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Mom Plots a Double Homicide

One month before I was born, although it would be forty years before I discovered this, my mother had to be restrained by police from jumping off the Caveman Bridge into the Rogue River.

It would have been December and I know that river. Although the aptly named Rogue is deceptively placid as it flows under the bridge, its rapids are intense. Even in summer, up its tributaries, it's not for the feint of heart with a standard issue kayak. It's a no-nonsense river that's wild, ferocious and hungry. In fact, it's known as the 'Whitewater Rafting Capital of Oregon'. During the summer, outfitters' jet-boats, or 'mail boats' as they're known, take adventurers 'up river'. Their motors diligently fight the splash-packed flow between the densely wooded banks of Hellgate Canyon, dodging boulders and ambitious tree limbs left, right and center.

In college, at the start of my freshman year, one of several meet-and-greet options was a camp-out with fellow students launched by a trip up the Rogue.

One of the only true bits of 'non-identifying' information released to me by my adoption agency was my place of birth. I imagined riding the Rogue would take me tantalizingly close to my birth family, a healthy, happy group of relations I was determined to meet soon. Although never much of a camper, I couldn't resist. Our point of departure that early September day in 1979 was Grants Pass, Oregon, where I knew I'd been born.

As if still angry at missing its chance to devour defenseless, prenatal me so many years before, the Rogue steadily stabbed needles of rain and sloppy slaps of wave-mist into our squinched eyes and flinched faces all the way up. Enshrouded in tarps, we mostly looked down at our wet tennis shoes or hiking boots, trusting there were banks with lush pines and ferns almost too green to look at, just like in the brochures. This we did get a glimpse of on the way back down, when the clouds parted for a surly second or two. Camping was next. More rain with heavy mud on the side. My fellow happy campers and I didn't get dry the entire trip, but misery loves company and I made a few friends in the soggy, steamy van heading back up I-5 to Linfield, a small, private college in McMinnville, Oregon.

But getting back to the bridge business. It was nearly the first story told to me by my Haight-Ashbury-fried half-brother Greg, or Conrad, as he insisted on being called ever since San Francisco. No one knew why. As far as I know, no one asked. (I suspect some sort of connection with Monty Python's Conrad Pooh but this has never been verified.)

He was good-sized, with seemingly bowl-cut longish, blonde hair. A jack-of-all trades, my brother worked when he could or when he felt like it and kicked back the rest of the time, which was most of the time. I never saw him without his signature baseball cap and ebony-dark sunglasses. These trademark shades were like those favored by cops. You looked into them and all you could see were miniature yous. Even that night, in the dark, in a field in Medford, Oregon. Whether he was hiding from the world or was keeping the world at a manageable distance from

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himself I don't know. It's not something you ask someone you hardly know. Even if it is your brother. So that was Greg. Or Conrad, rather. Tons of stories, amiable as hell with his white-ish cap and hide-behind-sunglasses on board. We were sitting outside at a family party thrown for me by my cousin Riva. My boyfriend Rolondo and I were heading north after meeting up with my new mom and half-sister Lynn's family in Lake Tahoe. Riva I liked from the start. She had an earthy depth and an innate understanding of how overwhelmed I was by being on center stage for such a large family so fast. I told her how hard it was to figure out how I was related to whom (I even had a niece older than me.) As the afternoon wore on, we smoked and shared beers together at a picnic table outside while her son Noah, with aspirations of becoming a chef, made a wonderful soup I'll never forget. Other family members brought food, and it really was a great gathering of my freshly-minted relations. Inside the neat ranch-style house I met my elderly Aunt Opal, her daughter Debbie and her baby, along with my Uncle Jerry who I loved on sight. Sadly, he would die a year later of cancer, before I ever had the chance to see him again. The scene, however, was dominated by the young. At forty, I wasn't sure if I fit into that group or not.

Later that night, while tons of other family members and their friends floated in and out of the barn to imbibe in whatever drug (meth would be my first guess), my brother Conrad and I gamely swapped stories and swatted mosquitos under the low-flung stars. He told me one about the Summer of Love in San Francisco, where it was all still Scott-McKenzie-groovy. The girls actually did wear flowers in their hair on their way to 'meet the gentle people there'. Plenty of love, peace, food and shelter to go around down there, it seemed.

