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Snapshots

We find the carton in my sister's basement, where it's been stored ever since Mother's mind collapsed. Opening the carton, my sister and I turn our faces away from the dank smell of mould. There's a heap of discarded relics thrown in at random, dusty with age. I recognize the red kitchen clock with a crack running across the glass, the coffee-stained pillow embroidered with "God Bless Our Happy Home," two boxes of stationery with "Happy Panda" smiling from each corner, phonograph record in a dusty cover -- Caruso's Greatest Hits -- on 78s we have no way of hearing. If you didn't know Mother, I thought, how would you put an image together from this mouldy collection?

At the bottom of the carton, there's a photo album. It has black covers and pages so stiff we can barely turn them.

"Everything's falling apart," I tell my sister. Meaning, of course, our mother.

The call had come weeks ago, at four-thirty in the morning. Fumbling for the phone in the darkness, I knew what I was going to hear. A crisp voice said, "She's unresponsive."

The phone kept clicking away as I sat holding it, unable to disconnect. I stared across the room trying to make out the two figures in the browned framed photo on my bureau. They were shadowy in the dim lamplight, but I knew them by heart. They're sitting side by side in one of those wicker chairs on wheels that tourists used to ride in on the Atlantic Beach boardwalk. She's wrapped in a coat with a huge fur collar, beaming at the camera. He's holding a pipe in one hand, his other arm possessively around her shoulders. A plaid blanket is over their laps because it's late September and chilly. My parents. Their honeymoon.

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Last mother's day I sat beside her in the nursing home, trying to find some resemblance to that hopeful face in the photograph. Mind gone somewhere I couldn't follow.

"Edward called," she said.

Her brother's been dead for twenty years.

"What did he tell you?" I asked, tracing the faint blue vein across the top of her hand.

She looked away to the corner of the lounge where an oversized TV was blaring a sitcom she was too deaf to hear.

"What did he say?" I shouted.

"Grandma was with him."

I tapped the unopened box in her lap. "You haven't looked at your present." I pulled out the pink seersucker robe. "How do you like it?" She was looking past me, watching someone come into the lounge. "Lord, that woman's ugly," Mother said.

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"Unresponsive," the voice on the phone repeated when I called back. "She's been taken to intensive care."

By the time the plane landed and the cab driver had dodged through the morning rush hour, an oxygen cone had been placed over her face. The doctor told me not to think there was any hope. He wanted permission to insert a tube in this old woman's chest to drain blood accumulating in her lungs. A routine procedure. He needed a signature. My sister was on vacation, out of reach. I clutched the pen, staring at the printed words. In case of. . . No responsibility. . . I signed.

In the hall I asked a nurse, "Will they patch her up so she can go back to her happy-go-lucky existence in the nursing home?"

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Here in my sister's basement she and I carefully turn the fragile pages. It's an old-fashioned album, the snapshots held in place by little triangular corners pasted on the page. "I never saw this album," my sister says. I suddenly remember I'd had a glimpse of it once. It was when I was helping our parents pack for their exodus to Florida. Opening their closet, I'd seen a half-dozen albums stored on the top shelf. Quickly flipping through one, I saw my parents as husband and wife going from arms about each other's waists to bodies turned three-quarters away. There were my sister and I as babies on a youthful mother's lap, and as stocky little girls I could barely remember.

"There won't be room for all that stuff," Mother told me. Then she'd reached for a black album that had a frayed graying ribbon around it. She looked at some of the pages, holding them away from me. "I want this," she said. "Throw the others away." The album she kept was of her life before she married.

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My sister and I try to turn the pages gently, but still they tear. Mother's younger than we are. She's beautiful in a dark-haired, large-eyed way, a long braid down her back.

I don't remember her hair being anything other than short. She's leaning against a tree, a silky-looking scarf around her neck, pullover sweater over her slim hips, skirt to her ankles. She looks like a shy schoolgirl.

