

## Elegy

*Age 35.* With them absent now for years you find yourself standing straighter, aching less, running faster. You sleep prone. You can do the military crawl. In the park women run past with neon sports bras, tanned stomachs. Little girls skate by, halter-tops almost falling off, no thought of boys.

*Age 34.* When you're bored you press the glowing circle of a cigarette butt into your arm, hot and sweet and scarring. Your heart has been rope-burned from moving so fast, holding on so tight. The Man is gone, replaced by a memory like a magazine cutout tacked to your brain with sharp metal. Who broke up with whom, anyway? You had known it wouldn't last. While he slept, you used to rub little tufts of his red hair between your fingers. Once, you chased him with silver sewing scissors. "I need a lock for myself!" you shouted. "I'll need it to go to sleep!"

*Age 33.* The Man has bright red hair. He is prettier than you, skinnier than you, happier than you. You meet in cafes, bowling alleys, movie theaters. You meet in bedrooms, bathrooms, basements. You meet halfway. You meet all the way. You meet crying in the dark. You meet friends, you meet parents, you meet sisters. You meet everyone with red hair. You eat eggs in the mornings, white encircling yellow, circles encircling circles. You hike together to the soft, snowy tips of mountains, your faces blushing red. His hair feels like fire. When you touch him you think your fingerprints might be burned off. When he touches you, you feel as if you could burn right to the ground.

You take The Pill daily at 4pm, on schedule exactly because – just imagine: your children would have his fire red hair, and your terrible, errored DNA.

*Age 32.* When The Man puts his cool hands on the slight curve of your waist, you take a deep breath, as if about to dive into dark waters. You remove your shirt swiftly, like drawing back the curtain to reveal the lie: the nearly empty length of you, navel to neck flat and white except for those two horizontal flaws — pink lines, double-dashes that mark off the missing, inset like the slits of eyes on a swollen face, the skin around them tight and bumpy, squeezing in, tight as pursed lips. He doesn't sigh, he doesn't stop, he doesn't flutter his hands against you in some symbol of acceptance, he just pushes you backwards on the bed and whispers in your ear, "What do you like?"

*Age 31.* You meet a man in line at the grocery store. You meet another at the Laundromat while you watch clothes turn in white circles. You meet one outside of a diner in the rain, your hair wet and stringy. You want nothing to do with them. You are wearing something plain: a high school swim team sweater, a baggy T-shirt with no logo, a black raincoat. Anything to cover what isn't there. The men look at you, and you look down at your hands, the bare, white fingers, even whiter where they clutch at the clear container of pointed, pale meringues, or a pocketed white bra, or the white paper coffee cup growing soggy from the rain and too many refills. Your fingers are toothpicky, you've always thought, a ring would fall right off of them.

*Age 30.* The mirror takes courage. You start high. Your irises are light gray, like the moon, like your mother's eyes. Your pupils, wide as marbles, wider than most, like your father's. Everywhere, circles encircling circles. And below your neck, the fresh absence of circles. *Frankenstein*, you think. *A monster*, you think. *No, no, no*, you think, *a marvel of modern science*. Have you dodged a bullet? There's the possibility that you never would have gotten sick at all, in which case what you've done is cut and run before even being called to battle.

Body parts and the dead seem to float around you, invisible and heavy, like phantom limbs. In your wallet, a picture that you carry like a membership card. The picture is of you and your aunt and your mother in the backyard, bright yellow leaves poised in the blue-gray air, mid-descent. You are young and pigtailed, your aunt holds you above her head, you hold a shirtless Barbie above yours. You know nothing about your future, about the fates coded inside you.

*Age 29.* Before the surgery, you spend days wandering through the grocery store listlessly. Is this what it's like to be a man? Seeing them everywhere, in the configuration of fruits, on poultry labels, in the curved shape of pink ribbons? They stare up at you like eyes from magazine covers and five-dollar romance novels. You get it now, that men don't really see the shirt's neck at all, but what is contained in its inverse.

You consider the jokes you could make if people didn't look at you with such pity, something about making a clean \_\_\_\_\_ of it, getting things off your \_\_\_\_\_. It's not really a joke, you guess. Really, your heart hammers in your \_\_\_\_\_, and sadness rises in your \_\_\_\_\_, and you think perhaps you've always played your cards too close to your \_\_\_\_\_.

You seem to be levitating in a white room. Blue curtains swing back and forth as if you are on a stage, an opening act. A nightstand fills with cards, a windowsill with flowers. Your mother reads the cards aloud, all of them, word for word, even the words that aren't handwritten, and then she

describes the fronts to you as if you no longer have eyes either. “Get well soon,” she says. “And, look, flowers on the front, all purple.” Your father brings you books, the funnier the better. “Look at all of those cards,” he marvels. “Just look at all of those flowers,” he says, rubbing the petals softly between his thick fingers. In your dreams, cards and flowers float around you in circles. They have eyes that glance in all directions but yours. You look around deliriously, trying to catch an eye. “I forget the end of my sentence. . .” you say. Someone in the room is laughing. “I forget the end. . . I forget it before I get to the beginning.”

