

PRAISE FOR

When I Was Her Daughter

“This brilliant memoir, a debut no less, has the insights, the epiphanies, and the ability to let the reader really *live* the life being documented. Not only is this an extraordinary narrative about a family challenged by mental illness and foster care, it gives voice to a greater sense of displacement and alienation. It also offers hope, love, and forgiveness. It is a book for our time—for all time—in that it’s heartbreakingly beautiful and genuinely unforgettable. This memoir is absolutely not to be missed. There are not enough thumbs-up to give it. Read it! Now!”

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“*When I Was Her Daughter* is a gripping, visceral, page-turning memoir. With humor and heart, Ferguson tells the story of growing up with a seriously dangerous mentally ill mother, navigating the sometimes-terrifying-often-lonely foster care system, and ultimately finding a home. Unflinching, powerful, lyrical, and raw, this memoir is both heartbreaking and triumphant.”

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“*When I Was Her Daughter* is a powerful and compelling memoir. Ferguson’s gifted storytelling transports the reader to her childhood, a time filled with confusion, imagination, grief, and hope. This is a story that will break your heart and put it back together again.”

—HOLLY KAMMIER, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *LOST GIRL*

“In this haunting and heroic memoir, Ferguson captures the reader with her intense storytelling skills and invites us to cheer her on every step of the way. The book leaves inspiring moments of strength and resilience

throughout to be captured and called on for our own forever. Brilliant breakout book!"

—SUNNY REY, OWNER AND CREATOR OF POETS UNDERGROUND AND POETS UNDERGROUND PRESS

When I
was her
Daughter

A MEMOIR

LESLIE FERGUSON



FROM THE TINY ACORN ...
GROWS THE MIGHTY OAK



When I Was Her Daughter is a work of creative nonfiction. The stories in this book have been reconstructed from memory with the intent to present them as truthfully as possible. The conversations in the book are not meant to represent word-for-word transcripts but to portray mood, tone, and meaning as experienced by the author. In all instances, the essence of the dialogue is accurate. To reconcile gaps in memory, for brevity and clarity, and to protect privacy, some events and timelines have been compressed and some names have been changed.

When I Was Her Daughter

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*For my brother
who kept me safe*



*And for my mom and dad
who never gave up*

chapter 1

Summer 1980

AGE 6

MY EARLIEST MEMORY IS OF DROWNING.

Mom squints and smiles at me. Holding my hand, she guides me into the ocean. I'm on my tiptoes and intoxicated with excitement. I want her to take me farther so I can float like a buoy. The cool water lifts me up, makes me weightless under the blasting summer sun.

I'm six years old, wearing my pink and white floral two-piece with the ruffles over the chest and across the hips. The water's surface rises under my chin like a blanket, and a lukewarm chill trickles along the back of my neck.

Auntie Philys and William wade at the shoreline behind Mom and me where the water rushes in and tugs at the land. Auntie's polyester pant cuffs are rolled up, so I know she's expecting to get wet even though she can't swim. William is only five, and he can't swim either. The sun makes the top of his blond head shine.

Mom tells me, "Not too deep," but I pull her toward the

horizon, where all I can see is water and sky.

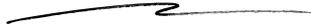
Then a ragged voice rings out. “Help! I can’t swim!”

When I look back to the shoreline, I see the surf has knocked my aunt down, and the water and sand take her, as if with fingers, into the sea. Like an overturned beetle, Auntie kicks at the air. Then, William falls, and the whitewash yanks him into the surf, too.

It all happens so fast. I think I should go back and save them, but when I turn toward Mom to tell her, water gushes into my mouth and floods my ears with its *whoosh, glomp, whoosh*, and then I’m like a bundle of clothes in a washing machine. I don’t understand the thick scent that fills my nose—mushed strawberries mixed with salt? My eyeballs sting like a burn, but I keep them open. I need them to find the light because that’s where the surface is.

Mom lets me go. I inhale ocean and flail around for her—a hand, a body, something to anchor me. I’m slammed into the sea floor. It’s a scratchy, sickening drag along the bottom before I’m tossed again and tumbling. I strain toward the surface, teaching myself how to survive already. Something scrapes my thigh. Mom’s fingernails? No, her ring. The yellow topaz one with the prongs that stick up like needles.

I reach for her but come up empty.



