

Louisa Meets Bear

AN EXCERPT

Instructions to Participant

When I was five, my mother, like all the other mothers I knew, slept each night in pink curlers so her dark hair would flip up at the ends. She had carefully plucked brows, a pear-shaped figure that looked skinny when seated and plump when she stood up, a closet full of polished pumps that I played grown-up in, and an unused Vassar degree. Then, my parents, who still lived together and, I imagine, believed they'd always do so, shielded us, my brother and me, from what they must have viewed as the provinces of adult life. We were not told about the Bay of Pigs or the arrest of the Freedom Riders. We were not told about grandparents' cancer diagnoses or our father nearly (but not in the end) being passed over to become a partner in his law firm. We were not told about the desperate attempts of my Aunt Anna, my mother's year-older sister, to win the respect of my scientist uncle, or about her having fallen in love with a sheep farmer in Mendocino County. We were not told-and I would not learn for another thirteen years until, flat on my back with my own calamity, my mother slowly uncoiled the tale-about what happened to my mother that year.

At the time, I still suffered considerable confusion about where my mother stopped and I started and a terrible anxiety about being apart from her (*Off, off, my little kangaroo*, my mother ordered those first days of school when, at the kindergarten door, I clung to her belly), so that the changes that took place in my mother seemed to me bigger than a person-more like weather or a sea shift, akin to lying on a hot, still beach when suddenly there are black clouds overhead and a wind lifting sheets off sand and soon people are packing their bags, glancing every few seconds at the dark sky and the water whipped with whitecaps. In my memory, one day my mother was all hustle and bustle, packing lunches, leaving directions for our after-school babysitter, stuffing books and shoes into a maroon canvas tote she kept under a mahogany table in the front hall. The next day, she was lying on the living room couch, staring out the ceiling-to-floor glass windows, her face bloated and pasty, a bead of blood on her lip from a place where she'd bit the skin. Although she would not have stayed on the couch for more than a few days, she never fully returned. When she got up, it was to quietly drive us to school, to a routine of laundry and carefully prepared dinners and supervising my brother's and my evening baths.

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My mother, I would later learn, had quarreled with my father about going back to school. To him-or so she remembered-it seemed like a lot of disruption for, in the end, very little money. As he put it, they'd have to pay nearly as much for a babysitter as she'd ever make as a social worker.

My mother, however, insisted. Her sister, Anna, worked. My cousin, Louisa, born a few months before me, had not been harmed. My mother's first semester, she took three courses, traveling into Manhattan two days a week for the classes. Your father softened, my mother told me, when I brought home all As. I think he was as proud as if it had been one of you.

In the second semester, my mother signed up for an interviewing class. As part of the course, each student was required to interview a family on public assistance, the visits arranged by one of the school's casework instructors. My mother could have selected a family closer to home, but she chose to go to East Harlem.

I still remember that morning, my mother told me, how I'd wadded my money into one of your change purses, a plastic thing with Donald Duck on the top that I hid inside my raincoat. It was the first time I'd taken the subway north of Bloomingdale's, the first time I realized I was scared of people who were poor.

Coming out of the station at 103rd Street, the vista before her came as a surprise. My mother had not known there were hills in Manhattan. There it was, a gentle decline from 102nd to 103rd, the length and steepness of the bunny slopes on which she and my father had taught my brother and would soon teach me how to ski.

My mother headed down the hill. Everywhere there were signs in Spanish: CARNICERÍA, FARMACIA, PAN RECIÉN HECHO. Christmas lights flashed over doorways and windows. Behind the rolling storefront gates and on tables dragged onto the street were fish dried and salted into leathery flats, bunches of green plantains, plastic shoes the colors of jelly beans.

At 105th Street, my mother turned east. Some of the buildings had boarded-up windows. A carton of milk and a stick of butter sat on a sill.

I remember the number, my mother said-235. A house dweller all of her life, it hadn't occurred to her to ask for the apartment number too. She climbed the steps to look at the names posted by the bank of bells, but most of the labels were too faded to read or missing altogether.

A boy with black hair poking out from under a hooded sweatshirt came through the front door. He sat

on the stoop and took out a pack of gum.

My mother gave him her mother-smile. "Excuse me, do you know where the Hendricks family lives?"

Slowly, the boy unwrapped three pieces of green gum.

"A lady named Jacqueline and her two children?"

A green bubble emerged from the boy's mouth. He pointed to the roof.

My mother rang the top two bells and stepped back to wait. She folded her hands over the belt of her raincoat and smiled again at the boy.

The boy darted his tongue in and out to gather the gum back into his mouth. "Bells don't work."

My mother could feel herself perspiring beneath her dry-cleaned blouse. The casework instructor had told her that the Hendricks family didn't have a phone. "Can you let me in? I'm here to interview Miss Hendricks. I can show you my ID card."

The boy wadded the gum and stuck it on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Door ain't locked."

The hinges made a nasty creak when my mother turned the knob. The light was out in the hallway. Not until she reached the elevator could she see the OUT OF ORDER sign.

Before her fears could gel, she pushed the door marked STAIRS and started to climb. At the third-floor landing, she froze. Had something scampered out from behind the piles of newspapers, Pampers boxes, garbage bags?

On the highest floor there were two apartments, one with the name TORRES taped over the bell. My mother knocked on the other. She turned her ear to listen. Had she knocked loudly enough? How long should she wait before trying again?

She gave the door two more raps.

"Hold on, Jesus, I'm coming." There was a clumping noise and then what sounded like locks and chains being undone. The door swung open and a teenage girl appeared with a baby on her hip. A toddler holding a bag of Fritos trailed behind.

