

When accidentally  
threw herself down a  
flight essay



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She hoped that I would die in the accident and she would be able to continue her life without the burden of a child she had never wanted. What she didn't anticipate was breaking her neck at the bottom. She was rushed to the hospital almost immediately, but it was too late. I, however, was salvaged from her train wreck body.

Sometimes I wish she'd had an abortion; I wish I wouldn't have been given the opportunity to grow up gangly and purple and acid-like. Grandma takes out her old shoeboxes of photographs and dumps them into my lap, claiming the two of us looked just alike, my Mother and I. I prod the dark spots under my eyes and wonder if she got as tired of Grandma as I do. Grandma looks worn, like a towel that's been through the laundry too many times, all knotted-unraveling and gray.

You can't say that, though, cause she'd like as not die of a broken heart right then and there. Her eyes are wise and smoldering, changing from green to yellow like autumn leaves. Around them are wrinkles, networks of worry, a road map of suffering. Her hair is coloured bright red, jagged locks shooting out from her head as though an electric current has passed through her body. She dresses just like her mother did, and tells me one day I will, too.

Did my Mother wear crumpled sweatshirts and overalls? Was the hair on her arms darker than the hair on her head? Did she brush pop tart crumbs out of her bed before going to sleep? Did her socks ever match? I have a special photograph of her in my room, in a wooden frame with ivy curling like smoke in the corners. It's a photograph from her prom, and her hair is in a cloud of curls around her face. I like it because I can pretend she doesn't have one.

Grandma says she went all alone and smiling. I wonder what kind of girl goes to her prom without a date and gets pregnant when she is eighteen years old.

My uncle Jared is in the picture with her, grinning, his arm around her shoulders. Uncle Jared and I get along really well. He hates her, too. He doesn't mind if I come over and watch bad music videos on his television. He doesn't make me load the dishwasher and dust the knick-knack shelves. He and his wife are expecting their third baby, though after the first two I don't know why they would have another.

I don't know why they would have any at all. I am sitting in his living room, oblivious to the buzzing of the television and the opened book in my hands, listening to Grandma talk to the baby in Michelle's stomach. Michelle is Jared's wife, a slip of a girl with half of a brain. Grandma said she was a fool for marrying her son, but then, Grandma says Jared is a fool, too. Grandma liked my mother best. It is November, and I like the dead things outside.

All hints of a morbid nature aside, it's nice to see the raw earth and the trees stripped down to bare branches. They seem like they are waiting for something, just like me. Creaking in the wind, thoughts turned inward, weary and waiting. I wonder if I will ever welcome a spring to my bones. There is a child looking at me. I do not remember its name.

It is Jared's eldest daughter, and she has a finger up her nose. I shrink under her stare until I am smaller than she, until I am escaping through the strands of the rug, little upholstered skyscrapers. I am invisible to human eye, but not to hers. I don't like children. They know too much.

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I never knew anything. I remember my childhood in colors, reds and blacks and vomit greens; the smells of Grandma's cigarettes and casseroles and play dough. I passed through school like a ghost, only pieces of me visible to the teachers and the other kids. A bit of be-sweatered arm there, a foot wedged into a Mary Jane, a small, thin lipped mouth mumbling answers to half-heard questions. They are always whispering about me.

I am too quiet. Grandma dressed me just like she dressed my mother when she was little. I wonder if my Mother hated the pink jumpers and the fold over lacy socks as much as I did. I've never asked Grandma why she kept me instead of giving me away. I think I would have liked to have been given away.

I could be glamorous and popular and intelligent if she had, I could play the violin or paint or run marathons if she had, I could eat bean sprouts with my bohemian adoptive parents and join P. E. T. A. and be a missionary over the summer in Ghana if she had. My mother would have a face, and I could touch it, too.

It is time to go. Grandma kisses everyone and makes a big show of leaving, she slips peppermints into the pockets of the children; she scolds uncle Jared and gives aunt Michelle her most superficial smile. We pile into the pick up and Grandpa grumbles as much as the engine as it coughs reluctantly to life. They spend the drive home bickering about whether or not the wallpaper in Jared's kitchen matched the tile. They are not so old. Grandma was only twenty when she had Mother, and my Mother was nineteen when she died and I was subsequently deposited into the world.

I do not think of myself as being born. I was cut out and put in a little plastic coffin with a respirator shoved down my throat. I think maybe I was not even given a chance to cry. I shut the door to my room and lock it behind me.

