

Love is an Oval

It's 5 am, and the sun is peeking above the rooftop of the next building, cloaking the yellow nursery in a creamy white glaze. She's eighteen months old, wearing purple pajamas embellished with ice cream popsicles. Her lips are lipstick red, her hair a mass of walnut brown corkscrew curls. She's standing in the crib holding the top bar, chattering away. Outside her door, you listen. It's the inflection of the nonsense sounds that have you laughing to yourself so hard you could bust wide open. She's having a full-on private conversation. She might be discussing the weather. *God, I really hate this heat*, she's saying. *Global warming. It's going to be the end of us babies. I know. Just slather me with the SPF 95 and let's go already.* She's been at it for a good ten minutes, and you're turning blue trying to hold in your amusement and wonder. But you're going to have to go in and change her diaper, give her breakfast, get her to day care so you can go to your shitty job at the local art gallery and get paid enough to feed her and keep the light on in her yellow room.

All of a sudden, she's seven years old. You have to take her to TJ Maxx every weekend so she can pick out a new outfit. Nothing she wears matches, yet she has impeccable taste. She's egg shaped. She giggles a lot. She loves to draw, still loves stickers and sifting colored sand through her fingers. Her aunts and uncles buy her velvet paint by numbers. They dance when she sings and sing when she dances. She struggles with reading. She doesn't care about school or homework, and frankly, neither do you. But you read Harry Potter and Heidi and The Baby-sitters Club together, hoping it's enough. She and her friends love dress-up. All your clothes are stained or torn because of dress-up, so you too have to keep buying new clothes for work. You can't look schlubby at an art gallery, even if all you're doing is sitting in the office taking care of the business of art. You can't wait to get home to snuggle with her and watch Princess Diaries or Princess Bride or Princess Diana. You should have named her princess or summer and not tried to be so exotic.

Time is an irreversible succession from the past, and now you're somewhere in the middle of the present. She's fifteen, feisty, moody, and mad at you all the time. Her clothes, her books, her wet towels are on the floor everywhere. She yells at you or ignores you or hides from you. When you threaten grounding her if she doesn't at least pick up

something off the floor or do the dishes. Do something. Anything. She says, *I hate you Mom*. And one day, you forget the reason but never forget, she says, *fuck you, Mom*, and you slap her without thinking but mostly want to kill the seed of rage that's growing inside her like a weed and will strangle you if you let it. She's changed her name, but it's not sunshine or flower. Instead of a daughter, all you see now is dark, dark red.

She's nearly eighteen and pregnant, crying on your lap. The bad seed has disintegrated. She needs you. You've been there too. Pregnant before you were ready, more than a few times, but you don't tell her. You don't tell her you want to reinvent yourself to be an interior designer but until now, taking care of her alone, there hasn't been time. You need your own secrets so she doesn't swallow you up with her need. You wipe up her tears, which have stained your new dress pants, drive her downtown and sit by her side, squeezing her hand, telling her it will be okay. She squeezes back to tell you she's grateful for you. After everything has been taken care of, she sleeps next to you, and a blue calm washes over both of you. Your blue secrets will link you forever.

Time is money, and you wish you had more of both. She is a woman now with a wonderful job and a fine husband. You're a little green with envy but also so filled with pride your stomach might bust open again. Her faded yellow room is empty of her. You've plastered the walls with all your design ideas. You go in there every day after work to tape up another idea and to summon back all the memories you can. The letter she wrote from camp asking for more tissues because she cries a lot. The gold name plate necklace you gave her when she was twelve, the one she has begun to wear again. The parties you shouldn't have let her have, but at least the booze and drugs were in your own house. You think about what a pack of nerves you were at the beach because what if she ran into the ocean so you grabbed her and held her and waded out into the green waves together. She is a speech therapist! She teaches children to stutter less. From artist to healer. Who would have guessed?

You don't need time to tell you it's years later, because the skin on your upper arms is wrinkled like the silk scarf bunched up in your drawer. You have the tiniest pink scar from a cold sore, which nobody but you notices. When you look in the mirror to tweeze a hair on your chin, your eyes fill with water. But you hardly care because your daughter is a mom now! She has a daughter of her own. Oh, how you wish you could kidnap this daughter and lock her in the yellow room where your designs sit untended. You could be Glenda, the good witch. But instead, when you see your daughter and her daughter, you turn into some sort of bad witch, because no matter what you say to your daughter, it's the wrong thing. You certainly

can't joke about how vicious she was when she was fifteen. You can't say how really pretty her daughter is, because all bodies are beautiful, and she doesn't want her daughter to care about looks. Sometimes you say never mind, just forget it, and then you're being passive-aggressive. She's the mother now, and she knows everything. It's true. She is a million times smarter than you were. Somewhere inside is the original oval girl who loved to draw and sing and change her clothes. But it's deep inside her, and her confidence has become kind of scary, so you tiptoe around her because you might lightly comment on her daughter's terrible eating habits or say how much you miss your daughter and dread her slipping away. But you absolutely won't say you're a little afraid of your own daughter because that's your secret.