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nonfiction by Christina Elia

I.

A flier that reads: **OLDIES NIGHT AT THE GOLDEN DOVE, 4th AVE AND 96th ST, BROOKLYN—FIRST 50 IN LINE GET FREE ENTRANCE.**

July 1984, and after hours of convincing from her friend Linda, my then twenty-four-year-old mother, who in fact is not actually my mother just yet, reluctantly agrees to spend her Saturday night in a dark dance club, one that lacks even the tiniest bit of elbow room. While Linda makes the rounds, conversing with every possible six-foot-tall Italian who may or may not have connections with the mob, my mother stands in back by the crowded bar, listening to the music blare around her. In contrast to the darkness, she is dressed in all white—down to the open-toed platform shoes, with her dark hair flowing below her waist (a detail that she never fails to mention when she recounts this story). She scans the room for a familiar face, or just a face that holds her interest for more than a second, before giving up on the prospect of meeting anyone worthwhile.

When she finally decides to go home, she finds Linda, then rushes through the narrow door as if her life depends on it. She is standing by the entrance, searching for her car keys in her seemingly bottomless pit of a handbag, when she hears his voice.

"You're leaving already?" He is dressed in all black, blue-green eyes glistening

under the glow of the street lamp, smoking one of those hand-rolled cigarettes.

"Yes, we're going home now," she replies politely.

"Well, that's too bad." He takes one last drag then flicks the filter onto the dirty sidewalk. "But maybe I'll see you around next week."

Meanwhile, Linda is nudging her side, a sort of ambiguous gesture that's an unspoken mixture between "he's good looking, be nice!" and "let's get going already." My mother is about to answer him, but he interrupts when he tells her his name.

"Maybe I will see you next week," she says before walking away.

Right when they are about to cross the street, he calls out. "Wait! You didn't tell me your name!"

This is when she turns for a brief second, just enough to get a good look at his face and still make the cross light.

"Francesca," she answers. "My name is Francesca."

II.

September 2012, the first week of my sophomore year, and there's a new girl in school. For a graduating class of only one hundred, this is a big deal. For the rest of the snobs at my outrageously expensive Catholic high school, a new girl means a shift in the balance of cliques. For me, it just means the hope of possibly finding a friend whom I can stomach for more than ten minutes.

I am sitting in fourth period lunch with some acquaintances when she sits across

from me. She introduces herself as Kristen and tells me she's from Staten Island.

"Staten Island? My cousin's best friend lives there!" A random girl sitting next to us interjects. "Maybe you know him? His name is Joe."

"Not everyone on Staten Island knows each other," I scoff. "Besides, there are probably a million Joes out there."

Kristen looks at me and starts laughing then she agrees—there really are a million Joes on Staten Island.

"Well, you never know." The girl shakes her head. "You really never know."

III.

August 1996, and my mother is waiting in a clean, white-walled doctor's office. She taps her foot nervously on the floor, staring at the clock on the wall as if the seconds pass like minutes and the minutes like hours. The endocrinologist finally comes in, his face fairly ambivalent, when he tells her the news.

"Well," he begins, "the good news is the steroids have been working."

"And the bad news?"

"The bad news is only one egg is viable."

She takes a deep breath, but then smiles, as if this isn't really bad news at all.

"Let's do it," she says. "I'm all in."

"And the father? Is he okay with all this?"

"We're just close friends," she tells him. "He agreed to give me his sperm because he knows how much I want this."

"Are you sure about this? Remember what we talked about? There's less than a

40 percent chance that you'll even get pregnant," he drones on. "At your age you risk mental retardation, heart and lung failure, stillborn birth ..."

"Yes." She is even more adamant now. "I'm meant to do this." She smiles again. "My baby will be fine."

IV.

January 2016, and I am sitting in a densely populated Italian cafe in South Brooklyn. My father's brother, my uncle Frank, is the owner. He is across from me, mesmerized by the fact that the little girl that he never watched grow up is now a woman. Even though my parents had an agreement when I was born, in some ways my father still wanted to be considered my father. He convinced my mother to put his name on my birth certificate and even came to visit me until I was three years old, after which he seemingly disappeared into oblivion.

"Are you sure you don't want anything, *bella*?" my uncle asks. His eyes are warm and loving, but I still shake my head.

There are men in the back shouting, playing cards with the kind of enthusiasm seen at a sports tournament. There are also a million thoughts going on in my head, most of which I can't properly articulate. I came here because I wanted to know more about my father, whom I haven't seen in fifteen years. I look around, then inhale deeply, taking in the interesting mixture of freshly brewed coffee, cigarettes, and paint fumes.

Meanwhile, my uncle stares at me intently, waiting for me to break the silence.

"Where does he live?" I finally say.

VI.

“On Staten Island with his wife and son.” He doesn’t seem shocked by the question. “I think his son is eighteen, just like you, actually.”

When the words leave his mouth, they smack me in the face. I don’t know if it is the fact that he has been living so close to me for so long without even the smallest inclination to come to my house—which I have lived in all my life—and see the creation he spawned, or the fact that I have suddenly come up with a great name for my one-woman pity show: The Forgotten Child. I only manage to get out four words before we go downstairs into the basement, share a cigarette, and look at old pictures.

“What’s his name?” I ask. My uncle stares at me blankly.

“His name,” I repeat, “his son—what is his name?”

“Joey,” he tells me. “His name is Joey.”

