Chapter 3

Cream Shoes

My mother, Faye, was a mailman's daughter. She grew up in town, in a yellow house with a white picket fence lined with purple irises. Her mother was a seamstress, the best in the valley some said, so as a young woman Faye wore beautiful clothes, all perfectly tailored, from velvet jackets and polyester trousers to woolen pantsuits and gabardine dresses. She attended church and participated in school and community activities. Her life had an air of intense order, normalcy, and unassailable respectability.

That air of respectability was carefully concocted by her mother. My grandmother, LaRue, had come of age in the 1950s, in the decade of idealistic fever that burned after World War II. LaRue's father was an alcoholic in a time before the language of addiction and empathy had been invented, when alcoholics weren't called alcoholics, they were called drunks. She was from the "wrong kind" of family but embedded in a pious Mormon community that, like many communities, visited the crimes of the parents on the children. She was deemed unmarriageable by the respectable men in town. When she met and married my grandfather—a good-natured young man just out of the navy—she dedicated herself to constructing the perfect family, or at

least the appearance of it. This would, she believed, shield her daughters from the social contempt that had so wounded her.

One result of this was the white picket fence and the closet of handmade clothes. Another was that her eldest daughter married a severe young man with jet-black hair and an appetite for unconventionality.

That is to say, my mother responded willfully to the respectability heaped upon her. Grandma wanted to give her daughter the gift she herself had never had, the gift of coming from a *good* family. But Faye didn't want it. My mother was not a social revolutionary—even at the peak of her rebellion she preserved her Mormon faith, with its devotion to marriage and motherhood—but the social upheavals of the 1970s did seem to have at least one effect on her: she didn't want the white picket fence and gabardine dresses.

My mother told me dozens of stories of her childhood, of Grandma fretting about her oldest daughter's social standing, about whether her piqué dress was the proper cut, or her velvet slacks the correct shade of blue. These stories nearly always ended with my father swooping in and trading out the velvet for blue jeans. One telling in particular has stayed with me. I am seven or eight and am in my room dressing for church. I have taken a damp rag to my face, hands and feet, scrubbing only the skin that will be visible. Mother watches me pass a cotton dress over my head, which I have chosen for its long sleeves so I won't have to wash my arms, and a jealousy lights her eyes.

"If you were Grandma's daughter," she says, "we'd have been up at the crack of dawn preening your hair. Then the rest of the morning would be spent agonizing over which shoes, the white or the cream, would give the right impression."

Mother's face twists into an ugly smile. She's grasping for humor but the memory is jaundiced. "Even after we finally chose the cream, we'd be late, because at the last minute Grandma would panic and drive to Cousin Donna's to borrow *her* cream shoes, which had a lower heel."

Mother stares out the window. She has retreated into herself.

"White or cream?" I say. "Aren't they the same color?" I owned only

one pair of church shoes. They were black, or at least they'd been black when they belonged to my sister.

With the dress on, I turn to the mirror and sand away the crusty dirt around my neckline, thinking how lucky Mother is to have escaped a world in which there was an important difference between white and cream, and where such questions might consume a perfectly good morning, a morning that might otherwise be spent plundering Dad's junkyard with Luke's goat.

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MY FATHER, GENE, WAS one of those young men who somehow manage to seem both solemn and mischievous. His physical appearance was striking—ebony hair, a strict, angular face, nose like an arrow pointing toward fierce, deep-set eyes. His lips were often pressed together in a jocular grin, as if all the world were his to laugh at.

Although I passed my childhood on the same mountain that my father had passed his, slopping pigs in the same iron trough, I know very little about his boyhood. He never talked about it, so all I have to go on are hints from my mother, who told me that, in his younger years, Grandpa-down-the-hill had been violent, with a hair-trigger temper. Mother's use of the words "had been" always struck me as funny. We all knew better than to cross Grandpa. He had a short fuse, that was just fact and anybody in the valley could have told you as much. He was weatherworn inside and out, as taut and rugged as the horses he ran wild on the mountain.