On the next page, she has a flapper haircut. Her hand is smoothing it, an uncertain smile on her face. I want to ask if she felt daring cutting off her long hair. Would she remember?

She's wearing the kind of tennis dress we call "quaint" when we see it in old movies. She's holding the racket up, ready to hit the ball. I didn't know that she ever played tennis, didn't know the sport I play was hers too. I thought I had made more distance between us. Mother, I will ask---should have asked---were you better at backhand than forehand, the odd way I am?

She's laughing in all the snapshots. BUBBLES AND FRIENDS---her long-ago nickname---she wrote in white ink under so many of the pictures. No one called her that when I was growing up, except my father's sister. "Bubbles," my aunt would say scornfully.

OUR CROWD---my mother wrote in white ink---in parks, by lakes, on beaches. In one snapshot the boys and girls are picnicking on the grass, laughing at the unseen person taking their picture. In another, the young women are standing, arms around each other's shoulders, knowing they're young and lovely. They don't expect to be spied on seventy years later in faded sepia.

"I don't know any of these people," my sister says. We turn another page. MY NEW BEAU! the white handwriting tells us. It's our father. Thinner than we had ever seen him. He's laughing, too, his arm around her waist. Mother said he was "so much fun" when they were dating. I'd look at the dour man across the dinner table and try to imagine.

She was in her thirties when they married. "I was certain I'd be an old maid," she told me when I was a child, on one of the rare days when we went to a movie together.

"Why, Mommy?" I asked. I had to ask a second time, raising my voice. "Who'd want a girl who was hard of hearing?" she said. I held on to the furry sleeve of her coat more tightly. "But you're so pretty."

"It must have been from all that swimming and diving," she said, pulling her arm away.

There's a picture of her waving from the water, white bathing cap making her face rounder. She loved to swim, one more thing we share. She told me she'd swum across the Hudson River to win a bet. The water was so dirty there was a thick black line under her chin, she said. As a child I bragged about her feat to all my friends. Riding on the ferry between New York and New Jersey, I'd stare over the railing into the murky water, imagining my young mother doing her breaststroke. Years later she told me, "Oh, it wasn't there that I swam, it was way upstate." She giggled. "More like a stream there."

I felt cheated.

In all the pictures of my father, he's wearing thick black-rimmed glasses, even with his bathing cap on. Mother said that when he proposed she warned him, "I may be deaf one day."

"I may be blind," he told her.

In his old age, he was. She emerged from the storms of their marriage to become what she called his "eyes." She'd guide his hand to the foods on his plate, lead him across streets like a child. "Stop fussing over me," he'd mutter.

"What, dear?" she'd ask.

In the pictures, she looks as if she's hearing what her friends are telling her, their cheeks pressed against hers.

"Remember how she wouldn't wear hearing aids because she said they'd make her look old?" my sister asks. We were embarrassed to bring our friends home. We'd shout introductions Mother would pretend to understand. After my first music appreciation class in junior high school, I rushed home with my discovery. "Beethoven was deaf!"

"Who?" she asked.

But she adored Broadway musicals. "I wanted to take tap dancing lessons," she said once, "but Grandma said nice girls didn't do that. I couldn't really hear the music anyway."

Here's a photo of Mother and her girlfriends lined up sideways in a row, each with her right leg out, pleated skirts coyly raised mid-calf, a finger flirtatiously under each chin. SOME CHORUS LINE!! she wrote.

When my first child was born, Mother finally bought hearing aids. "What changed your mind?" I asked her.

"I want to hear my grandchild when she cries."

In the nursing home, the batteries for her hearing aids constantly got misplaced, no matter how many packs my sister and I brought. "How are you?" we'd shout over and over. "Can you hear us?" She'd look past us, not answering.

"Ice cream today?" the aide would ask in the dining room.

"Chocolate," Mother would answer.

"She hears what she wants to," my sister said.

One time when we were visiting, Mother told my sister I looked "good" that day.

"How do I look?" my sister asked.

