

Summer 2021

## A small seed of fate carried inside me

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### Recommended Citation

Cadorette, Sarah Rose (2021) "A small seed of fate carried inside me," *Emerald City*. Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 2. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/emeraldcitylitmag/vol1/iss3/2>

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# A SMALL SEED OF FATE CARRIED INSIDE ME

by Rachael Walker

unplanned

I know when Mom was a teenager, she didn't see herself having kids. She mentions it with the kind of ease she approaches other plans of hers that didn't quite make the cut: an MFA in creative writing from Columbia, a sunny studio apartment in downtown Manhattan, a man who listens to Billie Holiday and nods along to the music. Let it be, she says. What is, is. What will be, will be.

She got pregnant with me only seven months into her marriage to my dad, soon after they graduated college. Over glasses of wine in the kitchen, she talks to me with her elbows on the granite countertops, the dark hair I didn't inherit cropped close to her jaw. She tells me she was always the youngest mom around, always looked down on by the thirty-something first-time moms, always scraping pennies and dollars found under sofas. Almost ashamed, she looks down to her cuticles, well-manicured thanks to money she gets from her second husband: "I was so afraid that you'd be a boy."

Mom grew up surrounded by only women, never quite learning the puzzle pieces that put men together. She got to dress me in pink ribbons and watch Disney princess movies, told me about bra sizes and helped with my makeup for junior prom. Not only a girl, but her girl. She gave me reading lists every summer through middle and high school: *Beloved*, *The Color Purple*, *The Grapes of Wrath* – books that English teachers winked at but were never allowed to assign for reading.

She was comfortable enough after a year of rocking me to sleep and playing with my baby feet to have my brother, then my sister. My brother has always been a flurry of anxious wings for Mom, after a complicated birth and a rebellious spirit, and my sister, the cure to that anxiety.

"We thought about having more kids, but my pregnancy with Grace was so brutal," she tells me one night, just the two of us, driving through the dark. "I had to crawl the whole last trimester, my sciatica was so bad. And the morning sickness – with all three of you, it was horrible."

A few weeks later in the car, I mention that I'm not sure about having kids.

"That's a decision your mom should be involved in," my stepfather says. He can't see my backseat eyeroll. Mom, silent in the passenger seat.

sisterhood is learned like prayer

Mom has just one sister, my Aunt Tina, who is seven years older. Mom, Grammy, and Aunt Tina all speak with almost comfortable ease about the series of miscarriages Grammy had between and before them, at least seven, possibly more. The ghosts of siblings Mom and Aunt Tina never had sit on their shoulders.

Aunt Tina has three kids of her own, her two boys just a few years older than me, her only daughter four months younger than I am. Cousin Emma and I grew up like twins. She and I chased each other in the lush grass of Grammy's backyard, our hair catching in the sunlight. We both look like our dads, but have our moms' hearts, our moms' spirits.

Emma and I spent our days as twins brushing my sister's thick, busy hair, teasing out the knots and tangles. We learn how to be girls here.

Mom and Aunt Tina have a giant collection of cousins. Grammy herself is one of two girls with six brothers. Her small house, too, pattered with the ghosts of baby feet. My great-grandmother was pregnant fourteen times.

trauma is a bird with clipped wings

Grammy speaks frequently of her immigrant youth in San Antonio, walking barefoot through the neighborhoods she knew well, carrying homesickness for a place that no longer exists. The small markets and neighborhood carts selling clote and fresh tamales have been paved over and made anew for Spanish-speaking white hipsters who love Mexican food but not Mexicans.

Mom's father is no more than a story, a story Mom tells with a quiet sort of longing, a story Grammy tells with vitriol, a man who cheated on her for years and left her in the eighties for a quieter woman who didn't raise her voice or eyes to him. My grandfather left his two daughters with only dusty pictures Grammy burned his face out of.

My siblings and I spend a great deal of time with Grammy. After battles with breast cancer and colon cancer, she moved closer to Mom and the three of us. We are more like her children than grandchildren, spending our afternoons at her house, texting her with our worries.

Grammy speaks to me with great candor, never quite one to cushion the truth, never a grandmother who bakes cookies but rather a grandmother who curses at Donald Trump on the TV. Every time I come home for a break from school, she stops me before I leave to ask if I have enough dinero to get through the month. I lie and say I do but she transfers money into my account anyway. I had two-dollars-and-thirty-six-cents in my bank account when your mom was in high school. I am not letting that happen to you.

"Your hair's getting long," she says when I come through the door one day in late November.

