

Gifts

By Jocelyn Johnson

*This is my gift to you, my mother whispers,
We will have two Christmases.*

And it's true: days after the first one, like an instant replay, we have Christmas again. She unpacks 30 meticulously packed boxes of decorations: glass bobbles, strings of white lights, handmade dough ornaments glossy with tempera and shellac.

But for the second Christmas the presents are only empty boxes dressed in ribbons. The fireplace turns on with a switch. My father stands like a coat rack in a corner, a wool jacket draped over his arm.

My mother is at the center of my memory, coaxing smiles from behind the glistening eye of the camera, more focused this second time. At three years old I don't realize it, but this production is not for me. The second Christmas is for those precious photographs, which my mother felt needed redoing because of an error in clarity or light. The second Christmas is for the scrapbooks.

I am told now that there is a whole community of scrapbookers: women who meet on Sundays, after church, suitcases of supplies under their arms. They are fully equipped to capture their lives with museum quality archival products, scaled down, marked up and marketed to them. Like my own mother, these women's memories are too precious for plain photo albums; their family lives must be laid out at jaunty angles, titled with gel pens on black acid free paper, kept safe under plastic.

Growing up, I didn't know about these women. I only knew that my mother spent hours with my image every evening. She worked at her desk, under a circle of lamplight, after I was in bed. When I woke up in the middle of the night, frightened from a bad dream, I would find her there.

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My parents' wedding portrait hung in the foyer, special in its silver oval frame. When I was young, I would study it. Upstairs my parents yelled and cried but in the picture my father was handsome and laughing into my mother's lacy bodice.

My father kept coming home later and later; then one evening when the ground was dusty with snow, he didn't come home at all. After days had passed without his return my mother removed that oval portrait from the hallway. It left a dusty silhouette that she eventually scrubbed away. For weeks, I stood in front of the newly empty space, trying to see my father's face there. In truth, I don't remember much else about him.

What I do remember is the freakishly neat rows of trees in our neighborhood; saplings supported by stakes and bound by ropes wrapped in rubber hoses, positioned so that one day they would become an allée over Maple Street. Every street in my neighborhood is a dead end. Every street is named after a type of tree and demarcated with saplings not much taller than I am on my bicycle at nine.

We kids in the neighborhood watch new houses go up: toxic siding, tufted pink insulation, pressure-treated wood. Dark-skinned men in angry machines bully the earth around these houses. We try to flag them down to ask them why, but they pay more attention to the gnats that sting their eyes. They just keep pushing the soil into new configurations, so that eventually all of the old trees, the big trees, the *real* trees die and get ground into mulch; their gravesites buried beneath rolls of new sod, as if they were never even there.

I also remember weekly trips to the craft store, the parking lot an expanse of black asphalt punctuated by bright painted lines. Inside the aisles are wide and long, and too cool for summer. This time my mother has brought me under the pretense of buying decorations for The Fourth of July, but we never even visit the section of sparklers and noisemakers.

My mother heads straight to the aisle with scrap-booking supplies and we circle back and forth like sharks until I am so frustrated that I begin to cry. "Be a big girl, now" my mother tells me when a woman in white sneakers squeaks by. My mother forces open a pack of crayons from an adjacent aisle

and hands me a coloring book we haven't even paid for yet. I plop down on the cold linoleum, my lip jutting up and out like a Mylar balloon. I use red, white, and blue crayons to color inside the lines.

Bored at the Store, my mother muses as she digs in her purse for one of several disposable cameras she keeps there. Then she thinks better of it. I am too old for this type of picture, she must think. At the check-out a gaggle of girls in front of us shimmy and shake in sparkly leotards; they brandish American flags and silvery pom-poms in their hands.

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I don't have a friend over to my house until I am twelve years old, and even then I know better, without knowing; like when you wake up to the sound of screaming sirens and know that something terrible has happened somewhere. You don't need to know the details to understand that it's safer to stay in bed.

"Let's hang out tomorrow afternoon at your place, Carlie," my best (and only) friend, Jala, sings softly. One lazy sparkled shoulder pokes out from her open locker; her head is still buried inside. I agree weakly, and Jala seizes onto my consent before I can back out of it. I have backed out of things before. The dimensions of the meeting, its neat dimensions between 4:00 and 6:00 pm, make it almost feel safe.

There are several instant cameras in our house and countless disposable ones, five in the foyer, three in the living room, one in each bathroom upstairs. In the dining room, my mother's workshop, I find fleets of disposable cameras, bought in bulk, and held together in sheaths of plastic. The day that Jala is supposed to come over, I try to collect or cover them all.

