

*Still unedited and very raw in its entirety. Story centering second/delayed adolescence, childhood trauma, shame, and family.*

*Protagonist quits her job and runs away to the other side of the country to stay with a great aunt for the first time since childhood, where she must confront her past and overcome her shame by unpacking her childhood memories in a haunted house.*

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Leaving for my aunt's house felt a lot like running away. One time when I was little I begged and begged my mom to let me go see my older brother at work, but the answer was -reasonably- no. I knew he worked at Hollywood Video, and I could imagine that I knew just where it was. I was so desperate to see him that I walked straight out of the house into the dark to walk there when she wasn't paying attention. The further I got down the hill, the further into the unknown I got. It began to rain gently and I remember becoming aware that I did not know where I was anymore. I must have only been six or so, and the big dark world swallowed me up. I didn't know the world could be that frightening. The problem was I'd made enough turns that when I looked back I didn't know how to get home. The minivan slowly pulling up and the door swinging open to reveal my mom backed by the orange glow of the interior lights in the rain was one of the biggest reliefs I'd ever felt. I never wanted to run away again after that.

## **The dark**

When I was little I was scared of everything. Everything had a face, had eyes, was watching me, and was waiting to get me. Every corner, every door was full of terrible potential. I fretted about ghosts and monsters and the dark they lived in. But they fascinated me. There was a book I couldn't stop picking up in my 3rd grade classroom when we had free time. It was a children's book about the history of ghosts in different cultures around the world. It gave me a deep sinking feeling in my stomach but I would read the whole thing over and over. Morbid curiosity was always a fault of mine. Eternally frightened but unable to look away. Later I would become

obsessed with ghost footage and evidence. I got into watching ghost hunting shows on Saturday mornings with cups of hot chocolate. It's ironic that I don't even believe in ghosts. I think I just need them to not exist. The world is too dreadful already. So I don't worry about ghosts.

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So anyway, I ran away. I couldn't take another power line. I couldn't stand the sound of morning traffic. And right now, I couldn't stand to hear another baby's mewling cry. It didn't feel so much like running as being squeezed out of a tube of toothpaste and landing on my Great Aunt's doorstep on the first of October. I was still hot and sweaty from the plane, and for the first time I could actually smell myself. I wasn't necessarily looking forward to seeing her, but this was the only place I could think to put myself with enough space to let out my edges and breathe. I rang the old doorbell and was met by the very concerned face of my great aunt Edna.

"Hi!" I grinned awkwardly. I was never sure what to do with her, nor she with me. Her brows knit together behind her glasses.

"What are you doing here?" The only reaction I had was to laugh.

"I'm staying here? Like we said? I emailed you yesterday." She gasped and put her dainty hands to her mouth.

"That's not next month? Oh I'm so sorry, but this is an awful time, Beatrice." And now I wanted to cry.

"I can't leave, Edna-" I must have made quite the face because she whispered harshly.

"*Almighty, are you pregnant?*" I gasped, the question aching in a way I couldn't name.

"No, Aunt Edna, oh my word, no I'm- The taxi's gone, and I quit my job and-" Was I really going to cry in front of her? I was supposed to be the sensible cousin.

"Oh Beatrice, come in, just sit down in the kitchen and we can talk." I nodded and gathered my bags. Inside I was smacked in the face with the smell of a house I hadn't been in in fifteen years. I almost expected it to be Thanksgiving inside. "Joe's off for the day, otherwise I'd have him help you with your bags. You know I can't, with my arthritis."

"Of course." I left them by the stairs in the foyer. She flipped the kettle switch and sat at the little table by the window with much effort, and I followed.

“Before you get too worried, you can of course stay here. But I have to tell you, *oh this is so embarrassing-*”

“What is it?”

“I thought you were coming in a month. I have a guest already.”

“A guest?” She moved her head from side to side to say, *sort of. Please, God, don't let it be a boyfriend.*

“In a manner of speaking. There's going to be a film crew here. Making a documentary.”

“Really? About the house?” She nodded. “That's all?”

“Well it's not just the house, not really. They're ghost investigators.” I tried not to laugh. “Don't laugh, beatrice.” I sucked my lips in. She continued. “Some very nice gentlemen are coming in this month to investigate the house. Don't you know the history?” A shiver ran up my spine.