I open my eyes after drowning to see Jesus looking down at me. He holds me in his arms, carries me to my towel. Seawater drips like honey from his long brown hair and beard. The sun behind him creates a halo around his head.

William lies on his belly on a towel, whimpering. I rest my hand on his trembling back.

Jesus leaves but returns soon, carrying Mom. He leaves again, and when he returns, he has Auntie Philys in his arms. He lays her gently on a towel.

"You're an angel," Mom says, her breath heavy like sadness. "You saved us. An angel sent straight from heaven."

"It's Jesus, Mom," William says.

Jesus laughs.

"Where did you come from?" Mom says. "The beach is practically empty except for those two fucking lazy excuses." She points to a man and woman sitting as still as mannequins in low chairs about fifty yards away.

"I was just out on my board," Jesus says. "The undertow took you."

Mom's mascara streaks her cheeks, and her short auburn hair sticks to her temples and forehead. "Damn Communists." She shakes her head. "They're everywhere."

Auntie squints. "Roberta, knock it off." She coughs into her hand, then gropes around the towel for her purse. "I need my glasses. And a cigarette."

I sink into my warm towel, floating on being alive. I look up, but Jesus is gone.

"Lazy bastards!" Mom shouts and shuffles through the hot sand toward the lounging couple. "Kids are drowning, and you just sit there?"

They ignore her, staring straight ahead in their sunglasses. Maybe they *are* mannequins. Or Communists, whatever *that* is. Auntie puts her hand on Mom's arm, but Mom kicks sand at their legs before giving up.

Towels over shoulders, we drag ourselves to the car. Boiled hotdog and coconut suntan lotion smells replace the scent of drowning. Soaring seagulls let squawks fall

from their beaks. A cloud-gray bird lands at the edge of the sidewalk to peck at breadcrumbs.

We drive home in Auntie's Ford Mustang with the fuzzy white dice hanging from the rearview. Lungs small and tight, I fall asleep and dream about how staying close to the surface keeps me safe.

On the sidewalk in front of our Paramount apartment, I turn the crotch of my swimsuit inside out to release clumps of sand. I should have died, but instead, I feel how soft the sand and I are, and how hard, too. I'm mad at the ocean for tricking me, for being so inviting when all it wanted to do was swallow me.



We moved in with Auntie shortly after we almost drowned.

One night, I awoke because Mom was sitting next to me, leaning over me where I lay on Auntie's loveseat. Mom seemed to be concentrating on something with all her might.

And then my throat was straining to break free of something constricting my neck, rubbing it raw like a rope burn.

Something glimmered. Mom's topaz ring.

I'd struggled to find her hands that day at the beach. Now, here they were, but I wanted them as far away from me as possible, those hard hands and the ring that pretended to be pretty.

Clawing, I scratched myself with jagged fingernails but couldn't loosen the material wrapped around my neck, couldn't make Mom stop killing me.

"Shh. Go back to sleep," she whispered. She tightened the

noose again, and her eyes went deep, dark, and mean. She eased up as if to get a better grip.

“You’re hurting me.” The room came alive, and the pressure of her body made me hot. I shrank, became tiny, lost in the couch’s velvety green ivy pattern.

My feet were so cold. Didn’t Mom know they peeked out from under the blanket? And how I needed them covered? Didn’t she know how blurry she became, how cloudy and cotton-like? And how good she was at making me disappear?

A dim, warm glow emanated from the hanging lamp in the corner. The wall beneath it shone as if someone had painted it with a clear coat of nail polish. I closed and opened my eyes, fluttered my lashes like a butterfly kiss, but instead of seeing me, Mom tightened her lips into a small *o*. Her eyebrows lifted and lowered.

Crying, William sat cross-legged on the always-deflating pool raft bed where he’d been sleeping. He leaned toward us and put his hands out. I thought he was going to pull Mom away from me, but he was too small to do that. He cupped her leg and begged her to stop hurting me.

I raked Mom’s arms and my neck, pawed her wrists and forearms. I kicked the couch cushions, which only jostled her a bit. The taste of metal spread into my mouth like the time I stuck my tongue on a 9-volt battery terminal. But I could hold a battery in my hand and pull it away from my lips. This was something else, something out of my control.

Mom blinked and shook her head from side to side as if exiting a trance, a wicked spell cast by an evil witch. “Oh, Leslie.” She sounded disappointed in me for not dying fast enough. “It was supposed to be over really quick.” I coughed. She eased her grip again, releasing one end of the

strangling thing, and slid it out from under me as if it were a scarf.

