



2010

## Snap shots

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# SNAP SHOTS

By

Nancy Stiles Nelson

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

## ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Chair, Dr. Brenda Miller

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Dr. Kathleen Lundeen

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Nancy Stiles Nelson

May 7, 2010

# SNAP SHOTS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of

Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Nancy Stiles Nelson

May 2010

# Abstract

**Snap Shots** is a creation story, an origin story, founded from an old cardboard box of photographs. While it is not about adoption, it is written through the eyes of an orphan, a foster child, an adopted person, a mother, a wife, a woman. It is a work of honesty, of courage, of pain, of love, and of acceptance.

Inspired and influenced by the work of Lawrence Sutin, specifically *A Postcard Memoir*, this work is the culmination of an intense and exciting dive into the genre of creative nonfiction. Unlike Sutin's collection of found objects over years of random scouring of antiques stores, **Snap Shots** is literally, and metaphorically, a photo album of me, my people (as much as anyone can have their own people), and profound parts of my life. An album that is not stagnate and placed on a shelf to become dusty and never opened again, but one that goes through change over time, with the photos and stories being rearranged, replaced, renewed. While the book is bound, its intention is to never really be done.

As I continue my career and life as a writer, I hope to always return to these photos and this life and, many years from now when I am a very old woman, still look fondly at these photos and read these stories, smile, and learn.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my one creative writing colleague, Chas Hoppe, and all the English studies colleagues in the graduate department. Especially Leslie, Andrea, and Joy who are great support, super smart, and fun travel buddies.

I am especially grateful to Kathleen Lundeen who got me through English 501 and served so generously and graciously on my theses committee. Her ever present smile and encouragement are much appreciated.

Without Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, I would not know creative nonfiction existed. I thank them for introducing me to *my* genre and pushing and showing me what I can do. Their feedback on this manuscript has been invaluable and I will always be grateful to them for believing in me and this project.



# Snap Shots

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## The Photographer

My father worked, my mother did not, and all the kids rushed around the house frantically at 4:00 getting it presentable for my father's 5:00 arrival. The kids, neighbor ones, too, rode their brooms, swatted their dust rags, and dumped toys in the box while my mother put the finishing touches on dinner. We knew this daily drill - the neighborhood kids whom she babysat, the revolving door foster kids - we all knew it so well we barely needed to be reminded of the time as if we all shared an internal clock that instinctively knew when it was 4:00.

The role in my family that was not traditional was that of photographer. Unlike the other men I knew who casually slung the camera around their necks, my father did not share in this. He was too busy fondling his beer bottle, and the lazy eye he was born with made for an easy excuse. So all the family photos were taken by my mother except for the rare few when another relative (not my father) or a friend captured her. There are few of these, though, and even here, with her slight smile and no idea she is being photographed, she gets

her camera ready. Ready to point it at us, her long, slender fingers fiddle with its dials while my father snarls, “Jee-sus, Margaret, we ain’t got all day. Take the goddamn picture.” She shoves him away in her mind, banishes him to the edges, like she did most days of her life, until he is a faint noise in the background, a fly buzzing softer and softer. She squints one eye and with the other looks through the lens and sees us, the jumbled collection of misfits and stray puppies no one else wanted. She sees us through her camera as only she can, knowing that what is on the other side of that piece of refracted glass is what matters to her most.

My grandmother, Ruth, died a few years ago and left an old cardboard box of photos in the shed next to her trailer. My cousin, Patty, also a middle child, sent me the photos of my family that she thought I might want. My sister, Peggy, had no interest, and my brother, Mitch, could not be found.

The stale cardboard smell mingled with the faint odor of cigarettes. I took out each photo, ragged and wrinkled yet some still glossy, and spread them out on the floor. I arranged and rearranged each one, stitching together a photographic patchwork quilt.

What is scattered on these pages are little bits of my life, small pieces of hope and wreckage that, if glued together, would assemble a life - a crooked, jumbled, uneven, broken one - but still a life. A life that hurt and knew disappointment but one that also smiled and carried on. I am thankful that Ruth kept these photos and that Patty sent them to me. They might not represent all I would have wanted for myself and my childhood, but they are mine, and to a person who does not know her past - who cannot look back for bloodlines, but must only look forward to her daughter - someone who was, and in many ways still is, an orphan, they are everything.

Part One

# The Beginning

“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

- T.S. Eliot



## Tommy

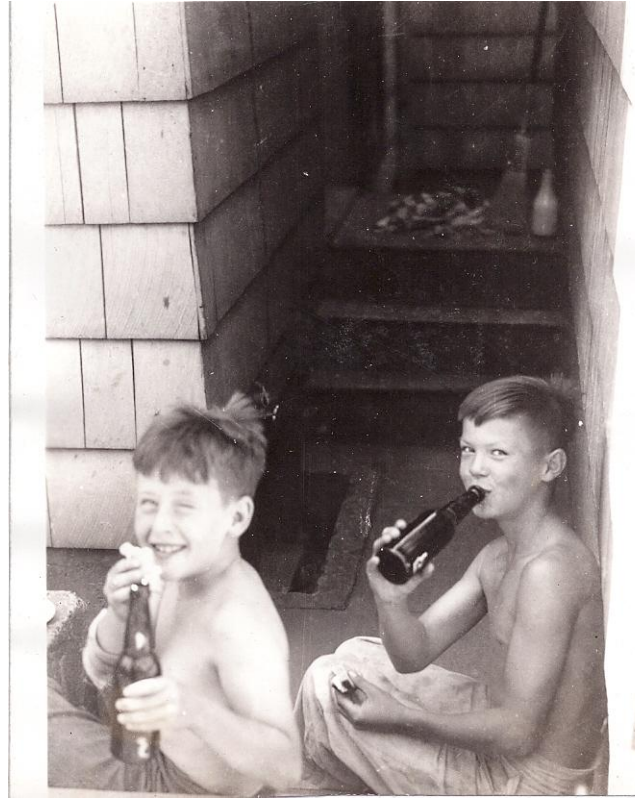
Oh my god, how cool is he? The dangling cigarette, beer bottle, rolled up shirt sleeve. Hard not to think of Elvis here. The irony is that my dad was probably the least cool person ever. As a young boy, he was short, skinny, had a lazy eye, thick round glasses, and was completely gray at twenty-five.

