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When You Meet My Parents

There will be a moment in the beginning when you ask me about my parents. You will ask me because I haven't mentioned them yet; because I am waiting. You may hesitate, but you will still ask and I will take a breath and I will tell you what you need to know.

And if you are the one who stays, I will begin to mention them every once in a while, I won't speak of them for long, only briefly and then I will move on. You will want to ask why I don't talk about them more, but you may be a wise one and decide against it. You will notice that I mention my father more and you will ponder, trying to glean a reason from the breadcrumbs I am unintentionally leaving. You will hungrily pluck them from my words, my voice, my silence and you will hold onto them, precious as they are to you, keeping them safe.

And then there will come a day when I ask you over; you will think nothing of it, you will have been to my place so many times before. You will come in and on the table there will be a box, opened, holding stacks of pictures, two DVDs, a deck of playing cards, and a road map of Montreal. You will glance at it quickly and probably pay it no mind, until I walk over to the table and say that I have something I'd like to share with you. What I will mean is that I am ready to share it with you. We will then sit down together, and I will take the photos out and hand them to you one by one.

You will see the life my parents had before me, in black and white Polaroids that have managed to keep their shine; my father, when he was young, about twenty, in aviator sunglasses looking right at the camera. You will think that it is a picture only of him at first and then you will notice my mother, much shorter than he, standing at his side, gazing up at him. It was her college graduation, she is laughing, and her entire face is love. She is holding onto my father's

forearm with her hand, and you will notice how small she is. You will ask me how they met and I will tell you that it was in a sociology class; that my father told me many times about how he had noticed her from the back of the class and spent the next few weeks continuously moving up a row until he got to sit next to her; how they spent a month just staring at each other; how in the last class, she turned to him and asked if he knew where the bus stop was; how it was the same bus that she took every single day to campus; how he offered to give her a ride home and asked her on their first date.

I will show you photos of the tiny log cabin they bought in New Hampshire when they decided to leave the city to live in the mountains. I believe it was my father's idea, sparked by Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*; he knew a long time ago that we were killing the Earth. You will see him on ladders, building houses, homes out of logs so freshly cut that you will smell the wood. You will see him again, young and bearded, leaning over a tiny wood stove that could only heat one cast-iron frying pan at a time, cooking breakfast. You can tell from his haircut and clothing that the photo was taken during the 1970s. And you will see how he and my mother took that tiny cabin in the woods, big enough only for two, and gently pushed its walls out, molded it, opened it up to make room for me.

You will see me when I was brand new, asleep, my father looking at the camera smiling as he holds onto my tiny slipper, my mother sitting next to him, puffing out her own cheeks and pretending to squeeze them. You will see me learn to walk and to dance; you will see all three of us, mother, father, and child, on vacations at the beach in Maine with me playing on piles of sand. You will laugh at the faces I made as a child and you will say that I still make them. I will laugh and agree with you. I will tell you how they used to call me 'hambone', and I would scrunch my shoulders up to my ears. You will see pictures of my father and me riding an

elephant at the zoo, of me poking my tiny head out of a snow fort that he built in the front yard, me sitting in the wooden toy car he made for me when I was four, the two-story playhouse he built when I turned five.

You will see me standing near a window with a hanging plant, green vines and both red and white flowers. I am probably three or four years old and my hair is the shortest I have ever seen it but for the first time, I don't think I look like a boy. I'm touching my nose to the flowers, sniffing them, opened-eyed, and my mother is behind me, leaning over me. Her hands are gently clasping the tops of my arms, and her curly, brown hair is shimmering in the light, rippling. She is resting her chin on the top of my head and she looks as if she is asleep, peacefully dreaming, smiling softly to herself, and I am unaware of anything but the flowers. I will take the picture back from you and stare at it for some time; I am still captured by it, this moment that I do not remember. It is her face, the expression that holds me; the love that I was too young to see.

You will say that my mother is always smiling or laughing in all of her pictures and you will be right, but there will be a few that I do not want you to see; I will show them to you anyway because my father chose to save them. Your expression will change, you will understand, and you won't spend as much time looking at them as you have the others because you will feel that I don't want you to. They are the photos that smell of disease, of illness worsening, of greying, dying slowly from the inside; they are the ones where she is in a wheelchair and struggling to walk with a cane. You will put them down and I will hand you a different one. I will make sure that these are not the last photographs you see of her; I will make sure that her laughter is ringing in your ears.

I will hand you the last of the photographs and you will reach your hand across the table and hold mine; you will thank me for showing them to you. You won't ask me about the DVDs

because you will know what they are from the title: *Christmas 1993*. What I won't tell you is that it was our last good Christmas and that four years later, it was only my father and me. You will ask me about the map and the deck of cards and I will tell you that he taught me how to play and that was our thing; every visit, whether I was home for winter break from college or I had driven up to his home on a Saturday afternoon, we would play cards. It was something that his father taught him and that he taught me. I will tell you that the map is from when I was in college and I would come home for winter or summer breaks. I would take the train from Toronto to Montreal and he would pick me up at the central station, Gare Centrale. I would be so happy to see him and so sad to say goodbye. I would start tearing in the boarding line and he would tell me not to be sad, that I'd be back before I knew it; that I'm not to worry, he's not going anywhere. And he would stand at the top of the escalator, as I descended, and I would stare back at him until we could no longer see each other.

You will then stand up and I will too; you will wrap your arms around me and hold me while I cry, mouth open, into your shoulder, because I will have let go. The joy, the love, the pain, the anger, the loss will have rushed back into my veins, my bones; I will be shaking. You will feel my hollowness, my choking breath; I have lost them all over again. And you will look me in the face, eyes open, unafraid, and you will see the eight-year-old girl who lost her mother; you will see the twenty-eight-year-old woman who lost her father. And you will realize that you are looking into the eyes of the woman I am trying to become, in their honor, for them.