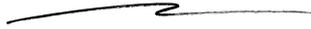
Then I recognized it—one of my red knee-high socks. My favorite pair. The socks I always wore with my fancy navy blue dress with white polka dots and a Peter Pan collar.

“You weren’t supposed to feel it. Mommy’s sorry. Go back to sleep.”

My skull throbbed from the pressure, lack of oxygen, and the thought I’d done something wrong that caused Mom to hate me.

“Why did you do that?”

She shushed me and slid from my side. “Go to sleep.”



On a Saturday, we drove to Seal Beach, where we almost drowned less than a year earlier.

“Don’t worry,” Mom said, “we aren’t going swimming. We are visiting someone.”

William and I stayed in the car while Mom traipsed up the walkway to a blue house. I couldn’t see the person who answered the door and stayed behind the screen. When Mom got back into the car, she said, “Your father is a son-of-a-bitch, good-for-nothing bastard, too good for his own kids and just turns us out on the street and starts a new life.” Her eyebrows got low and close over her eyes.

He’d left before I was two years old—before William’s birth. And I never saw him or thought about him except when Mom brought him up. From Mom’s reaction to being turned away at the door, I guessed my dad was not going to be involved any more than he’d ever been, which was too bad because I got the sense we needed him to save us.

chapter 2

1980

AGE 7

I WAS SEVEN WHEN WE STARTED RUNNING FROM the government.

We had moved in with Auntie Philys again after living in apartments and sometimes with Gramma and Grampa. Mom, William, and I slept in the living room of Auntie's tiny place. Mom slept in the cushioned rocker, and William and I alternated between the couch and the pool raft, which fit lengthwise in front of the door. When I slept on the raft, cockroaches crawled the still mountain of my body in the dark, and after they fled, their ghosts scurried along my arms and in my hair. William admitted he had trapped roaches on his arm in the night, but he always let them go.

Convinced Auntie Philys's place was bugged with listening devices planted by the government, Mom searched ceiling corners with her eyes and ran her hands along tables and under lamps, cursing the Communists. "Damn Russians.

Sent to torture us,” she said when I questioned her. And then she lit a Marlboro 100, puffed on it until the smoke streamed smoothly from its tip, and cleared a tobacco fiber from her lip.

Next to me on the couch in the daylight, Mom sat close. I ran my hand over the velvety ivy pattern and shuddered, more from the memory of what Mom did to me that one night than from her urgency about running from the government.

“What’s Communism?” I asked.

Mom scowled, shook her head, and took a drag off her cigarette like she was sucking it dry. Her disapproval and her refusal to answer my questions made me feel like I’d done something wrong. Mom’s disdain had fangs—it sat inside her face, behind her eyes, always ready to inject its venom.



We were poor not only because Mom had no job and no savings, but also because she often refused to cash her welfare checks or spend actual money. When William, Mom, and I walked to Pizza Hut from Aunt Philys’s, William found a dollar on the sidewalk. He always found money.

Once, a van almost ran him over in the Coin-Op Laundromat parking lot. He had crouched to scoop up a twenty. Mom yanked him out of the way, saving him just in time.

But this dollar foretold our fate, and it also showed the government where we were, so Mom held out her hand. William placed the dollar in her palm.

“Don’t pick up anything,” Mom said. “I’ve told you before it could be a trap. Now they’re watching.” She eyed

the buzzing wires above and squinted to focus on far away things. "Always think." She poked her temple. "You hear me?" She squeezed our chins to make sure we understood she was serious. Then, after a complete scan all the way around at the sky, street, and buildings, she squinted again at the telephone wires. I listened but couldn't hear what they said.

I tugged on Mom's hand. I didn't want to hear what she might say next. Hunched over and jutting her head out in front of her like a cartoon buzzard, she walked slowly, the crumpled dollar bill in her hand at her side. She stopped again. "Don't ever pick up anything." She turned toward William and then toward me, and her eyes turned from icy blue to gray as if clouds had settled in them.

"We know, Mom," I said. "Let's just get pizza." She didn't scare me. I felt annoyed at being lectured about a stupid dollar.