His father died when he was seventeen. I never met him, of course, but I don't like him. He beat my father. Cursed him. Crushed him. Reduced him to rubble with his hands, tongue. The shy, skinny boy with glasses and big eyes; the lazy eye grew droopier as time passed, a weakness that increased with weariness.

"I never met your real grandfather," my mother used to say, "and I'm glad. He used to beat Ruth, never worked, only drank. He was a true son-of-a-bitch, that one."

Tommy's mother, my grandmother Ruth, tried to compensate, erase the invisible gashes and glue him back together with favorite meals, new shirts, Sunday car rides, matinees on school days, just the two of them.

My father medicated with alcohol like his father before him. Inherited his tongue, too, that he used on my mother, my siblings, me. But not his hands. At least the cycle changed course there. The things handed down are strong, mortar between generational bricks. But there is also hope, a chance for change, no matter how small. The slightest mutation, the tiniest turn of the steering wheel, can save a life.



## Boys & Beer

The boy on the left is either my dad, his younger brother Jerry, or Jerry's son, Jerry Jr. I have no idea who the other boy is. It could be beer in the bottles, my family worked that way, but their expressions want us to think it is.

I think it is my dad because of the lazy eye and how pudgy he is; another indication of the boy who alternated regularly between fat and skinny his whole life. The smile is right, too, mischievous and funny all at once. He could be the meanest bastard ever - treated my mom like dirt, only liked his kids when we were quiet or agreed with him or held our heads just right - but he could also be damn funny. No one could tell a joke like my dad and he knew it.





## Margaret

**M**y mom was one of those women who would never believe how beautiful she was. She would carefully manicure her nails, dye her shoes to match her dress, slowly outline her lips and blot them perfectly with a tissue, making just the right smacking sound, leaving behind a symmetrical outline of her lips. She did all this regularly, ceremoniously, dutifully, ritualistically, but she never looked in the mirror and saw the fruits of her labor. She did all these things because that was what women did. Women of her time, place. She carried her tall frame carefully, glided strong and steady like an iceberg, but inside she was the water inside the rock, allowing herself to be broken by all those she came up against. Slowly

chipped herself away, leaving a trail of little pieces of herself, the tiny particles of herself she had lost yet did not know she had.

I don't know who the shy woman is sitting next to my tall, poised, beautiful mother with the long legs and confident smile, but I think she is more like the woman inside my mother than the regal beauty so casually drinking her beer and smoking her cigarette, a bucket of oysters between them as nonchalant and carefree as she is.



## Margaret & Tommy

**They** look happy, don't they? My mom all pretty and my dad sort of handsome. This was taken in 1950, the year they got married and before anyone had heard of the Surgeon General or the word "alcoholic." I remember my best friend Heidi Finkbeiner's mom said my dad was an alcoholic because he drank beer. I was so mad and told her so. So sad she turned out to be right. But he was what they called a "functioning" alcoholic, whatever that is. He functioned alright. But because he held down a job and we had a house and stuff, I was told by my relatives how much better I was than most kids of alcoholics. Yeah, but when you're eight and you silently pray from the back seat that your dad gets pulled over for drunk driving, you don't think you're so much better off. You start to hate him and you hate your mother even more for not doing anything about it. He is sick and you can sort of see that, but Mom isn't sick. Why does she stand by, pursing her lips and acting like you're crazy for crying? But she did, and at age five the clock started ticking until my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.



## Peggy

**M**y sister, Peggy, is four years older and she looks about four here so I am sure I was on the way. I wonder if my parents had any idea their funny, bright, oldest child would end up a high-school drop-out, join the carnival and get married at seventeen, annulled at 17 ½, get pregnant and married at nineteen, divorced at 19 ½, get married a third time at twenty-two and stay married but that her husband would send them to financial ruin and shame because of his love for heroin.

I do love her glasses. I hope she felt special in them, pretty, happy, important. I hope she felt this since for most of the rest of her life she usually did not. I don't really know why she felt mediocre. She was very smart and had a good sense of humor. She looked great in

hot pants and go-go boots, the ultimate fashion at Kilo Junior High, and was invited to take private voice lessons from the choir teacher.

Her hair was long, and thick, and straight, like a Breck girl's. The straw hat was probably a gift from Mom. Mom loved straw hats, hats of any kind actually, and was always trying to squeeze our heads into them. Much dismay was felt by her as hats quickly went out of style and her daughters had no interest in them. I guess a former New York hat model has a right to be bitter. But here Peggy looks very pleased to be sporting this straw hat. Or maybe it's the glasses; they really are what make the outfit. I think she liked hiding behind them, becoming whoever she wanted to be. Famous, rich, beautiful. Probably for her, though, at four, she wanted to be funny. Look at her smile. She is in love with herself and thinks she is hilarious. She *is* hilarious and my only wish for her in this picture is that that feeling would not fade. Sadly, it did, but we still have this very funny, cute picture to remind us of what she was, could have been. She is still alive and could reach back across time and grab the hand of this little girl, pull her to her feet and say, "Come on!"



## Nancy

**This** is my favorite pose, one I would display while either in deep thought or really pissed off. I don't remember which one this is. Am I seriously chewing on something, or am I disgusted with my parents for repeatedly denying my request for a beer? I often did not agree with or understand decisions my parents made. "Because I said so," was not an answer. My sister, however, could not wait to please. She never wanted to know why, never cocked her head and rolled her eyes or stared unabashedly, brow-knitted and eye-hooded at something they said. She was the good girl; I was the pain in the ass.

You want the dinner table set? You will have to wait until *The Partridge Family* is over. You want me to weed the garden? How much will you pay me?





## The Fosters

We always had a bunch of foster kids. Most came before me and I was actually one of them, too. Not like my sister, Peggy, who was pre-ordered, adopted before birth. I came as the others did: abandoned, or dropped off, or discarded. Peggy is in the middle here; the wanted child between the cast-offs. Patty and Ginny were their names and they left when I was really small. I don't remember Ginny at all, but Patty, the older one, was mean. Looking back, I can't really blame her now. If I had had her life, I probably would have been mean, too. She came and went from our home like a yo-yo; pulled back in by her mother after a string of "good days" (days when she could remember who she was, where she left her kids and that she even had kids. Days when she did not wake up drunk and got drunker as the day went on;

days that turned into nights and more days and more nights, all running together until a week had gone by and she did not even know if she was alive), only to be cast back when the realities of life and motherhood set in. I met the mother once, that last day we had Patty. Out on the driveway as my parents said good-bye to her for the last time. I think I was five and don't remember what her mother looked like only that I did not like her. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as she came near. Like a dog's keen sense, I knew she did not smell right.