I'd been with him there in spirit. Always enamored of the sixties, I decided I'd been born a decade too late. I'd run with a wildly diverse group of fellow undergrads at Linfield. We styled ourselves neo-hippies; sharing space, beds, trips and all. This at the ultimate end of the sexual revolution. In fact, I was twenty-one, still in college and one month away from getting married when I read an article on an exotic new sexual horror called AIDs in the Village Voice. No one had heard of it. So, in short, my ex and I limboed out just before the bar dropped and everything changed. New rules. New world. Clank. I was safely out of circulation for eighteen years of matrimony and was now, alarmingly, free.

Before Conrad told me 'the bridge story' that night I realized I was beginning to really care for this most-loving of all my brothers. For one thing, he called me 'Sis' immediately, like we'd already shared a lifetime together. Next to him, his pride and protectiveness was palpable, like now that he'd finally found me no one and nothing would hurt his sister if he had anything to say about it, by God. He was my brother. My real flesh and blood brother and I was completely under his spell as he wove his yarns.

In 1967, it seems, he was living in one of many Victorian houses in the Haight, where everyone shared the rent and slept with whoever. A revolving door of residency brought new faces each day. Conrad was in his element. Then, he said, one Christmas Eve, (his eyes got dewey at the memory), joints, baggies of pot and all manner of illicit were hung with

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care on the yule tree the group had stolen and leaned against a corner. He kept saying that the general rule of the Haight was to take what you need and give what you could. People were just beginning to travel in and out of the house en masse when he went to bed. "And the next morning," he said, eyes filled with the wonder of it all, "There was every kind of drug you could imagine on that fuckin' tree, man, every fuckin' kind." He paused a beat as if to apologize for his language. "Then," he said, "the branches were like, sagging, sis. It was like Santa and his reindeer had run through the house and all the way around that tree a thousand times. People just gave and gave. . . That's the way it was, man," he murmured, offering his palms to the stars. His voiced trailed off, lost in the landscape of the peace-loving past "That's the way it was."

We both took thoughtful swigs of our beers and I was looking over his cap wondering where Rolondo was, hoping he wouldn't come back too soon and ruin the mood. Conrad was cool. He had so many stories to tell, having left the family in his mid-teens to hit the road, as did nearly all my siblings. (Eight in all.)

Yes, Conrad was permanently drug-fried, but in a good way. He made you happy just to be alive and taking it easy with him. He was my spacey, satisfied brother and I admired that immensely. But as far as how it had been at home, something clearly wasn't right there. Something strange and secret was all mixed up in it. Something all dark and murky.

And here I was, thinking I'd already unearthed the big secret - (my real-deal birth family) - that had been held from me all my life. My own family. But come to find out, my family *was* the secret. Or the secret, once revealed, was really a puzzle. As I discovered, it's not like I could just step onto the scene and have family members all frozen in time with their stories hanging around their necks on clipboards. Clearly, back then, before I was born, something was bad at home. Maybe even for a long time before. I was just bracing to ask him what when he cleared his throat.

"Grants Pass, man," he said, apropos of nothing. He leaned back and braided his hands behind his head, lifting his chin to signal a change of venue.

Grants Pass, where I knew I'd been born, where I'd diligently researched to sleuth out my family and, of course, home of the Rogue River. I thought back to college. A dripping tarp. Swoosh-sided Nikes that squished.

"Shit. I remember the night the cops brought Mom home."

I froze in mid-bug-swap, saving perhaps an enormously extended family. Mom? Silent, tiny, sweet Mom, arrested?

"Yeah. God, I remember. It was Christmas, like in the Haight. We had a better tree, but the house was real tiny and shitty. Our houses were always like that, you know?" His sunglasses flashed as a door to the house opened and slammed shut. I could hear the slosh of his nearly-empty beer bottle.

"Mom just lived there three or four months to have you and then come back to Medford. You were like, the big secret. I remember thinking she was like some little bird with a temporary nest."

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I waited, picturing my young mom in police custody, eight months pregnant. Pregnant with me. "Just along for the ride, officer - I'm the big secret - don't mind me!"