"Don't take anything that isn't yours." She flattened the bill and held George Washington's dirty face to the sun, mumbling, her orange lipstick dark in the cracks and worn in the fleshy parts. "L00307506," she read from the bill, with trembling lips. "You see that?" She showed William and me the front of the bill. "You know what this means?" We shook our heads. "That L stands for Leslie." Mom pointed to the letter. "And the seventy-five represents the year William was born." She scanned her finger over the ink in an intentional, smooth stroke. "And the number three. There are *three* of us." She pointed to us and then to herself. "They're going to take you. And you. And me. And the zeros." She paused, circling them lightly. "They symbolize rape." She didn't say anything else for a minute but focused her attention on the dollar.

Then she told us what rape was.

I didn't understand why someone would want to do those terrible things to us.

She hit the bill against her other hand. "And that's why we can't spend a lot of the money we get."

"But if we spend it," William said. "It won't be ours anymore. They can't track us with it if we don't have it." Mom hugged him against her. A steady stream of cars rolled past us.

"Why would this dollar just happen to have these particular numbers? Huh? You think it's just a coincidence?" She glared into my eyes like she was reading my soul. A sick feeling rolled through my gut. Why would she lie? Mom turned the dollar bill over in her hand and ran her fingers under the phrase, "In God We Trust." Then, she ripped the bill to shreds and stuffed its snowflake bits into her macramé purse. Mumbling buzzed in her mouth like an insect.

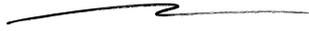
She thundered, marching toward the Hut, mumbling incoherently. She puffed up her wild, auburn hair with her hands, cigarette still between two fingers. Clinging to the strap of her purse, I sped up until I could feel the warmth of her body.

Inside Pizza Hut, standing on my tiptoes, I watched Mom move money across the counter—money she must have inspected earlier. I wondered what a "safe" dollar looked like.

Back at the apartment, Mom tossed the pizza box on the white Formica table. In the small kitchen, Dawn dish soap and stale cigarette smoke rose together in a bubble of scent mixed now with oregano and mozzarella. Auntie's

canary, Lemon, twittered and pecked at birdseed. His cage was so small, but it protected him.

Not even money was safe in Mom's hands.



That night, Mom woke me by shaking my shoulder. She knelt next to William, who was asleep. As usual, the plastic raft-mattress had deflated overnight. "Get your shoes on," Mom whispered. "They're after us because your aunt turned us in."

The darkness in my aunt's living room told me it wasn't morning yet. Mom and William were fuzzy blobs. The sticky swish of plastic trash bags and the unlocking of the door disturbed the silence. Mom stood in the doorway like a shadow, backlit by the yellow porch lights of the apartments in the small complex. William and I followed her outside. On the sidewalk in front of the apartment building, Mom handed me one of the trash bags and lit a cigarette. I held the bag in front of me with both hands, gripping the top, strangling it shut, and twisting it like a bag of bread. It bobbed up and down, hitting each knee alternately as I walked.

"It's cold," William said.

Mom stuck one hand into my bag and took out the multi-colored afghan Gramma had crocheted for her when she was pregnant with me. She threw it across William's shoulders like an old lady's shawl. The blanket hung to the ground, swallowed his feet, and slowed him down. I walked behind him at first, and I was like Pac-man and he a blue ghost I could gobble up for two hundred points. We walked along Clark Avenue, past the Pizza Hut and past the school I

had almost attended in the fall.

On that first day of school, Mom had driven me there, and I sat in the passenger seat, excited and in my new ivory-and-fuchsia-striped shirt with the scratchy tag. “I’m not taking you there,” she said and flipped a U-turn in the middle of the street. “They’ll brainwash you.” I begged and kicked the glove box, but her eyes scowled at the road, and there went the second grade.

Seeing the school now made me long for ordinary things—math worksheets, spelling quizzes, and tetherball and handball challenges at recess. The cold, misty air landed on my skin as we hiked away from the sidewalk a bit and up a slight hill. My bag weighed more with each step up. I held it against my tummy like a sack of groceries.

Mom stopped us and lowered herself to the grass. We had walked down the road, past the lighted intersections—not far from Auntie’s. I wasn’t sure how we would hide from the government outside, only a short distance from the street, where anyone could drive by and see us. There was a Shell gas station across the street. And farther up, the grass stopped where a huge, vacant parking lot began.

