

**HOW
YOU
WERE
BORN**

STORIES

KATE CAYLEY

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RESEMBLANCE

SAMPLE

There are three people in the car, driving to a house near Peterborough. The trees are beginning to turn, the grass stiffening with frost, the afternoon sky fading. The woman who drives is nervous on the highway. The other woman is profligate with her gestures, restless, drumming on her knees, rummaging through the bags at her feet, talking. In the back-seat their ten-year-old daughter listens to music, enclosed in a private world, looking out the window at the red and yellow leaves, the quick spatters of grey rain.

In the house, a woman is preparing dinner. She is alone; she is waiting. Her hair is grey with streaks of white, tied with a blue scarf, lopsided and too girlish. She wears jeans and a brown moth-eaten sweater. Sometimes she weeps without her face changing shape, keeps on working—this is commonplace now. She doesn't cry around other people anymore. It's been eight months. Recently she even smiles, the side of her face catching the smile like a blow. There is clay under her short fingernails. Her clothes are clean but she is not. She smells very slightly, like wet newspaper, but no longer

notices. Her son, Jake, who was forty, collapsed going into his apartment in another city far away. She has imagined his collapse over and over, a reluctant obsession. Did he feel the aneurysm coming but didn't know what it was? Headache? A clutch in his stomach? Was he afraid? Was there time to think? She imagines his body falling, herself in her house far away, not knowing. Imagines herself moving unknowing, the way she would imagine a stranger in a country that is about to be overtaken by disaster. That person spoke a language she has forgotten.

They stop at a gas station, Molly easing herself out from behind the wheel as if testing to make sure nothing is broken, Robin already outside, stretching, absently pulling a few leaves off the car. They both watch as Emma lopes through the sliding glass doors, heading for the bathroom, still wired into music.

The sun has come out. Everything is lifted, the shadows sharper, the trees darker. Mid-week, the highway is almost empty. Each car that passes hurls by them on the curve. How easy it would be to lose control, go too far to one side. That's all it takes, a forgivable lapse of focus, a small omission, and it's over.

“When we see her—” Robin swallows her thought, rubbing the fingers of her left hand with her right, shaking out pins and needles.

“What?” Molly says, too anxious today to be patient.

Robin scowls mildly at a point in the distance.

“What?”

“What should Emma call her?”

“Why should Emma call her anything?” Molly makes a face. Possessiveness or honest confusion, Robin can’t tell which.

“But wouldn’t it be kind?”

“It wouldn’t be *true*.” Molly is about to say something else that makes her seem less certain, less doctrinaire, but then Emma reappears. Robin kisses Emma’s forehead, watching Molly, and Emma wrinkles her nose, wriggles away, butts her head against Robin’s shoulder.

They never said *father*. They said *friend* to Emma at first, with a determined emphasis. Then they said *donor* but disliked the clinical connotation, like he’d given them a kidney rather than a drinking glass with half an inch of milky stuff at the bottom, handed round the bedroom door with a theatrical flourish. A daughter, growing, a serious baby, a serious girl, growing bigger now so that she often seems not to belong to any of them. Emma did not know him very well. When Molly and Robin stood together in the kitchen, crying (Molly still holding the phone in her hands), Emma stayed in the doorway, arms warily crossed.

“We have something to tell you,” Robin said, surprised at how parentally calm she sounded, how grave. Molly tried to stop crying and hugged Emma, the phone digging into Emma’s back.

“Jake passed away this morning,” Robin said, touching Emma’s hair, and then, not sure if Emma knew the expression, added, “Jake died.”

Emma looked at both of them, and they could tell she was relieved, having expected a more immediate disaster, and that her sadness was mostly for them. It made sense that it wouldn’t mean much to her, though they both knew that it would mean very much to her later, taking on the peculiar tug of something missing or unsolved. Knowing that, they left her alone.

They went to the zoo together, the four of them, the High Park Zoo where the animals live behind chain-link fences. Jake was visiting for a week, in the earlier years when seeing Emma had been a formal imperative, before they’d lapsed into distant goodwill. He walked beside Emma, asked her questions. She ran ahead to look at the emu, which had wicked red eyes and hissed, black-purple tongue darting out from the razor beak.

“If you put your hand through the fence,” the zookeeper said, grinning, “this one will take your fingers off.” He wagged his fingers and she laughed. Jake stood behind her, laughing too in that polite adult way. The older zookeeper looked suspiciously at his pierced ears, the tattoos on his arms, the leather cuff just above his hand on Emma’s shoulder.

“You look just like your dad.”

Emma laughed again. “No I don’t!”

“Sure you do. You got his eyes.”

She’d run back to Molly and Robin, repeating this joke. They’d said it was very funny.

Molly remembers Emma running, an unkempt little girl in dirty shoes with a flowered hair band sliding down over her forehead. She remembers Jake looking embarrassed and guilty, as if he wanted to ask for something or claim something he could never have. But he didn’t ask, then or later, and maybe she’d imagined it. There was so much they’d been too shy and decent to talk about, after all.

Robin remembers Jake walking ahead, remembers an Orthodox family, bleached against their dark clothes, the mother following her five children, the father walking behind, talking into his cell. The mother was very beautiful, her face like marble, her whole body tensed toward her children as they climbed fences, shouting to each other and at the animals. Robin wondered about the woman’s body under the lumpy clothes, wondered what the woman thought about her life, how she pictured herself in the eyes of others, or if vanity and longing were something Robin imagined for her, and this woman lived as a different creature. No, she thought, that’s patronizing. There are no different creatures. But what if that was patronizing too—not to allow for how separate one life is from another. The husband, still talking into his

phone, noticed Robin holding Molly's hand, frowned, and looked away. The eldest girl, maybe twelve, stared openly at a young woman standing next to her in a long black leather coat, her dark hair dyed blue like bird plumage. The children crowding at the fence reminded Robin of ungainly animals, their lives immeasurably foreign though (who knows) perhaps braver and more defiant than her own.

