

DIGGING THROUGH LAYERS

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I have been avoiding my writing. It is Saturday, and instead of claiming my usual weekend position in the faded blue rocking chair—a mug of twice-reheated coffee at my side, a laptop warming the tops of my thighs—I am shoveling three year old chicken poop into five gallon plastic buckets. Despite the eroding dampness of spring, the ground I am standing on in the tin roofed enclosure is oddly parched and mounded, like a burial site, a poop piled tribute to the golden chickens that had once lived here. Of course, the earth I am shoveling is not actually poop—not in the white, wet, smelly sense you expect to find in a chicken run. Nature has done her usual routine, recycling the waste into an impressive layer of compact earth, and I have to stand on the edges of the shovel and bounce my weight until the blade breaks through.

Sometimes, the ground comes loose in a single widespread chunk, like the peeling skin of a sunburn, and I have to stomp on it or beat it with my blade in order to fit it into the bucket. Other times, even with the force of my body weight, the best I can produce are brittle, yet sandy, lumps speckled with rouge feathers that remind me I am digging up bits of the past. Ironically, digging up the past is the exact reason I have been avoiding my writing.

Recently, I committed myself to writing an essay on my family's legacy of unwed, pregnant women—a legacy as entrenched and repeated in each generation as the green of our eyes. It is a history I've studied from an early age, my curiosity fueled by my own status as the only "illegitimate" of my mother's three daughters, and it is a story I joined with the birth of my son, Luca. However, today I am avoiding my writing. Instead of digging through the notes I've compiled on my grandmother's dismissal from the Navy, my mother's divorce, and my one visit with a family law attorney, I am in the

chicken run, digging through an entirely different kind of crap.

In three days, my son will be turning two, and for his birthday present I have decided to get him chickens. I came to this decision after I discovered him lying in the field behind our house, half propped against the honeycomb wire of the neighbor's fence, cooing (eye-to-eye) with their black and white flecked hen. As I uprooted invading patches of prickly thistle from our wooden garden boxes, clearing the ground for scarlet runner beans, sweet basil, and squash, he had remained in that position, plopped on his belly, chatting with chickens.

"Poor Luca looks like he needs some chickens," my sister had said when I sent her the picture I'd quickly snapped of him on my phone. I knew she only meant that Luca, an only child, was clearly craving some additional interactions—craving some chicken friends. But, the *poor Luca* struck a frayed nerve in my soul and sent sudden tears slipping down my cheeks.

Poor Luca was a sentiment I had internally, and externally, battled since the discovery and announcement of my pregnancy. *Poor Luca*, still snug in the belly and already saddled with the story of having a single mother and absent father that refused to claim him. The tangle of his parent's history seemed to cast long shadows onto *poor, sweet, wonderful Luca*. Like a moody storm cloud on a Missouri horizon, that sentiment lingered on the fridge of our lives, unexpectedly darkening moments—such as when I stood in my garden watching my son reach out and touch the world with his curiosity, his kind interest.

And so, I am shoveling three year old chicken poop from the old run behind my house, because my son is getting chickens for his second birthday. I am shoveling three year old chicken poop from the old run behind my house, because my son is not *poor Luca*.

As I crunch my blade into the fossilized mound, my thoughts hitchhike from chickens to birthdays, to my son's *actual* birthday, now two years past, and settle into the warm folds of a hospital bed and delivery room.

What in the hell was I going to write on the birth certificate? That was the question knocking on my brain as a nurse knocked against my hospital door before entering, a packet of papers in her

hands, a squishy red-haired baby in mine.

It was not an unexpected concern, nor a new one. My son's father and I had severed all contact abruptly after I informed him of my pregnancy, and during the months that followed, this question formed the theme of my thoughts. I was not the only one wondering the answer.

As soon as people learned of my single and pregnant status, the primary question was always: But what about the dad? Who is he? Where is he? Was I going to tell my son about him? Are you going to let him see him? Are you going to put him on the birth certificate? *What about his last name?* Questions upon questions—some were directly asked, others I only overheard in soft whispers, and picked out from knowing looks. As is the tradition, the questions often were coupled with ready advice.

During a Christmas gathering, my aunt, a social worker for Washington state, seized the opportunity to explain exactly why I should not list my son's father on the birth certificate. The nurses may press the matter, and while she generally didn't encourage lying, after all she'd witnessed in her job over the years, she was of the opinion that, well, *sometimes it was just the right thing to do*. Sometimes, you just have to say "I don't know" over and over again until people believe it (maybe until you believe it).

For me, the birth certificate was a symbol of my son's introduction to the world. It was an official document that detailed not only his name, but his origins: the place of his birth, the time of his birth, who brought him into this world.

I remember a book I once read in college, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, where a mother became obsessed with the ugly stamp of "illegitimate" on her daughter's birth certificate. At the time I read the story, only twenty years old, I remember sympathizing with the mother but thinking her response was a little extreme. Instead, I had aligned myself with the grandmother character, whose response to the certificate was, "Who cared what was written down? Did people read courthouse records? Did they ask to see your birth certificate before they sat themselves on you porch?" But, as I learned while pregnant, like the mother, I cared. And I wanted to do what was right—only, I wasn't sure what that was exactly.

As my belly swelled, pressing the hemlines of my shirts higher and higher, my fear of filling out my son's birth certificate also

grew. It grew and grew until it took on a life of its own. It became a beast that nipped at my ankles and then scurried under beds, only to pop out again during family gatherings, lunch breaks, or even shortly after giving birth.

