

Brick  
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Over my bedroom door was a large red brick placed there by my father. I wasn't allowed to bring it down, though many times I watched him slide his fingers along the frame and gently knock it loose. I was awed by its controlled tumble from the ledge above my door to his hand. I wasn't tall enough, he said, not yet grown enough to reach the ledge even by tiptoe stretches. He smiled as he said this, gently tossing the brick to himself.

When I was ten I saw some things I wasn't supposed to. I thought them to be secrets that might not have existed, keys to worlds that exist in the seams of my small family. The kitchen junk drawer was a seam. I found phone numbers in the drawer that I couldn't place among the few I knew, and believed they carried magic with them. I sometimes saved these numbers to dial into the "antique" rotary phone in our kitchen but always hung up after the first unanswered ring. I wondered though, who could be on the other end, waiting for my breath to swell into conversation. My feet on the step stool, the receiver too big in my hands, I stared at the phone as the connection rolled through the earpiece just once before I frightened the curiosity out of my body.

I found photographs as well, small snapshots hidden between the desk and wall in my fathers cluttered bedroom. Resting just behind the old computer monitor in a shadowed corner that took some sliding to reach, I found them. I wanted something like that, something small to prove my father had a life before Cassie and I were born, one he hardly spoke of. His conversations with us consisted only of things that would not mark his past, those unknown days so many years before. As his two daughters, sitting in the hallway with our eyes to the frame of my bedroom door - we wondered about him.

The pictures we found were mostly of cars my father owned and sold, as he found pleasure in fixing something broken. During the summer before I started middle school, my sister and I spent a week in the dark garage handing him tools as he replaced the minivan head gasket. Or holding tires in place on the bright Saturday morning driveway as he replaced the grooved brake rotors for ones that mirrored the sun into our eyes. All of his tricks were learned from our grandfather who passed on before we came to know him well, and these are the same techniques I learned through repetition.

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One afternoon, after my first day back to school I spent a few minutes wriggling my fingers to the dark spot I loved to search. It had been a few weeks since my last exploration, back in the height of summer, gathering the few glossy prints of cars in my palm. I'm surprised now that I knew to avoid making the greasy smudges that signaled an intrusion, my fingerprints giving away my intent. These photos were hidden for a reason, a mystery with purpose that only my father knew, and I shouldn't have meddled.

That Monday was different. I found just a single photograph of a woman, sitting on a bed that our family didn't own. My eyes cleared and I wasn't entirely sure what I held. So much time spent searching for clues about my father's life without much more than photos of cars I saw almost every day with my own eyes, I made certain to place this new photo solidly in my mind: A woman sitting on an almond colored bedspread. The mattress gently gave with her weight; her legs were crossed right over left, light blue skirt parting over her right knee. Both hands were behind her as she leaned towards the headboard at an angle, the bedspread pulled back at the corner a few inches, showing a hunter green and peach colored vertically striped sheet and pillowcase that reminded me of grass in the summer twilight. The pillow looked cool to the touch. A smile appeared to have crossed her face briefly, just prior to the photo being taken, passing along her mouth and upwards to her eyes where it remained for a second as a flash exploded into the room. The stab of light whitewashed the walls, brightened the shadows, and lengthened the darkness beneath the bed.

My father was not yet home from work when I uncovered the photo. I imagined him packing his things, leaving his office, and immediately ran down the hall. His small insurance firm was just three miles away, and I counted the stoplights he passed with each of my footfalls. Rushing with this new proof of his life before us, I exited the room as his truck turned onto the road that would connect him to here. Stumbled at full speed after he crossed the first intersection, handed my sister the photo for her review while he idled at a busy crosswalk, just across from the high school one mile away. Before she could speak, our father's truck door slammed as I ran the length of the hall in reverse to return the picture, socks slipping along the hardwood floor. Seconds later, he disengaged the lock to the front door. Shouting hello as we stood in our own doorways, my sister held my eyes. Hers wider than I'd seen them before, as if she knew more about the meaning of this than I did, even after she could only glance briefly at the blue skirted woman. After some time and some settling noises from my father moving around the kitchen to prepare dinner, my sister moved her gaze to the brick above my door. I became suddenly uneasy and crossed my threshold, closing the door gently behind me.

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I was packing to move away from my father's house after college when I found the photo again. It was much different now – the glossy paper had faded, its adhered colors muted by the constant scraping against the wall and my father's desk. I found it, though, when I spent a few weeks collecting my things from my small bedroom at the end of the hall. Since I had been away, the room became a repository for various items my father no longer cared to see. In-house storage for difficult memories, a resting place for the photo I found as a child.

My breath caught when I saw it. It was buried towards the bottom of a plastic bin of clothes, placed intentionally face down. I noticed the corners were aligned with the corners of the bin, an intentional process that spoke to the years I watched my father clean his tools after each use. Each had a place in its own drawer, grouped with similar items. Despite its tidy lay, the photo didn't belong here. These were my clothes, after all, mixed in a tumble that could be

taken as a loose summary of the eight years prior. Those years after I first saw the photo. I packed it with me as I left, thinking of it as I kissed my fathers weekend stubble on my way out.