“Yes. But really? Ghosts? Ghost hunters?” All I could think of was losing all that privacy I'd been looking forward to. *There goes walking around without a bra before breakfast and drinking wine on the couch watching TCM late at night. God, what was I, 80?*

“Just one or two... or three. I'm not sure. But I have to tell you something else. The man I spoke to on the phone from Boston, the professor, he's here already. I've arranged with the university for him to stay here while he does research until the crew gets here. He got here yesterday.” *I hate everything.* I whipped my head around.

“Is he here right now?” I tried to sound reasonable. The last thing I wanted was some old man in the house. Edna might not be great for emotional support, but there was a reason I came to her now. I wanted to be left alone, and for some reason I seemed to have an appeal to men of a certain age. It could be charming, but it got old hearing about how they'd have dated me in the 70's or whatever. What a charming young lady I was. Right.

“No, no, he's buying groceries. But-” she grimaced, “He is staying in the guest suit, and he's paying the full price. You'll have to sleep in the kid's room.” Nightmare. This was a nightmare. I tried *so* hard not to look as betrayed as I felt, pulling every muscle in my face into a small, pleasant face.

“I understand”

“I really thought it would be so long before you got here. The good thing is I'll have you here for Halloween!” She tried to justify. That, of course, was already one of the things I was looking forward to. The one thing I knew Edna and I had in common was love for a themed cocktail party. I gave her a smile.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Well, then that’s that. Hopefully it will all work out.” Sure.

“Is it alright if I take a shower?”

“Please do, you look dreadful.” My smile thinned and I excused myself.

Lugging my bags up the staircase as carefully as I could manage I tried to fight off the disappointment that threatened to put me straight to sleep. The double doors to the guest suite were closed. The last time I’d stayed here I was just 16, and the doors had both been left open wide for me. I continued down the corridor past my aunt’s room, really a small apartment, and found what the family collectively called “the kids room”. I was smothered by the staleness of the air. She hadn’t been expecting anyone to stay here, and so it was anyone’s guess as to how long the room had sat untouched. I’d worry about that later. I got my bags situated, checking for bugs as I went. This may be a nice farmhouse, but it was still a farmhouse. It used to be a six-bedroom house, but over the years bedrooms were combined or turned into alternative spaces, like a library and an office on the first floor. I grabbed a towel from the linen closet and found my way to the bathroom across the hall, thankful that the stranger would at least have no reason to come to this side since the guest room had its own attached bathroom.

I started the shower and waited for it to warm up, stripping off my travel clothes. God, I did smell. *Forgive me, Lord.* Naked in front of the mirror I did the usual looking and gazing of my lopsided breasts that had never been perky in youth. Nearing 30 they threatened me with the days to come. I turned and posed, to see if anything picturesque existed. I don’t know why I insisted on putting myself through this, but I always, always did. I posed and pulled faces and sucked in my stomach and turned to see if I had any real ass to show (I did not). I told myself, once again, that I needed to start working out before I got too old, and then reprimanded myself, once again, that I was not old. In the shower I took care to soap up everything, glad to get the hours of airplane sweat off my body.

In the bedroom I slipped on a large t-shirt and sweats. The bed was made up in pink, frilly cotton sheets with a bear and an old squishy heart pillow. I looked around the room, nearly identical to when I stayed here before. I was never officially old enough for the grown up guest room until now, and my chance at it was shot with the *guest*. There were picture frames stuffed full of pictures of every single member of every family on the wall collaged all together. Big teeth and glasses of my now beautiful cousins looked back at me as well as pictures of me and my mom when I

was a baby. There was a picture of us where my father was clearly cut out after the divorce. Funnily enough, there were plenty of pictures of other much less savory members than him still intact and proudly displayed. I knew dinner wouldn't be for a while, and Edna was very hands off, she wasn't the type to force anyone to go back down and socialize for hours until dinner time. I pulled the layers of sheets and duvets and pillows off the bed in succession. There were in fact a few bug corpses in there. I shook everything out and climbed into the little bed, falling asleep in the cool, bluish room quickly.

