

Believe in Me

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*... any life, she had to believe, was nothing
but the continuity of its love.*

Eudora Welty, *The Optimist's Daughter*

1

I WOULD LIKE TO WRITE down the portions of my mother's story that I know, but I'm not sure exactly what happened to her in the year before I was born. At times, the anecdotes she told about her life make sense. At others, I traverse a tightrope high above the ground and have to fill the empty air beneath so that I can move from one known place and time to another.

The story of my mother begins thirty years ago in 1974, the year before I was born. This was when, in Australia, a human skeleton estimated to be at least 40,000 years old, sprinkled with ochre and buried with ceremony, was uncovered in the shifting sands around a dry lake bed. In that year, too, Philippe Petit made eight passes across a highwire strung between the Twin Towers in New York, wearing flares that looked wide enough to trip him.

My mother's name was Sarah. If I can inhabit her consciousness, even a little, it might help me see who I am. Imagine that I'm creating a reversible figure; within a silhouette of a candlestick, for example, there lies hidden the profiles of two lovers. Sarah

is the candlestick. To make her as true to life as possible, I'll use her scrapbooks, which are filled with overlapping pictures and souvenirs and notes. I can also draw on memory. I'm living in Sydney, Australia, in 2004, and I need to walk towards the future without always looking back.

Sarah was insulated from the assumed freedoms of the 1970s. No-one at her church said that she couldn't show her thighs, but she apprehended the message without being told. Back then, she lived in Poughkeepsie in upstate New York, but was too young to go to Woodstock in 1969 and so missed hearing the words to Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' about how one pill could make you bigger, and another could make you small. The lyrics might've aided her in a metaphysical way: they might've helped her to see beyond the strictures of her daily life. Music was important to her. Before she left her home town, she hummed 'Jesus Never Broke My Heart' as she walked in the woods at the back of her house. She said, *Goodbye, Goodbye* to the trees, birds and all the animals hiding in plain sight.

Could she have really done this? Was she so naïve, so trusting? She was already eighteen years old.

Three days before I was conceived, Sarah packs her suitcase. Inside, most of the space is taken up by a scrapbook, a copy of *National Geographic*, scissors, glue and markers. Her brother Levi lends her a jacket, which she folds and places on top of her treasures. She sits on her case to pull the zip closed. When she stands, she's as small as a fairy; well, she's five feet and two inches. She covers her ears – they stick out a little – with her long straight hair, which she combs with her fingers.

Until this moment, she's been longing to escape her hometown. Now she begins to understand what she will lose: the view of the woods from her window, the shadows cast by trees, her friend Sam, her other friends down the road. It doesn't sound like much, she knows, but she feels the impending loss as needles in her fingertips, the desire to cry. It's three thirty in the afternoon, but someone's forgotten to turn off the light on Sam's back porch.

Her mom calls from the kitchen: 'Are you going to cut my hair?'

Greta – Sarah's mother – sits in a vinyl-covered chair, a sheet over her shoulders and covering her dress. Her hair, which falls down her back, is the colour of a coin. She went grey at the age of thirty-four. The scissors and comb stand in a water jar on the kitchen counter. See how the light slants in the window and catches the steel of the scissors.

'Hurry,' says Greta.

Sarah says, 'I'm not going.'

'Sure you are,' says Greta.

Sarah takes the ends of her mother's hair between her forefingers. 'A bob, right?'

'Yes. Be quick.'

'It's okay if I miss the train.'

Greta catches Sarah's wrist and digs her fingernails into Sarah's flesh. She says, 'It'll be over in the blink of an eye. Just three months. And it's God's work.'

'What'll you do without me?' Sarah doesn't flinch. 'Something's going to happen, I know it.'

'I have Levi.'

Greta lets Sarah go. The imprints of her fingernails – a row of long-tailed commas – fade slowly from Sarah's skin.