What Jake remembers is now closed.

The house is small. They're bunched in the hall, taking off wet coats. Elise insists on hanging the coats herself, while they shift positions and untangle sleeves, saying *please* and *thank you* too often. Emma, the centre of everything, is just young enough not to know it.

Elise didn't raise her children here; nothing in the house belongs to Jake except some boxes in the storage room that she is not sure what to do with. Books, mostly—the mystery novels he loved, literary theory he taught. Books with cracked spines, or not yet read, bought as a promise to himself for later, assuming uncountable days. It's a cabin really, one big room heated by a wood stove, a small bedroom added on, the storage room bolted shut, and an open pantry where a bulb with a paper shade lights up rows of jars.

A table made of reddish wood set with blue plates, mugs, a centrepiece of driftwood and leaves, anchors the big room.

Everything in the room is chosen carefully, carefully placed. The carved figures that line Elise's shelves, the pots hung from the rafters above the sink, the bowl of polished stones and beach glass on the coffee table, the quilt over the back of the couch. Elise is a potter; the plates and mugs and vases of dried grass and late-blooming flowers are hers. She sells her work at craft shows across the province, her signature glazes wild dark blue or a greyish blue that echoes the bluish tone of the clay itself.

"How was the drive?" Elise asks, then goes on without waiting, "I thought we could eat right away, it's all ready."

"We'd love to eat now," Robin says, thinking she doesn't know where to put her hands, that cutlery would give her something to hold. Molly keeps touching Emma and then catches herself and draws back. Emma looks around the room, goes to the fireplace. Elise rushes over and gives Emma a framed photograph from the mantle: Elise as a young woman, standing with her husband, son, and daughter in front of their house in Toronto. Everyone looks curious, beautiful, happy. Family myth-making, Molly thinks as she looks over Emma's shoulder, recalling the muddle and discontent and trouble of loving very young children. Though they probably *were* happy. Not as much as they seem to be in retrospect, but likely more than they felt they were at the time. Molly touches Robin's back and considers Elise in the photograph. They may be looking at Emma in twenty years.

Resemblances come and go—she looks like Molly, like Jake, even sometimes like Robin, known and unknown forebears showing up in her face.

The meal is fish, carrots and beans, biscuits, a salad, white wine, water in a glass pitcher. The flowers they brought seem inelegant next to the centerpiece. They spread blue cloth napkins on their laps, grateful that Emma talks freely and inconsequentially, looking from time to time at Molly to see if this is right. Elise is a relief too; she asks questions, smiles, the conversation skims along without too much awkwardness. They haven't seen her since the funeral, where she and her former husband had sat heavily, holding each other up.

Sometimes in the pauses Elise looks lost, sunken, but she recovers. As dinner goes on her friendliness becomes oppressive, as if she were speaking around a heavy object in her mouth, something cold or jagged, like metal. Choking, Molly thinks. Choked up.

As dessert (a pie made from Elise's own apples; she points out the twisted trees just visible from the window) is served (Elise briskly refusing help) and tasted and exclaimed over, Molly says quickly:

“We”—she almost puts out her hand to Robin, but thinks better of it, worried this makes Elise seem more alone—“we want you to know that if you want to see us—see Emma—in a more regular way, if that's something you want, we want that too. If you want.”

A pause. Elise considers Molly, then leans forward, almost touching Emma's hand. Emma keeps her eyes on her food. This is promising, and Molly goes on more freely, tearing up.

"We loved him. We really loved him."

Elise leans back, picking up her fork. "I know. Thank you. It's not as if I didn't know." She adjusts the napkin in her lap.

But it's true, Robin thinks. They did love him. There's a framed photograph in their living room of the three of them before Emma was even a hesitant proposition. They're younger, swaggering drunk, ambitious, and, for that moment, iconic, lit up by the camera flash and the streetlight out front of the bar, as much a mythology as the family group, and as impenetrable.

"You know, I'm lucky in a horrible way," Elise says, after swallowing her mouthful of food. "He could've been my only one."

She stops abruptly, surprised. There's a fraction of confusion, and her face seems older. She looks around her like someone who's just walked into the wrong house. Then she smiles at Emma.

"But one is nice, too, of course."

Molly and Robin do the dishes, insisting until Elise finally waves her hands in front of her face in indulgent surrender. She refills their glasses, watching the three of them reflected in the dark window. Emma has gone to the couch with a book, picked from Elise's shelf without asking, and is reading, as

she does anywhere. Robin is usually proud of this but now it seems rude, the casual entitlement of only children.

“Why don’t we just see?” Elise says, answering the question in their minds. “Why don’t we just see how we feel, later? I don’t really know much right now.”

Earlier, when they’d arrived at the house, Emma had stayed in the back seat of the car, wanting to hear the end of a song. Molly and Robin hadn’t noticed. They’d turned at the front door, looking, calling, Elise already standing there, framed in the sharp spill of yellow indoor light. Emma tumbled out, slamming the car door and dashing up the short stone path, momentarily younger—a child afraid of being left. She’d come up short between them, gripping each by the arm, jostling for room on the top step, and Elise opened the door wide, inviting them in. Each of them, all three of them, saw the same thing, watching Emma run from the car. None of them say what they have seen, and it’s not necessary to say. Jake’s there, just for a second, fully there. Running toward them.