* * *

When, the summer after I turned fourteen, my mother sat my brother and me down to explain that she was moving out of the house, it seemed that her decision was somehow connected to those shadowy memories from when I was five of her laid out like a mummy on the living room couch. We lived in

Dobbs Ferry, a river town fifteen miles north of New York, and my mother was heading three thousand miles west to Berkeley, where she had enrolled in social work school for the fall. They've accepted my credits from nine years ago, she told my brother and me-as though this were an explanation as to why she was moving across the country, across the bay from where her sister had lived until her death five years before in a car accident.

That summer, my brother had ditched the name we'd always called him, Josh, for Jay. Taller and broader than our wiry father, with gray eyes that already hid his emotions, he acted blasé, her decision peripheral to his real life. He'd been the vice president of his junior class. In the fall, he would be captain of the football team. He had two girlfriends: one a popular, freckled cheerleader who kept a horse in the north part of the county; the other a secret girlfriend, a Latina from Mount Vernon with a job modeling for the catalogues.

As for me, under siege by breasts and hips erupting on my large frame at a rate that had left me feeling both exposed and terrified that my destiny was not to be what my best friend Sandra optimistically described as statuesque and curvaceous but rather big and fat, my mother's announcement felt like a bomb had blown the roof off my precarious life. I was mortified, certain everyone would look at me with horror and pity. It took me a week to tell Sandra, who responded by bursting into tears and then saying my name over and over-*Lizzy, Lizzy, Lizzy*-which I interpreted as evidence that what my mother was doing was shameful, a blight that would affect even Sandra, her place in the world threatened by her proximity to me.

My father couldn't or wouldn't talk about it. All he said was, It's your mother's decision. The week after my mother left, he hired a housekeeper. Whereas he had always worked until ten or eleven three or four nights a week, he now managed to make it home most evenings by seven or eight for forcedly animated dinners during which he and my brother would discuss politics-Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, about which my father attempted to take a balanced view; Kent State, which Jay, just two years younger than two of the murdered students, experienced as a personal assault, evidence of a fascist undercurrent-after which he would retreat to his study to resume his work. A year later, with Jay already off to Yale, my father began dating a divorcée: a pleasant, buxom woman who seemed to be endlessly whipping up mushy casseroles out of what I still thought of as my mother's kitchen.

As for my mother, she wrote-or, rather, typed-my brother and me weekly letters, addressed to the two of us together. At first I made a show of not even looking at the letters, on several occasions ripping the paper into confetti when my brother tried to hand it to me. After Jay left for college, my mother took to

sending one or the other of us the carbon copy and, with no witness for my little dramas, I took to carrying my copies around, back and forth from school, the envelopes growing dog-eared in the bottom of my book bag, until, giving in to what I told myself was simply curiosity, I'd lock myself in the bathroom and read two or three at a time.

Through the letters, I learned that my mother was doing her social work internship at a state prison, where she provided substance abuse counseling to first-time offenders. I learned that my mother was living in a small apartment in Oakland. (That's where the Black Panthers are based, my brother would later say, knowingly.) I learned that my mother had taken to the California landscape: that she had driven north to Mendocino County to see the redwoods and the wild, rocky coastline and then south to see the sequoias and Kings Canyon; that she and a friend were planning a five-day backpacking trip into the more isolated parts of the Tuolumne Meadows. I learned that every Sunday she took my cousin, Louisa, out to lunch and that sometimes Louisa would bring Corrine, her babysitter when she was younger and now her best friend, and the two of them would go shopping afterward at the vintage clothing stores on Telegraph Avenue.

In the letters, my mother invited us, my brother and me, to visit her, anytime, well, anytime except April or May or December or January-then, she wrote, she'd be too preoccupied with her exams and papers to really show us around-but neither of us did. The first summer after she left, she came east for a month, staying with my grandmother in Hartford, but I refused to see her, refused to even discuss it with anyone, and although I heard hushed conversations between my father and her over the phone, I surmised that she'd decided I was old enough to decide for myself if I wanted to see her, an awareness that left me even more miserable than had she or my father insisted.

My mother's second visit, prompted by my grandmother's hip operation, came the fall I began college-having managed to graduate from high school a year early by taking senior English and honors calculus in summer school but then, secretly afraid of going too far away, following my brother to Yale. Jay must have received our mother's letter a day before me because I remember hearing from him first about her request to visit the two of us in New Haven. It was a hot Indian summer afternoon, the kind of day when complexions look oily and sallow, half the campus still in sandals, the other half with long-sleeved shirts stuck to their backs, and my brother and I were having coffee together at Naples, sitting in one of the worn wooden booths etched with initials, a fan whirring above, the smells of oregano and pizza dough wafting around us. I must have been silent in a sullen, aggrieved way after Jay told me about our mother's request, because he spoke to me sharply, saying something about how it was time to cut the crap-Christ, Lizzy, can't you give her a break?

The words of my usually unflappable brother fell like a slap, and I remember him reaching for a napkin from the dispenser for me to wipe my eyes and ending up with a wad two inches thick and then, a few weeks later, sitting in the same booth with my mother and brother, the three of us sharing a pizza while Jay talked about his plans for a semester in Grenada and I tried not to stare at my mother, who in the three years since I'd last seen her seemed to have grown younger-thinner, with her hair cut short in a way that elongated her neck, golden against a white peasant blouse-and who, I could tell, was using every ounce of self-control not to stroke my arm or push my hair off my forehead.

After that visit, I took to answering my mother's letters and she took to writing separately to my brother and me, and even though things were not what any of us could call okay, it seemed that we were on the path to rediscovering some kind of connection and even planning for me to visit her the following Christmas. Which I would have done had I not, the fall of my sophomore year, gotten pregnant.

