

How We Were Good

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We sing songs about the suburbs. We tell stories about our childhoods, back when our childhoods were full of stories. We do not falter, do not make mistakes, do not pause between *Once upon* and *ever after*.

We believe in happy endings.

When we were small, our parents bathed us in soapy water and sent toy boats free to float around the tub's perimeter. *Alice fell down the drain*, our mothers whispered and we made glugging noises, noses wrinkled in laughter. No drain or grate or chasm would ever claim us because we were small and loved and so much bigger than the universe. The world needed us just like it needed Lassie and Spider-Man, Captain America swooping in from off-screen to save the day like always. These things were true. Other things we held to be true:

1. It is important to talk to God every night, sometimes in the afternoon if you feel lonely.
2. Everybody secretly lives forever, but they pretend to get old anyway.
3. If you run fast enough, nothing can ever catch you.

We dreamed about running. Maybe someday we could run around the entire world, heels splashing in the Atlantic Ocean and slapping against the mountains of Peru, which was a place where they didn't have nice things the way we did. If you went as fast as anybody ever could, you'd leave a trail of fire behind you, just like in the Roadrunner cartoons, and everybody would know you'd been there.

We wanted everybody to know we'd been there, but this seemed another given. So we expanded our list.

4. You will be famous one day if you want to be, and everyone will remember you forever.

Sometimes our mothers cried and we pretended not to see. When we were sad, we bawled, mouths opened ugly and wide to the sky above and shoulders heaving, and then we were better. Adults cried behind spread palms and hunched shoulders, pretending that their eyes were just leaking or that they were invisible. We didn't understand this. If you were sad, wouldn't you want to be comforted?

Other days, our fathers came home late and kicked off their shiny shoes so the leather went flying toe-first towards the closet wall. I'm home, they bellowed, waiting for us to come running out of somewhere, diving for a hug. "Well, hey there champ," they said, grinning on one side of their mouths, "Didn't know you missed me so much." And then they would lumber into the dining room where our mothers sat reading the newspaper, or maybe a textbook, a glossy magazine, and kiss them quick and loud on the side of the cheek. Until we were much older, we didn't realize there was another way to kiss.

Hi, our fathers said, and our mothers said hi back quietly, flipping a page. In the kitchen, a roast congealed and vegetables went cold and limp. "You're late," they said, "half an hour late, and we've been sitting here starving all that time."

"Don't exaggerate," our fathers said, and we stepped on the floorboards gently on our way out, the way we'd learned long ago, not a single creak to be heard under our feet.

Most days, we had dinner past seven-thirty, our red-eyed mothers passing us rice in a pale pink bowl. Our fathers sat at the head of the table, our mothers at the foot, and we lorded over the long stretch bequeathed to us.

“You know I love you,” our mothers said when they tucked us in under flannel sheets. “More than anybody.”

“More than Dad?”

“You know that’s different,” they said, which meant they didn’t want think about it.

We kept secrets inside our dressers, boxes of army men and farm animals that we brought out as our piece de resistance during neighborhood games. Other people kept secrets inside their skin. We sang songs about going home and being young before we understood the words, and then after because we thought they were funny. Our parents liked us to perform for them on the nights when everyone was smiling, and so we did, our hands thrown up to the sky at the end of every number like the kings and queens of showbiz. “Oh, isn’t that funny,” our mothers said, hugging our fathers’ arms close. “Where on Earth did you pick that up, you smart thing?”

We sang songs about the suburbs, made up different childhoods, and we always closed with love songs to make our mothers smile. We heard our own voices in the quiet evening air like flutes or knives, high and clear, and we watched for the moment our fathers would nod. It’s Friday, I’m in love, we sang, not knowing yet just what a liability love could be.