That evening we did not have a usual dinner. I drove up the street with my father to Buddy's Drive-In and brought home hamburgers, French fries, and milkshakes for everyone but Mom; she wasn't hungry. The white bag with greasy spots on the bottom rested on my legs, the heat from the fried food warming them in the night air.

Every few years I would get a new roommate, usually a baby, but one year I got Danny. He was a year older and a lot of fun except he farted all night long. I would shove my face under the blanket of my tiny twin bed and wake up in the morning sweaty and gasping for air. He and I would talk long into the night and pretend that we were on the train we could hear in the Auburn valley below. We would take trips to far off places like Seattle, or even as far as Disneyland. Sometimes we would talk about finding our real parents, but usually the trips were just for kids. The other fosters didn't get to come along and neither did my sister, especially not her - just Danny and me.

I remember when he left; I stayed in my room alone for days, only coming out for school because my mother said I had to. The only belonging Danny had brought with him was a small wooden chair with a straw seat. It was painted in bright colors and they said it



came from Mexico. He left that behind, I don't know why, but it became mine and I sat in it even after it was much too small and all the bright paint had worn off.



## Tommy & Me

I love this picture of my dad and me. I have no memory of it being taken, or even of being wherever we are, probably Snoqualmie Falls, but it is one of the rare photos of my dad and me, alone. Just the two of us and neither one of us looking sad, or mad, or like we might cry. Just calm, and content, and casual. Not even posed, fake smiles all around, waiting helplessly for my mother to take the picture, something it always took her twice as long to do as the normal person, silently squirming for it to be over so we could get as far away from each other as possible.

What is he thinking here, a slight smile on his face? What am I thinking? My small body precariously perched on the rock, not at all worried, my dad's hand lightly resting on

me, the invisible and silent support that most kids take for granted, but was so uncommon in my household. Uncommon, perhaps, but, at least, possible.

Part Two

# The Middle

“We dance around the ring and suppose,  
but the secret sits in the middle and knows.”

- Robert Frost

## My Mother's Closet

I sit on the floor of my mother's closet gazing up at the rows of clothes hanging above me.

Skinned knees drawn up to my chest, my arms clasped around them, the glint of my steel ID bracelet is reflected by the overhead light. The bracelet is too big for my tiny wrist and I unconsciously flip it over from the engraved side with my name and address to its smooth side reserved for noting allergies such as penicillin, which I don't have. I flip the metal plate over, back and forth, its link chain brushing my knee. This morning, I have carefully chosen my pink shorts and the matching sleeveless blouse with white sailor collar. I wear no socks, but have on my plaid tennis shoes with no laces. My skin is tan, adorned with many scrapes and bruises covering my eight-year-old bony legs. My hair is long and its usual medium brown is bleached light by the sun, gold and red strands highlight the ponytail.

My father has gone to work and my older sister is still sleeping. My mother is in the kitchen fixing breakfast while my baby brother plays quietly in the playpen next to her. Our house is quiet and I hear the morning birds through my parents' open bedroom window. The day is already warm for early morning and I think of which swimsuit I will put on later. I have two: one is pale yellow with white, fuzzy raised dots and the other is green with smooth white butterflies. My mother came home with them this spring. She had been shopping at the JC Penney and called me from the payphone next to the ladies' fitting room to ask which one I would prefer. My sister, Peggy, was jealous that the suits were not for her and would not give me the phone. After I flicked her on the forehead, she shoved me and dropped the receiver on the kitchen counter. Picking myself up off the linoleum floor, I tucked the turquoise receiver between my shoulder and ear, wrapping myself up in its long, spiral cord.

I loved the sound of them both and debated out loud, back and forth, as to each suit's attributes.

"The yellow one will go with Peggy's old swimsuit cover-up, but I love butterflies. Which color do you think looks better on me?" I asked.

"I think you look lovely in both."

"Me, too, that's why this is so hard."

"I'll tell you what," my mother began, noticing a young man impatiently waiting for the phone, "I'll get them both."

I hung up the phone, stunned, and ran to find my sister.

## h

As I now continue to mentally choose a swimsuit, I gaze up at the row of blouses hanging neatly, arranged by color and sleeve length. They are a rainbow to me with the pot of gold the large, floor to ceiling shoe rack at the end of the row. These, too, are neatly placed by color and heel height, the mouth of each shoe carefully slipped over its wire tongue. I know each pair well, with which outfit they are worn, which ones are their original color and which have been dyed to match a new skirt or blouse. I remove my right tennis shoe by its wide, white, rubber toe and slip my foot into a black patent leather pump with white piping along its rim. My mother has long, narrow feet and my foot barely fills the front half. I admire my foot and leg in the floor-length mirror at the back of the closet and raise the leg of my shorts to get a better view. I note the heel's shape and height: spiked and tapered, narrowing to a point at the bottom, approximately three inches.

A shadow falls over the doorway and I see my sister's bare feet reflected in the mirror.

“What are you doing up?” I ask my reflected foot, “It’s still morning.”

“I’m going to tell you’re in here,” Peggy replies, shoving her foot into a nylon stocking.

“Go ahead and tell Mommy, she won’t care.” My mother doesn’t mind if I play in her closet and my sister knows this.

“*Mommy*. What a baby, nobody says mommy at your age.”

“You’re the baby!” I snap, “Everyone knows that’s not how you put on a stocking. Like this.” I hold the opening of the stocking in both hands, thumb and forefinger gripping its elastic band, and with the rest of my fingers I gently gather up the leg. She grabs it out of my hand and again shoves her foot in, struggling to pull it up.

“Stop! You’re going to run it!” I yell. “Besides, you can’t wear nylons until you’re thirteen.”

“I’m thirteen.”

“Not for another six months; this is *July*, not January.”

Peggy throws the stocking down and stomps out. I roll the stocking up and carefully tuck it inside the elastic band as I have seen my mother do a hundred times before. I hear Peggy fume down the hallway, down the stairs, and the screen door slam shut behind her. Since Paul recently announced that the Beatles were breaking up, my sister has been extra cranky.