"Tired."

In the car going home, stopped for a red light, my sister tapped her leather-gloved fingers against the steering wheel. "She likes the way you look."

"Don't be silly," I said. "She cares that you're tired. She doesn't even notice when I am."

We have always competed for crumbs.

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Leaning over the hospital bed, I sneak the bars down so I can hold her hand. It feels parchment thin. She was always so proud of her long elegant fingers. In the nursing home they were idle, folded in her lap. I'd pay for manicures, tell her, "Your nails look great today." She'd glance down at our joined hands, as if from a distance. "Manicure!" I'd shout.

The nurse comes into the room, pulls the bars up. "You might as well leave," she says. "Your mother doesn't know you."

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There's a picture in the album of my father with his brother Charlie. They're at the beach, wearing those ridiculous striped bathing suits. So many beach pictures. My father and Uncle Charlie are clowning for the camera. I like seeing my father this way, hand cupped like a dunce cap over his brother's head. In that family of five somber men, Charlie was known as the "happy" brother. He used to blow smoke rings for my sister and me when we were children. He'd take a big puff on his cigar, close his mouth, tap his finger against his cheek while we held our breath too. Then his mouth opened and smoke would circle to the ceiling in perfect rings. I knew I was a bad girl to wish he were my father.

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I turn back to the picture of my mother leaning so dreamily against the tree. Her hand is stroking the scarf at her neck. "Look," I tell my sister, "no rings."

We'd gotten used to seeing Mother's hands weighed down by those massive rings she was always buying after Dad died. "Guess what I bought today?" she'd ask me on the phone, giggling like the "Bubbles" she must have been before we knew her. When she went into the nursing home ("Dumped there," she accused us) the rings were stored in my sister's bureau because Mother was sure the home was a den of thieves. After a while, she stopped asking how "my rings" were.

When I visited her in Florida, I saw how neatly she lined the rings up on Kleenex before she went to bed. My sister and I take out the rings and line them up the same way. A friend comments on what a different style each one is. "How many women your mother must have been," she says.

I crouch over the rings, studying them for clues. The largest has five silver tendrils clutching yellowish quartz. The stone looks as if it's being strangled. "At least we didn't inherit her taste," I tell my sister. We giggle in unison, daughters of Bubbles.

One of the rings looks like a man's. That unexpected business-woman side of her, I think, remembering how for a while she went into business for herself, a public stenographer, working all hours, through the night sometimes, my father grim as he took my sister and me to the local diner for silent hamburger suppers. The ring has a wide dull gold band, a square purple stone. I try to imagine Mother wearing this with the fluffy chenille cardigans and flowering blouses in swoops of clashing colours that were her Miami Beach costume.

The most cluttered ring has a twisting double band, holding a collection of fake sapphire bits. Her birthstone. Mine too. On my birthdays, Mother always got a corsage from my father congratulating her. Two weeks later she'd get another corsage for her birthday.

"You should have this ring," my sister says. "Afterwards, I mean." I try on the ring, but can't imagine ever wearing it. Mother and I overlap too much as it is.

Underneath the rings, wrapped in Kleenex, is the small gold pendant Dad gave her on their fiftieth anniversary, a miniature calendar, with a single tiny ruby on the 26th, the day they were married. The back's inscribed: "I love you more than yesterday, less than tomorrow." In the nursing home, Mother never mentioned him.

When he was ill, she cried, "Don't leave me, I won't be able to live without you." After he died, she blossomed. Still living in the one room they'd shared in a residential hotel, she'd invite the "girls" in for afternoon concerts on her stereo. "Pavarotti!" she'd breathe ecstatically into the phone when I called. "Domingo!" As though they were the names of her lovers. She'd pour "little drinks"---shots of whiskey---for her guests. The five or six ancient women sitting on the folding chairs would titter as they sipped, chatter through the glorious voices, scatter cookie crumbs on the carpet.