Mom took the blanket from William’s shoulders and laid it on the grass like a picnic blanket. She sat on it cross-legged and patted the ground next to her. “Lie down here and sleep. It’ll be fun. Like we’re camping.”

We were caught in that space between dusk and dawn that laces the dewy air with a crisp chill. Street and car lights made a kaleidoscope of colors. We lay down, William on one side of Mom and me on the other. I’d never been camping before, but on TV, camping meant a tent, a campfire, and

marshmallows roasting at the end of a long stick. It was supposed to be cozy, and maybe we'd sing songs, and everybody'd laugh and have a good time.

This was not that.

The starless sky, midnight-blue with gray layered in it, peeked through the tree branches. Pine trees dropped needles on us like prickles of rain. I shivered, and my teeth chattered. The wet grass poked my skin through the holes in the afghan.

In the morning, worms, roly-polies, and ants crawled in the grass. Had I slept with them all night or had they only just arrived? Pine, sap, dirt, and asphalt scents surrounded me, and cars zoomed by on the street below. I stretched my stiff, cold face and hands to the air.

"We heard from Philys," a voice said from down the grassy hill. It was Gramma, and the sound of her words made me panic like I'd done something wrong. Her short, wide body bobbed toward us as she climbed the slope. She and Grampa were there to help. I relaxed. Gramma shook her head and sighed.

"We've been driving all over Hell and back," Grampa said, "trying to find you." He didn't look at us but surveyed the street, hands on hips. The light from behind him made his face too dark to read. But his voice was sick and tired of dealing with Mom and us. Grampa jerked his head like he did when the Dodgers were losing—a quick, restrained shake. "Come on, Roberta. Don't be difficult. This is no life for children." His deep brown eyes had a glimmer in them, as if from tears about to fall, though I'd never seen him cry.

"I suppose you'd rather see us dead," Mom said. She folded her arms across her chest. Maybe she meant to stay

there for a while, but I knew we would be leaving with Gramma and Grampa. And I was glad.

Gramma clucked her tongue. Seeing her downhearted stung me. Grampa shook his head again, and when I put my hand out to him, he closed his fingers over mine with a warm, gentle pressure that gave me permission to breathe.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I needed to apologize since I should have resisted Mom more, should have refused to follow her into the night. But she was my *mom*, and I wasn’t an expert at standing up to her. And didn’t William, Mom, and I belong to each other like three sections of the same thread?

Mom looked into the distance, scowling as if deciding her next move. She mumbled and shook her head, gnawed her fingernails and spit out the bits.

At Gramma and Grampa’s, William and I settled into the den, the room at the back of the house. Small, backless couches against perpendicular walls became our beds.

A square black table inset with a mother-of-pearl mosaic fit in the corner between the beds like a puzzle piece. I ran my fingers over the shell table, admiring it for how smooth and bumpy it was at the same time—and how iridescent, so many different colors at once.

That morning was the start of the three of us living with Gramma and Grampa so they could keep an eye on us.

chapter 3

1981

AGE 7

GRAMMA AND GRAMPA'S DEN BECAME A BEDROOM I shared with William. Mom routinely lifted the cushions with her bony hands and ran her fingers along the inner rims of lampshades and behind the furniture. Her whispers barely audible, she tried to explain herself. "Communists are everywhere, and everyone is brainwashed not to see it." Mostly, she didn't speak at all because, she said, the government listened in on our conversations. She accused Gramma and Grampa of ignorance. "You just don't understand. The government has brainwashed you against us."

Except for the TV and the arguing that went on between Mom and my grandparents, the house was hushed. Grampa rocked in his chair, furrowing his brows, ticking his tongue or digging a toothpick between his teeth, and shaking his mostly bald head.

Gramma sighed her disappointment and disapproval as she slowly blinked her blue eyes and wiped her sweaty

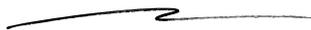
forehead with a paper towel. I preferred Gramma and Grampa's to the streets, so I stayed quiet and out of the way. William did, too. Other than time spent outside playing, we both carried on like baby lambs, following the path set before us, doing what we were told.

In the backyard, we tried not to bounce the ball over the brick wall into the neighbor's yard or into Grampa's camellias. Mom stayed in her room, which was the middle bedroom, for days on end, so the slam of the screen door announcing her presence startled me. She sat without a word on the back porch and smoked cigarettes while staring off into space as if she were contemplating the various unsolved mysteries of the universe.

