



THE FIRST WASHING

*You don't look back along time
but down through it, like water.*

– Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*

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When I was eighteen weeks pregnant, I made a confession to my sonographer.

I lay on the exam table in a maternity bra and thin cotton robe, veiny belly bare, eyes fixed on the ceiling poster of a kitten with a diamond-studded collar. “This morning,” I told her, “I prayed that God had spared a girl from landing in my womb.”

She took off her glasses and slid them into the pocket of her lab coat. “Let’s talk this out, hon,” she said. Her name was Bridget, and she had an elegant neck and an impressive overbite, a Class II malocclusion—the daughter of an orthodontist notices such things.

I closed my robe and inched my rear up the table, wanting to talk. I was not a sharer by nature. I did, however, relish the company of emotional close talkers, like my friend Sheri Jacobstein, who often punctuated her sentences with “my shrink says.” Last week after our birthing class, we had lunch at Heinemann’s—we’d both been craving their grilled cinnamon bread—and I soaked up her description of her mother’s new obsession with step aerobics. I never spoke of my mother.

Bridget grabbed the chair typically occupied by my husband, Sam, and wheeled up to the examining table. “Where’s Dad today?”

“Madison. Business trip.”

Sam hadn’t missed a sonogram appointment yet. Bridget had

handed him a tissue when he wept after seeing the baby's heart-beat for the first time.

"I wanted him gone. He doesn't care about the gender as long as the baby is healthy, and I—" My sentence was too ugly to finish.

I stared at the feline overhead. "It's not that I don't know how to handle a little girl. I'm a teacher." I was a good teacher, too. I'd received the Milwaukee Early Childhood Education Golden Apple award two years in a row. I liked girls; I simply had too much baggage to raise one of my own.

Bridget waited for me to finish my thought.

"And I had a good mom." I paused. "For a while."

"Do you want to tell me about her?"

"I don't know." I considered what I would say. Maybe that she sang me Ella Fitzgerald to lull me to sleep and taught me how to knead challah dough. And she was a superb listener.

Bridget waited without making me feel rushed. I knew she had a packed schedule, and I felt like the person who shows up at a busy grocery checkout line with a wallet full of coupons.

"I'm keeping you from your next patient," I said.

"I'm fine."

I swallowed. "My mother baked me chocolate cakes from scratch for my birthdays and let me lick the batter off the beaters."

"To heck with salmonella," Bridget joked.

I smiled, still staring at the kitten, remembering my Saturday-morning walks to Shabbos services with my mother. She held my hand with a touch so light that it felt like her fingers were blowing mine kisses.

"Seriously, it sounds like you had a good mom," Bridget said, fishing her glasses out of her pocket.

I reached for her arm. She folded her hands in her lap.

"I can't take care of a girl," I whispered.

"Oh, get out of town. Of course you can. Look at all the things your mom taught you!"

My mother had shown me how to ditch her children when

they needed her most, to walk out the front door without so much as a glance over her shoulder after shaming them with her bad behavior.

“Yes she taught me a lot of things.”

I was breathing hard now. Hot red circles were colonizing my breastbone, and my armpits were sweaty and rank, as they'd been since I woke up this morning. No matter how much deodorant I put on, I smelled like an onion bialy. Even Sam had noticed it when he kissed me goodbye, and he has no sense of smell.

“Deep breath, honey.” Bridget took my hand in hers and held it tightly for a few seconds.

“Okay,” I said obediently, and then waved my hand in front of my nose. “Sorry for the stench.”

“Not to worry.”

I tried to dry my armpits with the sleeve of my robe.

“Forget about the pits for a second. I want you to listen to me,” Bridget said.

I shifted my gaze until I was staring into this semi-stranger's kind blue eyes.

“You're not the first woman to lie on this table, scared witless that you'll hurt your girl like your mom hurt you.”

How did she know?

“These women go on to become good moms and love the dickens out of their daughters, and if you have one, you'll do the same.”

I hope I can.

Bridget squeezed my hand hard. “Trust me, or better yet, trust you.”

Trust. It was something I could think about. I shivered. My toes were icy, despite the vents blasting hot air in my direction. We sat in silence for a few seconds. Through the thin walls, I heard my OB recite his mantra to another patient: “Small meals throughout the day. Call me with any questions or concerns. You're never a bother.”

“Okay, let's do this.” My voice sounded gravelly.

“You don’t want to wait for Dr. Mathison?”

“No.” I didn’t want anyone else to see me this whacked out.

Bridget got up from Sam’s designated chair and walked around the table to the ultrasound cart. She gently undid my robe for me, which I liked. She squirted a glob of jelly on my stomach and spread it around tenderly. I liked that too. She detached the wand from the machine and moved it around my belly. I shuddered.

Bridget squinted into the screen. “Everything looks *real* good.”

I breathed my usual sigh of relief, but I didn’t let the breath entirely escape from my body.

“Mrs. Blumfield?” she said softly.

“Yes?” I answered to the cat above.

“You’re having a perfect baby girl!”

I stared at the screen, at the baby’s heartbeat, and each pulse of light propelled me forward in time. I knew things. I knew that I would name my daughter Lili, and that after she was born, I would reach out to the mother who had left me. I knew that my mother and I would have biweekly desultory phone calls to compare the hues of the leaves falling from our elm trees or the price of unleaded gas at our respective Mobil stations. I would not sing Lili Ella Fitzgerald, even if I could carry a tune. I would choose raw folksy singers like Marianne Faithfull and the Cowboy Junkies. But I too would be a superb listener.

When Lili turned two, I would run into Bridget at Sendik’s, at the deli counter, but I wouldn’t recognize the woman who had sat next to me and pried my fears from me as she would a sharp object from a small child’s fingers. When I prayed, I would thank God for my triumph over my mother’s legacy, knowing that my mother would one day need me as much as the baby now growing in my womb, and that the sour smell I’d so easily washed away after my sonogram would return with more pungency.

My glue would hold for fifteen years, until a gorgeous September day when a letter would arrive through my mail slot and blast me back to the tail end of my childhood, to the morning my mother began her final goodbye.