* * *

How and why I got pregnant at eighteen the first time I had sex, the unbeknownst father the husband of my history professor-Benita Frosch, a brilliant German woman with wild hair secured on top of her head by lacquered chopsticks, whom I worked for as a research assistant and who had pushed her timid husband, Hans, on me so she could pursue what was, I learned later from my brother, a scandalous affair with a female graduate student-has always seemed to me less significant than what ensued. Dumbly, I let two months go by, missing two periods, chalking up the nausea to nerves, finally taking a pregnancy test, which came back falsely negative, then waiting another week for a blood test, the results arriving in my eleventh week.

My roommate, Miriam, a modern dancer with a pointy nose and an obsessive crossword puzzle habit, came with me to the appointment at Planned Parenthood.

You're cutting it close, hon, the abortion counselor told me. Another week and we wouldn't be able to do a D&C.

Always efficient, Miriam took notes on everything the counselor said. *A long tube connected to a vacuum aspirator is inserted into the cervix. You'll hear a sucking sound for about five minutes. Imagine it as a mini-vacuum cleaning out the tissue attached to the walls of your uterus.*

I came back to my dorm room with pamphlets and mimeographed instructions. The *procedure*, as it was called in the pamphlet, was scheduled for two days later. *Don't eat anything that morning. If the cramping and bleeding continue for longer than three days, immediately contact your doctor. Bring payment in full in CASH.*

Miriam and her premed boyfriend disappeared into Miriam's room. I flopped down on the couch in the suite living room, the pamphlets perched on my stomach, my arm sweeping the floor for distraction. Then, in one of those coincidences that seem too fantastical to be true but that determine more of our lives than we would like to think (years later, when the evolutionary biologists would rewrite Darwin, moving randomness from background to fore, I knew from my own minuscule experience in the stream of evolution that they were right to give chance marquee billing), I picked up one of Miriam's boyfriend's books, dropped in a heap on the floor.

Perhaps it was not, in fact, as creepily uncanny as it seemed. Perhaps I had registered subliminally that it was a human biology text-not an accident when my hand landed on that book rather than the paperback of Machiavelli's *The Prince* or the organic chemistry text between which it was sandwiched.

Flipping pages, I reached the chapter on embryonic development. Seven color pictures showed the fetus at various stages. In the eleven-week photo, the fetus rested on its back in an orb that looked like the sun. Little hands played with a nose. A black eye stared out from the page. At three months, I read, the fetus is the size of a mouse.

I sat up. I felt queasy. They were going to vacuum something the size of a mouse out of my belly and into a bottle labeled medical waste?

The bed creaked in Miriam's room. Miriam, I feebly called. Can you come here? Please come.

* * *

When I started to bleed in my fifth month, the doctor I'd been seeing in New Haven ordered bed rest. I really should insist on a bedpan, he told me, but I'll let you get up to go to the bathroom. Otherwise, flat on your back. I withdrew from the spring semester, and the deans, encouraged by Benita Frosch, in whom I never confided the paternity of my baby but who must have suspected, granted me a leave of absence.

Miriam packed my things, and my brother and his roommate Tom, a theater kid from New York whom I'd had a bit of a crush on but realizing that he knew everything about my situation could now hardly look in the eye, loaded my things into my brother's car. Good luck, Lizzy, Tom said after my brother had settled me into the back seat with a pillow. He gave me a little salute and then a deep bow.

Jay and my father carried my boxes to my old room. Although we had talked about what I might do when the baby came-my father had arranged for a possible adoption, the cousins of one of his partners, a nice childless couple from the city, the husband a Yale graduate too, as though that somehow linked

us in one big family, just an option, my father said, careful not to push me, you'll have up until the delivery to decide-this newest flat-on-my-back twist had come too quickly for me to think further than getting home.

We ate dinner, the three of us, in my room: me lying down with my dishes on a bed tray, my brother and father on chairs with their plates on their laps.

What the hell are you going to do on Monday? Jay asked. Who's going to bring you food while Dad's at work?

I looked helplessly at my father. I imagined him leaving a bowl of food by my bed.

My father cleared his throat. Afterward I thought maybe his eyes were damp. Your mother, he said. Your mother's coming home.

* * *

Although my mother had known that Jackie was eighteen and black, one of the few black families in the largely Puerto Rican neighborhood, my mother was, she would tell me (I was by then in my eighth month), taken aback at the sight of the girl-tall, with big arms and broad hips, a burnished Rubens, all volume with beauty and delicacy delegated to her almond eyes and bow lips. *She's so young*, my mother remembered having thought. And yet, the girl with her lushness, her full body and taut skin, seemed to my mother more fecund, a closer replica of Nature's Madonna than herself.

My mother extended her hand. Should she introduce herself by her last name or her first? Uncertain, she used both. "You must be Jackie," she added.

"Yeah."

"And this must be Brandon."

"That's the little bugger."

My mother leaned down to coo at the baby. Yellow crust rimmed his nose. The baby looked away, uninterested in my mother's feeble sounds.

Jackie led my mother in and motioned her toward a brown plaid couch with tufts of foam sticking out through the fabric. My mother caught herself about to dust off the spot where she would sit.

Jackie lowered herself into a metal folding chair facing the couch. From the back of the apartment, my mother could hear music like she'd once heard in a nightclub on a trip with my father to a hotel in San Juan. The toddler carried her bag of Fritos over to my mother and began dropping the chips one by one

into my mother's canvas tote.