Easing down the driveway, I distracted my thoughts away from this picture: fiddling with the radio knob as I left the neighborhood, remembered my broken antenna as I pulled onto the single lane highway that separated my fathers house from the industrial area on the opposite side, and finally selecting a disc from the uncased pile in my glove compartment. The image still burned through my eyes, though, and I only heard the soft thrum of guitar as an accompaniment to memory rather than the distance I needed.

Crossing under the last bridge in our county, I inhaled deeply through my nose. Deep, full breaths that didn't do much to clear my head. I rolled the window down to feel the autumn air on my face as it streamed past my car, along the farmland I traveled through. My father was raised in this land and wanted to move back to it. He told us this, but never pushed himself to do it. I dreamed of working with him in a garage we could fit all his tools into, rather than dividing them among the few empty rooms in our small house. I wanted badly to stretch into the earth here, to move along the grass barefoot, run through the overgrowth of our acreage, and rush to meet my father as he pulled down a long driveway to our bigger house. The imagined gravel crunching of his tires along our unpaved driveway filtered through the rain that had begun to slap hard against my windshield.

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The ledge on which the brick rested angled backwards very gently, and almost so slight the brick could have been blown down by an errant breeze. The frame had somehow degraded from its original measured level over the forty years since the house went up, the wood angled away from the wall allowing the brick to rest quietly if placed just so. I closed my door slowly as I entered, making sure to not jar the weight loose. I sometimes forgot this in excitement or frustration, closed too fast and waited with my ear to hear the heaviness slam against the floor and reverberate through the thin walls of the house. Nothing held the brick in place other than its own mass, and nothing seemed to move the brick down from its place aside from my father's hand after sliding along the frame to find it, watching a smile rise into the corners of his mouth as he watched me watching.

Just about every second week the brick was brought down closer to us, cupped in his hands as if it were a bird's egg rescued from a negligent mother. His fingers were scarred from years of work and I grasped them to map each line, brushing the brick lightly as it sat. Always, the brick was warmer than I thought, warmer than his hands as I explored them, warmer than the air around us. I wondered why this was, but only glanced up to meet his eyes, keeping my mouth closed.

The photograph was with me after seeing it: behind my eyes as I woke, appearing gauzily above me as I pushed the thin sheets from my legs to rise for school. Each morning I passed my fathers bedroom, catching his desk with my falsely casual gaze, I paused and

remembered. I didn't look for it again, since I was troubled enough when I caught myself wishing for more information without a way to access it. Even if I could have, the amount of any knowledge gained about this real, physical person on a real bed somewhere would have limited my imagination for who she could be. I didn't know it then, of Somehow I understood that to know exactly who she was would result in years of remembering that small, brief haunting, one I tried so hard to figure out before everything either cleared with understanding or faded to black forgotten mess assumptions. The way a child's mind works. Unsolved little tricks of whispered stories, guesses about this photo that drifted in air between sisters at the end of the hall.

The morning after I found the woman on the bed, I rose with the weight of sleep still pushing downward on my eyelids, slowing their opening. Cassie fought me briefly for the bathroom before she sat down in the hall, her back against a faded yellow wall, humming a made up song to herself to pass time. I caught a radio melody, parts of two songs that didn't fit, its lilting plying audibly between my toothbrush strokes and faucet hiss. I spit out toothpaste, pressed a half full paper cup to my lips to rinse as the water still ran. My sister stood and stared at me as she walked into the bathroom, sensing her turn. Her humming stopped as I spit again and walked out.

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I came home from school on winter break during my second year. Cassie cornered me in the bathroom, eyes wide with the residue of shock. She said father came home late a few weeks prior to my arrival, and was drunk, though she and I never knew him to want that kind of release. Between the groans and rants he managed to hide from us for most of our lives, he apologized for running away after I was born, he apologized for our mother leaving because he didn't get in touch for the three weeks he was gone. My sister stood amazed, and promised she wouldn't tell me any of this.

A friend of his called later on in the evening. My sister said she had trouble hearing the ring over my father's snoring that echoed from the couch to the kitchen walls, skittering across the hardwood floor. A woman stammered apologies mid-greeting, saying that she knew what happened, and it was her fault for inviting him out after work. Father left his keys and license at the bar, after falling from his stool, a shadow of whiskey staining the front of his shirt. She said his car would be safe in the lot that night. After a pause this woman told my sister that our father loved his girls more than he could ever tell us. Cassie didn't recognize her voice.

Huddled in the bathroom, we wondered who his friend could have been, though I immediately thought of mom. Our father didn't have any friends that we knew of, and he kept to a tight routine that mostly involved work and car repair. I didn't tell Cassie this, though, knowing that she might take it as a challenge to find this woman in the grocery stores and shopping malls that ran along the edges of town. I shook my head as she spoke, letting my hair fall into my eyes to cover them. We didn't talk about the call again after that afternoon, though there was a distance between us that I hadn't noticed before.