*Age 28.* The stars align, misalign, realign. Your horoscope makes claims that never come true. A comet zooms through the sky, sperm-like. Can you wish on those? Your mother waits with you in a cold, pastel pink room that’s full of women wearing scarves, hats, wigs, women whose eyes are bulging from skeleton faces and blackening sockets, a room like where your mother went weekly when she was sick, while you stayed home with a friend, almost gleeful about the free reign, watching TV all evening with a bowl of ice cream the size of your head. You wait, your fingers wrapped tightly around a Styrofoam cup—the tea bag has broken, and confetti flakes surface, forming unreadable shapes. Soon, you hold the results instead, pinched between the thumb and forefinger of each hand, the way you might hold a cookie’s fortune. Your mother’s face is as flat and white as paper.

The doctor is pale with gray hair and a starched white coat. Perhaps he works so often with the dying that he is beginning to take on their colors. “I want them gone as soon as possible,” you say. He puts a hand on your shoulder, explains again that your mutated gene doesn’t guarantee anything, that the surgery’s just preventative, prophylactic, just-in-case. “Take time to think about it,” he says. But you have thought about it. You’ve been thinking about it for years. You’ve had dreams where you were miniature and helpless, sliding down your own double-helix, passing through a terrible, quiet darkness, cold and damp like a cave, but worse because nothing could live there, or even try. “Off,” you say. “I understand,” he says, so easily and without pity, because he knows the other possible futures, and you want to thank him for that, you want to fling him backwards on the table and make sure, one last time, that what’s going won’t be missed.

You sleep in your green-walled, childhood room. Barbies stare into space from atop your bookshelf, sitting the only ways they know how, in painful splits or with legs placed properly together. If there were brains in their heads they’d be wondering what kind of woman you’ve become, wondering if you’ve used your body to its full advantage, or if you’ve used it beyond its full advantage and now it’s paying the price.

*Age 27.* You are resigned to a fate no one has confirmed to be true. You've thought about making an appointment. You begin to wear baggy shirts, your ugliest plain gray sports bras, as if you've never worn shirts with necks that V, scoop, drape, plunge.

Sometimes, late at night, you think you catch a glimpse of your aunt, of her white, gauzy nightgown, so thin and weightless it could only be made of air.

You open your mouth—it's empty and dark. Tongues arrive blindly as worms, squirming in and out of the inhospitable darkness, burrowing deep and then departing, depositing nothing, least of all love. You bring home a coworker who is not really your type, but who does what he's asked without asking why. He likes them more than you do. If you were dating, you could present them to him as a parting gift, like a severed ear.

*Age 26.* Your aunt's cheeks have sunken in like the skin between the ribs of the deer that summer with no rain. You sit by her side relentlessly, like one of those conservationists who won't leave a condemned tree. *Here*, you want to say, *have my puffy cheeks, my healthy cells*, but all you can do is hand her books, water, pictures. All you can do is watch as she becomes smaller, becomes sweatier, begins speaking in tongues. "This picture," you say, your hands shaking. "This picture of us." You want her to see how everything is suspended, how the bright yellow leaves seem to hover in the air. Her white nightgown flutters, her arm thrusts towards you with unexpected speed, as when, in the movies, you suddenly realize a body is not yet dead. "Stop," she says, grabbing your wrist. "Just stop."

Flowers. The house fills with flowers.

*Age 24.* You write a *Get Well Soon* card to your aunt. The front is filled with lilacs. All of the cards in the pharmacy are either too funny or too morose. Maybe this is your future career path—the market for non-shitty *Get Well* cards seems largely untapped. And what about cards for those who might never get well?

*Age 22.* The boys are soft, warm weights. They are shots of hard liquor and the morning payback. They are carnival goldfish, shiny and forgetful, easily lost and won. They are songs performed live that make you sway, swoon, swell, that end with a chord you can't play but they can, and you can feel it vibrate and echo through you. They are vampires, werewolves, things that appeared in the night to confess, convert, cry, come. They are moonlit shadows dancing on

the wall, dark and featureless, versions of the truth. In the sunlight, always, they expand and disappear.

*Age 21.* You got into this situation a little too quickly, a little too drunkenly. After, you pull the sheet up around your neck. “You embarrassed?” asks the brown-eyed boy who doesn’t know you well enough to know what you are and who therefore shouldn’t comment. He pulls his pants up right in front of an opened window.