I also plead with my mother to stay out of my bedroom. I banish my mammoth collection of teddy bears from their nest over my pillows; the bears aren't mine anyway, not really, even if I do sleep among them and chew on the pink one's ears while I sleep. My mother has given me one bear for my birthday for every year of my life. Each one represents something about me, she says. Like the plush teddy in a tuxedo, a conductor. She tells me she spent weeks searching for him at various specialty stores. He commemorates the summer my mother signed me up for piano lessons, even though I never went back.

Every year the bears come and I allow it, like I allow the incessant photographs and the questions asked: *Do you have a new favorite color, Carlie?*

Which star do you have a crush on?

Who is your favorite teacher and why?

Like the interviews you read about those glossy women in the magazines, I am documented too. I wonder if all the details in the world can even begin to get to the bottom of me. My mother's questions always seem all wrong, contrived and pointing, but on good days I answer them anyway.

These interviews are documented in the scrapbooks. My clipped responses seem even more insignificant in my mother's neat script. My mother prints my words on vellum next to her own musings. Everyday of my life my mother tries to write something about me.

I have even timed my mother working from the family room in 30-minute increments, measured out by afternoon sitcoms, my homework radiating out in front of me like a fan. Each scrapbook page takes her nearly three hours to finish. Each binder holds nearly 50 pages; 20 books chronicle the first three years of my life. After that there are fewer books; to compensate, my mother chooses more luxurious materials--velvet and silk sewn right onto the pages. Three hours of my mother's life traded to document three minutes of mine.

"I won't come up while your friend is here, if you don't want me to, honey," my mother promises. Palpable disappointment weighs down the corners of her eyes. "But this is a big deal, this is your first friend over." Before I begin to feel too guilty, my mother's face slips into a familiar, wistful smile. *First Friend Over*, she repeats, like a line in a poem, or the title to a collection of short stories. This cadence, too even, balls up in the pit of my stomach like crumpled paper.

But that afternoon my mother is good. She greets Jala at the door with a Southern accent too deep for our Northern subdivision. Her lipstick is freshly applied, her linen apron ironed and slightly askew. After that, she excuses herself to the kitchen where something in the oven already smells warm and rich and sweet.

On our way to the staircase, we pass the dining room and Jala cranes her neck to look inside. "What the *f* is that stuff?" she whispers, "Is your mom a serial killer, or something?" I sink my fingers into the crook

of her arm. “It’s nothing,” I want to say, but I cannot form the words. I want to pull her upstairs, but the two of us stand frozen in front of my mother’s work space.

In contrast to the surfaces in the rest of our house, the dining room table is covered in papers and pictures. Between these piles are collections of tools and supplies: colored photo corners and wheat glues, rivets and raffia, specialty scissors and stamps. A series of overfilled cork boards, heavy with pinned images, lines the far wall. My mother’s supplies fill every space in the dining room. From the floor, a full sized paper cutter, with its single jaw swung open, gawks at us.

I look past everything to the fat leather binders that hold the finished scrapbook pages. They tower in tall stacks in front of the bay window, in case of fire.

A timer goes off in the kitchen and Jala flinches from my grip.

“You okay, Carlie?” Jala asks. Her eyes are still two headlights, illuminating the spectacle of my mother’s space.

“I am,” I say as if waking up from a dream. “But I can’t hang out today.”

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Leaving, Jala looks bewildered as she crosses our neatly clipped front lawn, past the pots of cheery pansies. I watch her disappears from view before shutting the front door. I find my mother in the kitchen, staring out a back window.

“My friend, Jala, she had to leave,” I say to the back of her head.

“Oh. That’s too bad. The cookies.”

“I mean she had to leave because of your room.”

“Don’t be silly, dear.”

“Why do you have to have all that STUFF?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Carlie.” I want to believe her, but there is something knowing in her eyes.

“I mean, why is our house so weird?” I continue, “Why are WE so WEIRD?”
Why are *you* so weird? I want to say.

My mother doesn’t say anything; her face is empty as a frame.

“Do you want a cookie?” she finally offers, “They’re still warm.”

I shake my head and run upstairs, crying.

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When I come back down I see the sad curve of my mother’s back in the cave of the dining room. I make a show of closing cabinets noisily in the kitchen, but she just sits.

