

A Confession – We Do Look Alike

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My mother and I do not look alike. This bothers her immensely, although she hasn't explicitly told me this. I can see it though, in her eyes when she looks at me, when people express their surprise and she smiles in that close-mouthed way, teeth absent.

Both of my sisters look like her; that is, blonde and tall and thin. If you were to look at a picture of the three of them, some snapshot of a smiling family on vacation, you would be able to detect the resemblance almost immediately. However, when I look into the face of my mother, I see no part of myself staring back. My brown hair and light eyes reject her claim on me – I am much more my father's daughter.

I remember a few years ago I took a trip with a friend to Target. This was soon after arriving at college, with thousands of miles deliberately placed between me and home. I had tagged along on this ride just for fun, with no real motivation behind joining my friend as she shopped for linens and a shower curtain. I recall stopping, though, when I passed the aisle filled with boxes and boxes of hair dye. My hair was still blonde then, and I felt this itching, violent urge to grab a box and dye my hair something much darker. So I grabbed two boxes of dye and all the resentment festering inside of me, and did.

That night, my friend helped me cover every inch of my head in that foul hair dye that smelled like wet garbage, and I smiled the whole time. After it was finished, I looked into the mirror and saw a version of myself I almost recognized. When I came home for Thanksgiving that year, my mom took one look at me and my darker hair and said nothing. She hasn't really said much after that either.

That's not to say that my mom and I have absolutely nothing in common. My sisters inherited her ease with other people, her infectious smile that creates in others a desire for friendship. They have her loud laughter, her sense of fashion, and her comfort in verbally expressing love. I have her temper – I can go from smiling to cruel in a matter of seconds. The whiplash I've received from her changing moods has scarred me in similar ways to tumbling down hills as a child. She didn't like my comparison so much. I also cry when I'm mad, which means that our fights are very wet and confusing for any bystanders, as no one is able to tell whether we are extremely sad or extremely angry. I've never given much thought to how we could be both. My mom and I love to watch terrible rom-coms and to drink black coffee. I think we both hate my father sometimes.

This is all to say that my mom and I are plenty similar, as much as I despise recognizing it. I can sense our pasts overlapping sometimes too, and I feel for her a vicious pang of sympathy. We both were raised in rural towns in Oklahoma, never understanding the ease that followed wealth. She washed cars and walked dogs to make extra money, and I worked retail jobs all throughout high school so that I wouldn't have to go to my dad, red-faced and filled with shame, to ask for money to go to the movies. She knew that her father didn't have money to give her whether he wanted to or not, and so we shared this anxiety and resentment towards our fathers and their billfolds. She works as a front-desk manager for a hotel now, and I don't ask her about her divorce from my dad or her lack of a sufficient income. She never asks about my retail job I hold

alongside my academics or how my financial independence both frightens and empowers me. In this silence we are very much in agreement.

I call her “Janice” in public and “mom” in my head, which confuses the hell out of my friends. It doesn’t make much sense to me either, except in the ways that it really does. When I say, “Janice struggles with bipolar-II disorder” out loud, it sounds far less scary and more distant than when I think, “Mom is crazy.” I never fully understood her mood swings or what they meant, only that they frightened me.

There was the time that she cooked an elaborate meal for over six hours and wouldn’t wait to put on mittens to pull a tray out of the oven. She burned her hands and dropped food all over the floor and sat on the linoleum crying while I watched from the doorway. I had to get her a bowl of cold water and then spent the rest of the evening cleaning up the mess that was our kitchen. Afterwards, she didn’t leave her bed for three whole days.

Madness became as familiar to me as the smell of roasted chicken and my mother’s voice. There was another time though, when she let me skip class and took me to Oklahoma City to visit the zoo and we drank lemonade and spent the whole day looking at animals. It was bright and sunny and I remember the warm look she gave me and how I wanted to grow up and look just as pretty as she did that day. After, we both agreed that we wouldn’t tell dad about our trip and that the tigers were the coolest out of everything that we’d seen. I hadn’t laughed so much in a long time, and I remember smiling the whole drive home. When we pulled back up to our house, I didn’t quite understand why the sight of our porch lights made me feel so nauseous.

When my dad attempted suicide, he succeeded in killing my relationship with my mom where he failed in killing himself. She cried and cried after the police officer told her the news, and I remember being dry-eyed and stiff, looking at her and thinking to myself, “We don’t look alike at all.”

We tried going to some perversion of couples-therapy after that, both of us sitting on opposite ends of some ugly paisley couch with a therapist staring at us from behind her mustard-colored desk. I thought her clock was ugly too, because it was big and painted neon-orange and didn’t match anything else in her office. I almost snickered to my mom about it, but decided not to in the end. I think my mom and I saw that therapist a total of three times before writing off the whole experience as a failure, probably because of our refusal to discuss anything actually relevant. When our therapist asked my mom whether she despised my obvious preference for my father over her she looked rather confused, repeatedly saying, “Despise her? No, no, I love her as much as much as she loves me. We’re fine, it’s his fault, you see, it’s his fault,” while shaking her head slowly, methodically, grasping the fabric of her pants so tightly her knuckles turned white. I never denied my therapist’s claim that I preferred my father, as it seemed to me to be an unwavering truth that needed no explanation, not even to myself.

My mom doesn’t call me anymore, but she does favorite the occasional Facebook picture I post for the benefit of my extended family. I’m still not sure whether this prolonged silence is better than our constant fighting, but it aches all the same. I have found that nothing stings quite as much as a mother’s love. When I call my dad or my sisters, the absence of her name seems to me

like an empty, looming void hovering over my shoulder that tempts me to turn and look, even though what I would see terrifies me.

Everything I write now seems to be flooded with her presence. I can see my mother in the expressions I use, my verbal tics, the themes I choose to engage with. Sometimes when I write a certain phrase it is as if I can hear the echo of her voice saying it back to me.

When I think of home now, I can easily imagine the presence of my sisters running through the house and laughing, the awkward lunches with my dad as we make small talk, the couch covered with our dog's hair because he never learned to stay off the furniture. I cannot imagine my mom there though, as the moment she comes to mind the idea of home fades right in front of my eyes. I feel a warm hand in mine and the sun on my face and know that if I just glanced over, I would see recognition in smiling eyes. Doubt always tugs on my other hand, and so I refuse to look.

To write with any type of honesty or truth I know I must write as much for her as I do for myself. She knows as well as I do the reason I dyed my hair dark all those years ago, and why I refuse to dye it back. She dislikes when I call her crazy and I cannot blame her, although sometimes I feel the sharp edges of her mind poke at me. Insanity has always frightened me and so she frightens me too.

As far as Catholicism dictates, a confession involves kneeling in front of a priest and divulging your sins. This never felt true to me. What sins would I confess to her, if I found myself in front of her pulpit?

One of my friends saw an old picture the other day of me and my mom and said, "You know, you really look like her." I didn't reply to them then, but I will now. You're right. I really do.