Dad's mother worked for the Farm Bureau in town. As an adult, Dad would develop fierce opinions about women working, radical even for our rural Mormon community. "A woman's place is in the home," he would say every time he saw a married woman working in town. Now I'm older, I sometimes wonder if Dad's fervor had more to do with his own mother than with doctrine. I wonder if he just wished that *she* had been home, so he wouldn't have been left for all those long hours with Grandpa's temper.

Running the farm consumed Dad's childhood. I doubt he expected

to go to college. Still, the way Mother tells it, back then Dad was bursting with energy, laughter and panache. He drove a baby-blue Volkswagen Beetle, wore outlandish suits cut from colorful fabrics, and showcased a thick, fashionable mustache.

They met in town. Faye was waitressing at the bowling alley one Friday night when Gene wandered in with a pack of his friends. She'd never seen him before, so she knew immediately that he wasn't from town and must have come from the mountains surrounding the valley. Farm life had made Gene different from other young men: he was serious for his age, more physically impressive and independent-minded.

There's a sense of sovereignty that comes from life on a mountain, a perception of privacy and isolation, even of dominion. In that vast space you can sail unaccompanied for hours, afloat on pine and brush and rock. It's a tranquillity born of sheer immensity; it calms with its very magnitude, which renders the merely human of no consequence. Gene was formed by this alpine hypnosis, this hushing of human drama.

In the valley, Faye tried to stop her ears against the constant gossip of a small town, whose opinions pushed in through the windows and crept under the doors. Mother often described herself as a pleaser: she said she couldn't stop herself from speculating what people wanted her to be, and from contorting herself, compulsively, unwillingly, into whatever it was. Living in her respectable house in the center of town, crowded by four other houses, each so near anyone could peer through the windows and whisper a judgment, Faye felt trapped.

I've often imagined the moment when Gene took Faye to the top of Buck's Peak and she was, for the first time, unable to see the faces or hear the voices of the people in the town below. They were far away. Dwarfed by the mountain, hushed by the wind.

They were engaged soon after.

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MOTHER USED TO TELL a story from the time before she was married. She

had been close to her brother Lynn, so she took him to meet the man she hoped would be her husband. It was summer, dusk, and Dad's cousins were roughhousing the way they did after a harvest. Lynn arrived and, seeing a room of bowlegged ruffians shouting at each other, fists clenched, swiping at the air, thought he was witnessing a brawl straight out of a John Wayne film. He wanted to call the police.

"I told him to listen," Mother would say, tears in her eyes from laughing. She always told this story the same way, and it was such a favorite that if she departed in any way from the usual script, we'd tell it for her. "I told him to pay attention to the actual words they were shouting. Everyone *sounded* mad as hornets, but really they were having a lovely conversation. You had to listen to *what* they were saying, not *how* they were saying it. I told him, That's just how Westovers talk!"

By the time she'd finished we were usually on the floor. We'd cackle until our ribs hurt, imagining our prim, professorial uncle meeting Dad's unruly crew. Lynn found the scene so distasteful he never went back, and in my whole life I never saw him on the mountain. Served him right, we thought, for his meddling, for trying to draw Mother back into that world of gabardine dresses and cream shoes. We understood that the dissolution of Mother's family was the inauguration of ours. The two could not exist together. Only one could have her.

Mother never told us that her family had opposed the engagement but we knew. There were traces the decades hadn't erased. My father seldom set foot in Grandma-over-in-town's house, and when he did he was sullen and stared at the door. As a child I scarcely knew my aunts, uncles or cousins on my mother's side. We rarely visited them—I didn't even know where most of them lived—and it was even rarer for them to visit the mountain. The exception was my aunt Angie, my mother's youngest sister, who lived in town and insisted on seeing my mother.

What I know about the engagement has come to me in bits and pieces, mostly from the stories Mother told. I know she had the ring before Dad served a mission—which was expected of all faithful

Mormon men—and spent two years proselytizing in Florida. Lynn took advantage of this absence to introduce his sister to every marriageable man he could find this side of the Rockies, but none could make her forget the stern farm boy who ruled over his own mountain.