I was woken up by the front door and the sound of a man's voice downstairs. The sun had dipped below the trees but the world had yet to go completely dark. I could smell something cooking and my mouth watered. I wasn't eager to present myself, but I also had to reckon with my empty stomach. I rolled my eyes. The idea that I would be visible to a stranger and a man while I was meant to be on a quiet retreat was disproportionately upsetting to me. I'd expected to have the house, the farm, all to myself. The idea of being observed was close to ruining everything. I felt stupid for being so petulant. I laid in bed while I strained to hear the conversation, trying to imagine the kind of stranger that would dare ruin my vacation, although I insisted on referring to it as a *sabbatical*. Pretentious as ever. Fine. If he would be in the house, he should deal with it. Not me. I'm family, this house is a part of my history. I slunk downstairs in the clothes I'd slept through the afternoon in, although I did decide to throw on a bra. Not a real one, though, goddammit. The floor creaked, announcing me as I came around the corner to face my Great Aunt and the handsomest man I'd ever seen in my life. And there I was standing in tube socks, swimming in sweatpants. He was the worst kind of handsome, my kind of handsome. Tall, academic, big nose, good sweater, kind of handsome. I looked like a raccoon girl.

"Good to see you're awake for dinner. This is Nick Matthews. Nick, this is my niece." He held out his hand for a handshake, but I was short circuiting, completely forgetting how to act. In this house I'd only ever been a girl waiting in the wings. I finally shook his hand, I think, but I was also maybe blacking out. This was so much worse than a gross old man.

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It had been three days and I still hadn't seen this *guest*. I hadn't seen much of anyone, seeing as I slept for nearly 48 hours. I was glad he'd made himself scarce.

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The ghost hunting thing got me back on an old kick. After Edna went to bed promptly at 8:30 with one of her novels (the ones with the cracked spines) I wandered down to the TV room with the bottle of red wine I'd snagged at the airport. In my memories when I thought of Aunt Edna's house I thought of the blanket forts I'd built with my cousins. She had the biggest blankets on earth as far as I was concerned. I opened the chest that I remembered them being in and found my treasure, the horse blanket. I was a mountain of cloth and hair on the couch with one hand poking out with my wine watching old ghost shows oddly comforting and spooky at the same time.

"Ghost hunting?" I heard from behind me, and nearly spilled my wine. I turned around to see a man standing against the wall, still fully dressed even at this hour. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry I didn't mean to scare you." Even though I was frazzled I couldn't help but try to be polite.

"Don't worry about it. Are you staying here?" Stupid question. He smiled good-naturedly and nodded.

"Do you mind if I join you? I can't sleep." I minded. One thousand percent, I minded.

"No, I don't mind." He came and sat down in the reading chair, leaving me to the whole couch still. "Do you want some wine?" I found myself asking, even though I was not in the mood to share.

"Um, sure." I knew I shouldn't have asked. It was an effort undoing the burrito I'd carefully constructed from the horse blanket. I found another bowl-sized glass and poured what I hoped would seem like a generous amount, so he wouldn't think I was trying to polish the bottle off alone. Not that I couldn't. I spent the better part of the next hour switching my focus between the TV and his profile in the light of the screen. He could have been anywhere between 40 and a good-looking 50. A full head of hair. A mustache, a really nice one. His profile was elegant, like he belonged in a painting more than my aunt's living room, with a distinguished larger nose. I was annoyed at my observations. I hated how handsome he was. This was the last thing I needed, when all I wanted was to relax. Usually I laughed a lot at these sorts of shows but I wasn't sure if he thought they were as funny as I did, and didn't want to make it weird. Weirder.

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## Ghost hunting

I hated and adored my awakening happening like this. I was a woman, a full-grown adult with voting rights, an education, a job, and yet here I was, a *girl* surrounded by the presence of this *man* in my aunt's home. A place I'd only ever been a child in suddenly thrown into a sort of ice-cold pool of my own desires. There was a *man* in the *house*. And his presence wouldn't leave me. I saw him at breakfast, shared coffee and toast and the like, sure, but we slept under the same roof. I knew he and I were undressing at the same time, climbing into bed. Why should it even occur to me, why should it even matter? I was a grown woman shrunken to a teenager, curiosity and lust doing an uncomfortable cha-cha inside my stomach. I wanted so badly to be in control, to be above this sort of thing. The proximity of him in what I'd perceived as a private space was throwing me off. Against my better judgment I asked him questions, I brought up the weather, anything to just be talking to him, imagining a closeness to him. I was so inexperienced and desperate.