“Mom, you wanna take some pictures of me in a little bit?” I finally say. Her smile is weak at first, then, reaching for an instant camera in her purse, it hastens. I pose for her in the foyer, in front of the front door that is safely closed to the outside. I tuck one hand behind my head and jut out my opposite hip. I laugh high and shrill for my mother behind the camera, like that women in the movies that my mother used to love. My mother gets so giddy capturing me this way, never mind my nosey friend, never mind my C’s in Chemistry, never mind that group of girls at school who wear their hair loose and corner me in the stall in the girls room just to pass the time, so that I don’t go to bathroom at school anymore.

When we are done, my mother sits back in her favorite chair and labels the pictures she has just taken. Her lipstick is smudged at the edges; dark circles are boats beneath her eyes. She pours over the images, weeding out the blurry ones. Then carefully she places those remaining in a manila envelope, dates it, and gets up to put it in her files.

“Could you manage dinner tonight, Carlie, honey?” she asks “Something frozen, maybe. Pizza’s fun, right? It’s just that I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

I look around and see that, except for her workshop, our house is immaculate. The laundry is fresh and folded; framed photographs on the mantle want for dust. My mother is a model housekeeper and a fulltime nurse, but her real work is recreating me in paper and images and words. I’ve snooped through her filing cabinets and she is years behind.

If my mother is a serial killer, then I am her only victim. She kills me again and again on the cork board in the dining room, for my passing friend to see. She lies out and dissects images of me as if she is magazine editor, as if I am some freakish, rare bird in flight.

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On the first day of tenth grade I notice Jimmie in the locker corridor, among the crowd of jostling students. Then I catch him looking at me in chemistry class, when my face is screwed in futile concentration. He doesn’t look away from me. He tells Jala that he thinks I’m pretty.

A few days later, he saunters up to talk to *me*, asking if he can call me. I laugh too high and write my number on the back of his binder in even script. He calls me that very night, full of questions:

How do you feel?

What do you want?

What is your family like?

One night on the telephone he tells me, in a low conspiring whisper, that he hates his own mother, and the news thrills me, like being on top of a Ferris wheel.

“Come over to my house,” I blurt into the receiver. “Come over as soon as you can.”

Jimmie does eventually come over. He even encourages my mother to take a picture of us together, him holding my hand sweetly at the landing near the door. At first my mother is ecstatic. *Sweet Sixteen*, she muses, *No- Puppy Love*. She struggles to get the both of us on the frame. She drops the film off at the

drive thru at the pharmacy and rushes back an hour later to pick up the prints. Those images, in doubles, must have disappointed her. “The sunlight in the doorway just turned you two into shadows,” she told me. “I threw all of the pictures of you and Jimmie away.”

Jimmie stands over me in the atrium at school, his hands snug in the back pockets of my jeans, his eyes looking through me. My jeans are low slung and tight so that he had to work to get his hands there. I’ve started to change into Jala’s clothes in her car on the way to school most mornings.

“Come over again today?” I beg.

“You know I’m supposed to help my mom today.”

“Come anyway.”

I look over at Jala, who stands beside us, her back against her closed locker.

“Yeah, Carlie’s house is really fun,” she says.

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Jimmie does come over at 4:00 instead of 3:00 so I greet him at the door scowling. My mother comes up behind, her mouth bent into a sharp smile. My mother’s dress matches the curtains, the same forest green. Jimmie asks her to show him the scrapbooks I’d mentioned.

The two of them sit, side by side, and realize that no one ever comes over. No one else looks at the scrapbooks my mother has made. My eyes dart nervously over their shoulders as my mother entrusts heavy binders to Jimmie’s lap. He turns each page slowly, at her prompting. “And what is going on in this picture, Mrs. Jackson?” he asks. There is no need to ask, not really. The *What* and *Where* and *How* is laid out on the page in words and pictures and stencils. The *who* is always me.

I grow impatient as minutes turn into an hour. “Come oooon,” I cry, daring my mother to scare Jimmie away too. I want Jimmie safe in my room, where my teddy bears now live permanently in a box in the closet. Every moment I spend with Jimmie seems super real. Not like time watching TV that ticks away like a clock, or those aimless hours behind different desks at Maymont High School. Not like life in my house, alone with my mother, life edited, enclosed. “Come upstairs,” I moan, jostling back and forth

against the banister in the looser clothes I have changed back into for my mother's benefit. And he finally does.

Jimmie accepts my duplicity without question, how I am both tight and loose. Upstairs in my room he unwraps me and discovers my core. His lovely, brutal pushing, neither too hard nor too gentle, breaches my half-hearted defenses.