"Yeah, I like it long," I say. It's more split ends than anything else.

"I liked having long hair. The only thing is, during sex, it gets so in the way, and men don't care if they're pulling it," she says, waving away the concern. I try not to laugh, glue on the face of a girl walking with less experience, who has felt the earth move less underneath her feet.

"I'll take your word for it," I smile.

I remember sitting in the waiting room during her breast cancer surgery, when Mom and Dad were still married. I was seven years old and falling asleep on the plastic chairs. Remember that the hospital was on Gallows Road, how strange that seemed to me even as a little girl. Remember how Mom tried to explain cancer to the three of us but we were too young. Grammy got a prosthetic breast after the surgery. Remember a fact I read in a book from my elementary school: Amazons would cut off their right breast to carry their bows and arrows better.

blood

My sister didn't tell me when she got her first period. I find a box of tampons I didn't buy under the sink and feel shockwaves of you have not been a good big sister. I'm sure it happened when I was too depressed to breathe and the last thing I wanted to celebrate then was either of us being a woman. I live in my body again and want to share this moment with my sister. My heart tears a little at the seams to know that someone else took my job, thinking of one of her friends' big sisters teaching her how to avoid cramps and get blood out of jeans. My first period was a moment of panic and shame because my body was so often a house I no longer had a key to. Tried to hide it, wish it away, too afraid to tell anyone, for reasons I both do and do not quite understand.

My sister holds dreams of being a mother the way I hold dreams about writing lines good enough for hipsters the world over to get tattooed on their ribs. She is glassy-eyed whenever she sees baby shoes, falling over herself to babysit for the family down the road, kids drawing crayon pictures of her to show their love. I am not that kind of woman. When we were little girls, she played with baby dolls while I dropped Barbies out of the second-story window.

worried

My body is a hazard zone and I am afraid to assess the damage. The packaging of a pregnancy test in my trash, pushed down as far as it'll go. I tap my fingers against the sink as I wait the three minutes to see if it's one line or two, pacing alone in my small bathroom, the harsh fluorescents reflected off white tile. One line: in the clear. Two lines? The possibilities are bleak. There's three options and none of them are good. I imagine I would drive alone to a clinic far enough away that no one would recognize my car.

I have a boyfriend who doesn't like using condoms and I don't have the backbone to shoot it down when his body and mine are in collision. We have frequent fights, in the car, waiting for the bus, standing outside of gas stations:

"You need to go on birth control," he says.

"I don't want to. It's my body," I maintain, again, again, again.

"I don't want to use condoms. It doesn't feel as good," he says.

"Okay, well, my health is more important than your pleasure."

"It's something that needs to happen. We can't keep playing with fire the way we are."

But every time we have sex, I give in. He takes off only my jeans or leggings, leaves on skirts and t-shirts, sweaters and bras, can't unhook bras anyway. He is a record stuck in a groove, can't see beyond the half-a-measure he's looking for. In stores, while driving, while eating dinner with friends, he snakes his hands up my skirt: his property. Tells me he likes me wearing skirts for the easy access.

The two of us cram ourselves in his twin-size bed, have quiet sex while footsteps echo above us. Hope the timing's right. I take my temperature every morning, write it down in a chart, track the patterns. Hope he understands his body well enough to interrupt before it's too late. He asks me every time, begs me, tells me it's the most intimate act possible: can I finish inside you? And I say no, I say no, I say no. The threat hangs in the negative space between us until it is spilled on my lower stomach. He curls up next to me afterward, his hands on my skin, his hair on my shoulder, holds me in his arms as he tells me he loves me, starts to sleep.

I am awake and every nerve in my body is aware of the possibilities, the great perhaps I carry inside me until I bleed again.

Rachael Walker

Rachael Walker holds a BA in English - Creative Writing from Hollins University. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Bone & Ink Literary Magazine* and *Two Cities Review*. This piece, "A Small Seed of Fate Carried Inside Me," was the 2018 recipient of the Bill Hallberg Award for Creative Nonfiction. She lives in the Washington, DC area, where she fills her days writing, reading, baking bread, and watching cooking shows with her cat. Her work focuses on femininity, the body, ghosts, and memory. Talk to her about books and writing on Instagram, @rachaelgoesreading.



## SARCASTIC BEGGAR

"We parked in front and I heard the music, felt the bass and my dad got out and told me and my mom to wait and I knew those kids were in trouble because that music was too loud and they better hope there aren't any cuss words because my dad barged in when I was taking a shower and took my Slipknot CD because it cussed."

— Jacob Collins-Wilson

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