I've come to realize that it wasn't solely my own experiences that fed the beast, but also the stories I inherited from my mother and grandmother—women who all faced the same question: *What in the hell was I going to put on the birth certificate?*

Beverly June was twenty-two years old when she became pregnant with my uncle and was promptly booted from her position as a key punch operator in the Navy W.A.V.E.S. (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services). Her pregnancy came only three years after President Truman signed an executive order granting military services the permission to discharge women due to pregnancy.

Returning to Washington state as a young, pregnant, unemployed, unwed Catholic woman in 1954, my grandmother made a choice—the choice to legally change her last name in order to play the ever so slightly more acceptable role of a divorced woman. When her son was born, it was her new last name that she wrote on the birth certificate. She created an alternative story—a necessary lie.

Of course, their last name changed again only a few years later when she married my grandfather and he adopted her son. Yet the lie, and my grandmother's shame, lingered. It lingered and prevented my uncle from learning any information about his biological father (or at least until he hired a private investigator in his fifties); it lingered and made itself known in my grandmother's encouragement for my mother to lie about my own father when she became pregnant with me.

As my son's father once reminded me, he was not a monster. He was not a random person. He was not a stranger. In fact, I knew him as a young boy; the shocking white of his blond hair and pink speckled skin can be easily spotted in the Reeves Middle School 2001 yearbook. I knew him as a young man, with soft wide lips and oddly slanted nose (crooked to the side from repeated breaks). And I also knew him as a veteran with multiple tours completed, a busted knee, an ex-wife, and two daughters. Yet, although he was not a stranger, from the moment I told him of my pregnancy, we were estranged—I

knew nothing of him and he knew nothing of me. He was not a monster, but he became the unknown that crept into my thoughts when I was most vulnerable and this was primarily why I feared his potential claim to Luca (a claim that could be legitimized by a birth certificate). It was our estrangement that drove me to the law office of Meredith Gerhart.

I went to Ms. Gerhart to learn what would be the best legal decision for my son's birth certificate. We spent an hour looking at case documents, parental-sharing plans, and discussed ways in which I would look "credible" in the eyes of the law. I explained to her my fear of inviting a man legally into my son's life who had made it clear he was furious at my pregnancy. I also explained how I feared cementing my son's first government document in a lie (was I willing to start this sweet baby's life with a lie? Was I willing to teach him that lies are acceptable?). She explained that if I wanted any money, any at all, I would have to list his father (I didn't want any money); she explained that if I did end up in court someday, I would lose credibility if I selected "Unknown" on my son's birth certificate (i.e., what kind of slutty woman was I?). I left her office with the resolute decision that I would cite both mother and father on my son's birth certificate when that day came.

Once, I asked my grandmother who my uncle's father was, ignorant of the discomfort she might have felt from her young granddaughter picking at her life in the way one would pick at a scab. Her answer was vague. He was from Arkansas. I don't know if that was true; I don't know if she knew.

As a child, all I knew was that, because my mother was not married to my father, my birth had caused a bit of a scandal and I was *illegitimate* (and, secretly, I liked that—though sometimes my eyes would sting for unknown reasons when I thought about it). I knew that my mother went through great efforts to keep me connected with my father, and openly said she did not want to recreate her eldest brother's experience.

On a bus ride home from school, I boldly informed the classmate seated behind me that I was a bastard, reveling in the wide roundness of her eyes, calmly explaining what that *really* meant, and why my last name was different from my older sisters' and why I

looked so different from them.

My mother was still technically married to my sisters' father when she became pregnant with me. Being married to an undercover narcotics officer, his infidelity and the subsequent crumbling of their marriage had led my mother to a divorce—a nasty divorce. The relationship she had with my father was unexpected, out of character, and in many ways brief (even if it lingered for years).

I can only assume it was my grandmother's own residual fear that made her encourage my mother to lie on my birth certificate, to give me the last name of her soon to be ex-husband. I can only assume that she feared my mother would suffer the same pain, embarrassment, and shame that she herself had experienced.

On my first birth certificate, I did share the same last name as my sisters, but only because at the time it was also my mother's last name. Instead of taking my grandmother's advice, my mother waited the necessary six months after I was born to perform a paternity test, proving that I was indeed my father's daughter. That I was a child born out wedlock. My mother never hid her story, or created a lie. And, when I was six months old my last name was legally changed.

Virginia Woolf once wrote that “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.” I have come to look at my own family stories in the same light. The only way I can conceptualize my anxiety over my son's birth certificate is to consider the situation through the lens of my family history, and to understand that the fear I had felt was not solely my own.

Of course, I had no way of knowing that when the day finally came for me to fill out my son's birth certificate the only option I had was to write my own name and then check the box “Unnamed”—not “Unknown.” It wasn't until the nurse explained to me that in order to list a father on a birth certificate he would have to be present to sign it, that I realized the magnitude of the fear I had been carrying. It wasn't until then that I recognized how the experiences of my grandmother, mother, and aunt (and maybe even the experiences had by Meredith Gerhart), had piled up end-to-end, obscuring our vision of what was before us—the truth. I did not have to saddle my son with an “unknown” lie. I did not have to be the mother who hated the

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“illegitimate” mark on my child’s birth certificate. I did not have to make up stories or defend my decision.

My son will turn two in three days, and I will be getting him chickens. I won’t completely avoid writing; I will eventually sit down to dig through my thoughts like I am digging through the layers and layers of densely packed chicken poop. I will sift through my story and my mother’s story, and my grandmother’s story. And I will think about how they are just as dense, and cemented, and connected, as the ground I am standing on. But today, right now, I am avoiding my writing, because my son is getting chickens.