Grampa refused to let her smoke in the house, which made me glad. "It's a filthy, disgusting habit," he said, scrunching up his face and shaking his head.

On the porch, Mom sat in the white metal chair, one leg crossed over the other. She faced William and me, but her stare seemed a million miles away.

One time, I thought she was admiring me, watching me hit the ball against the wall. I tried to hit it perfectly, so she'd applaud and smile, but when I smiled at her, she didn't smile back. Her eyes shone empty as holes. She tightened her mouth, opening it only to slip her cigarette inside. And when she was done, she smashed it into the ashtray on the patio table and vanished into the house before the trail of smoke died out.



In the middle bedroom, I plopped next to Mom against the headboard. She raised her wine glass to avoid spilling. Then,

she gazed into the distance, twirled her hair, and sipped from her glass.

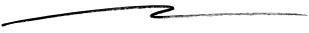
On the wall above her head hung the scary ghost boat painting that put eerie feelings of loneliness deep within me. Mom didn't mention it, but I wondered if the artist put brainwashing messages in it on purpose. Framed in solid, carved walnut, it depicted a remote lake alcove with bushes, lily pads, and blush pink flowers. On the lake rested a small hull, empty of everything but its oars. Where did the boater go? Maybe a lonesome woman wearing a flowy white dress paddled across the lake to her destination. Maybe a large bird or some terrifying sight overtook her and caused her to fall overboard. Her lungs took in too much water, nobody arrived to save her, and she suffered a wet, bloated death.

"I wonder where the person rowing the boat went," I said, but Mom didn't answer.

William trotted into the room and jumped onto the other side of the bed next to Mom. I pointed at the muted painting.

William's eyes widened. "It's spooky."

The dark colors recalled old, haunted things that made me long for something I couldn't describe. If I walked into the painting, maybe I could discover a new world—haunted or not—because wherever a sliver of light crept in, there was potential for secrets, mystery, and horror. Why would anyone paint a picture of a lost boat unless to announce that someone who had been in the boat was also lost? It chilled and comforted me at the same time because becoming lost in an unknown world seemed like such an easy thing to do.



Mom caught William and me pretending to smoke camellia branches, so she taught us how to smoke.

The cigarette was more fragile than I'd expected. The sheer act of trying not to drop or crush it made my hand tremble. Mom laughed. I put the filtered tip to my lips. Pretending to smoke was much more comfortable than the real thing. Even though I had practiced many times with my candy cigarettes, smoking the real thing didn't feel natural to me. I fumbled and tried to be as graceful as possible with the cigarette between my straightened fingers, delicately placing it there with my other hand. Mom flicked the wheel of her neon green Bic lighter. A flame spurted from a series of sparks, and a blue-white cone of light shuddered up to my cigarette. Nothing else happened.

Mom said, "You have to light it by sucking in. Then you *puff, puff*. Like this." She struck another flame and made it kiss her cigarette. She sucked on the filter like a straw, and her cheeks caved in, emphasizing her high cheekbones. She blinked fast behind the smoke.

I puffed at uneven intervals as the tip burned orange beneath my nose. The glow made me shudder. I held *fire*. I couldn't drop the thing and prove I was too young to be smoking. A dumb girl who can't hold on to a cigarette certainly couldn't smoke one. She'd burn the house down.

Mom lit William's cigarette, and as always, the first burn smelled so good. The three of us smoked like chimneys next to Grampa's truck. I coughed. William made a face as if he'd tasted sour milk. Then he coughed, too. Mom laughed and pointed at me with her orange frosted fingernail. "Now

maybe you won't be so curious. Smoking's horrible for you." She took a long drag on her cigarette and exhaled at the sky.

The heat of the fire near my skin startled me, and I dropped the cigarette on the cement. I heaved and choked before stamping out the burning body with my shoe.

"You're only supposed to smash the tip with your toes, like this." She pressed the tip of her sandal onto the cigarette as if she were pointing to something on the ground with her foot.

William got a few more puffs in. Then, shaking his head, he held the cigarette up to Mom. His face reddened, his cheeks puffed up, and he exploded in a thunder of cough. Mom took the cigarette from him and bent over to rub the hot tip on the cement. She stuck it back in the pack.