Your mother calls. Your aunt is not well.

*Age 19.* Your first is finished so fast you never manage to take your shirt off, or maybe you won’t let him take your shirt off. They are too big, too pale, the space between them is too wide.

*Age 17.* A boy puts his hand under your shirt. You stop breathing, your teeth start to chatter, but you don’t stop him. “What?” he says finally, leaning back. “You’ve never done this before?” You tell him you do it all the time. You tell him it’s as common as eating breakfast, and as boring. You tell him you’ve had these stupid things since you were twelve, and you’d trade them in a second for something better, like a bike.

They often don’t feel as if they are yours in the first place. A drunken man with greasy hair and a yellow face standing near you on a dark subway platform picks up a piece of trash and examines it carefully, places it back on the ground, then comes to touch you. In the dark there, alone, you don’t dare move or act human.

*Age 16.* Your mom has a new pixie haircut. “It shows off all of my bad features,” she says again and again, feeling the edges with the palm of her hand. She seems always, that year, to be wielding a bottle of hairspray.

“What are you wearing?” says your mother. “Wife beater,” you say. “Excuse me?” she says. “Do you realize your bright pink bra is showing right through what, in my years, we called an incredibly small *tank top*?” Your father looks you over, wide-eyed, like he’s never met you before. “Uh-huh,” he says. “You be careful in that.”

*Age 15.* Everyone at your lunch table buys a pink ribbon for fifty cents from a girl with a coffee can and too many clips in her hair. The quarters clink in coolly, one by one. No one looks at you.

While your mom sleeps, you stand at her bedroom door and watch for the gentle rise and fall of her breath.

*Age 14.* The house is like a florist's shop, all flat surfaces overflowing with color and a sickeningly sweet scent. Your mom puts a vase of daisies on your bedside table. She doesn't seem sick at all, but at first neither do flowers that have been cut off at the stem. The fridge fills with lasagnas and chili, foiled baking dishes, plastic yogurt containers labeled with masking tape. Your father must have called everyone—family, friends, coworkers, maybe even people in the neighborhood who you have never met. The mantel is crowded with cards like it always is around birthdays, but these say *Get Well Soon* in thin, shiny cursive. Your father wanders around the house sniffing, touching petals, rubbing them sometimes to nothing between his pointer finger and his thumb. "Look at all of this!" he keeps announcing to no one in particular. "Like a funeral," you hear him mumble once.

In newspaper and magazine articles things grow and spread like \_\_\_\_\_ and on every map there is a bold line marking *The Tropic Of* \_\_\_\_\_ and the horoscopes say that for the crab called \_\_\_\_\_ not everything will go as planned.

Your mom doesn't miss much work, but she looks alien, eyebrowless and bald. Her toes are always numb. Sometimes she wears an itchy wig or a blue flowered hat she's borrowed from you. When she opens her mouth to speak you see it like a black pit in the cold earth. "You know I'm going to be okay?" she says. You nod, but you don't know anything.

*Age 13.* Thirteen isn't like the movies or those books for girls—you have no craving to bleed from your most private organ, you don't want to go bra shopping with your mother or, god-forbid, talk about it at all, you have no need for what is growing on you; all they do is get in the way of headstands, soccer, walking home from school in the afternoon alone without getting looked at. But you don't yet think they can be bearers of anything worse.

*Age 12.* For over a decade there is no "them" to notice, until one day you follow some boy's unguarded gaze, and you find them there, foreign hills sprouting from your chest, appearing without your encouragement or consent, throwing you instantly into some stage of life you don't want any part of.

*Age 8.* A shirtless neighborhood boy pegs you with a water balloon. You try to tear the next balloon away from him, so you can throw it at his shorts, but instead it breaks open, spraying you

both. You always seem to make this kind of mistake, either holding on too tight or letting go too soon. "Come here," your mother yells from the window. "Not. Appropriate," she says when you're by her side. You've been running up and down the street shirtless, just like the boys. You don't see why it should be otherwise.

*Age 7.* Leaves fall from the trees. Your aunt lifts you high above her head, and you lift your shirtless Barbie high above yours, as if you're pretending that that Barbie is your niece or your child or the person you want to become.

*Age 0.* You appear from the depths as soft as a seal, naked, crying. You are imperfect in ways no one knows. You are symmetrical: fingers, toes, lips, chest. Your cheeks are pink, your big-pupiled eyes are an alarming light gray. You are suddenly and automatically loved.

*-9 months.* Your parents are newly married, unwrinkled, sweating, skin to skin, breast to breast. It is all determined now. No one has a say. The little X's play their hand of cards. There: your ski jump nose. There: your muscled calves. There: your propensity for math. There: your thin, pale fingers. There, there, there.