Levi materialises in the doorway, runs a hand through his brown mane. Sarah cuts as though nothing will change, as though the moment will swell and accommodate them forever in this kitchen in the late afternoon sun. As Greta's hair falls to the tiles, Levi lays his drawing pad on the counter, takes up a broom and begins to sweep; this point in time is the one that matters. The only sounds are the scissors and the broom. For a second, there's no other noise, not even a bird.

Greta says to Sarah, 'What's got into you?'

'You scared?' says Levi.

'No. What's got into you two? Wanting me gone.' Sarah says, 'Will you read to Mom while I'm away?'

Levi nods. Sarah knows that he won't. He doesn't have the patience. Of course he'll pay the bills and deal with any correspondence. They keep their mom's illiteracy a secret. People will take advantage of me if they know, Greta says. They always have.

'Don't make me leave,' says Sarah.

'Listen,' says Greta. 'Just stay fancy-free. No boyfriends out there.'

Sarah snorts.

'Don't worry about us. Be as free as a bird, as a fox. You know?'

'Okay.' When Sarah moves around to her mom's fringe, she dampens the comb and runs it through Greta's hair. For a second, her mom's eyes are closed, her face still. In this moment, when Greta's face is completely motionless, Sarah's overwhelmed by dread, or a feeling that's even colder: the touch of icy water when you take off your shoes and step into a pond in spring. She shivers and lays her hands on her mother's head, which is reassuringly warm.

‘You want the same bangs?’ Sarah says.

‘Yes.’

Greta’s eyes are still closed. Open them, Sarah thinks. The scissors make their steely sound. Levi sweeps, gathers the hairs in a dustpan and tips them into the trash.

‘Enough,’ says Greta. She brushes the hair from her neck and shoulders.

Sarah washes the scissors, lingers.

‘Get your suitcase. Put your shoes on,’ says Greta.

Sarah’s obedient; at least, she slides her feet into her loafers. She’s wearing a matching skirt and shirt, so sneakers won’t do. Levi – who’s always Greta’s ally on the face of things – heads into Sarah’s room and emerges carrying her suitcase. He’s envious that she’s escaping, Sarah knows, and at the same time he’s guessed why Greta is sending her away.

2

AN HOUR LATER, SARAH KISSES Greta, hugs Levi and boards the train that will take her as far as Chicago. Now, she's simply nervous. The train smells of aftershave, cigarettes, men. It feels as solid as a house, although in a moment it will begin to rumble, to move.

Isaiah Woolcott, pastor of the Faith in God Assembly Church, shows Sarah to her roomette and leaves her to settle in, while Greta watches from the platform. Levi sits on the platform with a sketchpad. When he looks up, he lifts one eyebrow, then bends over his drawing as if trying to capture his sister's face.

Sarah is accompanying Isaiah west to Idaho. Tomorrow evening, after they've spent the day at another assembly church – this one is called 'Lakeview' – in Chicago, they'll board the North Coast Hiawatha and cross the prairie. On 10 October, in Sandpoint, Idaho, they will alight. My mother is heading towards a kind of nowhere.

As the train rumbles and begins to sway, Sarah glimpses her

mom stepping into the dark cavern that is Poughkeepsie Station, disappearing from sight. Greta's shoulders are held clenched. In that moment, Sarah realises she's cut the back of her mom's hair on a slightly slanted line. If it were possible, Sarah would reach through the window and call, 'I didn't cut your hair straight. I love you.' She would caress her mom's tensed shoulder.

When Sarah looks south in the direction of home, she can see the train's steel body snake through the marshes lining the Hudson River. Between the track and the river lies a strip of tall grass and reeds. She sees a flash of red, a white-tipped tail. Could it be a fox? She stands to look, but the creature – if it wasn't a trick of her eyes – has disappeared.

Last spring, when a vixen was killed on the highway, Sarah walked through the woods out the back of her house until she found the kits. When she heard them crying, she crouched in the pine needles and stuck her hand in the hole. They sank their teeth into her wrist. She slipped her other hand in, grabbed one by the scruff and the other by the leg and dragged them out. One was so weak that it didn't survive the first night in the woodshed. The second she fed with an eye-dropper, making formula from a book.