"Denise, you stop that or you'll get a smack," Jackie said. The child kept on with her game. My mother reached down and lifted the tote onto the couch. She touched the little girl's arm, and then fished around in the bag until she found her keys with the fuzzy animal ring. (You'd given it to me for my birthday, my mother told me. That was when you still thought that if *you* liked something, I would too.)

The child picked up the key ring and wandered over to show it to her mother. Brandon had started to cry, and Jackie put a bottle in his mouth. Denise yanked on her mother's pant leg.

Jackie jerked her leg back. "Girl, you been getting on my nerves all morning."

Now Denise was crying. Feeling somehow responsible-really, she thought, the only adult in the room-my mother leaned forward and beckoned to the little girl. "Come, you can sit with me. Mommy's busy with Brandon."

Denise next to her, my mother took out a legal pad from the tote. Folded into the pad was a sheet titled "Family Relations: Interview Assignment." My mother glanced over the list of questions she'd so carefully reviewed the night before: *Who do you consider to be the members of your family? With whom do you discuss your problems? Who do you turn to when there's an emergency?*

Brandon had stopped sucking. His head rested now on Jackie's shoulder. She reached into her pocket for a cigarette pack.

"Before we begin," my mother asked, "do you have any questions?"

Jackie lit a cigarette and inhaled. For a second she closed her eyes and an expression of calm passed over her face. "Yeah, who's gonna see what I say?"

"No one. I mean, no one outside my class."

"My caseworker ain't going to see this?"

"No. This is for my educational benefit only."

"You mean like homework."

"Yes. It's one of my assignments."

Jackie leaned back in the folding chair so that her shoulder blades rested against the metal back and her legs, crossed at the ankles, stretched in front. Brandon lay belly-down on top of her. "Just the Welfare thinks that my gram watches the babies. She does a lot, but like today and some mornings she cleans this lady's house."

From the casework report, my mother had learned that Jackie, her two sisters, and her brother were raised by their mother's mother, Faith, after their own mother had disappeared. Now this gram at fifty-two had a third generation of kids in her home. "So, who watches the children?" my mother asked.

"I do, mostly. Or when I was going to school, I'd leave them with the girl downstairs."

My mother wondered if she should ask more, but child care was not on her list of questions and it seemed like prying to inquire further. "Well, maybe we should start," she said. Clearing her throat, she began reading aloud the lines typed under the heading "Instructions to Participant": "These are all questions about family relations-how you and your family work as a unit. Answer them as honestly and completely as you can. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers."

Jackie rubbed Brandon's back with her free hand. Denise sucked on the fuzzy key-ring ball. "What's *relations* mean?" Jackie asked.

My mother struggled to find a way to explain. "You know," she said, "it's like relationship, how people get along."

Jackie looked bored already. "Sounds okay. I'm just gonna put the baby down first." Jackie got up with Brandon and walked toward the back of the apartment. The music stopped and then my mother heard the familiar rattling of crib rails lifting.

When Jackie returned, she took the cigarettes out from her shirt pocket, turned the pack over, and tapped another one out.

"All righty," my mother said, embarrassed at how unnatural her voice seemed. (Something about the way that *all righty* came out, my mother told me, sounded like the Mr. Rogers imitations your brother used to do. Do you remember? He'd tease you, going on and on in that singsong voice, until you were so overexcited you'd start to cry or pee in your pants.) "Could you list for me the members of your family?"

Jackie took a drag on her cigarette and blew out three silvery rings. "Well," she said, "there's my gram and my two sisters, but they're both out of the house. And then my brother, but we're not sure where he's at."

"Anyone else who lives here?"

"No. Sometimes my uncle sleeps over, but that's not too much. And my kids."

Jackie looked at Denise. Her face softened. *She really is awfully pretty*, my mother thought about

Jackie. As though sensing the shift in her mother's mood, Denise went over to her. She rested her head on her mother's knee. Jackie leaned down to pick up the child. She cuddled Denise in her lap.

When my mother finished writing down what Jackie had said, she moved on to the second question. "Who do you turn to when there's an emergency?"

"An emergency," Jackie repeated.

My mother could hear Brandon starting to cry. For a moment she thought about telling Jackie that probably he needed a clean diaper after having drunk that bottle, but then she realized that Jackie would, of course, know this.

"Hold on." Jackie put Denise down on the chair and walked to the back.

My mother looked over at Denise. She was reaching a hand toward Jackie's still-burning cigarette.

My mother jumped up. "No, no. Cigarettes aren't for children." She put out the cigarette and carried the child and the soggy key ring that had slipped out of her mouth over to the couch.

The crying stopped and Jackie returned.

"I put out your cigarette. I was afraid Denise would burn herself."

"Thanks." Jackie patted her shirt pocket and pulled out the cigarette pack. She turned it upside down, but nothing came out. "Shit." She covered her lips. "Pardon my filthy mouth." She sniffed, wiggled her nose, and looked around the room as though willing more cigarettes to appear.

"You mind if I run to the corner and get a pack?"

My mother wondered if it was against the rules for her to be in the apartment without Jackie, but it was hard to think of what or whose rules and it seemed silly to say no. "Sure," my mother said. "No problem."

Jackie took a jacket from a nail near the door. When Denise spied her mother with her hand on the bolt, she wailed. "You stay with the nice lady," Jackie said. "I'll be right back."

Denise's wails turned to shrieks.

"Jesus, this kid's driving me nuts." She picked up the screaming child. "Okay, okay, I'll take you."

Jackie turned to my mother. "Brandon's out cold, but if he starts to cry, his bottle's on the dresser next to the bed."

My mother nodded.

Jackie zipped the jacket so Denise was swaddled inside. "I won't be but five minutes."