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"Have you ever heard of the estes method?"

"No"

"Remember the spirit box?"

"Sure."

"Ok, well, when you were telling me about your hesitations the last time, this is what came to mind." I hated it when he sat this close to me. It only made me more aware of myself. That and fear of how my breath might smell. "One of us asks the questions as usual. The other puts on headphones to listen and says what they hear, without

knowing what the questions are.”

“Eliminating any kind of bias in the perceived answer.”

“Exactly. Would you do that with me? I’ll put on the headphones and tell you what I hear. You investigate.” I thought only briefly. It seemed better than the alternatives of talking to the dark or trying to piece together answers.

“OK. I’ll stand here and talk.” He began to move to sit in a chair in the corner we used to put on our shoes before leaving the house.

“Please take this seriously.”

“As the grave.” Ah shit, was that really what I had? He gave a good little chuckle.

“Uh huh. Here we go.” I looked into the dark of my aunt's foyer. A place I’d gotten a terrible rug burn playing tag a good 20 years ago. Maybe I didn’t believe in ghosts, but I’d be damned if I did this poorly. My evidence, even if it directly discounted his, would be well-gathered and thorough.

“Margaret? It’s me again. My name is Beatrice. Are you able to say my name back to me?”

“Peg”

“Peg. Peggy? You go by Peggy? Peggy, can you say my name? My name is Beatrice.”

“Knees.”

“Uh-”

“Hurt.”

“Game. Heart. Hurt.” She remembered for the first time in almost two decades how hurt she’d been by the game she’d played with her cousins that christmas. Something had changed. They used to be her friends, now they were pushing her in tag and she didn’t know why. She didn’t mean to live so far away. He’d just said game and hurt, those didn’t have to be anything. It was this old house that brought this weird stuff out in her. Remembering things she’d tried to forget, or things she just forgot to remember.

“Peggy. Can you say my name?”

“Bees?” She tried to keep her heart from dropping to her toes. Coincidence.

“Why are you still here, Peggy?”

“Lost” She looked over at him. His eyes were closed and his expression calm. He couldn’t hear anything she was saying.

“You’re lost? How can we find you? How can we help you?”

“Where’d you go?”

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“I’m moving here later this year, to work at the University.”

“Here? Why?”

“It’s better for Chrissy.” My stomach dropped, but I pressed on to save face.

“Chrissy?” His eyes crinkled that way I loved.

“My daughter.” Ok. Don’t react. No, don’t *not* react, that’s worse.

“You didn’t know?” Now I was blushing, and embarrassed. This was even worse. Married and he has a kid. But... no wedding ring? I glanced at his left hand just to make sure I wasn’t crazy. I was driving myself insane with the circles I ran myself in. I shook my head nonchalantly.

“No, I didn’t. Is she with your wife?” His expression became that of an attempt at good humor.

“I certainly hope not. Her mother left a long time ago.” I gasped just a little. *Don’t react. No, that’s kind of a bomb, you should react. Support him! No, that’s weird.* He cringed as if he’d heard my thoughts.

“I’m so sorry-” I tried.

“God, no, I’m sorry, that’s way too much, I shouldn’t have said that. I usually have something more vague to say, I don’t know why I told you that, I’m sorry.”

“No! Please, it’s fine.” I said reflexively. But he is single. And I am so single minded. Focus. He’s talking to you. The idea of him being a father was also instantly adding to his appeal. Oh, shit, what if she was my age? It was technically possible. I mean, maybe a bit of a stretch but possible. I still couldn’t ascertain how old he was, and I was notoriously bad at this guessing game.

“But, anyway, she’s with her grandparents while I get settled here. I’m grateful to your aunt, I didn’t want to be in a hotel the whole time.”

