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What Might Have Been

James Langlas
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Imagine that your grandfather as a young man had sat in the diner for another ten minutes, sipping a second cup of coffee, considering his future one last time. Or that your mother had never been infatuated with creases and could have ignored the straight lines and fresh smell of your father's shirt before he sweated through it on the dance floor. Or that no one had been allowed to wear blue jeans to the dinner table.

Even the smallest details—a word, a passing look—make a difference, causing us to wonder how everything might have been. Nothing in families is trivial.

I once saw my aunt break one of her mother's china cups in the sink. It fell without a care, making a single clicking sound. My aunt is the type of woman who sleeps lightly, who awakens if someone puts a key in the front door. I know that if one tick of the clock travels upstairs in the dark, she raises her sleeping hands to her mouth again, looks above the chair in the corner, and sees the white of the sink and hears her mother's words, sharp like slivers of glass.

For years, my aunt has carried that one awkward moment with her. Her movements have become carefully planned, perfected, as though she had written them down beforehand. To this day, as her mother had done, she charms the guests in the living room. Alone in the kitchen, she stutters to herself and wears gloves to keep her fingers strong and certain.

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