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"All the Good Roles": A Narrative of Motherhood through Artifacts

To mother is to navigate competing impulses, to hold on and to let go, knowing all the while the impossibility of each urge. In this lyric essay, I explore the ambivalence of motherhood, the tension of a mother's desire to both preserve and destroy, through artifacts, both mine and my mother's. I take up my sons' baby teeth, their empty baby books, and the objects lost to my mother's dirt floor crawl space, the black mould, the bowing walls, all as a way of excavating both my and my mother's dreams of our creative lives before and during our lives as mothers. There is the caustic smell of Bic Wite-Out beside my mother's typewriter and, decades later, the three unworn wedding rings in my jewelry cabinet, all dormant objects that still buzz with longing. Ultimately, I do not seek in this essay to reconcile these competing impulses but to illuminate the complexity of a mother's desires for herself and her children, oftentimes at odds, and what we choose to keep and abandon in our stories as mothers.

In my house, misplacing something rarely bothers me because I know nothing is truly lost. For it to be lost, I would have had to throw it away, and I remember the things I throw away most of all.

Recently, I found an envelope of teeth in a leather purse in my garage. This is not a metaphor. The purse is mine, and the teeth belong to one of my four sons, although I am not sure which one, as tooth fairies often work at odd hours and under stressful circumstances, frequently rushing to work on the heels of fitful sleep. Slipping teeth out from under the pillows of slumbering children, without a floorboard creaking too loudly or a pillow lifted too noticeably, is no small feat. Then, there is the task of where to store these teeth in the dark morning hours before dawn. Over the years, I have found them in desk and nightstand drawers, sweater pockets, even under my pillow, and, in this recent instance, a forgotten purse in the garage.

The teeth, too, become forgotten, as it is not really about the teeth but about the magic of mornings that my sons wake to find their small bloody offerings missing, replaced by mystical gifts of candy and cash. The older the child, or the more harrowing the tooth loss, the more money they receive. During the chaos of my divorce, my youngest son, Willem, lost a tooth, which I promptly plopped into a pink ceramic teacup on the kitchen counter, a kind of temporary container, as we were heading out to run errands. Upon our return, it was not until I had started the dishwasher that I realized my mistake. In place of his tooth, Willem wrote a letter, a brutal, accusatory one, to the tooth fairy, explaining his mother's mistake. The next morning, he would find a generous stack of one-dollar bills under his pillow, his letter having moved the sympathetic fairy, his anger, now, assuaged. And although I don't know exactly where—in a drawer, box, or purse—is that angry little missive in his four-year-old hand's scribbled letters, I hold on to these things, every tooth and every letter, those small, still anchors in the current of motherhood.

It is not unusual for me to be searching for a stapler and to come across a plastic bag of blonde locks, one of my son's names scrawled across a scotch tape label, and the date I first cut their hair. My shelves brim with stacks of colourful construction papers and cracked and chipped paintings of small hands. I have always preferred to work on paper, so while my sons' report cards are all online, I save every physical copy, as well as every concert program, handmade Mother's Day card, notebook drawing, and schoolwork folder. A scan of my bookshelves will reveal the corners of handwritten letters I've placed in books that remind me of the letter-writers.

In my jewelry cabinet, in a small satin bag, I keep my wedding ring and my ex-husband's. He had left his behind the night he left and never returned, and while I had done everything possible to prompt him to leave, I could not bear to part with our rings, whose physical existence, their perfect circular weight, acts as a testament to our fifteen years together, few of them happy, all of them meaningful.

Next to my ex-husband's wedding ring and mine, I keep another diamond ring, an internally flawless one from Tiffany's on Michigan Avenue. Two weeks after my divorce was finalized, my current partner proposed with this ring, the proposal being a source of joy but also a source of embarrassment, knowing that such a quick engagement after the end of my marriage looked brash and foolish. Still, we moved in together. I wore the ring for a few years. But as time moved on, and the distance between my divorce and the present grew, the idea of being someone's wife became unappealing to me. Yet it is the ring I always wanted, one that sits, unworn, with the others.

I have been in a period of waiting, marking time until these objects are reanimated. In a hall closet, I have four beautiful but empty baby books in boxes, one for each of my sons, chosen for colours that remind me of each of

their personalities and temperaments. For years, every summer, I tell myself that I will gather up the children's artifacts and begin composing their stories. Every summer, as these objects and artifacts continue to accumulate, I do not put together the baby books, yet I do not throw anything away.