My mother stays away from my bedroom. Downstairs in her favorite chair, she cradles a new scrapbook in her arms. "Nothing's too small," she coos to it, as if it is an infant, precious and small and shocked by the expansiveness of the world.

"I really care about Jimmie," I tell her after Jimmie has gone home.

"You're just a girl," she says.

"No. I'm in love, real love, Mother." She doesn't even look at me.

She stays sitting on the couch late into the evening, even after the falling light paints the room in shadow.

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What do you want to be when you grow up? My mother questions, not for me, but for the scrapbooks. I am 17 years old, and she is 47. She has recently left her full time job after so many years. Those irregular shifts are interfering with her home life, she tells them. "More time with you, Carlie," she tells me. Now she works half days at the clinic.

I guess she still has money enough to pay for those specialty papers from places we've never been and will probably never go. Cold pressed with flowers, dyed with saffron, all praises to me, she says. The cupboards are barer. Creditors sometimes call. And I refuse to have my picture taken by anyone. Not even a senior portrait. Still, somehow my mother's books continue to come.

What do you want to be? My mother asks with pen and paper ready. I've slammed door upstairs while she has worked quietly downstairs, the whole stinging cold winter. Jimmie broke up with me at Christmas. He said it was because I called him so much but the truth is I called because he didn't. I

didn't know he had caller I.D. My number must have looked like accusations, scrolled out so many times over winter break, no message left. He said his mother hit him for it, the ringing, the hanging up, but I know that wasn't the reason. He broke up with me after he sat again and again with my mother; after enduring the vapid expanse of those scrapbook pages.

"I don't want to be anything like you," I snarl at my mother. "You should write *that* down." I jump up from the gingham couch as I say this. I see my mother noticing my forest green tank top, cut low so that the swell of my breast are showing. My college applications are in the mail and I don't care anymore. One way or another, I will soon be free.

I know I have stung my mother, but it is not enough; I cannot hurt her enough these days. I want to scream that I am losing everything. That nothing works out how I want it to. That I am lonely in our house. But her face is already plastic; she smiles an empty crescent that doesn't come near her eyes.

"Carlie, you're fine," she finally says.

At this, I plow into the dining room, her room, and I am struck again, because there are so *many* scrap books bristling with so many pages full of photographs of me. I notice on her work table, among the clutter, the utility knife that my mother uses to carve out shapes from cardstock, to crop photographs. I pick it up because I don't know what else to do. Beside the razor tip my skin seems thin and translucent like rice paper. I turn towards my mother, surprised to see the knife still in my outstretched hand.

"Carlie?" she murmurs, her voice trembling.

I know she is really seeing me so I turn back towards the dining room table. A completed scrapbook lays open there. It houses images of me at three years old; my silhouette nosed up to a patch of coneflowers. The flower in the foreground sags, a washed out purple in the sun, but I look burgeoning and new.

I use my mother's knife to carve deep deliberate lines through this image. I hear my mother gasp behind me. I open another book and scrape and scratch and dig into the things I find inside. One page reveals a series of quirky, close up portraits documenting my random smile minus a tooth in front. In the pictures,

I twist and push my protruding tongue deep into the new empty space for a mother who is strangely never seen.

“Why are you doing this?” my mother whispers hoarsely. Then: “I didn’t know, I didn’t know, I didn’t know...” I leave the leather covers of the scrapbooks untouched, so that when I close them they look whole again.

In the doorway, my mother whispers turn into desperate sobbing. I know that she cries for them, her marred children, but she does not come to their defense. For that, I decide to leave the pages documenting our second Christmas intact, as a remembrance, as evidence, as a gift.

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Outside the trees in our neighborhood are more mature now, certainly taller than I am. They stand without supports; men came back years later and took the supports away, trimmed back branches dangerously near power lines. The deep grooves between the rolls of sod have long disintegrated beneath years of sprinklers. Water from those sprinklers spills beyond yards, onto sidewalks, where little girls with pigtails skate through it. I look out my window and make a list of all these things and more.

What kind of adult do you want to be, Carlie? My therapist asks me. I want to be
Fuzzy,
And shiny,
And new.

I want to be the kind of person Jimmie could love. I want to be a mother someday, maybe. If I am, I want to be the kind of mother who asks questions that require long meandering answers, who eats out instead of in, who lives in the city instead of the suburbs, whose curtains are blue instead of green, who doesn’t need curtains at all.

No- I want to be able to see that she did the best she could.
I want to her to understand that there were losses all around.
I want to be the center of things, clean and tidy on the page.

