mother. I would have much preferred to be like Sam, all about forgiveness and hugging and all that crap, but I wasn't there yet. I probably had some unfinished karma or something.

Gertie came to visit me in rehab. She saw me every one of those thirty days. She talked about Jack nonstop, painted a picture of him like she did her imaginary father, used broad strokes of her narrative brush. But I was on to her by then. I knew she was lying. You don't take a twenty-three-year-old, homeless, heroin addict and turn him into a hero. That Horatio Alger bullshit story didn't fly with me, but I let her have her fantasy. It was another one of those times where I remained silent.

About a year after Lakota was shipped south, and I had fallen off the wagon—again, Gertie moved on to Troy. Troy was in a band, according to Gertie, lead singer, the next Cobain. I never met him but I heard from others that he had a temper and was prone to jealousy. I was twenty-four. Gertie would have been the same age in another month. But that month never came. May sound like a cliché, and I sure wish it didn't, but Jack showed up one day at the coffee shop where Gertie worked, and begged for a reunion just like in the movies, only Troy got wind of it and carried on like a mad man. Stan and Same drove down to find me and broke the news. If you asked me to reconstruct the story, I couldn't. Blah, blah, blah, Gertie became a headline and a statistic.

To describe the scene and circumstances would give the power to Troy and I prefer to brush with broad strokes and paint a portrait of the spirited young girl who befriended me at nine. She taught me to tell lies so others wouldn't pulp my face, but when I speak of her, I can only speak the truth. She showed me how to survive. She helped me navigate the system, how things worked, what to expect. Because of her, things didn't seem so scary. She was my Little Orphan Annie and I was her Sandy. She was a beautiful woman who would cry after eating a hamburger, not only because it would disappoint two people she truly loved but also because she actually felt bad for the cow. I laugh when I write this because it's so dorky, yet so truly her.

Gertie Borland was not a statistic. She was a human being, who did her best under the most difficult circumstances. Sometimes she was lucky and sometimes she was most unfortunate. She had dark hair, hazel eyes, and relatively straight teeth. She snorted when she laughed and she laughed often, and often found things to laugh about even though she had been removed from her home at the age of two, placed into the system, where she spent the next sixteen years. She was flawed in the most beautiful ways. She was loyal to me.

Gertie got lucky when she was placed in the home of Stan and Sam and she recognized her good fortune and was grateful. She was kind and too trusting—and the honest to God truth is she had bad taste in men. Maybe the sociologists are right, maybe the psychologist have something to say about the choices she made and how she died, but I prefer to remember what she meant to me: There once was a beautiful maiden, a fortress of power. She was a writer of justice, a poet and a person of the purest of potential. She is the reason I'm sober and I'm still standing. She is my family of choice. She is my angel.

I've been sober for four and a half years. I finished my two-year degree and recently completed a BA at a nearby university. My holidays are spent with Stan and Sam. We mail gifts to Lakota for her birthday and Christmas. We visit Gertie's grave and we grieve. We share our joys and stories along with our sadness. The memories we have woven and the experiences we have shared are stronger than any strand of DNA.