

One

I want to remember the day I was born, that rainy day in September. My parents have told me the story so many times that I can feel my mother's hands on me, slippery with after-birth. There is a stench of lightning, a hot smell from inside my mother's body. But in her hands, I am cooling, becoming solid. Becoming real, like a photo in fixing solution, shedding all other possibilities.

My mother was out in the yard in her rubber boots and rain poncho, picking late summer tomatoes for supper. She bent over to grasp one and when she straightened up, something dropped, like an elevator inside her plummeting toward the ground floor. It was her water breaking. "And you," my mother likes to say, "the one who pushed the elevator button, were not far behind."

There was no time to get to the hospital. My mother leaned against the kitchen table, holding her belly in one hand and the phone in the other. She called my father, who worked as a hospital administrator, and told him to come home. As usual on a Saturday, he was catching up on his paperwork, but he arrived soon after, ahead of the ambulance, which just goes to show how fast he must have driven our battered old Chrysler.

Breathless, his dark hair plastered to his head from the rain, he found my mother sitting on the kitchen floor in a sticky pool, which clung to the soles of his boots as he came to her.

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She cradled me, her first-born child, between her legs, the umbilical cord still intact, and looked at him with what my father describes as a mixture of astonishment and accusation, as if she could not believe what had just happened, and was blaming my father for it.

My mother remembers it slightly differently. “I held your little head in my hands and when I looked up, there was your father standing soaking wet in the doorway with his mouth open. He’d forgotten his briefcase. You looked so alike, him with his red face and hair stuck to his head, and you with yours, that I was astonished—your father is right about that. It was as if I held in my arms your father’s younger self, although in the form of a girl.”

“Help me cut the cord, then,” she told my father, who continued to stand there, gaping. Like a stranger, she told me later in private, who’d just happened on the scene. But then the ambulance arrived, with Dr. Jamieson, our next-door neighbour, close behind, poking his head around the doorframe. My father was pushed helplessly aside to hover in the background while the doctor and the ambulance attendants took care of my mother and me. My mother often says that instead of her going to the hospital to have me, the hospital came to her, “including the ambulance, doctor and even the administrator.” It is her one brilliant joke. My father smiles each time, or maybe grimaces is a better word. My mother claims I was in such a hurry to arrive that I left my briefcase behind, which she can sometimes feel floating around inside her, like a lost piece of luggage. She says the briefcase contained my instruction manual, and without it she wasn’t sure how to raise me, but, she says, she figures she did all right.

I am not so sure. At twenty-nine, I am a nervous wreck—a train wreck of a human being. For one thing, I’m addicted to cough drops, and I haven’t been able to keep a job for more than

six months. Because of that, I've moved back home with my parents. My father is retired, and after working for three decades at progressively senior administrative positions at the hospital, he can't understand why I drift from job to job, and why I am now struggling to keep my current one as an elementary school bus driver. A bus driver, for Christ's sake—that's what I hear him thinking, behind his study door in the evening.

My father is an Englishman, with the black hair and blue eyes of an Irishman, which earned him some teasing as a boy. He's been in Canada since before I was born, but he still refuses to sing "O Canada" or pledge allegiance to the queen—he's anti-monarchy and fancies himself a Socialist. He grew up in York, in a working class family, and was the first of his clan to go to university. There he studied classics and literature, much to his own father's concern. But because my father could spell and because he was a good typist, he was never short of work after he graduated and moved to London. At his first job he made more money than his own father ever had.

My father met my mother in 1970 in Hyde Park. There was a crowd of students gathered around a young Chinese man with a bullhorn, who was shouting, "Long live Chairman Mao." He also shouted some other things, but his accent was so thick it was hard to understand him, my father says. My mother was standing in the crowd a few feet away, with a bemused smile on her face. She was, says my father, as lovely as a lotus blossom, her black hair hanging limp and impenetrably dark, her cheeks flushed from the damp air. Her features were Chinese, he says, but instead of Socialist drab she wore an orange mini dress. When she thrust her arm out to salute Chairman Mao, my dad swears she was in fact mouthing the words "Long live the Queen!" She glanced over at him and he was transfixed.

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My father doesn't sit with my mother and I watching the news on TV after dinner any more, but goes directly to his study. Just the fact that he even has a study in this day and age is a clue to what kind of man he is. Private. Retiring. Well-read. On special occasions, he smokes a cigar in there and the smooth scent of it creeps out from under the study door. The aroma of my father's absence.

There was a time when his study was a special place where I could come to sit, in a leather chair with brass studs all around the seat, and read a book from his shelves. They were mostly far over my head, swimming with small print and big words that I didn't know. My father would nod approvingly, as if just by opening one of those books, the magic of knowledge would rub off on me.

On his fortieth birthday, my father invited me in to his study. He put the painted rock paperweight that I had made him as a gift on the corner of his desk, and leaned back in his chair, appraising me. He seemed satisfied. His dark eyes were warm with tenderness, something that I did not often see—for the most part he was a handsome man, to my mind, but there always disappointment lurking in him, which made him appear sad and awkward. He handed me his cigar.

"Don't tell your mother," he whispered and seemed happy, almost buoyant. I held it in my hands then put it to my mouth and inhaled.

My father later told me that I turned green before throwing up on his Persian rug. All I remember is feeling queasy, and then I was lying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. My father was standing over me, with a perplexed and concerned look. It is the same look he gives me now that I am almost thirty and teetering on the edge of unemployment.