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Portrait of a Time

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PORTRAIT OF A TIME

Erika Tibbetts

Pictured from left to right: John, my brother, Jesse, Diane, Mike, TJ, Cyndi, Allen, Kevin, Robin, Scott, Lynn, Caitlyn, Dad, Mom, Me, my sister, Scott, Christina, Evan, Poppa, Grandma, Melissa, Tristan, Sean, Liam, Sandy, Joshua. Child molester not pictured. Two aunts, seven uncles, twelve cousins, one boyfriend to one cousin, two grandparents, two siblings, two parents. And me. Twenty-nine people in the backyard when twenty-eight of them mattered, my age giving the benefit of the doubt.

Dad stands next to Lynn, smiling, before Grandma's rooms in ICU's, before Poppa has more cancer than liver. Lynn says it's just gas and hides his medication from him.

Grandma tilts her chin out. She has a ring on every finger and all of her permed hair. Her proud smile pulls up higher on the opposite side of mine behind her.

Two Altoids

I don't get as nauseous as I used to, driving with the holiday herd to the East Bay. I used to pop six Altoids and pray dad wouldn't have to pull over. Now I can make it on two, as long as I remember the steps. Everyone will say hi and hug you. Uncle Mike will ask if you're taller than your sister now. Christina and Melissa will tell your sister how gorgeous she is. All of your uncles will ask Bub about college. Poppa will tell you you look like you've lost weight and that you look more beautiful every time he sees you, and then ask you if you have a boyfriend yet. Grandma will call you her girl and hug you and always smell like Grandma. You are used to Diane's judgmental watchfulness; Robin's rigid silence; Lynn. After this you will bide your time until Dad breaks out the pudding and it's almost time to leave.

Ammonia

My age passes from nineteen to twenty in seven months of fleeting, small lumps that smell like ammonia and taste like stress. Acid and rocks against my gums.

ICU's

Kaiser Cafeteria food

Family emails

The Calendar

Lynn using her medical skills to cure Grandma

Isn't she a book keeper? For a doctor's office, Mom says. Mom tries to break up the bad news with Uncle Mark's surprising nuptials but Grandma is gone that night and Lynn wants to have the service on Dad's birthday. I don't know what is in the eulogy the minister reads the day after. I'm not listening, but staring at the flower arrangement beside the pink casket filled with pictures of grandkids and great-grandkids, not finding myself or my brother or sister. We're not among the tacky poster boards beside the chapel doors either. Or in the photo montage filled with pictures of Lynn, Christina, Caitlyn. Cyndi wrote the eulogy. Writing was always her thing. I know it doesn't say that Grandma asked Poppa out on their first date when he was trying to set her up with his best friend Dale. It doesn't say at eight months pregnant with Robin she climbed through a kitchen window in Holland because she locked herself out. Or that she gave birth to Rick on the hospital welcome mat. It doesn't say that when she worked at the theater, Poppa saw Bambi more times than a sane person could because he loved her. But every period and comma was right where it needed to be. Everyone said Poppa would be the first to go.

Modesto

In Indian summer when the grass turns to tinder, and the hills crack with dehydration, and all of the kids are shut up in classrooms again, we drive. Three hours through Sacramento, Stockton—Satan's Armpits, Mom says—on our way back in time where perms are tight, bangs are high, and you get your water from diet 7up. Where Bologna is not only acceptable but expected. Where every morning you eat cherry turnovers for breakfast and watch movies from rise to barely awake. Where inside is its own season and outside is 99 degrees.

Pallbearer

The sun is stronger in the East Bay, as if the universe is trying to instill warmth into glacial Tibbetts bodies. Not likely. The brick patio is full of holiday family, the ones I see

every birthday and Memorial Day camping trip when I'm young, and less and less as my age goes up and my opinion of them goes down. In an hour I won't have to hear their voices. In an hour I won't have to see the faces of these people that mean only anger and turmoil. In an hour the men in the Air force uniforms will fold the flag on Poppa's casket and I can stop popping Altoids. My brother-in-law waits for the service to begin with my brother, Jesse, Sean, Allen, pallbearers. Someone says Cyndi's ex-boyfriend TJ is going to be a pallbearer instead. They broke up in '09. I look to my sister and hear her grinding teeth. One more hour.

Cook & Serve

Grandma taught Mommy how to make Banana Pudding. Every Christmas Eve Eve I watch as she stirs figure eights into the yellow liquid until it turns into a pot of gold. In a year I'll be old enough to stir. I'll cut the bananas and layer them with Nilla wafers in the pink bowl Mommy's dog Lucy brought home. Until then, I watch the ripples.