V.

March 1997, and my mother is eight months and some weeks pregnant. She sways on the swing in my backyard, while my father sits on the chair nearby.

“I can’t believe the day is almost here,” she says, giddy with excitement. “I feel like I’ve been waiting forever.”

“You’re going to be a great mother,” he tells her, “with or without me.”

“What if she wants to know what you do for a living? Am I supposed to tell her you’re in ‘waste management’?”

“Well ...” He is at a loss for words, evidently. “We can cross that bridge when we get to it.”

JOURNAL ENTRY—MARCH 8, 2016:

*I think about him all the time.
Now it probably seems like I’m going to go into some cliché, romantic bullshit about the target of my current interest.*

I’m not, so let’s rephrase this:

*I think about my brother all the time.
I have a newborn brother, well he’s newly born into this fucked-up world of mine, which I call ephemeral existence. Also he is younger, and by that I mean he is precisely three months younger than me.
The thing that separates us from normalcy is the unfortunate fact that I know I have a brother, but my brother definitely doesn’t know he has a sister.*

*An open letter to my newfound next of kin: it’s weird to think I went approximately eighteen years and nine months without knowing you existed; the fact that you will go indefinitely without this same knowledge makes it very hard for me to be patient. I think my whole life I felt like I was waiting for something to happen; for some kind of sign, and I’m taking this as it. I am writing from a state of nonbeing, because in your world I have neither come nor ceased to be. Every day I wonder about who you are, what we’ll become, and if we could possibly have anything in common. We are both half-blood products of 1997 and I’ve been waiting a long time for some sort of salvation.
I don’t mean to put any pressure, but you are figuratively my Jesus Christ.*

*please come soon.
sincerely,
your shadow in broad daylight.*

VII.

October 1997, and my mother is laying me

down on the long table in the cardiologist's office. She is worried because she is starting to believe what people have told her. On my forehead there is a bright red, irritated mark, spanning from temple to temple, and from my hairline down to the bridge of my nose. The ob-gyn said it should go away within weeks; six months have passed, and it is still there.

"What seems to be the problem?" the doctor asks after he walks in.

"My ob-gyn told me to go see a doctor if the mark on her forehead doesn't fade." Her exasperation is even more obvious now. "I'm worried it may be linked to some sort of disease."

"Let me take a look," he says while perusing my tiny face.

In this moment, my mother feels as if my life depends on the man standing in front of her, closely examining the child she worked so hard to have. She holds her breath without even realizing it.

"Are you Christian?" he asks with a hint of humor in his deep voice.

"Yes. Why?"

"Well then," he says, "you need to ask Him why He would give your perfectly healthy daughter a cross-shaped birthmark that's so concerning."

Sighing with relief, she asks him if it will ever truly go away.

"Maybe it will," he retorts, "or maybe it won't."

VIII.

July 2016, and since my first visit to Uncle Frank, I've been talking to my father on and off for about six months through Facebook Messenger. He knows I want to meet him, but he keeps putting it off. More importantly, he knows how much I want to meet Joey. Since the day I found out he existed, I have thought about him constantly. Growing up as an only child, I've always felt isolated and lonely.

Even though I haven't had a full conversation with my father in a little while, I remember that it is nearing Joey's birthday. I log onto Facebook and type in his name, and I'm greeted once again with the crazy fact that we have one mutual friend: a girl named Kristen I knew from high school.

I scroll less than an inch down his profile and read a post that makes me feel instantly dizzy. It's from someone I assume is his friend, and it's dated May, almost three months ago. It reads: **RIP Joey. I never thought you would go out the way you did. I still remember the times we shared.**

In this moment my phone drops; I don't even need to confirm the facts with my father for the pain to be overwhelming. I already know it's true because it all makes sense, the elusiveness, why he hasn't fully answered my messages since May. I am heartbroken at the loss of the sibling I almost had.

Later, when I go home and tell my mother the news, she cries. Even though she didn't know him, she feels as if she's lost someone too.

"I'm so sorry." She hugs me tight. "I guess it just wasn't meant to happen in this world."

IX.

December 2016, and I am sitting across from my father in Uncle Frank's cafe. It's the first time I've met him since I was three years old. We've been sitting for about three hours and we've talked about Joey the whole time. He tells me that even though his friends claimed he overdosed, he actually didn't. They couldn't find any drugs in his system. The autopsy was inconclusive, and we still don't know how he died. For the first time since his death, though, I feel as if I have some closure, even if it's ever so slight.

I look at the man who sits across from me, different from the person I imagined. He is bald now, but still has those same shining, blue-green eyes my mother remembers from all those years ago. He's smiling at me proudly, while smoking his tenth cigarette of the evening. I think about all the energy I spent looking for him, and I feel relieved to have finally met him, if not a little resentful that I never had the chance to meet my brother.

"I can't get over how beautiful you are," he remarks, "but do you still have that birthmark on your forehead? I remember how red it was."

"Kind of," I answer. "It definitely faded with time."

"You know Joey had the same mark, right? It was just as red as yours, if not worse."

"I know," I say. "You told me that."

"Your brother. What a great kid he was. I miss him so much."

"Me too."

"Really such a sweet kid, he would have loved you so much," he goes on. "You know what he said to me one day? He looked at me with those big brown eyes of his and you know what he said?"

"What did he say?"

"Dad," he tells me, "I really wish I had a sister." ♦