I have covered the pale yellow walls with pictures cut out from magazines, people smiling and smoking and drinking, people playing the guitar and jumping off of cliffs, actors acting and singers singing. I like them. They make me feel less alone. I like their smiles. They make mine seem almost real. I can hear Grandma cooking dinner in the next room; I hear her sighs and the soft little worries she mutters under her breath.

She has to pay the electric bill this week. Grandpa's pension is worthless. Jared asked her for money. I look like I need new pants. I look down at my faded Wal-Mart jeans and admire the pale ring of ankle that shows between shoe and cuff. They fit fine.

We eat dinner and the television takes the place of conversation. Grandma tries to ask me about school but Grandpa turns Friends up louder and Joey is talking instead. We laugh. Tomorrow is Sunday and I am dreading the Monday that follows. I cannot sleep.

I roll over and over in my bed; I crumple the blankets and cast my pillow to the floor. I sit up. I lay back down. I look at the slants of moonlight on the carpet, the bars of light that creep slowly closer to the foot of my bed.

I close my eyes again. I climb out of bed and trot across my room, my bare feet little white mice scurrying. The kitchen is empty and the refrigerator is buzzing. I hesitate before opening it, and the cold light bounces across the

linoleum and is eaten up in the heavy darkness. The corners are deeper at night. I make myself a chicken salad sandwich and pour a glass of orange juice.

It is two o'clock in the morning but it doesn't matter. Things are different at night. The air is not so busy; the sounds of sleep lay thick on everything. But when you are awake, you feel it all the same. The collective unconscious.

It makes me feel powerful, ageless. I am finally alone. "Annie." I jump nearly out of my chair, a bit of toasted bread lodges itself in my throat.

Grandma is standing there in her bathrobe, the little embroidered pandas transformed to leering beasts in the shadow, creeping across the thick band of her waist. She clicks on the kitchen light and I wince. She can tell I've been crying, I am sure. "Can I sit down?" She does so before I can even shrug indifference; I am overwhelmed by the lingering scent of her perfume.

The plastic chairs creak underneath our awkwardness. "You're upset. You know you can talk to me." I cringe. I cannot keep myself from her, much as I try. I can't lie.

Even in my silence I am heard. "I just don't want to." I say softly, taking a gulp of orange juice and swishing the pulp in between my teeth. "You can't keep everything inside you, Annie." "That sounds like TV.

"Well, where do you think TV got it?" I say nothing; Grandma sighs and presses her fingers to her temples. She does this when she is worried. "I'm not asking you to spill your guts for me. I have enough problems of my own

that I don't need yours, too. But at the same time I know you, I know you just like I knew your Mother.

You wear your feelings all over your face, both of you. " " Why do you still talk about her like she is alive? " I ask, looking away. My mouth is dry after my sandwich. Maybe it is the words coming out of it. " Because she's my daughter.

I love her. I miss her. You remind me so much of her. So melodramatic.

" " I'm not like her. I would never have done what she did. " The words fall flat, dead flies smacked down. There are no wings to pick off. " You don't know that. You don't know her.

Everybody does things they are not proud of; everybody makes mistakes. Sometimes people make big mistakes. The point is that you were her mistake, not your own. " I consider Grandma, and wonder suddenly what she looked like when she was younger. Was she pretty, too? Like Mother? Will I ever be as pretty as they are? " That doesn't make me feel better. " " It's not supposed to.

The only person that can make you feel better is you. " " That sounds like TV, too. " Grandma says nothing this time. She stands up; she walks to the refrigerator but does not open it. " She was always up at night, too, you know. You could hear her moving around in her room, playing music softly, talking to herself.

She used to say the funniest things. She was brave, too. But you defeated her. She didn't have enough heart for you. " She is suddenly behind me, her hand on my shoulder.

I like the touch; I like her cool palm through my t-shirt. I hold my breath. " She liked autumn and funny socks and reading. She didn't like chicken salad, though.

" Grandma sighs, just once more, and I hear her exit the kitchen. My shoulder is warm where her hand was, but the rest of me is ice cold. I reach down and rub the feeling back into my toes. They're long and delicate, good for balancing.

I'll bet my Mother had long toes, too. I reach for my sandwich, but it never makes it to my mouth. I start to cry, and the salt stains the bread and my face. I cry for what seems hours, but can surely only be minutes. I cry and cry, and at some point, before all the tears are gone and yet the sadness is purged, I stop.

I throw the rest of the sandwich in the trash. I don't think I would've eaten it anyway.