I place the nylon pillow in the top right drawer of my mother’s dresser that sits under the row of blouses. I look in the dresser mirror and tuck a stray hair behind my ear. I pick up her hairbrush and slide the rubber band from my hair, shaking my ponytail loose. I watch myself in the mirror brushing my hair, pretending I am Marcia Brady or one of the Breck girls in the commercials. My hair has a slight wave and no matter how many strokes I brush,

I can never get it like the Breck girls, shiny as silk and smooth as glass. I look at the baby pictures on top of the dresser, each in a silver frame. Peggy's and mine are black and white but my brother Mitch's, taken a few months ago for his first birthday, is in color. I hold my picture up to my face and look at us in the mirror: the same eyes and turned up nose. I am wearing the ID bracelet but my chubby one-year-old wrist is stuffed into it. I raise my arm and see how it dangles loosely on my wrist. I shove Peggy's and Mitch's pictures to the back and place mine front and center.

I tidy up the closet, put my shoe back on, and re-ponytail my hair. I stand back and admire myself in the full-length mirror. I turn to the sweater section and select a White Stag ski sweater with a narrow burgundy, horizontal stripe across the chest and around the back. I unzip it with the tiny, silver, deer zipper pull, and put it on. I find a pink chiffon scarf in the top left drawer of the dresser and tie it around my ponytail, covering the rubber band, its long tails fall down my back. I adjust the scarf in the mirror and, satisfied, sit with my back against the far wall, under the tiny section of my father's clothes, and lean back to take in the view. I know every shoe, every blouse, skirt, dress, and pantsuit. My favorites are the ones in dark or neutral colors: her black, wool, knee-length dress with the matching jacket; the tan pleated skirt and dark brown sweater that she always wore together, usually to school meetings. The matching tan and brown pumps with the bow on the toe are the best part of this outfit.

## h

My mother and I have spent hours in this room, separately and together. We were often quiet, both understanding the silent language of fashion. When we did speak, she would tell me the history of her outfits, when she wore them, and the occasion. The black,



crepe, two-piece suit she wore to her grandmother's funeral. It had rained that day and she has yet to get out the water spots on the skirt hem. The red, checked, sleeveless blouse and white pedal pushers for my first trip to Mt. Rainier. It was my second birthday and an unusually hot May; I had not yet seen snow and she wanted to give it to me for my birthday. Her white plastic sandals kept slipping on the snow and, after many near saves, she ended up on her behind, laughing, with me next to her, leaning down to grab some snow then shaking my hands violently, not understanding why it was so cold. My father was laughing so hard, the movie camera shook. This is one of our home movies that I watch over and over. The ski sweater that I am wearing was a Christmas gift from my father that she always wore when she and I walked the beach at Hood Canal, collecting shells and looking for starfish.

She would tell me what had been going on in her life at the time: moving to Santa Ana, California when my dad was in the Marines; her sister's fatal car accident; adopting each one of us kids. In each of her stories she always wove in the clothes; they were like characters in her life, voiceless friends who were always there for her, patient and not judging. They did not tell her she did not know what she was talking about, like my father did, when she offered a suggestion while he was trying to repair a leaky faucet. Fixing faucets was a man's job and something on which she was not qualified, nor allowed, to comment. They did not tell her she was not allowed to finish high school because the family needed her to get a job, even though her brothers all finished their educations. The clothes were not the first and second husbands, who married her, and within months left her by note; the first husband left the day after the honeymoon on a business trip and never came back; his mother delivered her his letter postmarked from New York. I don't know anything about the second husband, but can guess his exit was equally painful and abrupt. She held these

wounds deep inside, too ashamed to admit her foolishness, always taking the silent blame. She would gloss over the negative aspects of her experiences, her life, focusing on the good, as if the dark and ugly did not exist. I think she was afraid they might touch me, become a part of me, if she spoke of them out loud.

I would sit on the closet floor and watch her get ready. I became her own personal attendant in a department store dressing room. She would tell me what she would be doing that day and choose the best outfit for the occasion, weather and comfort. On indecisive days, she would discard each outfit and I would put them back in their proper place so as to not clutter the closet, mindful of each crease, collar, and drape. I would offer suggestions and she always took my advice seriously. I wonder now if any of the ensembles I concocted for her were hideous. Did they cause her to pretend to not notice the sideways looks of strangers? She always had them on, just as I designed, when I returned home from school.

On a top shelf she keeps the hats she modeled in New York before she got married. They sit neatly tucked in their boxes, wrapped in tissue paper. When I beg her, she will take them out and show them to me, but she never wears them; they sit on the shelf as a memory of a time when she had a different life, was a different person, before the hard edges of her life had permanently etched themselves onto her skin. When she still had hope and believed her life could be what she dreamed of, that she could escape where she came from and did not have to be the dutiful housewife ruled by a man, did not have to accept what was handed her, like her mother did, and could go out into the bright, shiny world and carve a life for herself, a life she chose, a life she wanted.

h

The times I spent with my mother in her closet I could pretend I was not a middle child without the distinction of being the first born (another girl, how nice), or the long-awaited son, blending in unnoticed, wearing my sister's hand-me-down clothes. I did not have to be adopted and a source of freakish curiosity to my friends and their parents, a sideshow at the circus. I could erase the older sister, not be the little sister who was gullible enough to believe Peggy when she told me to put my face in her butt because it smelled good. I did, and, of course, when my nose got near the seat seam of her shorts, she farted. Or who allowed Peggy to stuff me in the clothes dryer with the cat and turn it on.

In this room, my mother was also not the woman who was married three times by the time she was twenty-four, or who could not give birth. She was not married to an alcoholic who belittled her and ordered her around like a dog. She was not the woman who lifted her husband's head out of his dinner plate after he passed out, or who pleaded with her children to be very quiet at least until daddy goes to bed. She was not the oldest of nine children who raised the three youngest children and learned, on her eighteenth birthday, that her mother was, again, pregnant. She was not insecure, and frightened, and disappointed and tired; rising early to adjust the smiling mask she wore for her children.

Together in this tiny room we were two women sharing a passion for the classic, clean lines of a tailored suit; for the unwritten rules of good fashion: we would never wear white after Labor Day, or reinforced-toe stockings with sandals. We knew that we both possessed this gift, and, while we shared no blood, we were of the same breed. We had our lives ahead of us, our futures as bright and plentiful as the clothes hanging around us. We selected the appropriate outfit, put it on, and became who we wanted to be.

