

“Everybody Smile!”

Nancy Fowler

I’m standing behind my seated parents in the Olin Mills photography studio in Birmingham, Alabama, wearing my red velvet jumper and a gold cross around my neck. My sun-streaked chestnut flip is as obedient as my recently straightened teeth. Although I’m pleased with how I look, my stomach tightens. It’s taking a long time and my father needs to get home to watch the golf match on TV.

A few weeks later, the studio calls. My mother and I go down and choose a photo in which I wear a pleasant expression and my parents smile through the weariness of sales and secretarial work and raising a teenage daughter in the radical 1960s. We look happy. This reassures but also confuses me because I wonder if we are. I’m pretty sure *I’m* not. “But all families fight,” my mother explains and at 13, I’m still enough of a child to trust her more than I trust myself.

Vulcan, the world’s largest cast iron statue, watches over Birmingham from high atop Red Mountain. At 100,000 pounds and 56 feet tall, the Roman god of fire is an imposing figure wielding a sharp spear in his upraised right hand. Some think of Vulcan as a protector. I’m not sure.

My father wields the power in our house. As a toddler, I already know not to bother him in his basement office. But when he comes upstairs, I wiggle on his lap as he pours sugar and evaporated milk into a coffee mug on the orange Formica table imprinted with little boomerangs. When he offers me a spoonful, I slurp it up and laugh for more. Watching him dip into the mug for my next taste, I love the way his ropy hands and thick fingers are punctuated by immaculate nails.

My mother faces away from us. Her dangling apron strings dance across the back of her skirt as she scrubs the dishes. Is she crying after one of their regular fights about my much older brother Ted, who’s rarely home?

Ted is the child of my mother’s first husband, who was shot down in World War II. He’s 12 years older than me, mysterious and cool. Standing outside his bedroom, I absorb the lyrics to “Devil or Angel” by Bobby Vee and other hit songs.

My mother has a special voice for when she says Ted’s father’s name. An exuberant *awe* followed by a soft *bree*: Aubrey. But even with her Southern accent, my father’s name is a hard consonant followed by *ick*: Dick. That’s what my mother and brother call him. But I call this man whose face is a dark shadow of whisker dots, Daddy.

As a toddler, a wisp of a memory. *I said stop crying* rings in my ears as Daddy jerks open the shower door and grabs me under my chubby arms to show me who’s boss. I only have my mother’s word for most of this story – a rare candid admission from her when I’m older. But I don’t have to conjure up the whiskered beast leaping from the pages of my *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. At three, I know him well. Glaring at me with yellow eyes narrowed into slits, roaring my name through teeth that bear down on me like a cage.

I imagine the long squeak of the faucet handle. The shock of freezing water. The puzzle of being in the shower with my clothes on. The slam of the shower door that says there’s no escape. Planting my feet and closing my eyes, telling myself *You can do this* over and over, my body memorizing survival mode.

As I ride it out, my mother says he eventually turns toward her, “No child’s gonna run my life!”

“Turn it off,” she begs.

“Stop coddling her!” he says.

But my mother can’t seem to stop, even though everybody knows her coddling has already ruined my brother. That’s what I hear my father say when my parents fight. It’s why Ted can’t finish his paper route, why he wails like a sissy in his room after he and my father argue over his failure to listen and obey, *goddammit, after all I’ve done for you*.

As he yanks me from the cold shower, I picture much of my sassiness disappearing down the drain, a few droplets glistening on the pink tile floor. Later, my mother whispers an idea that becomes a refrain, then a mantra: “He just has a temper, most men do.”

I’ll bet if a woman could have a temper, my mother could grab my father under his arms and throw him into the shower. She’s nearly as tall as him if you count the extra inch of the dark bouffant hairstyle framing broad cheekbones. But in the South, women can only be something called feisty. My mother’s definitely not that.

“It’s fine; we’re fine,” she explains. “He works hard – and he doesn’t cheat on me.”

My room a wall away is a fortress of candy.... As the fortress dwindles, my body expands.

A few years after the family portrait and continuing into high school, my grades slip. That’s what my parents and teachers call it, slip. Slide, tumble, topple, like mountain homes in a mudslide, pushed by an unseen force, nothing to do with my brother returning home after dropping out of his graduate program in psychology and leaving his marriage, holing up in his childhood bedroom at nearly thirty years old, playing his mournful guitar, wailing as my father sneers at him words like *quitter* and *can’t even take care of your wife and children*.

My room a wall away is a fortress of candy. Dozens of cans of Katydid’s stacked on orange shag carpet, a fundraiser for my high school sorority. Each can beckons with images of rich chocolate treats, whispering, *come on, no one will know*. I roll back a thin metal top with the key to reveal delicious relief. Barely pausing to appreciate the oozing caramel and crisp pecans, I shove another and another and another into my mouth. As the fortress dwindles, my body expands. My clothes cut into the new folds of my flesh which I hide at school under my tan corduroy coat well into spring.

“Aren’t you hot?” my friends ask.

“Guess I’m cold-natured,” I tell them.

One noisy night, my grown brother bursts from his bedroom. Rushing out the back door, he bumps his suitcase and

guitar down the deck stairs to slam them into a dilapidated car and roar away. We don’t hear from him for a year. His departure seems to confirm what I’m beginning to suspect, that happy families don’t operate like this.

