

"Look," my grandma said, her voice trembled with an unfamiliar emotion. I was so young then. I didn't understand.

I turned my gaze to where she pointed. "It's a cardinal." Her rough pat on my head shook my whole body.

Grandma loved bird watching, and I loved how it felt to make her happy. I could identify a hundred bird species by the time I was ten.

"Listen." She grabbed me hard by the shoulders.

"Grandma, you're hurting me-"

"Listen." She insisted.

She'd never spoken to me like that before. It was unnerving how she changed so suddenly. Grandma was the most steady presence in my life- conqueror of under-the-bed monsters, leader of teddy bear parades, baker of cookies, wiper of tears. Grandma had never once spoken a harsh word. The woman standing before me was a stranger.

"Look at its legs."

I tried, but my eyes stung with unshed tears. I nodded as if I had seen, hoping she'd let me go.

"Tell me how long cardinals live," she asked, and I saw my chance to make her love me again.

"Three to five years usually," I stammered. "But, they can live fifteen or more sometimes." She nodded, and a shiver of relief ran through me.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"See his purple leg?"

"His- what?"

She placed the binoculars into my hands and, sure enough, one of the bird's legs was purple and the other was green.

I had dedicated my eleven years to the study of birds and had never seen anything like it.

"Grandma, why-?" Grandma gripped the old porch railing to kneel in front of me. Her bones creaked and it looked painful. I reached out to her and she grabbed both my hands in one of her gnarled ones, holding my face tenderly with the other.

She stared through me for a long time.

When she finally spoke she was my grandma again. Her voice was like burying your face in a big duvet straight out of the dryer.

"The day you were born, I painted his leg purple."

I thought about what she said for a moment. I didn't know what she wanted me to say.

"So.. he's at least 11 years old." I ventured, thinking I'd solved the puzzle. The corner of Grandma's mouth quirked up and the wrinkles around her eye unlocked to release a single tear. I searched the map of her face.

"And I painted his other leg green the day your mother was born." My heart flinched the way it always did when Mother was mentioned.

"And underneath the purple paint is the blue my mother painted there the day I was born."

I didn't understand. It was quiet for a long time besides the drizzle hitting the tin porch roof and the distant gossiping of insects.

I looked up into her face, but she was not my grandma again. I looked out past the porch at the fat purple-green-legged cardinal gorging himself on the suet feeder.

Back then I thought he was oblivious to our fervent conversation, but now when I think back, I wonder if he was just used to generations of the women in my family revealing his secrets like this.

When Grandma told me that on my 11th birthday, I thought she was changing my life. But when it was my turn I realized my life had been shaped over generations like a river rock.

Grandma wasn't sure how long our family had been aware of the immortality of birds, but her mother, and her mother's mother, and her mother's mother had all painted that cardinal's leg when their daughter was born.

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I hadn't been home in a long time. To be honest, I tried not to.

Since Grandma left, the place felt empty and full of ghosts at the same time. It was a wet August morning, just like that one in fact, 20 years to the day.

I tucked my feet beneath me in the splintered rocking chair with great effort. The sticky breeze ruffled my hair and tickled the wind chime. I wrapped my hands around my mug of tea, grandma's mug. In the steam, I caught glimpses of her. Of my mother and our great-great-grandmothers.

A streak of red chased the spectres away.

"Good morning, old friend," I whispered to the cardinal. He perched on the porch rail, clutching the beat-up old wood with one purple foot and one green. I leaned back in the chair and watched him peck the crust of my toast.

As I caressed the taught skin of my belly I felt what my Grandmother must have felt that day in the rain. I understood the embers burning within her that made her act so strangely. In the cardinal's eyes I saw the tightly knotted threads that braided together the stories of generations of women, and, within me, generations yet to come.

"I brought you something," I said to the bird, tapping a fresh can of paint on the weathered table top.