## h

The smell of bacon filters into the closet. I look around one last time, at my mother's costumes hanging neatly, the dresser full of masks and stage make-up, the light and mirrors. As I leave the closet, my ID bracelet glints in the sun streaming through the bedroom window. I turn its plate over to the blank side, the bright, shiny metal waiting for me to write upon it the person and life I choose for myself. Armored with the teachings of my mother, I know that when that day comes, I will be ready.



## Peggy & Me

We are adopted and share no blood, no personality, no bond, a little obligatory love. If I had not lived with her, I would never have sought her out, asked her to come over and play, go to the movies, or the mall, have dinner, or watch my kids. Ours was a relation left to chance, an arbitrary assignment like locker or lab partner. Even now, we hardly speak. I send the customary birthday card; she pretends not to get it. The day Grandma Ruth died, I called her and she acted like we had spoken the week before. No, she could not come to the funeral as she always slept late on Saturdays and the thirty-mile drive to Seattle was too far. That was almost three years ago and my phone has not rung her number since. But, here, with our sweet and goofy smiles, our ridiculous matching outfits, we are sisters, at least for a little while.



## Ruth & Me

I love this picture of my grandmother, Ruth, and me. The mundaneness of it all: no posing or smiling, the clothes hanging on the clothesline and the beer bottles on the table. Just Ruth and me hanging out. We kind of look alike even though her own DNA road map did not match mine.

I like that we look alike, that I am hanging with my grandma at four years old. I am a member of the club, one of her group, in the inner circle. I rarely had any alone time with Ruth as she usually preferred my older sister, Peggy. I like the matureness of my expression here as if I have graduated in some way to be alone with my grandmother - photographed with only her and not wedged in between the other kids. I must have somehow satisfied some initiation, jumped through a hoop, passed a secret test. To be invited in by Ruth was quite a

coup. Everyone loved Ruth - her broad smile and quick laughter, always ready for anything whether it was motorcycle riding or hula lessons, her sincere ability to laugh at herself. Luck followed Ruth and everyone envied her, jockeyed for position close to her. Even at four I don't think this escaped me; I am sure I did not really understand it in words but I felt it. If I had thought of it, I would have grabbed one of the beers and gulped it down.



## *Cec & Me*

**M**y cousin and I are middle children and my grandpa always said we were his favorites.

“The middle child gets the shaft,” he’d say. Not the oldest and not the baby, lost in the shuffle. I don’t know if he was also a middle child, but I bet he was.

I love that I am sitting on his lap, a place I felt safe and welcome. That is my sweater hanging on the clothesline behind us.

My grandpa was an interesting man - owned a tavern, played pool, took shit from no one - but was also kind and gentle. At least to me. He had your back if he liked you, but if you crossed him, forget it. My kindergarten Christmas art project was a tissue paper wreath glued to a white paper plate. My school photo graced its center. I gave it to him that year and it hung in his shop the rest of his life.



MAY • 64 •



## Harvey's Tavern

My grandparents, Ruth & Cec, bought Harvey's Tavern near the waterfront in Seattle in 1963. I was one then and don't remember it, but am told I used to sleep in my baby seat on the bar. Harvey's was their home away from home: they hosted New Year's Eve parties, sponsored bowling leagues and baseball teams, and hung out there even when they were "off." Cec tended bar and Ruth made sure the customers kept drinking. She joined them in toasts and beer chugging contests; I am sure she was great at her job. Ruth was hot. She wore pants, and drank whiskey, and danced, and gambled. Cec's name came first on the sign, but everyone knew Ruth was in charge.



## Beacon Point Resort

We visited these cabins every summer from as young as I can remember until my parents divorced when I was thirteen. We were not resort people, but in the 1960s that's what places like these were called. Maybe to make the middle class feel better, those who knew they would never go to Europe, be airplane vacation people, whose trip planning did not include a cooler.



## Swimming

Peggy was a fish. I was, and am, afraid of the water, but she could never get enough. She was always doing handstands underwater, her legs sticking straight out, toes pointed perfectly like a gymnast, or a ballerina. She would make me rate her performances, like they do in the Olympics, making sure I never gave her a perfect ten, but that I also did not rate her too low. She would emerge with her nose full of water and her hair in her eyes, looking like the monster in 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.

One of the last years we went to Beacon Point, they built a swimming pool across the street. It had chlorine, and a diving board, and a slide. I hated it, but my parents made me go in. It was new, and to my dad, new meant “good.” I did not agree with him, and thought a

swimming pool next to salt water was wrong. Like drinking a diet coke with a hamburger and French fries.

So we went to the pool to appease our parents but would sneak out of the cabin at night and wade in the canal. Thick seaweed wrapped around my toes, slippery and smooth. Peggy would dive in and I would only go in up to my knees. It was still water and I was still afraid, but at least it was fresh water and my feet were on sand, not on rough cement in blue water that came out of a garden hose and was full of chemicals.



## Oysters

Going on vacation to Beacon Point was all about the oysters. At least it was to the adults. You would have thought they contained gold or were the fountain of youth. We had oysters every way possible: fried, baked, boiled, barbecued; for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I hate oysters, did then and do now. I had my first raw oyster recently and can still taste the salty slime in my throat, feel it settled in my stomach like a giant spawn.

But back in the late-sixties and early-seventies, it was all about digging oysters, cleaning them, cooking them, and eating them. Maybe it was the leftover innate hunter-gatherer thing. That my sister is in this picture I am sure was an after-thought; who would actually want a picture of this sign? Let's shove Peggy in there so we at least can pretend we

are taking a picture of her. Peggy loved oysters. She used to eat them raw when my mother wasn't looking; let them slide down her throat slowly and sensually, making huge gulping sounds to make me squirm. When my mother caught her she told her she would surely die from it and that oysters would start to grow in her stomach. Peggy didn't believe her, or care, and kept on every chance she got.

The part I did like about oysters, though, was the shell. My father would open the oysters with his oyster knife, a strange looking thing with a short, thin blade attached to a round wood ball for a handle. It reminded me of the rubber thing my mother used to suck the snot out of the babies' noses. He would slide the knife just beneath the flat oyster shell so precisely and perfectly that the two halves magically popped open, smooth and slick. The disgusting oyster lay coiled up and wet inside, but once he slid it out, he would pass the shell to me.