“That’d be awful.” I didn’t want to move to more banal subject matter. “How old is she?” The smile returned to his eyes in a way he clearly had no control over.

“She’s four.” I smiled too.

“Four’s fun.”

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Halloween came with a special kind of smell. The cold air, the rot of the leaves on the ground, the weird plastic of cheap decorations and black tarps used for haunted houses. Downstairs the house was nearly completely decorated for the party tonight. At the breakfast table I was surprised to see only Nick eating a bowl of cereal in a thick flannel I tried not to fixate on. Stupid glasses, stupid flannel-  
“Love the sweatshirt.” I smiled and pulled on it. A number of years ago I’d hot-glued a jack-o-lantern face with black felt onto a giant orange crewneck and couldn’t bear to part with it.

“Thank you. Where’s Edna?”

“She didn’t tell you? She’s volunteering this morning.”

“She didn’t tell me anything besides what chores need to be done.” I pulled down the oatmeal and a pot.

“What are your plans for the day, since you’re looking so festive?”

“Edna asked me to carve some pumpkins before tonight, so I’ll be doing that. I also told Jamie I’d go with him and the kid’s trick-or-treating at 5 since Janine is sick. There’s just too many of them for one person.”

I thought I’d imagined him saying, “Would you mind if I joined you?”

“Did you say something?” I turned to face him. I’d never seen his face this red. He cleared his throat and moved the cereal around in the bowl.

“Um, could I join? You? I don’t have anything to do and usually I’d have plenty to do with Chrissy but-” Butterflies exploded from my belly button.

“Oh, yeah of course! Totally!” The way I’d said it rattled around in my skull, *totally, wow, awesome, totally!* Eugh. Gross.

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He helped me drag the folding table into the living room with the TV. We decided to put on some ghost hunting shows to pass the time while we worked away at the pumpkins, but ended up talking over the show almost the whole time. I tried my hardest not to imagine us doing this together every year, or with Chrissy. I had no right. But I was having so much fun.

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Usually evening comes upon the world top-down, but on Halloween evening seems to slowly seep up through the ground in a thick haze. A haunted sort of in-between space begins to emerge, a world where everyone is out and about, kids are outside at night, there are strange sounds in the distance, and you are privy to the thinness of the veil that separates the world from winter, the land of the living from the land of the dead. I met Nick at the front door, the both of us bundled up and ready to walk around for a few hours with a bunch of kids. I had no idea what appealed to him about that, but then again, I was doing it because I missed trick-or-treating with my sister's kids. He drove us the five miles into town to park in front of the Lewis' small brick house where we were met with Jamie and his six children under the age of ten. I introduced him to Nick, wanting desperately to call him my— *something, anything*. I wanted to call him mine.

We did our part to follow the group and keep any stragglers or wanderers from straggling or wandering, but were generally able to walk in step behind the group.

“So why did you come with me to help cattle drive a bunch of kids on Halloween.” I could see my breath in the cold.

“I guess it's' because... it sounded fun.” I laughed.

“Okay.” We walked a while longer and stopped the youngest from eating some rocks before directing him back to the group. “Did you go trick-or-treating as a kid?”

“Funnily enough, no. My parents were the nervous type. Still are. I wasn't allowed to do a lot of things other kids were allowed to do. Trick-or-treating was never on the table. But when Chrissy came along—” I noted the lack of ‘when *we* had Chrissy’, “I wanted so badly for her to not live with the kind of fear I do. God, I'm so freaked out all the time. I wanted her to experience a little bit of everything. And she loves dressing up, of course. We put out our pumpkins and put up the fake spiderwebs, and I always find some from last year still clinging to the house, and we'll get together with some of the neighbors and go all together. At least that's what we've done for the last few years.”

“You miss her a lot right now?”

“I've never been this far away from her for this long. It's hard.” His distinct profile was outlined by the many glowing lights from the houses we passed. He'd grown a good mustache since I met him. I put my hand on his arm, feeling moved and a little brave.

“You'll get to see her soon.” Jamie was escorting the kids to the door of a house while we stood back waiting. He laughed quietly, and looked around before turning to face

me, and I was taken aback by the way he looked at me. I became nervous. “Is my nose running?” His smile was gentle.