As the fox grew, she named it Lucky and fed it cat food, earthworms and berries. They roughoused together all summer. She showed him how to dig for worms, watched as he sprang on a field mouse that ran too fast for her to see and looked away when he bit off its head with a snap of his jaws. Only when he drew blood from Levi's finger did she let him go. Sometimes she still sees her fox, almost fully grown, in the woods out the back of her place. Although she's too far from home to glimpse him now, the flash of a white-tipped tail is a message saying, *foxes will always*

be with you. She prefers to think this way than to imagine the dangers that await Lucky: highways and rifles, traps and poison.

Outside, light is draining from the sky. Sarah stands to flick the switch in her compartment. When Isaiah told her to settle in, he probably meant, ‘Clean up for dinner.’ She should brush her hair at least. The cabin is illuminated and her image is reflected in the window: her hair past the small of her back, her bony face with its large ears. Stop with the vanity, she says to her reflection, but she sweeps her eyes downwards over her white blouse, her embroidered vest and the braided leather belt around her handspan waist. Instead of brushing her hair, she pulls an elastic band from her wrist and ties it up in the hope that it will make her look older.

This is the first sanctioned trip she’s taken away from home. No-one told her to arrange a passport, but she saved her babysitting money, had her photos taken, and now she has one with a green cover and a number inside. Another mark of her determination, that she did this. Isaiah said that when winter comes – it’s already almost winter – he might head south to preach in Mexico. Right up until this afternoon, when she started to feel uneasy, she planned to go too.

Isaiah has a suitcase of pamphlets, warning about how the first four seals on the scroll have already been broken by the seven-horned lamb. The white horse, the red horse, the pale horse and the black horse are galloping over the four quarters of the earth, bringing the sword, famine, plague and men who are as wild as beasts. Sarah imagines the four horses as luminous, visible even at night. Sometimes she thinks she catches a glimpse of one of them. Although it isn’t in the pamphlet, this is what she believes: that the horses are in the air and can be seen from the edge of one’s

vision. Other times she thinks that the scroll and the horses are a fantasy. The belief that she's living on earth at a time when the sun might turn black and the stars might fall like figs from the sky is a delusion.

Isaiah knocks, then enters her roomette. He's over six feet tall and wears a hat to cover his bald spot. Sarah has seen him hatless, and the feathery hair that edges the denuded area reminds her of baby bald eagles. He's old, in his late forties or so. The overall impression he gives is of someone who could be a modern-day Pilgrim Father, even though he wears turtlenecks and is capable of strumming a guitar. He stands in her tiny compartment and keeps his feet despite the rocking of the train, holding the steel door open with one boot.

Isaiah says, 'Dinner.'

He offers her the crook of his elbow. She slips her arm through his, brushing the sleeve of his turtleneck with the back of her hand. It's the first time she has touched him. She resists rubbing her cheek against his shoulder and breathing him in. Her dad died in Vietnam five years ago and before that he was away a lot. Being beside Isaiah fills her with a desire to be hugged, to feel the roughness of a man's coat and leathery fingers. Her bones long for it.

They can't walk to the dining car arm in arm without crabbing sideways because the passageway doesn't admit two. For a moment they walk like this, Isaiah leading Sarah and she almost sashaying out of pleasure. Sarah would persist but Isaiah lets her go. Isaiah and Sarah, she whispers to herself, wondering why she has never murmured his name before. He has a wife already, the most perfect wife in the church, with baby skin and curls. The wife has borne Isaiah five children and is pregnant with the sixth,

which is why she isn't coming to Sandpoint. At least, that's how Isaiah explains his wife's absence.

The letters the pastor has exchanged with the faithful out west outline an arrangement for Sarah, although she's vague about the details. Sarah's being sent to Idaho because it's a long way from New York City: a long way from trouble. Three months earlier, when she was still seventeen, she and Sam jumped on a train to New York City to see a band called Dead Boys at CBGB, missed the last train home and spent the night sleeping in Bryant Park; they'd absorbed so many stories about the dangers of the city that they were too terrified of being shot or knifed to actually sleep. Greta thinks that Sam is Sarah's boyfriend and that he's leading her astray. In fact, it was Sarah's idea to go to the city. When she came back, her mom wouldn't look at her for a week.