Gene returned from Florida and they were married.

LaRue sewed the wedding dress.

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I'VE ONLY SEEN A single photograph from the wedding. It's of my parents posing in front of a gossamer curtain of pale ivory. Mother is wearing a traditional dress of beaded silk and venetian lace, with a neckline that sits above her collarbone. An embroidered veil covers her head. My father wears a cream suit with wide black lapels. They are both intoxicated with happiness, Mother with a relaxed smile, Dad with a grin so large it pokes out from under the corners of his mustache.

It is difficult for me to believe that the untroubled young man in that photograph is my father. Fearful and anxious, he comes into focus for me as a weary middle-aged man stockpiling food and ammunition.

I don't know when the man in that photograph became the man I know as my father. Perhaps there was no single moment. Dad married when he was twenty-one, had his first son, my brother Tony, at twenty-two. When he was twenty-four, Dad asked Mother if they could hire an herbalist to midwife my brother Shawn. She agreed. Was that the first hint, or was it just Gene being Gene, eccentric and unconventional, trying to shock his disapproving in-laws? After all, when Tyler was born twenty months later, the birth took place in a hospital. When Dad was twenty-seven, Luke was born, at home, delivered by a midwife. Dad decided not to file for a birth certificate, a decision he repeated with Audrey, Richard and me. A few years later, around the time he turned thirty, Dad pulled my brothers out of school. I don't remember it, because it was before I was born, but I wonder if perhaps that was a turning point. In the four years that followed, Dad got rid of the telephone and chose not to renew his license to drive. He stopped registering and insuring the family car.

Then he began to hoard food.

This last part sounds like my father, but it is not the father my older brothers remember. Dad had just turned forty when the Feds laid siege to the Weavers, an event that confirmed his worst fears. After that he was at war, even if the war was only in his head. Perhaps that is why Tony looks at that photo and sees his father, and I see a stranger.

Fourteen years after the incident with the Weavers, I would sit in a university classroom and listen to a professor of psychology describe something called bipolar disorder. Until that moment I had never heard of mental illness. I knew people could go crazy—they'd wear dead cats on their heads or fall in love with a turnip—but the notion that a person could be functional, lucid, persuasive, and something could still be wrong, had never occurred to me.

The professor recited facts in a dull, earthy voice: the average age of onset is twenty-five; there may be no symptoms before then.

The irony was that if Dad was bipolar—or had any of a dozen disorders that might explain his behavior—the same paranoia that was a symptom of the illness would prevent its ever being diagnosed and treated. No one would ever know.

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GRANDMA-OVER-IN-TOWN DIED THREE YEARS ago, age eighty-six.

I didn't know her well.

All those years I was passing in and out of her kitchen, and she never told me what it had been like for her, watching her daughter shut herself away, walled in by phantoms and paranoias.

When I picture her now I conjure a single image, as if my memory is a slide projector and the tray is stuck. She's sitting on a cushioned bench. Her hair pushes out of her head in tight curls, and her lips are pulled into a polite smile, which is welded in place. Her eyes are pleasant but unoccupied, as if she's observing a staged drama.

That smile haunts me. It was constant, the only eternal thing, inscrutable, detached, dispassionate. Now that I'm older and I've

taken the trouble to get to know her, mostly through my aunts and uncles, I know she was none of those things.

I attended the memorial. It was open casket and I found myself searching her face. The embalmers hadn't gotten her lips right—the gracious smile she'd worn like an iron mask had been stripped away. It was the first time I'd seen her without it and that's when it finally occurred to me: that Grandma was the only person who might have understood what was happening to me. How the paranoia and fundamentalism were carving up my life, how they were taking from me the people I cared about and leaving only degrees and certificates—an air of respectability—in their place. What was happening now had happened before. This was the second severing of mother and daughter. The tape was playing in a loop.