Cigarettes and Mom went together like peanut butter and jelly. Like Batman and Robin. I couldn't imagine her without Marlboros. She needed them. I understood the idea of needing something. But what if the things you think you need aren't good for you? How do you train yourself to need something else? I was attached to Mom and to her cool skin and sparkly laughter—and to her cigarette scent. I wanted to be like her—hoped I'd grow to be tall and thin with bright eyes and a straight smile.

When I curled up next to her and she caressed my forehead and hair with soft fingers, I sank into her love. But was she the lake and I the drowned girl? I lived somewhere between fear of her and fear of being lost to her. I needed her to be a boat so she could always be the one to save me.



The more Mom talked about being harassed by the

government, the more Grampa felt harassed by Mom.

One night, he'd had enough, so he kicked us out. We went to Auntie Philys's, but soon, Mom accused her of being brainwashed by the government. The more Auntie tried to defend herself, the more convinced Mom became that Auntie was spying on us for the Russians. So, we drove to a motel.

In the car, Mom sang our favorite lullaby, "You Are My Sunshine." Her voice rose and fell into the lyrics, lifting me up because I was her sunshine, and William was, too. I closed my eyes and imagined a smiley-faced sun bouncing in the sky between puffy clouds. When Mom sang, my world stopped spinning. And it was enough.

William and I joined in. We existed as each other's sun—not even a storm could annihilate us.



In some spots, the motel stairs' white paint was scuffed black like someone had tap-danced all over it. Chipped parts revealed many layers like a jawbreaker. The peachy-brown underneath made me think about how things on the inside can sometimes be shockingly different from how they seem on the outside. Even Mom was layered like that.

When she unlocked the door to our motel room, Mom propped her suitcase against a wall, said, "I'm tired. Good night," threw back the scratchy floral bedspread, and climbed in.

It was still daylight, and William and I weren't sleepy. We rummaged through our black trash bags of belongings for our swimsuits.

At the pool, a chlorine smell filled my nose, and my lungs

grew tight as I inhaled. I jumped in first and somersaulted backward and forward. After pushing off of the pool tiles with my feet, I glided through a clear blue lagoon, a mermaid fantasy creature with long hair that tickled my shoulders and back as it snaked behind me. It made a gauzy weblike mess in front of my face and went into my mouth when I inhaled.

William dog-paddled at the edge of the pool. I rushed from one end to the other, underwater, holding my breath longer and longer, wishing I could transform into a real mermaid. The water stung my eyes, which burned so hot I thought they might explode. Pressure filled my chest until my face and lungs were about to pop and all my brains could burst out like clots of jelly.

I scanned the pool for William. He wobbled in a blur of color at the deep end. His arm shot up. I laughed. His hands flapped at the surface like bird wings. He sank. Then, for a moment, his mouth came up. He was so quiet, I thought he was playing dead. I laughed again, but as I got closer, nothing was funny anymore.

“Grab the side,” I yelled. But his head was underwater. I reached for him, but the more I tried, the weaker I grew and the slower I swam. I shouted and splashed and flailed, swimming toward him in the deep end. One hand touched him briefly, which gave me hope, so I scratched and clawed at him. He clung to me, and I pulled him to the surface.

All he had to do was *reach* for the wall. “I’m *drowning*,” he said, frantically dog-paddling.” He went under again. I slipped under for leverage to shove him with all my strength. He was so heavy. Locking onto my neck with his fingers, he pressed into my throat and pulled me down. He kicked my

legs. We got tangled. He climbed my body, drowning me.

I sank.

Underwater, I focused on the wavering blue tile lining the inside of the pool. Then William clobbered me over the head, and almost as if by magic, the burden lifted, and I shot to the surface.

“Don’t ever do that again.” I gasped. William clung to the side of the pool, his chest red and rashy against the cement.

“I was *drowning*.”

“You were *drowning*,” I said. “There’s only one ‘d.’” I had to teach him *everything*, and now I had to protect him, too. I was so mad at Mom I wanted to scream. She should have been there. But I knew we could never tell her what had happened because she would have blamed us for going swimming without a lifeguard on duty. And she would’ve been right. It was our fault.

We slowed our panic, got out of the pool, and trudged upstairs, slapping our wet feet along the painted walkway. As a trickle of water dripped from my ruffled bikini, I recalled the time I almost drowned in the ocean and thought about how I was doubly lucky to be alive. For some reason, that made me remember the time Mom squeezed my throat with my sock, and it made me shiver. Triply.