A waiter in black and white opens the door to the dining car. At the sight of the white linen tablecloths and the vases containing fake flowers, she's pierced with homesickness.

They sit down. Is Isaiah saying grace? She sees his lips move. She mutters grace too. When she raises her eyes, his are already waiting for hers.

'Are you nervous?' Isaiah says. 'Don't worry. I'll keep you safe.'

'Thank you.' Nervous of what? she thinks.

Sarah and Isaiah eat Green Salad with Thousand Island Dressing, Oven-Baked Salisbury Steak then Apple Cobbler. Sarah feels full to bursting, a pleasant feeling, rare at home. Isaiah doesn't say much. He glances at her, then out of the window. The train is climbing now. Along the railway tracks grow straight-trunked trees. If Sarah looks, she can see their almost-bare branches. She knows some trees' names; her father could name them all. So much knowledge is like that: her own erudition feels shallower

than that of her parents. Sometimes she still thinks her father died understanding everything. She is left with only fragments of what he knew.

After Isaiah drinks another cup of coffee, he says, 'I can show you the dome car. The windows give you a view of the sky.'

It's getting dark. Sarah thinks that they'll see nothing besides lights and wires.

Isaiah studies his hands and looks up. 'Did you know that in the west men take more than one wife?'

'I didn't know that.' Sarah stands, then Isaiah rises too. Isaiah spoke about men with two wives for no good reason. Okay, so he knows more about the world than she does, although perhaps not as much as her father: he'd been to Vietnam, after all.

Under the domed glass, they sit side by side. Sarah looks up. The night is moonless but clear. Lights pass overhead. She and Isaiah do not touch, but the speed of the train, the sound of wheels on tracks, fosters intimacy. Other people are sitting nearby – a man who sips from a glass of clear liquid; another who sits close to the window staring out – but it's as though these others aren't there.

'Will you miss your animals?' Isaiah says.

'I let them all go.'

'I see the fox sometimes.'

Sarah didn't realise that Isaiah had heard about the fox.

Isaiah says, 'I don't know if you should've raised a fox. When I was a boy my mom had a chicken farm near Sugarloaf, Pennsylvania. I used to trap foxes and shoot them. Anything to stop them from getting at the birds.'

Everyone kills despite the sixth commandment, Sarah thinks with melancholy. For some reason, animals don't count.

Isaiah didn't have a dad either, otherwise why would he be

talking about his mom's chicken farm? Then he speaks about the chicks and ducks they raised in Pennsylvania, how they would trail after him, imprinted. He was their mother. He would hold them in his hands and stroke the chicks' yellow feathers. They grew up fast, became white leghorns – laying hens – in no time and forgot he'd ever existed. He wonders if that's how people are with God. If God holds each of them in his hands and later, they forget him. Everyone grows into a white laying chicken and is caught up with eating and sleeping, working and drinking: their own insignificant lives. One day they die. The way he talks, she sees it as tragic: this automatic, mechanical life. She resolves to lead a different kind of existence, less blind, more purposeful.

Then he tells her about how he might've been a veterinarian, if he'd been able to go to college. The vet in town showed him how to do a post-mortem on a chicken. She might have seen a carcass split with a pair of steel scissors. He knows what it all means, how the interior spaces are filled with intestines, with the egg sack. He could look and know what had killed the bird. This is a strange thing to say, sitting on a train, close. Sarah, meanwhile, is still thinking about how not to turn into a white leghorn, always looking for grain without considering the sky.

When she returns to her compartment, alone in the bed the porter constructed from her chair, she lies with the blind raised. The train rocks past towns, past lakes.

'Be as free as a bird, as a fox,' Greta had said. In fact, being free means loving whoever you want, thinks Sarah.

She hardly sleeps. Instead, she imagines Isaiah's hands on her.