

The Bathtub

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In the 1940's she danced on TV with my father. She wanted to be a movie star and maybe he could make that happen. He dressed her in elegant sequined gowns with taffeta skirts that flared when they did the foxtrot. He took pictures of her looking down at the camera, dressed in pointy push-up bras, short shorts and strappy heels. From that angle her legs went on forever. Her hair was bleached blond and perfectly set, her red lips plump and pouty. He had an eye for what was beautiful.

My mother stopped dancing after my father died. A deep empty pit formed inside her. I was afraid to let myself get close to her, not even close enough to peer over the side, for fear I might fall in. Later, when she started smiling again, it seemed like I was the only one who noticed it wasn't real. People tell me she used to be vibrant. But I've seen the pictures and films from those years and all I see is the fear in her eyes, like she was wondering if she was standing right, smiling right, acting normal. Other people didn't get to see her when she stepped off her make believe stage. When I desperately needed her to be real and she didn't know how.

June and Allen left their home in upstate New York, Airstream travel trailer in tow, and drove to Hollywood in the 1950's. Allen recorded their trip in typical Hollywood fashion. Using an 8 mm camera, he filmed my mother feeding birds in Florida and posing in front of giant red rocks in Arizona. It was a moving picture, so she couldn't just stand there. She had to keep moving. The films show her walking back and forth clumsily in her high heels, posing with her hand on her hip, or shading her eyes and looking into the distance. There's no sound, but you can tell that Allen is giving her directions, telling

her, "Now, point at the giant cactus and put your hand over your mouth like you are astounded by what you see." Later, he cut out the parts where she fell down or frowned at him, and he added title cards between the clips with fancy white lettering like a silent movie. They read, "The young maiden is astounded by the giant cactus," and stuff like that.

They drove along the strip in Las Vegas, filming all the neon signs as they went. Girls! Girls! Girls! She must have been holding the camera then. My mother never learned to drive. He tried to give her a lesson once. She was so nervous, she said. I picture Allen giving her directions then too. "Now, press on the clutch and put it into gear. No! The clutch. The clutch!" Driving is much more complicated than pretending you are astounded by a giant cactus. June's job was to be pretty. Once I came along, my job was to stand next to her, hold her hand and be pretty, too.

They lived in that Airstream trailer until just before I was born in 1968. Flowers were planted around the trailer hitch in an attempt to hide it. They hung a striped awning off the side and put a white picket fence around the wooden, step-up deck my father built. A reporter doing a story on trailer park life came and took pictures of them. They were sitting in lawn chairs next to a plastic bird bath and two pink flamingos. My parents enjoyed trailer park living because it offered all the comforts of a suburban home with all the conveniences of the city, plus cool breezes. That's what the caption reads under their picture. Another shows my mother walking her poodle through the trailer park. She was wearing her short shorts and pointy push up bra. The article says that my father was going to school to be a radio technician. Before color television was available, my father invented a remote control to mute commercials. That's the first thing people tell me when I ask about him.

It's his handwriting that fills my baby book. He kept a record of my weight and height through my first year. He wrote that I slept on my tummy. That I sat up at seven months, crawled at nine months, walked at 14 months. It's his boxy lettering that lists the food I liked to eat: mashed potatoes, pizza, French fries, liverwurst. He writes that I screamed to the babysitter for "Da Da" while mommy and

daddy were out dining and dancing. That Jackie Gleason, Bob Hope and Tiny Tim were the foremost entertainers of my generation. That the styles of my time were long straight hair, mini dresses and skirts, natural or white lipstick, heavy eye makeup, stretch pants and bell bottom trousers. That I was born with deep blue eyes and blonde hair (even though the pictures show my hair as auburn). That my first word was "pretty."

My father took hundreds of pictures of me. He dressed me in white lace and gingham and put ribbons in my hair. He used his 8 mm to capture me bouncing up and down on my plastic horse, kicking my legs in the kiddie pool and pointing at the geraniums in the backyard. He let me scribble on a piece of paper with red and green markers and wrote, "Charmagne's picture, Sept. 5, 1969, 3:40 AM. Title: The World Today as I See It." He stayed up with me. He gave me baths.

They kept me away from my father as he lay dying in the hospital. I don't know who they were, but there were lots of them coming in and out of the house, watching me, squeezing me, telling me, with tears in their eyes, to go play so that they could talk to my mommy. I asked to come to the funeral, but they wouldn't let me. It got quiet after that.

"Show me how daddy used to wash your toes," she says flatly, staring through me at the plastic tile tub surround.

I play along, even though daddy didn't wash my toes. I push the wash cloth sloppily between each toe with my finger then lift my foot. "See?"

Her gaze drifts dizzily past my toes then down at the bathmat.

Toes flexed, I splash my feet in the water one at a time. Droplets spring from the tub landing on her arm. "See?" I say again. But her eyes remain fixed on the floor.

I splash my hands in the water, hard, in rhythm with my feet. Left right left right left right. She stands up slowly then walks away in a daze, shutting the door softly behind her. She doesn't really want to see. She just said that because she thinks she's supposed to.

I was three years old when she left me in the bathtub. I sat there until the water got cold, listening to the hollow sounds it made when I lifted my foot and let the droplets fall one by one from the end of my toe into the tub.

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