* * *

In fact, my mother's coming home was not the way my father's look that night suggested. She moved into the house the way a boarder might, taking the guest room, bringing only a few things with her: a trunk of clothing, two boxes of books, her typewriter. (She had, by then, decided to get her PhD in social work and was at work on the dissertation—a comparative study of the relationship between the availability of an array of social services and infant mortality in thirty-six countries.) She and my father talked to each other politely. Could he move the television into my room? she asked. Perhaps she might like to look in the attic for some rain boots? he wondered.

By the end of the first week, my mother and I fell into a routine. I'd wake to the sound of her typing or her chair making a squeaking sound against the floor, as she got up from the card table she'd set up as a desk, in search of a book. She'd break to bring me cereal and juice. At two, she'd stop writing and we'd have lunch together—me in bed, she seated in the armchair my father had carried into my room. After lunch, my mother would wash the dishes, change the sheets on my bed while I took a shower, bathe herself, and then, in the dove afternoon light, we'd talk.

While we talked, my mother knit—first a vest for my brother, then a scarf for me, and, in the last month, a pair of yellow booties. I'd never seen my mother knit, hadn't even known she knew how. My mother smiled when I told her this. How could you, she said, I haven't knit since I was pregnant with you. I knit matching hats for you and Louisa. Of course, I didn't know that my sister and I were both having girls, we didn't do amniocenteses in those days, so I made them both yellow like these. After that, with two young children, there was hardly time to brush my teeth. And then, well, I lost interest.

It was my mother who always determined how long these conversations would last, sometimes half an hour, sometimes two or three, the house growing dim around us. There seemed to be no pattern to when my mother would signal the end—stretching her thin arms over her head, arching her back, rolling her neck, and then saying, depending upon the hour, I better get to the store before it's too late, or, My goodness, your father will be home any minute, time to start dinner—and I'd be left, still flat on my back, to think over the things my mother slowly told me.

* * *

We circled backward and forward—backward to my mother's childhood in Hartford, she and her sister left to entertain each other while their mother retreated with her migraines to a room with the dusty velvet curtains drawn closed. Their father had worked as an insurance actuary, thirty-nine years with

the same company and *never* a sick day, a point, my mother said, he often repeated, as though the mere fact were a virtue. He'd insisted upon no talk during meals due to his belief that silence aided digestion.

We circled forward to my mother's Berkeley life and her new friends, each quirkier than the next, in whom my mother seemed to take pride, and then back to the numb, really desperate, my mother said, state she'd been in when she'd left my father five years before.

My mother looked up from her knitting. It was May and the sweet, tickly smell of lawns cut for the first time of the season wafted in through the open window. I was in my seventh month, my legs swollen like zucchinis left too long on the vine.

Of course, my mother said, I didn't realize then that I was depressed. *Clinically* depressed, as my friend Harold would say. I just thought I was losing my mind. I felt like I was someone else, like I was floating above looking down at this other woman scooping food onto plates. It got so bad, I'd wait for you and your brother and father to leave in the mornings so I could crawl under the desk in your father's study, all balled up with my arms hugging my knees, trying to squeeze back into my body.

In my eighth month, I began bleeding again and the doctor banned even bathroom trips. I wept when he told me that I would have to give up this last thread of autonomy: the toilet and shower to be replaced by bedpans and sponge baths. Driving home with my mother, me lying on the back seat, still sniffing, I complained that I felt like a junked refrigerator.

A beached whale, my mother countered from the front seat.

A paralyzed elephant.

Mount St. Helens, she said.

That eight-hundred-pound man who could only leave his apartment lifted out the window by a crane.

Although my mother managed the bedpans with no more fuss than she did my trays of dishes, although she knew not to talk as she sponged the lower half of my body, beyond my mountainous belly and out of my sight, it felt, nonetheless, like a terrible intrusion. Perhaps in recompense, I began asking her bolder questions, which she, perhaps also in recompense, seemed to feel obliged to answer.

Do you have a lover? I asked on a hot June afternoon.

My mother reached for one of the tall glasses of herbal tea. Ice clinked as pink splotches of embarrassment rose above the neckline of the old football T-shirt of Jay's she was wearing. Not now, she said. But I did.

Before you left Dad?

No, after.

And then, on another afternoon, Did you love Dad when you got married?

Of course, she said. Of course I did. My mother paused as though trying to remember. She ran her fingers through her hair. Her lids fluttered. Your father was terribly handsome and bright and filled with promise. Like a young Jack Kennedy.

When did you stop loving him?

She squinted as though peering through time. I don't think I stopped loving *him*, she said. I just stopped loving.

My cheeks burned with nearly unbearable suspicion: My mother hadn't come home to take care of me. She'd come home to make me, roped to this bed, listen to her explanations for why she'd left. My temples throbbed. I closed my eyes, the thought dissolving, like a drop of colored oil in a pool of water, into the pounding in my head.

When? I asked the next day. When did you stop loving?

My mother furrowed her brow. Her hands rested on the yellow booties, done except for the heels. Your father thought it was when my sister died. But the truth is, it was long before.

When? I demanded.

You were five, she said. In kindergarten. Your brother was eight.

* * *

After Jackie left, my mother sat perfectly still as though there were a store camera pointed at her, watching what she would do. *Don't move*, my mother thought, and then, *That's ridiculous*, but still she felt odd as she got up. Just stretching my legs, she said to herself as she headed toward the back of the apartment.