Back in the motel room, the blackout drapes were drawn. Mom slept soundly, curled into a ball, with the covers over her. William and I put dry clothes on, and I hung our suits over the spout in the bathtub.

I wrapped a towel around my hair like Mom wrapped hers after a bath. It made her seem glamorous, like an actress. The towel pulled my eyes tight toward my temples. My head throbbed. I felt small and dry. The real me was

trapped beneath my lips and skin but ready to burst out any minute. I itched all over. I scratched, but I couldn't make it go away. Loaded with exhaustion, my lungs still pulsed with the memory of attempting to recapture lost air.

William curled up on the bed next to Mom. I landed on the bed with a jolt, laughing.

"Don't wake her up," he said. But I didn't care. I wanted to play by my own rules. Soon, it was dark out. I found some change in Mom's purse, which we used to buy candy and chips from the vending machine by the motel office. We watched the end of a movie, and William drifted off to sleep. I punched the Channel UP button on the remote until I came to a woman and man moaning together, naked. I lifted my head to make sure William's eyes were closed, and I lowered the volume to zero.

The man and woman kissed and touched and moved together as if they were one body. Where did the man end and the woman begin? They closed their eyes. I couldn't close mine, couldn't look away, afraid I'd miss something. Looking to Mom and to the TV, and to William and to the TV, I rested my finger on the Channel DOWN button, ready to press it if I got caught. Everything flashed fleshy gray-peach in the TV lightning. Being there with the man and woman doing sexy things made me feel dirty and curious at the same time like the time the liquor store clerk caught me flipping pages of *High Society*. I was losing myself in the taboo and a tingle from "down there."

In the morning, Mom put my hair in a ponytail. She pulled it so tight it seared my temples. "It hurts," I said, but she shook me still and combed the tail and braided it anyway. I leaned away, but then she smoothed my hair

behind my ears and let her warm hand linger there for a moment. I cried but not enough that she noticed, which was for the best since I had secrets I needed to keep now that I had grown up a little while she slept.



In the car, Mom smoked with the window down, and the three of us remained silent. The events of the previous day put a sinking feeling in me. We drove all afternoon, and when the summer heat faded, giving way to dusk, my body shivered. We arrived in front of my grandparents' house.

"But Grampa doesn't want us," I said.

"Where else would you like us to go?" Mom said. It was a good question.

"What about back to Auntie Philys's?" William asked.

"I can't deal with her right now. She makes me so mad. I'll sort everything out with Grampa."

We grabbed our bags of stuff and dragged our bodies up the driveway. Mom unlatched the gate to the backyard and let the wide barn-style door swing fast against the brick wall that divided my grandparents' property from the neighbor's. The back door was unlocked, so we let ourselves in and went straight to the back of the house without announcing our arrival.

Mom wouldn't let us watch TV because that was the primary way the government brainwashed us, she said. I protested, and she shushed me. We sat in the stuffy room, staring at nothing. Then, she put her index finger in her mouth and pressed on her bottom back teeth.

"I think I have a cavity," she said. "Here." She pointed, and her mouth widened as she pressed. "And here." She

pressed another molar. "I'm not going to the dentist. The last time I went was when this happened." William and I made eye contact. "They put radios in my teeth." Mom bit on her index finger as she pronounced the words. "So they can tell me to do things that make me look like a crazy person." She brought her wet finger out of her mouth and wiped it on her brown pants. "The voices talk constantly. They buzz all day." She brought her hands on either side of her head and held them there. "They won't stop."

"Let me see," I said. "Open your mouth and say, *Ahhhh*." When she did, I said, "I don't see anything but silver stuff. Besides, that's a really small radio to be in your *teeth*."

"They have their ways, Leslie."

Gramma poked her face into the room. "I thought I heard you," she said, shaking her head in a way that told me she was disappointed we had returned. She knew we had nowhere else to go. "We still plan to leave for the Sierras tomorrow," she said. "But I guess you guys can stay here while we're gone."

I almost asked if William and I could go with them, but I knew the answer would be no, so I didn't bother. The next day, they stocked the trailer and drove away as William and I waved goodbye.

Sitting in her bed, Mom doodled pretty flowers and swirly letters on her spiral-top notepad as if she didn't have a care in the world, but if everything was fine, then why was I so terrified to be alone with her?

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