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It's silent in the intensive care unit where I sit beside her. There's a tube running into Mother's arm, with its plastic bottle upside down on a pole. Her eyes are open, unfocused, staring blankly at the wall. I stroke her bony cheeks, the wisps of grey hair, remembering the lovely dark braid in the photograph. "Do you remember when you had long hair?" I ask her. In the silence I hear the muffled beating of the machine that's recording the pattern of my mother's heart.

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She had yearned for Florida, the promised land. And 1,400 miles from the sister-in-law she resented. "You'd do anything for her," she used to rage at my father. Taking him away, to the other end of the country, was the revenge she finally got. After so many decades, it scarcely mattered.

He hated the hot sun, the glaring sand. All the things Mother feasted on. "Come visit me," I'd plead.

"I'm not going back to New York until they carry me there in a box," he'd say bitterly.

On the plane that carried his coffin back from Florida, Mother and my sister and I acted demented, telling jokes. . . "Did you hear the one about. . . ?" Mother hearing finally, all of us shrieking with laughter as passengers glared. My brother-in-law, waiting in the airport, stared at the hysterical trio staggering towards him. My sister ran to him, pressed her face into his jacket, sobbing as we watched. I stood beside my mother, strangely taller than she was now, holding her by the sleeve of her thin coat. "Why is she carrying on like that?" Mother said.

For five years, Mother lived her newly minted independence. Then one afternoon she went to a movie by herself. Coming out of fantasy world into the blinding sunlight, she stood still on the pavement, weeping as people hurried past, faces averted from this crazy woman. Finally, a policeman took her back to the hotel. "What happened, Mother?" I asked, when the police put the call through.

"I don't know," she said. "I just felt so alone. I never felt that alone in my whole life." Her voice sounded like a scared child's. "He's really gone, isn't he?"

Was that when her mind began crumbling at the edges, like these faded photographs?

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Day after day, I sit beside her, listening to the hum of the heart machine, watching her blank eyes, remembering the young girl in those pictures.

Suddenly her eyes turn slightly toward me, her face lighting up.

"Mother," I cry. "You don't know me! Do you?"

There's a long moment, neither of us moving, as though we're posing for a picture.

Her eyes film over.

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On the long train ride home after the funeral, I keep the album on my lap. "Take it," my sister had said, "What good is it?"

What am I to do with these photographs scattering bits of paper on my skirt? I turn to the back of the album, my finger tracing the outline of my father's features, then my mother's. People have always said my sister resembles him, and that I am the "image" of Mother.

What happened to both of you, I ask those silent faces. I turn back to the laughing girl leaning against the tree. What did you love about him, I ask her. Were there others before him? What was it like to lie in his arms that first time, you who were always so shy about sex you could only tell me about "it" in a hurried whisper, the bedroom door shut. Who were you both, before you were my parents?

"Where are you going?" a man's voice asks. I look up at the conductor, dazed. Yes, I remember, I'm going home. It's today, not yesterday.

"Have a good one," he says, punching my ticket.

After he's moved on, I open the album again. Stuck at the bottom of the page, there's a picture of my parents with his sister in the middle. My mother's smile is strained, as if she knew even then that this bulky woman towering over her would always be between them. For my mother's sake, I tear the picture in half, dividing her from my aunt.

Carefully I pry a few pictures out of the tight corners they were pasted into so long ago. Pictures where that young man and woman are looking at each other with such delight. Where my mother's playing volleyball with her friends on the beach, where my father's smiling from the last page.

All the rest--those endless repeated poses and faces of strangers---I shove into a plastic bag. I bend and break the album covers, grey cardboard showing at the jagged edges. I stagger

down the aisle of the train, force the bulging bag through the slot that says Waste.
Grabbing hold of seat handles, I stagger back to my place. I sit for a while staring out the window at a blur of houses.

Finally, I reach into my purse, take out the few snapshots I've salvaged and turn them over.
There are no dates on any of them. I hold the pictures in my hand like a card player. How can I arrange them?