It was a railroad flat with two small bedrooms behind the front room where my mother had been, and then a kitchen and bathroom at the rear. The first bedroom was small, with a linoleum floor and a window that faced brick. There were two single beds, a dresser, and a curtain rod mounted between the side of the dresser and the wall for hanging clothes. From the items that hung there-plaid shirtwaists, two white uniforms like nurses' aides or cafeteria workers wear, a nightgown, some cardigan sweaters-it seemed like the clothing of an older woman, probably Jackie's grandmother, Faith. In the back

bedroom there was a crib where Brandon lay and a mattress where, my mother supposed, either Jackie or Denise must sleep.

I was so taken up in those days, my mother said, with the struggles with your father about his belief in a natural division of labor between men and women, I think I was looking for clues to bring home about how they lived together, Faith and Jackie. Who was in control? Who decided who'd bathe the children, or did it just happen: the children cried, wet their pants, got dirty, and someone then scrubbed or did not scrub a tub before drawing water?

In the kitchen, my mother opened the refrigerator: milk, cookies, peanut butter, a plate covered with wax paper with what looked like chicken underneath. In the bathroom, she opened the cabinet, examining the vials and reading the prescription labels. She cracked the smoked window and peered into the alley of trash cans, the acrid odor floating up to the top floor. She closed the window and went back to the room where Brandon lay in the crib.

My mother felt dirty, as if she needed to scrub grime from behind her ears and soot from the bony protrusions of her ankles. She could hear her mother instructing her the first time she'd spent the night at a girlfriend's house, Don't touch anything, don't open any of the people's drawers, don't snoop, as she leaned down to look at Brandon, to inspect him too.

The baby lay facedown. He was perfectly quiet. *He's small*, my mother thought, *really very small for three months*. Hardly bigger than her own children had been as newborns.

My mother put her hands on Brandon's sides to pick him up. Lifting him, it was as though he had no muscle tonus, as though only the part of him that touched her fingers yielded, the rest heavy and limp.

Not until my mother had Brandon turned toward her and fully in her arms, his head resting on her breastbone, did she realize she could not feel or hear his breath. Her heart pounded, hard, hard, as she jerked Brandon away from her body until at arms length she could see his open motionless eyes. *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God*, she heard herself saying, and then she pulled Brandon back to her chest and began banging on his little birdcage of a back, small sharp thumps with the flat of her hand.

There was still no breath.

Holding the baby tight to her chest, my mother ran to the front room. She pressed her nose to the window, *Please, please, Jackie, be there in the street, on the stoop, footsteps on the stairs*, but there was no Jackie and then my mother remembered that there was no phone. She dropped to her knees, laying the baby on the floor, and tried to breathe into his mouth, her thumb pumping the spot she best guessed

to be near his tiny heart in vague memory of a lifesaving course she had taken years before when she was pregnant with my brother.

My mother could not say how long it was that she knelt over Brandon, her mouth over his, whether it was two minutes or five, only that her breath floated up over her cheeks, bathing her own face, the baby refusing to drink in her air, and that at one point she jumped up, grabbed her raincoat from the couch, wrapped it around and around Brandon, and ran down the stairs.

She screamed when she reached the street, "Help! Help!" but, whereas before it had seemed like there were people everywhere, now there was only a little girl bouncing a ball.

"Telephone, I need a telephone, an ambulance," she yelled at the girl, but the girl looked at her uncomprehendingly, picked up her ball, and ran.

My mother clutched Brandon to her and ran too. Wrapped in the raincoat, he felt more like a sack of flour or a bag of gardening soil than a baby. She ran to Lexington, short mincing steps in her pumps and narrow skirt, panting from the pressure in her lungs and the weight of the baby in her arms, a small sound like a whimper or a yelp coming from her throat.

At the corner, she paused to look, and then ran left toward a storefront.

Jackie will be there, my mother thought, Jackie will be there hanging out in the store, smoking cigarettes and joking with the other young people. She will take Brandon, unwrap him from the raincoat, and once in his mother's arms, he will breathe.

But there was no Jackie inside the store, only the smell of rolls warming in golden lines on bakers' trays laid out under a picture of Jesus, cases of cakes decorated with pink and yellow and blue sugar roses, a small crowd of people waiting for cups of coffee mixed with steamed milk and rolls stuffed with melted orange cheese.

"An ambulance," my mother cried. "Please, please call an ambulance."

The woman behind the counter wiped her hands on her hips, shook her head, and stared at my mother.

"Ambulance, I need an ambulance," my mother half panted, half screamed.

The woman lifted her hands so her brown palms were revealed and her fingers pointed at my mother.

"No speakes English," she said. She rubbed her hands together, and little torrents of flour fell through the air. "No speakes English," she repeated, shaking her head slowly from side to side and then tapping her lips with her floury fingers.

My mother leaned against the counter to steady herself. A man in worker's garb pushed toward her. "Miss, miss," he said, "what's the problem?"

"The baby. He's not breathing." My mother stared at the clock on the wall. Everything felt slowed down and speeded up all at once. Mostly what she was aware of was that too much time was passing. She started to cry. Brandon no longer felt human. She had the fleeting thought of setting him down amid the napkin dispensers and the boxes of coffee stirrers and running out the bakery door.

The man touched her arm. "Lady, lady, calm down. It takes a very long time for an ambulance to come to this neighborhood. It is better to go right to the hospital."

The man pointed. My mother followed his finger with her eyes. "This way. Up two blocks. Then you turn left."

No one, not the man, not the lady, was going to take over. They weren't going to take the baby from her. *He's one of yours*, she wanted to cry, *you take him*, but instead she ran. Out the door, with Brandon still wrapped in her raincoat. Lexington to Park. Park to Madison. Everything's okay, she repeated over and over as she ran, a blister now burning on her heel. Everything's okay, okay, okay. He's just asleep. *Dear God*, she prayed, *let him just be deep in sleep*.