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Cassie's school was halfway to mine and we walked the mornings, through the yards of other houses, just beside the road on paths overgrown enough to prevent our bicycles from navigating. Leaving after us each day, father made sure the bikes were still tucked in a corner of the garage, difficult to access without moving mountains of half repaired mowers, cases of motor oil, and unidentifiable pieces of cars. Avoiding so much noise and effort, we always chose our feet.

We walked down our street and then turned left between houses that stood as guideposts. We talked to ourselves at the same time, as was our habit, but never listened to what the other said. I tested my sister, saying her name under my breath, wondering if the wind could carry it as she tramped a few feet ahead. Beyond our neighbor's homes, the grass grew long and we allowed it to lead us to a narrow dirt path. I heard my sister speak to herself or someone else not visibly present, and wondered who it might have been. Perhaps I still shouldered the photographic weight, and searched for something important in anything that day, but I didn't ask what she mumbled about. I never did ask, on any of our school bound walks, choosing instead to respect her mysteries in a way I never did with our father. We never spoke to each other on these walks and even after growing into adults, never spoke about why.

Months now had passed since we found the photo, and I wasn't sure Cassie even remembered. Dew clung to our shoes, shining them in the sun. We shuffled through ankle deep grass purposely, but I hated that water gradually sunk through the seams of my shoes to my socks. My sister said it reminded her of the pools of rainwater collecting in the hollows of the poplar trees in our backyard. I shook my head and walked high-step until the grass grew shorter, trampled eventually into the brown path that we continued on. The worn earth cut behind a line of White Pine trees, shielding us from much of the road noise, and the curiosities that rose from traffic so early in the day. The light scent of exhaust fumes just barely breezing through the evergreen needles to follow us. The screech of tires occasionally breaks the rhythm of our shoed feet pumping the earth smoothly back into itself.

The pines eventually broke into a small field lined with the planned growth of weeds and brush, a natural fence for school children. Onward, down a small hill strewn with tiny stones that ensured I would slip, and through a larger field reserved for soccer or baseball or secret telling. Then, her school stood light brown with long rectangular windows. A gymnasium had been added since I left the year before. It looked new on that autumn day- constructed during the summer and finished prior to my sister entering the second grade. With the building in sight, Cassie moved faster across the field that separated us from the school, walking just to the right of the overgrowth that never fully succeeded in keeping us on or off the property. Quickly, she continued walking, waving her hand toward the school though I know she meant it for me. I stood until she crossed the blacktop and entered through the gymnasium door. Some mornings the latch would click loud enough to carry to the opposite end of the field where I waited. Whenever I did hear it, I couldn't move until the sharpness of the sound was gone

Just past my sister's school, the path continued again into trees, deciduous leaves browning on their branches, awaiting a strong wind to pluck them off by the each. Every step away from my sister's school was led deeper into the thick wooded lot between streets. I sometimes found myself lost on a side path, marked only by the leaves that had been trampled by kids before me. I knew them well enough to close my eyes and make it before the first bell. I closed them then, on this day, and missed the wind blowing; a wind that blurred the orange and brown leaves into a confused wash of color. I kept them shut, feeling the cold rain touching my hands like painless pinpricks, millions of cold prisms reflecting each other and the earth around me. I stood alone, missing the brightness and clouds shadowing the paths margins. I stood in the path for hours waiting for the sun to bleed the darkness from the corners, listening to the wind blow the branches dry. Finally, opening my eyes, everything seemed to move at half speed, but away from me. I ran twice as hard as I needed to catch the last lunch bell.

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My father told me that the brick had been thrown through the front window of the house a few days after my mother left us. He always assumed it was her, our mother, after she found a place to live closer to the coast, leaving us inland. We never heard from her after that, and being so young, I never really missed her until there were other mothers at friends houses or school functions. The way he smiled and tossed it between his hands in front of our rooms when I was a child, I wondered if this was the closest he would get to the truth.

The day I left, my father hurried out after me, hands behind his back, smiling as he bent to my car window. I looked close at his eyes, and only saw my face reflected back. He told me that he had something and I had to take it, and there would be no questions. Still smiling, he pulled the brick from behind his body, as if it were a magic he was passing on to me. He didn't need it, he said. I accepted it from him, with a similar lack of need, eventually tossing out of the window along I-70. In the driver's side mirror, I watched it settle along the berm, just outside of the city, tumbling into the overgrown grass.

When I mentioned this to Cassie that night, she didn't respond. My phone had a fuzzy connection and her breath mingled with crossed lines, splitting the noise into pauses that divided her breath into static. When she finally did say something, it was only that she remembered the mornings before we left our rooms for school, the evenings when she waited for me to walk the path, moving quickly out of fear from being caught in the darkening woods. We talk, now that I'm settled into my new place, about the one time our dad came home too drunk to speak. I can hear her smile into the phone, awaiting my response, waiting for new information. Before too long, she says she misses me. She misses when we return home from school to stand between our rooms, speaking quietly until the keys click into the lock and we shush ourselves. When we secreted into our rooms until our father opened the door and set his keys on the kitchen counter. Both of us sat silent, until he walked up the stairs into the hall, calling us out, reaching to the top of my door frame.