

## Roots

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They said I had her eyes, cornflower blue with specks of goldenrod, although I always thought mine were more the color of slate. They said I had his loopy sense of humor whenever we chuckled together over some inane joke, our shoulders bouncing up and down like Popeye. She and I were fair of skin with slender builds, though they said I was large-boned. I shared his love of dancing around the house to Dean Martin and early rock and roll. He bought me my first forty-fives and we bickered about which side was superior, and he always defended the flip side. When I despaired at my ineptitude in sewing class in the fifth grade, she finished my project so I wouldn't be embarrassed when I presented my finished garment.

He and I shared tall, frosty glasses of milk on sweltering Brooklyn days when he would convince me that I could feel a chill spreading through my veins as we raced to finish every drop. She surprised me with my favorite potato pancakes and apple sauce, waiting on the kitchen table after school, on a day when she sensed I needed it. She once made me pineapple upside-down cake for dinner for no reason at all. He taught me how to drive his fifty-six, blue and white Chevy, and she would be waiting on the porch when we returned from a lesson, embroiled in a shouting match, his face beet red because he said I drove too fast and didn't listen, and I said that frantically pumping an imaginary brake from the passenger seat was counter-productive. We compulsively repeated the exact scenario on a regular basis.

She once rushed me off the bus a stop before ours, on our way home from shopping for an Easter dress because she spied from the window, my *secret* junior high school heartthrob, after which, walking the extra blocks was like walking on clouds. On Thanksgiving we ate his lumpy mashed potatoes and her roast turkey, the crispy, succulent skin of which he showed me how to steal from places she wouldn't notice. The meal was served on blue and white china which had belonged to her mother. I would shutter as I watched them eat pickled herring from

a jar, and Ritz crackers, accompanied by her yearly Rum and Coke and his familiar glass of Rheingold on New Year's Eve, just after we banged wooden spoons against metal pots in the cold on the front stoop at midnight.

He defended me against neighborhood bullies and taught me how to change a tire. He also taught me how to fight, in the alley next to our house, so I could protect myself when he wasn't around, and he called me Junior. 'Put up your dukes, Junior,' he would counsel, and tap my cheek lightly with an open hand, as a challenge. She braided my hair and sewed tutus for my dance recitals, as well as a gauzy ruffled skirt for the vanity table she saved up to buy me one year for Christmas. They both dropped their daily pocket change and occasional dollar bills into candy dishes kept in the china closet, the sum to be used for our escape from the August heat to rent a two-room apartment in an upstate farmhouse a neighbor had told her about.

He would sometimes look at me from across the dining room table and say, "You're a beautiful kid, you know?" And at those moments I did know. She took me to the local bank to open a Christmas Club so I could buy him presents. I used half of the money for him, and the other half to surprise her with something she would never think to buy for herself. We watched *Abbott and Costello* and *Burns and Allen* on television, and shared Saturday morning breakfasts, which he was a master of, be it hot dogs and eggs or bologna and pickle omelets. They shared fears as well; the fear of him losing his job if his union went on strike, or the fear of one of the landlord's sons deciding to marry and wanting our apartment.

There was one thing we didn't share. Blood. Our love and respect, and habits and tastes, were conjured by devotion, not by genes. Our family existed because they were given a gift of an unwanted three-month old baby girl, who they *did* want very badly. It didn't take blood or DNA for me to grow up honest and compassionate, or loving the color blue and the sound of thunder, or driving on back roads, eating in diners, or pumping my own gas.

The people whose blood runs through my veins gave me life and they provided me with the opportunity to be part of a family with whom I developed bonds as strong as any strands of DNA. The connection I experienced is one that exceeds physical heredity. It is a love that settles deep in one's bones and one's psyche.

All I learned, and all I absorbed living with the people who raised me, has also been passed on, like a fantastical transcendent chromosome, to my son. Just as a single grain of rice will exponentially produce ten-thousand grains, my own kind of heredity has been handed down to him and will hopefully continue to thrive. His eyes are brown, but his sense of right and wrong and unconditional love is connected to a family line that runs deep. He also drives too fast and we also argue about it. He can change a tire with the best of them. Did I mention that one morning he surprised me with a breakfast of odd, random ingredients he had foraged from the refrigerator, and it nearly took my breath away.