

Betwixt

My existence began as the sixth child of one parent and the long-awaited first of another. All of us are accumulations of lots of things. Some of them make sense; our parents are actually two different people, which is crazy if you think about it. People who are of mixed ethnicity or are immigrants have a very clear and outward-facing sort of mixing. They are both and yet neither, too much of this and too much of that for one title or name to ever really describe their lived-in experience. For myself this awkwardness-soup is borne of ingredients like being one of 10 children, blended and mixed. 5 of those siblings were already teens when I was born, and I became an aunt at the age of 3 months old. My father, 17 years older than my mother, listened almost exclusively to the Beatles and the Beach Boys. I thought the Beatles were the only music that mattered, sitting in the back of my parents car in 1998. My mom had us listen to classical and jazz, and of course the christian family station. And on the radio was Britney Spears, BackStreet Boys, the Cranberries, and Nirvana. During the day I watched Mr. Rodgers and Disney princess movies, and at night I watched my brothers and sisters play super mario, Banjo azooie, and if I woke up in the middle of the night I would sit with my father to watch black and white westerns. I didn't know that these things all came from different worlds, or belonged to different kinds of people. They all just existed to me. To me, everything came from the same place. Surely, Grease was made in the 50's and the Beatles were contemporary. Old and new never really made much of a difference to me.

So my brothers were punks, one sister was an artist, the other a mother. My own mother worked every day, putting on the costume of a corporate workwoman before I woke up every day, and my father was home with me. I would watch my mom do

woman things. She would put on pantyhose and heels and she would curl and blow dry her hair. She put makeup on in the mirror. Hair spray and vanilla were my mom's smells. Grownup, woman smells.

I remember the sound of the dial up if we wanted to use the computer, and by 5th grade I had a cell phone. There are so many of us, not even just generationally, whose identities rely on having to mix two or more things in order to convey what is actually a completely different third thing, to express an internal truth of constant overlap. When I would wake up in the middle of the night, I would see my dad watching black and white westerns or Zorro. For most of my early life westerns existed only in the dark. I didn't know that Antonio Banderas and whoever played him in black and white were different people. And in the day I'd watch Blues Clues and Mister Rogers Neighborhood and Barney, and then with my much older siblings I would watch them play the Nintendo systems. All of them teens or young adults, they would come and go. They wore studs in their belts and had tattoos on their hands and had waterbeds and painted princess murals. But then who was I? I was just a baby wandering around with no cousins, just this baby brother who had to take naps while I played chess with my dad or cheated at Candyland. In 2001 the best things ever happened. I got a baby sister and Barbie in the nutcracker was released on VHS. Princesses and video games and the Oregon trail, making potions out of roses and my mothers perfume samples.

One of my favorite things in the world growing up was having my mom all to myself on a saturday morning. The night before she would come to me with her eyes alight with a secret smile and say, “do you wanna get up early with me to go garage-saling?” And I would grin so wide and shake my head “yes” with fervor. I was selfish with my mom, I couldn't help it. She was like a fairy or something. Warm and soft with

strawberry-golden hair, and a musical voice I couldn't get enough of. But mom had to work. I didn't learn until later that this was not by choice, but anyway. I would do anything to get extra time with my mom's shimmering goodness. Those Saturday mornings where we would get special coffee drinks and donuts and rifle through everyone else's junk are like bottled joy to me. And of course we'd listen to music and talk. I loved when it was just the two of us. But all that to say that my life was full of just... stuff. We only watched movies we could get on VHS, and a lot of those were also weird garage sale finds. This mixing of eras and cultures was natural to me, and I've never shaken that sensibility.

One time I walked in on my dad watching Titanic. A frozen blue face and floating, bobbing bodies were carved into my memory. For a long time I thought the Matrix was a bad dream I had. Tubes coming out of pockets of skin, being sent down a dark and scary slide in a big black room. I was scared of everything, or could be convinced that anything was scary. I learned later that this fear is an heirloom. My grandmother used to panic about the girls getting lost in the corn. I panicked over riding bikes and dogs and Bowser and dolls that might move and the zombie Donald duck that would chase me in my sleep. My mom was scared too, and she hated to see me suffer or panic, so I was rarely made to face any fear. Although it was my dad who was home. I must have known who this man was with a kind of familiarity at some point, right? Somewhere in me is a girl who knows him and feels safe with him. In the years that have passed both his body and the memory of him have become ghosts. Quiet, bemoaning, rattling bodies. He was home with us until sometimes he wasn't. I went to school and I went to daycare. I wanted nothing more than to go home. I just wanted to be home. My mom gave me a "Q" necklace to wear to school and I would touch it like some talisman to feel close to her. The Q was actually a silly little gift from work for "quality assurance." I was obsessed with hammering nails into pieces of wood at pre-school. That and anything that involved paint, scissors, felt, paper, glue, all those things. It was a special treat when they would set out the wood and nails and hammers. That was all I wanted to do. At some point my legs were too short for the playground tricycles, and then eventually they were too long and my knees would hit

the handlebars. My hair turned from blonde to brunette at some point. All this time my mom was grieving the loss of her mother. She was grieving all the time she was pregnant with me, so the taste of that sadness is a familiar taste so that it just tastes like my mouth. My dad taught me how to play marbles and we would go to the park sometimes. He was so quiet, but what else was there? Sometimes we'd go to see the Farm. My cousins were my best friends until something bad happened to them and not me, but I didn't know about that. They were very blond and thin. I had a softer, rounder, taller body. Sometimes we would go and see my sister Krista where she lived by the big rocks. Krista had kids who were my age. Rachey was her oldest and my best friend and my niece. We were both given a make-up pallet. Our very first. We went into the bathroom and started to put the special little soft shovels into the colors but they were not going like I'd imagined they would. They would get so powdery and on the counter you couldn't just wipe it off. The counter just kept getting purpler and purplier until the whole room began to look like a bruise. I knew we'd be in trouble. We looked like bruises too. It was the first time I remember confessing, my nose already tingling fiercely the moment I opened my mouth. I don't remember if I said anything besides "mommy" before crying. I didn't know anyone else with grown-up brothers and sisters or who played super Mario or who listened to the Beach Boys. I used to sit on the kitchen counter watching Bob Ross paint. I wanted to do what he did, what my sister Amber did. She painted Rapunzel and her prince on her wall. All my stories had boys and girls and weddings and babies. That is the right way for my life to happen.