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Mamaw's Dress

My mamaw doesn't know her birthday. On her birth certificate it reads August 19, 1938 just below her name, Della Mae, but last year, while my mother was filling out a passport application, Mamaw told her that was the wrong date. She said to my mother over the phone that the midwife had taken it to the hospital late. I heard her voice dip against the speaker, "It says nineteen on my license, honey. Just write nineteen. Ain't no one going to know the difference."

Mamaw grew up in the backwoods of Virginia. She told me her daddy was a coal miner and her mother sewed their clothes by hand. She wore her sisters' old shoes, even after the seams had torn and the heels had been worn smooth. She was the middle child of too many siblings. I remember her counting their names on the ends of her manicured fingernails, occasionally pausing to tell me how they died.

On a hanger inside my mother's old bedroom is a pink dress. My mamaw likes to play with its sleeve while holding up the matching pink shoes, she smiles when she tells me it's the same color pink as the coffin she's picked out.

I have no pictures of Mamaw in my dorm room and this is the first time I've noticed she isn't here (but for some reason a picture of Harrison Ford is hung on the wall beside my coffee maker).

Maybe it doesn't feel necessary to frame her on the wall yet. She's still alive, there's no need to memorialize her. Not until she puts on her pink dress. She's 80 now, but I don't think of

her as an old woman. Her hair has remained as blonde, her lips as red, and her waist as tight as in the wedding photos she keeps in the album on the coffee table.

It's strange knowing that Mamaw grew up in a one-story house where she had to share the good Sunday shoes with her sisters and hope no one noticed when she wore the same dress twice in one week, because when she lowers the rearview mirror of her gold Buick to apply lipstick, she looks just like Jane Fonda. The only thing that gives her away is the Appalachian twang that twists against her voice. She has the voice of a woman that keeps Crisco in the same cabinet as the first aid kit, which she does.

Since I don't have any pictures of Mamaw, I tell people she looks like a Jane Fonda action figure with her small stature, standing just above five feet tall, but one that's been accidentally fitted with a Dolly Parton voice box. I told Mamaw that once, and she said her voice wasn't nearly as pretty as Dolly's.

I think that's why I don't have any pictures of Mamaw, because she feels more genuine in her voice. You can hear her vulnerability in the dips and curves of her speech, but on her face, all her past echoes have been covered in foundation and powder and blush, and even more powder. She doesn't try to alter her voice to make it fit into the mold she wanted herself to be. Her voice is the part of herself she always intended to keep. It's her mother telling stories beside her bed and fighting with her sisters before their fights turned to money and men and men who hit. And it's calling her family to supper and reciting the prayers she knows without ever remembering being taught.

I keep her voicemails saved to my phone and record the stories she tells me when we're sipping coffee at the kitchen counter. When the voicemail box gets full I transfer them into a

folder on my laptop labeled “Mamaw’s Voice.” I know they’ll be important once Mamaw takes the pink dress from its hanger.

Mamaw didn’t have a wedding dress. She was married to my papaw in a black suede cocktail dress during their lunch break. They were ballroom dance instructors at the Arthur Murray Dance Center. When I try to imagine this I only see my papaw holding his hand above my mamaw while she spins in slow circles, like a ballerina in an open jewelry box.

For a long time I didn’t think Mamaw would like me. I knew she loved me, but she didn’t know enough of me to like me. My mother was so afraid I would break my Mamaw’s heart that she only let me visit her in pre-arranged costume.

On the drive to Mamaw and Papaw’s house, I would lay in the backseat and watch the ceiling vibrate while my mother recited her list of Dos and Do-Not-Evers: *Don’t curse. Don’t talk about the meat packing industry. Pretend you want kids. Eat whatever food she gives you. Be ladylike. Don’t say anything that will make her cry.*

When I arrived at Mamaw and Papaw’s house I would put on my costume. I left the hand-me-down flannel shirt I wore around my waist in the car and traded it for whatever brightly colored floral dress Mamaw had stripped from a mall mannequin and given to me for Christmas. I raised my voice to a higher pitch, and dropped it into a more Appalachian place, twisting my words in the direction of my family’s origin. My teeth knew to bite down if they felt a curse word in my throat. I’m only now realizing how my voice would fall into Mamaw’s, mimicking her sounds and beginning every sentence with a drawn out *Well...*

“Well,” Mamaw said, “if Lila had known how pretty she’d look, she would’ve wanted an open casket.” I was only seven when my Papaw’s mother died. My mom asked my brother and I if we wanted to say goodbye to Mamaw Lila, but we were afraid her eyes would be open. So instead my father carried me on his hip into a parlor and handed me a *Nancy Drew* book, and gave Will a *Hardy Boys*. We stayed still until the service ended, both of us too afraid that the casket would somehow open to leave the room.

I remember my mother telling my father about how Mamaw Lila looked before the casket door closed. “She had this beautiful green dress,” my mother said. “It was velvet and emerald. Everything was perfect. Everything matched. Her nails, her hair, her eyeshadow. She looked beautiful, Tim. Just Beautiful.”

Fifty years after Mamaw and Papaw’s wedding, my mother bought me my first pair of Spanx so that I could fit into my mamaw’s black suede dress. Mamaw wanted my brother and I to wear the clothes she and Papaw got married in at their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary. We were to act as living models of the past. And I was told by my mother not to complain or draw parallels to incest, as that would be rude.

I remember being fourteen and standing inside a bathroom stall with my mamaw’s narrow wedding dress pulled to my hips, wondering how anyone could ever be this small. Even at nine weeks pregnant, she still had the slender figure of a Coke bottle.

I liked visiting Mamaw less as I got older. By twelve I had learned the term feminist, and like a first tattoo, it was something I wore with pride and that older generations weren’t sure how to respond to. And it was permanent.

I didn't like that I had to wear certain clothes around Mamaw and I didn't like that she called me a "lady." I didn't like that I was only allowed to read outside if my brother was with me. I didn't like that if Mamaw had a question about politics, she only asked him. And if she had a question about shoes, she would only ask me, and she would change her opinion to match whatever I said. I wanted Mamaw to understand feminism wasn't just agreeing with a feminist. I wanted her to think for herself. I wanted to know what *she* was thinking, not just what she hoped I was thinking.

Last summer, Mamaw, Papaw, and Mom wanted to visit Mamaw Lila's grave. Mom hadn't been since the funeral, and that was over a decade ago. Papaw offered to drive, but my mother said no. She wasn't going to die riding to a cemetery because he was too stubborn to give up his license. When she died it was going to be because of something sad, not some kind of dumb-assed irony.

So it was me that drove on the S-shaped backroads that stretched to the cemetery. I parked my car on the asphalt, beside the names of relatives I'd only ever met in stories. When my mother saw me reading the names, she touched my arm and promised they would've loved me.

No one had ever taken me to a cemetery before, not even when Mamaw Lila died. I didn't like standing on the grass above Mamaw Lila. Even as a twenty-year-old, I was afraid her eyes would open. I was even more afraid that they would open and nothing would be there.

I said goodbye to Mamaw Lila and I apologized for not saying it when I was seven. I walked down the line of tombstones and counted the names I remembered on my fingertips.

Uncle Phil, he got killed by that lady. Sally, she was the hoarder. Papaw Roy, his liver went out.

And then I stopped, because carved into a pink granite tombstone was the name Elmer Bernard, and beside it was Della Mae with the date August 19, 1938 etched beneath it. On the other side of the date was a dash, it was stretching into nothing. Waiting to connect to its other half. I wondered how much longer, how much more, until it was complete.