It was smooth on the inside, a sharp contrast to the rough outside, and the colors gleamed in the light like oil spilled on wet pavement. I saved them in a Folger's coffee can and by October my mother was begging me to throw them out. No way. They were magic, exotic, provocative, sexy. They were as far from my suburban home as I could get and I was not going to part with them because of a faint, lingering sea smell.

We were the same, these shells and me. One thing on the outside, another on the inside. Two distinct parts of one self. As foreign to my family as anything, I was the outsider, the misfit. But to know that something like an oyster shell existed, taught me there was a world outside my home, one where I might fit. They were a reminder to me of my ticket out, the silent clock ticking off the minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years until I could move out and start my own life.





## Olympia Beer

One of my childhood chores was to get my dad a beer while he worked in the garage. We lived in a 1960s split-level house – the first in the new subdivision of a Seattle suburb. Camelot it was called. I ran up the stairs as usual and instantly was going back down, beer in hand, having swiped it almost blindly from the bottom refrigerator shelf reserved for the neatly stacked brown bottles, lying on their sides, nesting on each other, bottle caps facing forward. I ran down the stairs two at a time as I always did, but this time, I don't know why - having traversed this path so many times my feet knew it instinctively, muscle memory so keen and wise for eight-year-old feet - this time I missed the last step. Was feeling a bit cocky, perhaps, traveling too fast. My momentum pushed me forward like a snapped rubber band.

The amber beer spread across the linoleum floor at the bottom of the landing and seeped under the basement door. White foam swirled through it, white caps on a shallow ocean, or meringue in my mother's mixer.

I push-upped myself off the floor and waded in the beer, felt it seep between my toes, lap at my ankles. It covered my shirt - the new pink and green striped tank top my mother brought home with her last Saturday from JC Penney - soaked my undershirt, stuck to my skin. The brown glass was shattered, a mosaic that would have been beautiful if I was not terrified. The mess on the carpeted stairs and linoleum was the second of my worries: nothing was worse in my house than to waste something and beer topped the list. The Rainier Brewery was housed along the west side of the freeway about ten miles north of my house. The big red "R" floated above the building, a beacon in the night and a conversational landmark on the way to my grandmother's house on Sundays. It is now Tully's Coffee, the red "R" replaced by a giant green "T."

Never mind the cuts across my palms - blood beads stitched my skin with thin, red thread - I panicked and wiped them across my stomach, red smears on my new shirt. A third earned spanking. I flung the door open and tiptoed to the laundry room, wet toe prints traced the concrete floor, going and coming. Back with plastic bucket and wire scrub brush, I tried to clean the mess. Small shards of beer bottle floated in the bottom of the bucket but the scrub brush just swirled the beer around, lapped it against the walls, a tide pool of beer. I was making the mess bigger, expanding its boundaries, multiplying it, a finger paint canvas out of control. My frenzy faded and I slowly accepted the futility of my efforts; I was not equipped to fix my mistake, did not have the proper tools. With blood and beer streaked hair, sticky feet and filthy shirt, I climbed back up the stairs for another beer. My mother may



understand the stairs and floor, but a missing beer my father would not. In my family, the only thing a refrigerator was good for was keeping beer and the only thing I was good for was getting it.



## Steven & Me

The last summer I remember going to Beacon Point, I was twelve and my almost seventeen-year-old sister did not come along. She was too busy planning her unplanned pregnancy. My five-year-old brother did come and I spent as much time as possible avoiding him. I decided to befriend the owners' younger son, Steven, who was nineteen and the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. He had brown curly hair in the shape of a helmet (a white boy's afro), lean muscles and a line of hair that started below his belly button and disappeared under the waistband of his jeans. It was strange, scary, and I could not stop staring at it. I would go upstairs above the resort store where his family lived. His bedroom was old and quirky. One half of the room had a sloped ceiling covered in ancient, peeling wallpaper tacked up by posters: Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Jethro Tull, The Who. The floor and furniture were covered with clothes and I did not know where to sit. Or if I should sit. I leaned against the sloped

ceiling trying to look cool in my pink shorts with matching sailor-collared shirt. I crossed my skinny legs casually, hoping he would not notice that my tennis shoes were *plaid*.



## My Sweater

**That** is my sweater hanging on the clothesline, reflected in the window so there are two of them. That is fitting because there were, and always have been, two of me. Even if I wasn't born under the sign of Gemini, the twins, I still would have been two people in one. A split personality my sister called it, always wanting to make me crazy. The little girl who was shy and giggly all at once, wanted to wear her mother's lipstick to go out and play baseball with the boys. Who loved and hated her family fiercely, equally, simultaneously. I don't know where that sweater came from, probably a hand-me-down from my older sister, Peggy; all of my clothes used to be hers. But even though it also had two lives, hers and then mine, it was my sweater, it was my life (however many of me there really were), and I was going to be in charge of it.

Part Three

# The Hood

“I am always drawn back to places where I have lived, the houses and their neighborhoods.”

- Truman Capote



## Camelot

It arose as one of the first, great suburbs. Halfway between Seattle and Tacoma, it was a commuter's dream. Ours was the first house built (so my father says), and also the best. The slope of the corner lot rose slightly so the house was perfectly perched on top, angled just so to capture the Mount Rainier view from its rectangle picture window. It was also, eventually, painted black. My father chose this color, as he chose most everything about everything, and since it matched our car, he was satisfied. We were the family who lived in the black house (the only one), and this notoriety, however negative, pleased him. We just thought it was weird. And embarrassing. But that is where the negativity ended. Camelot was my home, my place in life, my hood, my people.



## Marci & Me

**Marci** is my best friend. She is ten months older and a grade ahead of me in school, but she is still my best friend. She likes to ride bikes, and play baseball, and never cries when the dodge ball smacks her in the face. I respect that.

Marci has the kind of family I want. Her mom not only works, she is a nurse. I have no idea what her dad does, but he drives a VW Bug and sometimes cooks dinner. They have a round kitchen table and chairs like in *The Brady Bunch*. Their house is only one level so they don't have a basement, which seems weird to me, but they have a big backyard and their dad turned the garage into a rec room. That makes up for no basement.

Marci's dad is tall, and slim, and handsome. Mine is short, and chubby, and drunk, and scary. Marci's dad wears jeans and tennis shoes. My dad does not own a pair of tennis shoes. The rare time he works in the yard, he wears white socks and black sandals. The kind

with thick tire treads for soles. His Bermuda shorts look more like highwaters; they are so long on his stubby legs.