“No.” He leaned in and left the ghost of a kiss on my cheek. My jaw dropped, and covered my mouth. Just that small, chaste kiss on the cheek and could feel the disproportionate effect it had on me, I was burning up under my scarf. He was still just looking at me. “Was that OK?” I nodded emphatically, still not quite knowing what to do. He leaned in again, slowly. I could feel his warm breath, and sense his mustache just above my mouth. His eye lashes were so long and dark. I moved forward just far enough for our lips to meet. It was a small, sweet thing, but my whole body was so hot I thought briefly I might set him on fire. My heart was pounding and I felt an unfamiliar leap at my center. It was already too late for me.

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Have you ever fallen in love with a stranger on a bus or in a park? A five minute fairy tale that leaves you just a little wistful? It’s a talent of mine. It took me a long time to realize that I did it as often as I did, and even longer to realize why I did that to myself. But anyway. The handsome stranger in the library. I saw him while I browsed the fiction section for something atmospheric, spooky. He had a whole table to himself and the sun was pouring through the window spilling through his tawny hair. He had a robust, 80's-handsome face, more Bill Pullman than Brad Pitt. He looked so serious and soft, and in the Library of all places I could of course imagine him a serious, academic type. I had never been one for longer hair on men, but he was convincing me. My hand hovered over *Rebecca* while I peered through the shelves to watch him. I felt awfully guilty. He was probably married. He had that beautiful slightly worn-in look to him, like he’d been softened by love already. I watched him flip through newspapers and books alike. What was he doing here? Library men were rarely so robust. I chide myself for such a thought. I couldn’t help myself. Breaking up with Cameron had left me gutted of my romantic potential, but pent up all the same. Dating long distance was not for me, it seemed, and I was just not for him. So it goes. He was still so far away from me, and he was deep into his task and taking notes.

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“For someone who doesn’t believe in ghosts, you sure like ghost stories.” I had a mouthful of cereal when he came into the kitchen. I tried to sit up subtly to hide my lumpy crouched form.

“So?” I maybe put a little too much stink on that. I shrugged.

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I’d been on dates. I’ve dated people. I’ve even had a kiss. It sucked. So it goes. I was ready to believe that maybe it just wasn’t what I was destined for, no matter what aches and desires I had. I worried, in that stiff old bed under a quilt my mom had made herself when she was little, that in fact I might not ever have kids. I thought of Charlotte then, of course. I reached down between my feet and grabbed the hot water bottle in its little cozy. I laid on my back and laid it between my breasts, heavy and warm, just like I remember Charlotte feeling when she was just five months old. Hot and pink heart on my chest while she slept. Usually I would put her down for a nap in her crib, but often I would just have her sleep in my arms or on my chest. I’d often fall asleep too. It wasn’t fair. My nose prickled and a tear escaped my eye and rolled into my ear. I rubbed the water bottle gently, it felt just like a soft little baby back. How did three years go by so fast? Why did I have to love her so much when she wasn’t mine to love? In the dark, alone with my thoughts and old family photos I let myself be madder than I ever admitted to anyone. I loved her. I loved when we were out and we’d get compliments. “She looks so much like you!” “She’s such a good listener.” “Oh I see she *loves* her mama.” She’d cling to my leg when strangers would say hello. I only ever said thank you. It was simpler than the explanation that I was her nanny. And I dreaded the alternative. When I told the truth the light in people’s eyes would dim, I saw it happen. Instead of seeing a young mother and her lovely little toddler and the life they imagined we had together, the love we shared, I became a foreigner to them. I wasn’t a part of their world anymore, I was just a babysitter, the help, a stranger. The connection was lost. No longer two mothers conversing in their shared secret language, but a mother and... someone else. So I let the lie be. And it suited me just fine to be seen as the doting, kind, educational, loving, mother I longed to be.

She called me mommy too, and often. I always corrected her, I would never encourage that, but it *hurt*. *Please let me be your mom. Let me be allowed to love you recklessly and without reservation.* Once I found one of her sippy cups in my purse while I was looking for my keys, and just began to tear up and I was so embarrassed. When I woke up in the morning the water bottle had fallen to the floor.