

# History

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My mom had this box in the top of her closet where she kept old stuff, photos, letters, things like that. She called it the Box of the Past because she'd read this poem once where the guy said, "Whenever your name comes up, the box marked 1934 falls off the shelf." Isn't memory just like that, my mom said, somebody says one little thing—like "high school"—and everything comes tumbling out. Even if you don't want it to. You can't control it.

Songs, photographs, certain smells were like that for me. I knew where the box was because whenever I wanted to see a picture of my real dad, my mom would get it down and show me. It was always the same picture: her and my dad, long hair, hippies, she was pregnant with me. Right before he left for college.

I never thought it was weird, how she only had one, until this day in American History when the teacher was talking about how we believe things are true because we've seen pictures, but then he said, someone had to make those pictures. Someone had to decide which details were important enough to write down. Someone had to decide what should be in a book and what should be left out. Just think, he said, if you were living in the South during the Civil War, you would think Lincoln was a tyrant. But what if the South had won? What if they had written the books? What would they have left out? History is a kind of fiction that way, he said, pictures can lie. You always have to ask yourself what was left out.

Now, I knew you could crop things out of a photograph, but it suddenly occurred to me that my mom could be leaving things out of the story altogether. How did I know she had only one picture of my dad? She'd never let me look in the box. No, she would take it down and show me one or two things. On my last birthday, for instance, she showed me a picture of her best friend, Amanda, who got killed in a car accident when they were sixteen, and then she gave me this silver ring that had belonged to her. At first, I felt kind of funny about the ring, like it was just the ring of some *dead* girl, you know, bad luck to wear it, maybe. So I wouldn't wear it. Instead, I hung it on a ribbon over a picture on my dresser. Then one night, when my mom saw it hanging there, she held it in her hand for a long time. She looked at it like it was so precious. And a part of me thought—I couldn't help it—a part of me thought I would have to *die* for her to feel that way about me.

Anyways, that day in class, I decided to look in the box for myself, to see what she had left out, was saving for later, or maybe was never going to tell me. I had a right to know. After all, her history was my history. Maybe there were lots of pictures of my dad in there. Maybe even letters. Maybe one explaining *why* he never came back. Maybe an address.

When I opened the box, I felt like I was on the brink of discovery, but she kept such random stuff. If you were an archeologist, what would you make of shells and beach glass? I guessed you'd figure she liked the ocean. There were a lot of photos of her and Amanda. Amanda looked like she could've been one of my friends and it was weird to think that now she should be nearly as old as my mom, but, instead, she looked like me. Amanda would never get any older. She'd always be a teenager. I'd never thought about death, how it freezes you in time, but there it was. In three years, I'd be older than Amanda ever was.

And then there were other things: postcards, ticket stubs. Photos of my mom standing with some guy, his arm around her. None of me. Which kind of took my breath away. Not one. Didn't I count? Or if I went further down through the layers, none of my grandma. None of my mom's childhood. There were some of her with the other half of the picture cut away. Or in a dress with some guy, but she'd burned a hole where his face was supposed to be. My dad, I guessed.

So this is what it all meant: there were important things she wasn't telling me. What? She didn't trust me? And so I wondered, Would she ever include me? Or, like she did with my grandma, would she leave me out of the box forever? Or could she, one day, get so mad at me that she'd burn a hole where my face was supposed to be? Erase me. Never tell stories. Never look back.

Even when I was little, I felt like she was fragile, like I had to protect her. Even when I was little, I would do anything to make her look at me, really look. To make her laugh. To keep her happy. To keep from being invisible. But it hadn't worked and now, now, maybe that was *why* I liked to make her mad. I felt like I had to dig, to hurt her to get inside.

Open up, Mom, I wanted to say, let me in.  
And I actually saw myself like a heart surgeon, my hands wrenching open her rib cage. I saw her bloody heart, and still, I didn't know her. So this is what I did, I left her a note. It said: *I belong in here. If this is your history, where am I? I don't see one baby picture. Not one lock of hair. No baby shoes. Nothing.*