Marci's dad is young; mine is old and looks even older than he is, having turned gray before I was born. The smoking and drinking don't help, his skin a sallow yellow, bloodshot eyes sunk deep in their sockets; the right one lazy and impossible for him to keep open when he is drunk, which is most of the time.

Marci's dad wears crewneck sweatshirts like Mr. Brady. His first name is Jerry and he lets us call him that. My dad doesn't give a shit what you call him; he isn't going to answer anyway.



## The Typewriter and the Fire Hydrant

The Saturday night after Christmas, I made my way down my short street and around the corner to the top of the sledding hill. It was perfect for sledding: all the houses that lined it faced another street so there were no driveway cutouts to get in the way. If you started to veer off, the curb would keep you on the road like a pinball machine bumper. The rest of the gang was already there: Donny, Jodi, Glenn, Lori, Marci, and Roxanne. The Hanvey girls were hovering on the corner, making oh-so-obvious subtle eye contact. We were not very nice to the Hanvey girls; we rarely included them and were openly mean to Noelle. I don't know why; they were the chosen ones, I guess, predestined by God or something to be picked on. Maybe it was because Noelle's mother put love notes in her lunch box, or because none of the kids could play on Sundays, or because Noelle cried if she got out at four-square.



That year my sister got a typewriter for Christmas and I got a sled. Our gifts could not have been more different, which was perfect because my sister and I could not be more different. She was pale, and plain, and shy, and awkward; I was athletic, and cute, and outgoing, and confident.

The sleek orange *Smith Corona* was the latest model. It had an *automatic* carriage return with a bell to chime its warning a split-second before it whooshed across the front in a blur, practically capsizing the machine off the table. It would have gone perfectly in Mary Richards' studio apartment on the *Mary Tyler Moore* show, carefully displayed on the tiny table in the bay window. Its off-white plastic trim rimming the light orange metal reminded

me of an orange creamsicle or the orange sherbet/vanilla ice cream Dixie cups served with school lunch on Fridays.



We lived in one of the first housing developments in a suburb of Seattle. It was called Camelot after King Arthur's Court and the elementary school was supposed to *be* King Arthur's Court with 1960s architecture and a parking lot. There was a sword in the stone by the front door, next to the Frank Lloyd Wright-esque floor-to-ceiling windows. The principal's office was called The Round Table and the bathrooms were labeled Damsels and Knaves; it took me most of my first year there to remember if I was a Knave or a Damsel.



I hugged the Flexible Flyer, not yet ready to let her smooth, shiny runners touch the snow. I finally placed her in position and stepped triumphantly back, making room for the circle of oohs and aahs that would soon be forthcoming. She was a beauty. The overly varnished wood slats gleamed in the moonlight and the bright red **Flexible Flyer** letters looped and swirled far fancier than anything *Smith Corona* could spit out.



I couldn't have cared less about the *Smith Corona*, as my sister always referred to it, as if it were a person, but I tortured her with it anyway. I would bang on the keys so hard and

all at once so the metal “legs” would jam, the ink from the ribbon gluing them together, take up my sled to join the neighborhood kids at the hill while I left her to typewriter surgery.



Now it was time to decide the pile up. If there is anything sacred in this world, it is the order of things to a bunch of seventies, suburb kids. More important than the order, however, was the ritual of *establishing* the order. This could, and often did, take quite some time, and we all had to be home by 11:00 so I proposed that we would arrange by age. The fact that we were all the same age, as Glenn proclaimed, did not matter because we were going to go by birthdays. I knew my birthday was last and I wanted to be on top; I was always on top. Besides, it was my sled. So Glenn climbed on first after much complaining since he was the smallest and was sure he would suffocate. He wasn't the best steerer and probably should not have been on the bottom, but his birthday came first. Then Donny (the biggest, Glenn's eyes reminded us), Lori, Jodi, Roxanne, and Marci. I climbed on and spread out face down on Jodi's pink nylon parka, its shiny surface slippery so I held on tight to the white fur trim on the hood, my legs wrapped around the pile like the ribbon straddling a huge present. And we did not move. We all yelled at Glenn to get us going and as his green mittened hands clawed hopelessly at the ground, he began to cry. Marci Hanvey ran over, gave us a shove, and we were off. Of all the Hanvey girls, Marci was the one I *could* have liked; she was small but scrappy.





We were off to a good start despite Glenn's frantic and erratic turning of the wood steering arm; our weight must have kept us going in one direction. We entered the steepest part of the hill and really picked up speed, whizzing by parked cars and other sledders walking up the hill. Up ahead we saw the Finkbeiners practically crawling down the hill on their stupid plastic toboggan. Mr. Finkbeiner held it by the rope and slowly pulled it down the hill, practically walking; making large, wide arcs as if he were painting a picture on the snow and the toboggan was his giant brush. Mrs. Finkbeiner and their three daughters huddled together with not even the slightest breeze in their hair. Mr. Finkbeiner was the minister of the neighborhood church and they lived in the house across the street from mine; it was called a parsonage. I never figured out why it was called that but I did know that it meant they got to live there for free.

So, we're gaining on the Finkbeiners and Glenn is useless. He had already lost a mitten and I *know* his eyes were squeezed shut. Mrs. Finkbeiner's pink knit hat with the enormous pom pom on top was getting closer and we had to do something. We all started screaming at Glenn to go around them. "Turn, turn!" we yelled at the top of our lungs. Nothing. He probably passed out. Donny punched him several times and he finally responded with a wailing and whimpering that was pathetic. Donny tried to reach over his shoulder and grab the steering arm but Glenn kept batting him away like a fly buzzing in his ear. "I get to steer!" he kept screaming, although no steering whatsoever was taking place. It was too late anyway. We slammed into the toboggan and sent it flying off to the right, the pink pom pom and orange sled blurring together as they sailed past my peripheral vision. The

sled careened to the left straight for a fire hydrant. We all stuck our feet out like landing gear on an airplane, trying to slow the out of control sled. My feet didn't reach the ground but they went through the braking motion anyway. Donny did manage to decrease the impact with his size eleven feet but we hit the hydrant head on, bodies flying through the air to land in reverse stacking order on the Benoit's lawn.



Mrs. Benoit was the shortest person I had ever seen in my life, but she could yell. She must have been watching from her living room window because we hadn't even righted ourselves and she was screaming in our ears.