On the other side of a cheap, hollow slab door is the crawlspace. No garage or basement, the house has little storage space, but there. Growing up, when friends spent the night and asked what was beyond that door, I lied and told them it was my sister's room because I was ashamed that the six of us—my mother, stepfather, sister, two brothers, and I—shared only two bedrooms among us. Our house was cramped, chaotic, and cluttered, and part of me wanted to believe there was something else behind that slab door, or that, at the very least, someday we could make it into a livable space full of light. This, the 1980s, was also the decade of latchkey kids—kids who were without adult supervision, who, like those in *The Goonies* and *Stand By Me*, were off on adventures on their own, with possibilities behind every closed door and secret spaces humming with mystery and meaning accessible to children alone.

As a small child, although it was forbidden, I waited until my mother was preoccupied, which was often, to sneak my way in and creep, shoulders hunched and head bowed, through the wet, dark crawlspace. The sweaty pads of my feet stuck to the plastic sheet that covered the dirt and rock floor below. Somewhere in the blackness, I could hear the hum of the sump pump, although I could not see it, and I imagined it was deep and dangerous, like a well that I could fall into, like Baby Jessica had that very same year.

Back then, the crawlspace kept a porcelain baby doll with real human hair and a set of sterling silver children's flatware that the grandmother I never knew sent to me from Germany. I had only heard stories of these objects, imbuing them with mystery. The crawlspace, too, housed a doll cradle made of wood, painted red. It was mine, I knew, but for reasons I didn't know then, and I don't completely know now, I wasn't allowed to play with it. Same with the doll and the silverware. Boxes and boxes of love letters with German postage to my mother from the father I never knew. My mother's yearbooks. Stacks of old, worn paper playscripts from my mother's days on the stage. Old journals and diaries that were eventually and mercifully thrown out before they could be destroyed years later by the backed-up sump pump. In time, the crawlspace housed out-of-season children's clothes and garbage bags of stuffed animals from carnivals. My prom dresses. My little sister's prom dresses. My two little brothers' micromachines and Ninja Turtles. Report cards and piles of shit from when the cats crept in, then were accidentally shut in. Baby books covered in black mould. Boxes with rotted-out bottoms. Centipedes.

Year after year, until she never did again, my mother went hands and knees back into that dank space the length of our house to store boxes that would

either never emerge or emerge waterlogged and ruined. Under the guise of safekeeping, whether consciously or not, my mother left things there to be forgotten and destroyed. We were not allowed to retrieve anything once it was lost to the crawlspace, and in this way, those abandoned things in that haunted place loomed large in my mind, beckoning me through the blackness to reclaim and restore them.

My mother, with the help of her father, bought her first and only home in the spring of 1985. It is a modest split-level, an example of late 1970s tract housing, cheaply and quickly made, and identical to its neighbours. As a child, I climbed the tall maple in the backyard to look out onto the stark horizon line, where our street, one of the first in the new suburb, ran parallel to miles and miles of cornfields. Back then, before the skyline was littered with McDonald's signs and the bright lights of Super Target, from our deck, we could watch the harvest moon rising above the golden corn husks on cool October nights. At the end of our backyard was a wooded area that, as a child, I called "the forest." It had a walking path a neighbour regularly mowed, and I would spend late afternoons burying treasure and secret messages under trees, and, as I got older, meeting boys in places where we could not be seen. "The forest" has since been cut down to make room for rows of townhouses, one of which has a large black-and-white FUCK BIDEN flag draped across the garage that I now pass on my way into town to take my sons to visit my mother.

Despite her thirty-seven years here, and counting, my mother never liked her home; she dreamed of farmhouses in the middle of nowhere, where she could keep chickens and bees, a home where she could be out in her garden without a neighbour approaching or a doorbell ringing. Even now, from late spring to late fall, she rises before dawn, unplugs her wall phone, and walks out into the dark, dewy mornings to plant, weed, and water before the rest of the neighbourhood stirs.

It was my grandfather who preferred the suburbs, new construction. After retiring from his work as a business owner, he began his second career as a realtor. A practical man, a man who joined the army to get the G.I. Bill to go to business school and get the hell off the farm for good, my grandfather had no love for old farmhouses or, for that matter, my mother's fanciful aspirations of becoming an actress. He paid her college tuition, so she went into education rather than theatre and earned her teaching license. "Something to fall back on," as my grandfather had urged my mother, became her sole means of provision throughout her decades-long teaching career. He gave her the down payment for her house, so she bought a split-level in the suburbs. But throughout my childhood, my family would take Sunday afternoon drives into the country if my mother saw a farmhouse for sale in the Sunday paper. She would slow down to a stop and point out the window for me to see it from the

backseat and talk animatedly about the kind of life we would have in the country. I would go to school the next morning and tell my friends that we were looking to buy a big farmhouse, although, like the story of my sister's room, which was really just the crawlspace, I knew it was a lie, even if my mother did not.

