

Sweetie

For as long as I could remember, my mother had a secret life. “It’s not good for your father to know everything,” she told my sister, Isabella, and me. We were bonded to her, I guess, because we were girls. We learned to keep her secrets: the bank passbook that went to Grandma’s house in Virginia. And the birth control pills that she came into our room at night to pop.

We understood that we were not to mention Newman to our father, no matter how many times he asked us whether mother was friendly with other men. At first, I didn’t understand the relationship between Newman and my mother. I just knew he was her friend. And he was our friend, too. When we needed pink ballerina slippers for dance class or money for a school trip, Newman provided. He stocked my mother’s car trunk with bars of Dove soap, six-packs of Fresca and cartons of Benson & Hedges cigarettes. He knew she smoked the kind that came in the gold pack. My mother, who was a domestic, tucked the items in her work bag, sneaking them in the house a little at a time. Sometimes, my father asked where things came from. My mother always explained that when she did the shopping for the family she worked for, she got a few extras for us. She called it “toting” privileges, her right as the maid.

My father would have surely killed mother had he known about Newman. Several times after noticing other men drooling over her, he struck her. Men stared at her, even with my father there. Once, the butcher asked if my daddy was her father. That got her a black eye. It wasn’t her fault that my father was seventeen years her senior or that she was Ava Gardner gorgeous.

Even little boys in my classroom ran down the steep hill of the elementary school to the car to get a glimpse of her when she picked up Isabella and me. My mother was as curvy as a dangerous road, and she had big eyes that had a way of dancing. She wore her hair short especially around the nape and her loose curls framed her round face, making a halo of sorts. She was especially beautiful when she slept.

When I first met Newman, I was ten. He was dark as coal with patchy skin, a squat man with arms and legs that were too short for his body. To me, he was as interesting looking as my mother was beautiful. Like my father, he was much older than my mother. Newman often appeared out of nowhere at the Laundromat or in the aisle of a grocery store. He always carried plenty of change in his pockets. He gave my sister and me all the quarters we could carry in our small hands. We would disappear for a while and buy jacks, Charm pops, or junk jewelry while the adults talked. He ran a place everyone knew as “Newman’s Inn,” in a residential neighborhood in the old part of Raleigh. My mother referred to it as a tourist

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home. She stopped by there before she dropped Isabella and me to ballet class or before she took me to my dental appointments. I went to the orthodontist every two to three weeks to have my braces adjusted. She would turn the car into an alley and park behind Newman's place.

From the outside, it looked like my grandparents' two-story, wood-framed home. I saw men and women pulling up in cars. The women smoked cigarettes and wore gaudy, skin-tight clothes. The men tended to be older and often clutching little brown bags. The young men working for Newman seemed to always be carrying white sheets for the beds or buckets of ice to the rooms. Newman had a microwave oven before I had ever heard of one. He had vending machines with hamburgers, hot dogs and grilled cheese sandwiches, a soda machine and a candy machine in the living room. He had the keys handy and gladly opened the machines up and let Isabella and I get anything we wanted.

Isabella and I sat in chairs in the hallway and watched couples going to and from the rooms upstairs. Our mother would be in Newman's office with the door closed. I never knew what they did behind the closed doors. Just that once a week, mother got money and her car trunk filled with incidentals. And that if we needed something and our father wasn't able to get it, Newman would.

I never liked keeping secrets from my father, but I was afraid to tell him anything that I thought would cause him to harm my mother. Truth, my father would say, was something you told if somebody woke you up in the middle of the night. I prayed he wouldn't wake mother.

My mother said when she met my father he gave her hundred-dollar bills at a time. She'd buy clothes or treat herself to the hairdresser. When my grandmother found out, she ran out to the porch with a broom to chase after him, but all that was left was a blaze of smoke and the sight of my mama on the back of his Harley. I felt sorry for daddy. He was sickly most of my life. I often saw sadness in his eyes as he listened to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth" on the eight-track in the baby-blue Skylark Buick as he dropped us off at school in the morning. He almost always wore a cap that hid the balding center of his head and made him look at least ten years younger. He called it his go-to-hell cap and wore it at an angle that showed his neatly trimmed sideburns. "Be good," he said as we got out of the car.

At night, we often heard him and mother talking about their childhood. He had very few memories of his mother, other than that she was short, big-busted and liked sweets. She had him during the change and went crazy right after. She died shortly afterwards, leaving his oldest sister to raise him. His father was a preacher and a plasterer, who had very little patience.

My father had his first stroke at thirty-three, which made his left arm partially paralyzed. He slept with that arm sticking straight out the bed, as if it would hurt if something as light as the sheet touched it through the night. He was a mechanic. He worked in front of our house. On a good day, he took Isabella and me to the store and bought us dolls or ice cream. On a bad day, and there were many of those, he was so moody that the sound of us crunching on a potato chip sent him hollering at us and fighting with our