Conrad had a slow way of talking that took the turns of his back road regressions easily and smoothly. "I was just staying there that night and - bam - there they were, man, bringing her through the door. One on each side. With all the Christmas lights and the cop lights going. The cops hassling Mom, man, and these fat tree bulbs blinking and the blue and red lights on the ceiling. . ." His fingers fluttered, trying to say the unsaid. "Too much. The thing is, see, she tried to jump off the bridge." His white cap tilted deferentially toward me. My stomach flinched like I'd been sucker punched. "I mean for real. It was only four blocks away," he said, as if that was the important part. "Four blocks. Fucking freaked me out."

"She . . . to jump off the bridge." I knew it wasn't a complete sentence but it felt like one.

I could see his cap shake from side to side like the ghost of his thoughts. The ghost of Christmas past.

"I still remember it."

He did. I was watching him remember it. And I knew, I was certain, that my brother's soul was sweet to the bone. He wasn't a liar. But right then, I wished he was. I wished on every star out there. My feelings towards Mom shifted. (Slide. Clunk. Chink.) Radically. Viscerally.

The thing was, now I had to, HAD TO, see my mother as someone else. Conrad had made this horrible thing happen. Speaking it made it happen. In the beginning was the word and the word coming from beneath the bill of that fucking ghost cap made her some horrible creature who could do this. I never saw it coming. (Here's a memory for ya. Merry fucking Christmas, Sis. For the rest of your life, that is.)

The voice-control-struggle of all time was on. He wasn't offering sympathy. And I was dead-set on not asking for it. "Was she arrested or what?"

"I don't know. I just remember her coming through that door. And how cold it was. Really cold in that house."

My empty beer bottle dropped to the grass. It made a soilish, echoing 'thunk' as it hit. "But she stayed with you guys, right? Until I was born, I mean."

I swallowed around some dense obstruction. The thought of my baby-self as a carefully planned, unselfish gift of love from my birth mother to my adoptive parents imploded like that rainbow bridge they'd invented just for me.

He might have thought I knew all this. But now he could see I didn't. Still, no sympathy. No empathy, for that matter.

"I guess. Yeah."

My brain scrambled around some cement enclosure; a deep, emptied pool, looking for something - anything - to climb so I could look over the edge of the present, there, right over my left shoulder, into the past. I

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ransacked my mind for reasons. He was high when this happened. Had to be. But no, a sterner voice insisted. Conrad, or Greg, was just a kid in 1960. His teen-aged days and hippie-ways in the Haight wouldn't happen for like, another seven years. I did the math and my heart dropped like it would when another family member later said it was all true. A double homicide thwarted by Grants Pass' finest.

"Just another night on patrol, sergeant. Some pregnant dame hanging off the business end of the bridge shoulder. We got her down off the pylon posts. Not much else."

Conrad's telling hurt. It slashed open a new, mean cut all pink and fresh, surprised to see the light of day right before it decides to bleed. Why would he tell it like this? To me? I genuinely, and to this day do, believe he loved me. It just came out. It was just another story. In fact, he moved on to the next even as I could feel my lower lip start to shake. I would not - NOT - allow one tear to sneak down my cheek. Like a scout-ant on the kitchen counter, it had to be stopped or an army would follow.

I couldn't believe he'd said it without trying to make it better. He'd said it like it was no big thing. Just some spaced-out connection with Christmas lights in San Francisco in 1967 and Christmas / cop lights in 1960. I stared at my new brother. It was too dark to see myself in his sunglasses but I knew I was hidden in them. Is it possible to have love without empathy? Can you just blast a loved one apart and not even know it?

And my mother getting ready to jump. No histrionics, it sounded like. Just recognition that she'd been caught and botched it. Did she at least look down into that water and think about me? If she was determined to do this thing couldn't she at least give me the chance to be born?

"C'mon Mom. Give me a month. Just one month."

Maybe she didn't, but I imagine the ice-knife smack of the water. The deadly, sweeping force of that impact and that current. A soon-to-be-baby who was already me. I would feel, wouldn't I, the lethal shock, and for a brief second or so, instinctively pull tighter. An action of reliance on the warm haven that was all I'd ever know of my mother. My center would draw inwards against my untried spine into a tighter-yet fetal curl that had, up to now, never failed me. And then, and then what? I didn't, I don't know. But in dreams, I live, and relive, the jump. The fall. Sometimes I'm the baby. Sometimes I'm my mother. I always wake up just before the impact.

"I saw one fall," said Conrad, the bill of his cap pointed up to the stars.

"I did too." That's all I said.