Decades after those drives, after raising four children and burying two dogs, four cats, two canaries, two hamsters, and one husband, my mother now lives alone and no longer dreams of farmhouses. After taking out second and third mortgages on the split-level she never wanted, she owes twice as much on the house as what it sold for in 1985, a significant source of worry for her in her recent retirement. The downstairs toilet does not flush, and her dishwasher has not worked for years, and it now exists as storage for handwashed cups and plates. The roof of the deck blew away several storms ago, and the steps up to it rotted and were replaced with stacks of concrete blocks. When her kitchen sink broke, she simply started washing dishes in the upstairs' bathroom's bathtub. Over the decades, the broken sump pump led to dozens of floods in the crawlspace, and the resulting black mould has exacerbated my mother's asthma and allergies.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of my mother as a victim of circumstance. It is not out of passive resignation that my mother lets things go.

Still, when I hear the abrasive clack of electric typewriter keys, I think of my mother. She was in her early thirties, a mother of three, when she returned to college to complete her master's of arts in teaching. I was in elementary school, the oldest of my siblings, and my two younger ones, fifteen months apart from one another, were out of diapers but not yet in school when she embarked on her thesis.

I would still be in bed when I heard the familiar buzz of the typewriter turning on, then the brutal first plunk of the type hammer against the carriage. Instantly, my stomach would churn. My mother wrote at the dining room table, near the kitchen, early mornings through afternoons, likely to be able to position herself in a space in the house where she could still keep an eye on my younger siblings, feed them when they were hungry, without having to move too far from her work. At dinner time, we would eat around stacks of paper, small but growing towers of her thesis chapters, and little bottles of Bic Wite-Out with their caustic yet intoxicating smell. Everything and everyone revolved around my mother finishing this piece of writing. As is the case with so many mothers and children, while my mother never spoke to me about her stresses or desires, both were palpable in her mood, comportment, and the nearly imperceptible sounds that escaped her lips when she felt that she was alone. But mothers, while oftentimes lonely, are rarely alone.

I remember my mother's long, delicate fingers carefully applying the viscous

white liquid to the page, blowing on it, smoothing it, her focus and fastidiousness making it clear to me that this action was paramount to completing another page. Wite-Out meant the day, like the page, could be redeemed.

But the graduate college back then had a limitation to how many errors could be obscured by Wite-Out, and at any place in the house, once that limit was exceeded, I could hear the violence with which my mother ripped out the page, crumpled it and groaned, and fed another sheet of paper into the typewriter, impatiently turning the roller knob and shoving the round paten back into place with the machine's too cheerful ding. Some days, she had to restart the same page a dozen times. Years later, the sound of the buzz of an electric typewriter still fills me with that familiar foreboding feeling of childhood, my mother's sobs just barely audible under the clacking of keys and the crumpling of tissue-thin paper.

But I also remember how prominently the framed photograph of her commencement ceremony was positioned on our living room piano, a kind of reassurance that those dark days had come to an end, and for many years, to my knowledge, they had. Other than memories of her grading her students' English papers, I do not recall my mother writing once she finished her thesis. The year I turned thirteen years old, she had her fourth child, an unexpected pregnancy, and her marriage began to unravel. She began teaching high school English out of financial necessity, first as a substitute teacher and then full-time until she retired in her sixties, not long ago.

Ten years after my mother finished her master's thesis, I became an English major at the same college where my mother had completed her graduate degree. I was in a semester-long seminar on the work of Oscar Wilde, a course I loved with a professor I respected and admired. One afternoon, as we were walking from class, I mentioned my mother had been a student at the college and likely spent some time in the English building. When I told him my mother's name, I saw on his face a flash of recognition that meant she had been his student, too. He said, "Ah, now that makes me feel old. But I can see it. You're both brilliant students and writers."

In my early thirties, much like my mother in her early thirties, I was finishing a graduate degree with three young children underfoot and an unexpected fourth one on the way. The month that I defended my doctoral dissertation, my sons were two, four, and six years old, and I was nine months pregnant with a baby who would come just after I made my final thesis deposit to the university and officially completed my PhD. My first son was born the year I defended my comprehensive exams, and the next two came during the ABD stage of my graduate work. Like my mother, I, too, have a framed photograph of myself at the commencement ceremony, my nine-months-pregnant belly utterly obscured by my black robe. But in my photograph, my three sons are there with me, as is my then-husband.