“Oh my god, you stupid kids. How many times do you have to crash into something? It's bad enough that you're out here all hours of the night but you have to go and destroy property while you're at it. And always in my goddamn yard.” She flicked her cigarette on the ground and it was so quiet I heard it hiss in the snow.

I scrambled to my feet, unhooking my glasses from my ear where they dangled crooked across my face, and stared at her. At eleven I was several inches taller than she was and my eyes met with the part on top of her head. I could see the silver roots leaking out from her jet black hair and wondered why she did not make an appointment at the beauty shop. My mother went every Saturday morning and her hair always looked nice.



We took inventory. No one was seriously hurt although Glenn was missing a mitten; he whined about this more than Lori did about her bruised elbow and Jodi was certain she

had damaged her temple which meant impending death. She made us promise we would not let her go to sleep so Roxanne volunteered to keep her awake since we all knew with Mrs. Benoit still yelling at us and the large group that had now gathered, Jodi was sure to nod off.

We collected our gear and matched up gloves and hats with their proper owner. Mrs. Benoit finally left and, discovering no blood, the crowd disbursed. I looked down at the Flexible Flyer and froze: she was a mess. The curved front metal bar was smashed in the middle forming a “V.” The red paint was scraped off and scratches covered the polished wood. Most of the first red “F” was scraped off and part of the “1...” The candy cane striped rope was cut in half, one end wound tightly around the fire hydrant that wore some of her red paint. I did not move, could not move, could only stare in horror. My friends gathered around me, clumsily patting my back or awkwardly draping a pre-adolescent arm across my shoulder. The tears welled, hot against my frozen face, making my nose run. I removed my glasses, wiped my face with a sideways swipe of my mittened hand, and knelt down, unwinding the rope from the hydrant. After I had set her free, I slowly towed her home, the gang following behind like pall bearers without a casket. Lori took up the rear and looked like she might cry.



My sister was in the kitchen when I got home, watching Carol Burnett, eating cereal, and painting her nails. She did not look up when I sat down at the table but asked how *sledding* was.

“Fine,” I said, grabbing the box of Life and reading the back. “Where’s *Smith Corona*?”

“Broken,” she said, not looking up from her nails. “Where’s the **Flexible Flyer**?”

“Broken.”

She looked up and I pretended to still read the box. She drank the rest of the milk from her bowl, shoved it across the table to me, and passed the milk.



## And Now

I am a grown woman now, middle-aged many would say, but age, like everything else, is relative. My life is probably half over and to most that would seem sad. But to me, it is happy. I get to have that many years all over again.

Last summer, I had a Camelot reunion with some of my neighborhood friends, a few introduced here: Lori, Glenn, and one of the Finkbeiner sisters, Robyn. It was amazing to see them as adults now, middle-aged, kids of their own grown or almost grown, some of them grandparents. We had, as everyone told us would inevitably happen, become our parents.

But not really. Glenn looked so much like his dad but was much more patient, kind, gentle. Lori looked exactly like her mom but smiled more, was happy. Robyn looked like both her parents and also acted like them, but had more confidence. They had taken the best of their parents and improved upon them. Made the best of what they were given and pushed a little harder, strived a little more, to be better people, who they wanted to be.

I look at my own daughter, now twenty, and hope that she will do the same. Take what she has been given and do the best she can with it. Thoughtfully, carefully, respectfully, kindly. Not forgetting from where she comes, but blazing a new trail ahead equipped with the best parts of herself and also with the best parts of those she loves. Keeping them inside of her, protected, not always present but never forgotten, stored deep down for safekeeping.





## Lin

**This** baby is cute. But he will grow up and, regardless of whether he stays cute or not, he will do things as a husband that you do not understand. Like leave a tin of Bag Balm on the bathroom counter for a week even though he knows it reminds you of your father's hemorrhoids. Do not ask him why he does this; he does not know. It is not something he learned along the way; it was planted in him from the beginning. This cute baby - so sweet and soft - is wired somewhere, deep down, to one day do this and you will not understand. He does not mean to confuse you; he just can't help it.



## Lin's Family

**With** the baby comes the baby's family. You will love them and they will love you (or not), but they will be part of your family either way. It is best to fall in love with someone whose family visit will require the purchase of some kind of ticket and at least a week's notice. Try to not have all family members for the same visit. If you can alternate years between parents and each sibling, that is best. When his parents visit and his mother insists on saving a single Ritz cracker, folded multiple times in its original wrapper and secured with a rubber band to sit on the kitchen counter (with every single item they brought or have touched including newspapers, decks of cards, cell phones, phone books, medicine bottles, hair combs and brushes, toothpicks, rinsed out zip-loc bags, paper plates, paper napkins, photos from their

last trip to Branson, Missouri with their financial planner: “It was the best trip he ever had!!”, a toupee, sewing needles and thread, the daily newspaper crossword - never finished - coupons to stores they don’t have back home) for the entire three-week visit, keep your mouth shut.



## Lin & Kinszy

If you meet him later in life, be very careful before you introduce him to your kid. Your kid could hate him and then you might start hating him or your kid might love him and you don't love him and then you might try to love him or pretend you love him but you are only kidding yourself and hurting him and ruining your kid. Just remember that you may want to move on but your kid won't want to give him back.



## Kinszy

I remember watching the television show *Thirtysomething*, before you were born, and the character Hope telling someone that she received so much advice about being a new mother but no one told her how much she was going to love the baby. She was right. No one told me that I would fall madly, hopelessly, crazy in love with you. That I would think everything about you perfect and good and kind and miraculous. That I would begin to feel an overwhelming fear that something would happen to you - a fear that burned and grew within me, smoldering, seething, spreading. I would do anything to protect you, not hesitate for a second. Even now, twenty years later, I would take the bullet for you, jump in front of the train, the car, the bus.

I place you last in this book because you are the one who will carry on. Carry me on. Everyone has a story, many stories, and this has been one group of my stories I want you to

know. Things that never got said during the process of day-to-day living. Things I have thought but never quite said. Things I was afraid or embarrassed to say out loud. Things I had forgotten but that have come alive as I have gazed for hours at each photo. Many things fragmented and lost, but the essence is there. Things that are important, silly, funny, sad, small. Things that seem small but are really big and things that seem big but are really small. Just things. Lots and lots of things. What you choose to do with them is up to you.