At Madison, my mother turned left. Ahead of her, she could see the hospital marquee and then green arrows for the emergency room. A fleet of red-and-white ambulances sat silently in the circular drive.

Once inside, my mother halted: a blur of signs and lights, a television bracketed to the ceiling. People with bandages on their arms and ice packs on their ankles, and one man with a patch on his eye peered up at a game show.

There was a drum roll, and the game show host was asking, Will the real Someone-or-other please stand up? while the camera zoomed in on three men, all dressed in what looked like mechanics' garb. The man to the left stood, Brandon a lump inside the raincoat, and then my mother screamed. Pure sound, voice swimming through larynx, panic transmuted into tone, my mother screamed over and over until the security guard and a nurse rushed her, the nurse grabbing the bundle of raincoat and baby, pulling Brandon's cold, stiff body out from inside, and then the nurse's voice rising over my mother's, "Code Blue, ER waiting room, Code Blue."

* * *

The casework instructor volunteered to attend the funeral with my mother, but the night before the funeral my mother bolted out of sleep with a terrible nausea. From then until dawn, she vomited, more

food than it seemed she could have possibly consumed during the three days since Brandon's death ("Most likely, he was dead before you found him," the doctor had told her at the emergency room), and by morning it was clear that the stomach virus would prevent the train trip from Dobbs Ferry to Grand Central and then the subway ride to the church on Third Avenue and 107th Street. Afraid there would be no delivery to Jackie's apartment, my mother sent flowers to the church-an arrangement of white lilies ordered through FTD.

Lying on the living room couch, music from the classical station blanketing the room, a cold drizzle dotting the bay window, my mother told herself that she would visit Jackie the following week and that, in fact, they would be better able then to talk about Brandon and what had happened when the police took my mother back to 105th Street to find Jackie after Brandon had been declared dead, about Jackie smashing her fist on the side of the police car and my mother then holding the big wailing girl while Denise crouched by the rear door, her thumb in her mouth, urine running down her legs.

But the following week and then the weeks after that, my mother said, things kept coming up. You caught my stomach virus and were home from school-her words jogging my memory so that vaguely, vaguely, some dusty brain cell firing after fourteen years on the shelf, I remembered coming into the living room, where my mother lay on the couch, her eyes fixed on the huge glass window, afraid to let her know that my stomach felt funny and my head hurt. Then it was Thanksgiving and the trip to your grandparents'.

The dean of the social work school gave my mother a leave of absence for the remainder of the term, allowing her to take incompletes in her courses until the spring. The week before Christmas, my mother mailed a red hooded jacket with white fur on the edges of the hood and the cuffs of the sleeves for Denise and a card with a hundred-dollar check inside for Jackie. The check was cashed but Jackie never wrote back.

On the first day of the spring term, my mother dressed in wool slacks and a sweater and packed the maroon tote with her notebooks and an umbrella. I remember standing in the foyer, my mother said (pointing at the floor to make sure I realized that she meant here, in this house where I'd been flat on my back by then for three months), looking at the front door, unable to bring myself to push it open and go outside.

My mother stared at the heavy wooden front door, at the frozen lawn with its patches of grimy snow, and then at the accoutrements of the front hall-the mahogany table she had inherited from her grandmother, the beveled mirror she and my father had found in a Poughkeepsie antique store shortly

after they were married and then paid an exorbitant amount to have refinished, my yellow rubber boots, my brother's ice hockey stick. She stood there for a long time looking, it seemed, at her life of little contentments, satisfaction and dissatisfaction perfectly balanced for that one morning moment, thinking about Jackie and Denise and Brandon. I hung up my coat, my mother concluded, stashed the tote under the mahogany table, took off my pearl earrings, telephoned the dean's office, and withdrew from school.

My mother smiled-a sad, wry, self-deprecating but knowing gesture that seemed to contain all of her then-forty-five and my nineteen years. We looked at each other, my belly and how little I'd known about her rising between us. I rested my hands on my stomach. My baby would know even less about me, only what the childless couple from New York themselves knew-that I was a college student who couldn't, no, wouldn't raise a child-and it was only then that I realized that I'd decided to do it, to give up my baby.

My face buckled and my eyes filled. All I remember, I said, is your face, lying there on the couch.

My mother nodded. She took my hand and stroked it from wrist to fingertip, as though my hand were something separate, a wounded thing. Tears slid off my cheeks, dampening my neck. I wiped my nose on my shoulder.

Well, she said, you were very young. Only five. Then, *whoosh*, my mother was up, the yellow booties dropping from her hands onto the chair as she mumbled something about the store and dinner.

* * *

My father made a respectable attempt to discuss with my mother her decision to drop out of school, but my mother could sense that secretly he was relieved. She stirred a leek bisque, a recipe she'd clipped from the Sunday magazine, while he queried her, answering each question matter-of-factly but briefly.

Within a few weeks, my mother resumed what she'd come during her eight years of motherhood to think of as her life: tennis twice a week, an occasional coffee with a friend or neighbor, involvement in various of her children's activities (a rummage sale for my ballet school, rotating driver for my brother's ice hockey team).

Still, the other mothers noticed changes. She'd lost weight-the pear bottom gone-and the gray had begun to overtake the brown in her hair. They envied the thinness. How had she done it? A diet center, a powdered shake mixed in the blender, an exercise machine bought mail-order? My father suggested a rinse for her hair. My mother bought new clothes, a size she hadn't worn since college, but she kept the

gray in her hair and stopped using curlers to make it flip up at the ends.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night or during a shower, my mother would be seized with the thought that what she must do was leave my father. Looking at the French lace curtains that hung in their bedroom or the floral wallpaper that covered their bathroom, she would yearn for a simple room, whitewashed, with a mat on the floor and a bamboo shade, a room where there would be no objects to tend and her mind would be free. *To do what?* she would think, but then my mother would draw a blank and she would think of her children and how, with their toys and their books and their kicked-off shoes, no room could ever be spare like the monks' quarters she'd seen in a book.