That was nearly ten years ago, and now I keep the photo in a desk drawer at my campus office. It is a painful reminder of so many difficult sacrifices during that time and the loneliness of motherhood, the loneliness of writing, too. On rare occasions, rummaging through desk drawers, looking for an old paper handout or file folder, when I see that photograph, I am struck by my ambivalence, remembering it as a moment of loss as much as a moment of triumph. Soon after that photo was taken, my fourth son was born, and my marriage began to end. I would not write again for many years.

In an act of amnesia, a kind of repression of my own childhood experience with a mother desperately and often hopelessly trying to finish a thesis with young children at home, I deliberately chose to have my first three children during the years devoted to writing my dissertation. I envisioned this situation as ideal, a kind of privilege, to be able to stay at home with my babies while writing and more or less living off student loans. I read and reread Louise Erdrich's beautiful *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Memoir of Early Motherhood*, relishing the lyrical descriptions of the intersections between the labours of mothering and writing, taking a particular interest in how those two realms of creativity and complexity might inform one another. In my mind, being ABD seemed a lot like the transition phase of labour, one that would be hard but short, the final push to completion before utter elation. In the months after I defended my dissertation, while nursing my fourth son, I wrote an essay on my own experiences of caretaking and writing (and trying to write) in graduate school. It was soon after published by a feminist press in an anthology, making it my first publication after finishing my degree, as well as my first publication that included a first-person narrative after so many years of stifled academic writing.

In here, there is a story of a particular momentum, a kind of success, which, at times, seemed to be a joyful integration between my lives as a mother and as a writer. But there is another story from the same time, equally true, one in which my marriage was failing and my resentments within the marriage were compounding, as I desperately wanted to write but was both the primary caretaker of our children and primary breadwinner supporting the family. Ultimately, I was never able to stay at home and write my dissertation, as it became evident in my first year working on it that, financially, we could not stay afloat if I did not seek out a full-time teaching job. So I did. That second year, when I should have been working on my dissertation, I put my writing on the back burner for the next three years to teach five writing classes per semester at the local community college, scheduling my teaching assignments around the babies' breastfeeding schedules. For those years, I did not write a word of my dissertation or read a word I had previously written. Four years into my ABD status, I received a letter from the graduate college notifying me that if I did not finish that year, I would be kicked out of the program. It was

my fourth pregnancy that operated as a kind of dissertation clock, keeping me focussed on finishing before the due dates, the dissertation defence in January and the baby's in February.

I often think about the kinds of sacrifices a creative life demands and how those demands are proportioned. My mother's dream was always to be on the stage, to live and breathe the theatre. It is what she studied during her undergraduate, but just as she was getting her creative life up off the ground, at nineteen years of age, she found out she was pregnant with me. A then-single mother, she moved back in with her parents, where my grandparents cared for both my mother and me. While raising me and then my siblings, she finished her undergraduate degree and then her graduate degree. She spent summers performing in travelling Shakespeare troupes and autumn and spring evenings performing in community theatre. Even so, with what seems like a kind of success, her degrees and motherhood and even chances to be on the stage, years later—my youngest sibling is now in his thirties—my mother still speaks longingly of a life she never had. While she spent nearly three decades teaching high school English and years directing high school plays, for much of that time she described her teaching career as one that was decided for her by her father, my grandfather, who paid for her education because, according to him, she "needed something to fall back on" if a life in the theater did not work out. And surely, as motherhood tethered her to Des Moines, Iowa, over the next several decades, my grandfather was right. Des Moines is not exactly bustling with opportunities in the arts. But in her sixties now, she continues to lament that she's too old for "all of the good roles" and even in retirement feels restless, often resentful of time and motherhood.

My sons are now nine, eleven, thirteen, and fifteen years old. I wonder what, if any, memories they will have of me writing, my door closed, what I can imagine might feel like an unspoken but pervasive demand to be quiet in the house when I am at my computer. I notice how my younger two sons approach me at my desk with some hesitation, unsure of my mood or my tolerance for interruption. I recognize the ways my children read me as I walk into a room, much like I did with my mother, trying to decipher where in my head I am at that moment, and how open I am to their stories of joy and desire, fear and confusion or if I am too wrapped up in my own stories of those things. I wonder how much of this has to do with being a mother or having a mother or something else altogether. And while I have never resented my children for any kind of effect they did or did not have on my writing life, I am still relatively young, still writing, and still hopeful for all the good roles.

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