A week or two before I went into labor, both of us worn out from the July heat during which I sweated so badly that sponge baths and a change of sheets morning and night were required, my mother told me she'd had the thought during those first months after Brandon's death that it would have been easier, more just, if it had been her own child who had been taken. (Seconds after saying this, my mother startled, as though she'd just realized to whom she was talking.) My mother continued: I would feel overcome with guilt. Dear God, I would say, I didn't mean that, please don't think that's what I want. Thank you, dear God, for sparing me and mine.

At other times, more often than not during a domestic moment, her family circled around the oak kitchen table, my brother, my father, and I excited and all talking at once, a pan of lasagna or a roast in the center, my mother would feel a vague anxiety, as though she might be punished for having wished for something heightened: years ago, for something different between my father and her; more recently, for an involvement with something outside herself or her family. For having been gluttonous for life. Wandering through the house after we were all asleep, wiping off counters, picking up toys, she would wonder, even though she knew it was illogical, if it had been her greed that had led to Brandon's death.

When the leaves began to fall, Dobbs Ferry turning gold and orange and red, my mother became aware that she had been tracking time as the days passed since Brandon died, with the approach of one year bringing an increased sense of dread and an accelerating feeling that she should take some kind of action.

At night, after you and Jay were in bed, my mother told me, I took to pouring brandy into a snifter, wrapping myself in an old blanket, and then moving outside to sit in one of the Adirondack chairs at the far edge of the lawn.

For a long time, my mother said, I stuck to that one snifter of brandy every night. Then, that last year before I left, it crept up-two, then three snifters before bed. Your brother, I'm sure, had noticed.

My mother sighed. For a moment, I thought it was about some conundrum concerning the nearly finished yellow booties.

What would Dad say? I asked.

Oh, your father was hardly ever home. And he'd long lost patience with me. Time to let it go, he said to me around the time of the second anniversary. Time to let go of this obsession with those people. The kid died. These things happen.

* * *

Once, near the end of my pregnancy when I was too big to sleep well, I woke in the middle of the night to hear something that sounded like groans and creaks coming from my father's room. A few moments later, a toilet flushed and I thought I heard my mother's voice. If so, if indeed my parents had resumed lovemaking during my mother's stay, in the end it didn't change anything between them in a permanent way.

I had the baby, a girl, at five o'clock on a Sunday morning. I saw her for only a few minutes. Then she was gone.

* * *

I named my daughter Brianna. When my mother asked me what name I'd put on the birth certificate, her eyes welled and I could hear her in her mind whispering the two namesakes: Brandon and her sister, Anna.

A few days after I left the hospital my mother flew back to Berkeley, and in the fall I returned to Yale. Because I'd left school before I had begun to really show, all but my closest friends assumed I'd been on a semester abroad or some such thing.

That first year, I woke every morning at four. Lying in my dorm room bed, Miriam lightly snoring across the hall, I would wonder why I'd given up my daughter. It wasn't as though either of my parents had pushed me to do so. It wasn't as though a Yale degree were a necessity. Then I'd feel a surge of anger at my mother for having told me about Brandon, as though learning about his death had tipped the scales.

Did she think we owed a baby back?

Did she put the yellow booties on my baby's feet or have the social worker hand them over with the paperwork?

The nice couple from New York-it was a long time before I could call them her parents-wrote me that they had decided to keep the name I'd chosen so that later in life, if Brianna were to decide to meet me, they and I would both know her by the same name. In the only letter I ever sent them, forwarded to them by my father's law partner, I wrote that when they thought Brianna was old enough to understand, I hoped they would tell her that I would always love her and always welcome seeing her but that I would leave it to her to make that decision.

The summer after I graduated, my father remarried-a stylish (but I thought hardened) woman in her thirties who was an associate at his firm. A couple of months later, my brother followed suit, eloping with a Brazilian model whose parents opposed the marriage due to Jay not being a Catholic. My mother finished her degree and took a faculty position in the school of social work at Sacramento State.

After two years kicking around at odd jobs in various parts of the country-editing a trade publication for the Idaho Association of Plumbing Supplies Distributors, keeping the books for an ostrich-breeding farm outside of Austin, teaching English as a second language at a Korean community center in Spokane-I came back East to go to law school. I direct a program that runs halfway houses for women with chronic mental disabilities. We pride ourselves on finding them meaningful work and fostering in the houses a sense of family. As for what my alumni fund questionnaire calls my "personal life," I live with a man who has an odd sleep disorder such that he sleeps during the day and stays awake all night. He supports himself on the interest from a trust fund and is working on a book on probability theory and games of chance. Our living room is stacked with DVDs of people playing roulette and blackjack.

Until Brianna was fifteen, I received a letter from her parents every Christmas. In their last letter, they told me that Brianna played on a travel soccer team, sang in her school choir, and loved to read. In the summer, they would go to Italy. They planned to show Brianna my letter around her birthday, and after that it would be up to her if she wanted to be in touch with me.

Although my brother and I both followed our father into the practice of law, my mother is fond of remarking how much my brother is my father's son-the implication being that I have in some way taken after her. It's not that I'm dismayed that she is, in fact, right (the area of law that I practice is essentially social work) but rather that I am troubled that this is so-troubled that those fourteen years the four of us lived together could have set the direction of either my brother's or my pursuits.

None of us have had more babies.