With a trembling lip, my mother studies TV footage of the Vietnam War, searching for the unlikely possibility Ted might have enlisted and been videotaped by news cameras cutting a path through the jungle. I’m worried too but her way of worrying annoys me. Why doesn’t she ever *do* anything? All she does is cry.

Summer is coming and I can’t wear my coat forever. “Diet pills,” my mother says, sharing her own weight-loss secret. She takes me to Dr. Shafferman, where women fidget in hardback chairs, waiting to weigh in and walk out with their prescription for amphetamines.

On the pills, I don’t sleep well. But they work. I’ve lost thirty pounds by the time I’ve fallen into a nap on my pink flower-power bedspread and my father barrels into my room.

“Get up!”

“I’m tired.”

“Only lazy people sleep during the day!”

Something primitive, animal, shoots through my body as he slams my door on his way out. I’m sixteen and I’ve had it. Bounding from my bed, I hunt him down in the kitchen. As I move in to his face, a voice I don’t recognize erupts from my mouth.

“I hate you! Always hated you – always will!”

Turning to leave, my shoulders tense as I wait for the snarling. *Oh, crap, I’ve done it now*. But as I march back to my room, the beast sulks in silence. That night, sliding past him on my way to the kitchen, I eye him carving the day’s dirt from beneath his nails with the pocketknife on his keyring.

Next thing I know I’m sitting across from a man my mother calls a counselor. I went to camp when I was younger but those counselors were teenage girls. This man is my father’s age. I don’t trust him.

“How is it at home?” he asks. His soft voice is not my father’s. His eyes are not yellow slits. They’re a calming blue oasis. I begin to whisper an answer.

I don’t remember my words. I do remember my shoes. Royal blue fake suede with four-inch wedge heels. Shiny scuff marks from constantly wobbling over on my ankles then catching myself have worn away the dullness of the cheap material. As I talk, I kick more scuffs into the toes. “Ok, then,” the counselor says as he opens the door to the waiting room where my mother sits, alone, and calls her in.

In the car on the way home, I study the road ahead like I don’t already know it by heart. When I glance over, my mother’s dark eyes are flat and dull and somewhere else.

“He asked me why I stay with this man,” she says.

I hold my breath and hope.

But she doesn’t say anything else. She doesn’t tell me how she answered. She doesn’t ask what I told the counselor.

There are no more appointments. Fifty-cent rewards for

each “A” on my report card, fifty-cent fines for leaving clothes on the floor, my life plods along. But I still watch my words, avoid being in the same room with my father. I can’t push down the feeling I might be one wrong glance away from being his next meal. But when he fattens me up with occasional praise, *You’re smart, you can do anything you want*, I lap it up.

Even Vulcan has a soft side. From the back, the statue’s naked butt is fully exposed by an immodest iron loincloth, rendering him less intimidating, almost endearing, like a stern-faced old man shuffling down a hospital corridor, unaware of the gap in his gown.

At night after my parents are asleep I slip out the back door to sit on the deck stairs in my purple satin nightgown, cupping an ashtray I’ve fashioned out of foil. Studying the stars, I dream about life after high school. Vague dreams, college, my own apartment, maybe moving somewhere up north or west to California. Inhaling the warm, smooth night, I feel a kind of peace rub over my racing thoughts and I believe my life will be good.

Back inside, I wad up the foil containing the cigarette butt and ashes and bury it in the kitchen trash can. Passing by the family portrait, framed and sitting on a table, I notice the dime-sized dent in my father’s forehead. I haven’t thought about it in years. Before my parents married, my mother said her own mother, a nurse, warned her the dent might make him an unsuitable husband. But I don’t think it looks that bad. A long time ago when I asked, my father’s amber eyes softened as he explained it was from falling off his tricycle. Then something about burying his bloody underwear deep in the closet so his mother wouldn’t see. I don’t understand how an accident that dented his head also bloodied his underwear. *Parents*. Sometimes they make no sense at all.

Dent or no dent, I wish the smiling picture-father in the dull gray sport coat was my father all the time. The one who asks me sometimes if I’m happy instead of just have I done my homework. The one who used to dig in my ears for blackheads and paint my cuts and scrapes with bright red mercurochrome while I squirmed but secretly enjoyed being close. And the photo’s perfect smiling picture-mother in her pale green polyester dress: Bet she wouldn’t tell me things like *But he enjoyed you when you were little* and would instead tell him he’d better start appreciating me now.

“I love you, Nancy,” I tell myself, a self-help book open on the orange shag of my bedroom. At 18, I no longer wear the gold cross. I no longer believe in the Bible, I believe in me. Affirmations of self-love are healing, the book says, and I practice them at night. No boy has yet told me *I love you* and I don’t remember those words ever coming from my parents. At night, I clutch my pillow and dream of clear, ocean eyes looking into my soul, of loving hands wiping tears from my freckled cheeks.

In my mid-30s, my heart glows as I watch my three children splash each other in a blue plastic Little Tykes swimming pool in the backyard. I’ve left my job as a journalist to

take care of them. Dinner, baths, bedtime stories, the frame of our life holds firm as we move from state to state for my husband’s job. My throat aches as I read them to sleep with *I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always*.

But when they’re awake, I can’t seem to control them. Wolverines, tearing through the house. I feel my eyes narrow as the voice of the beast erupts from my mouth. *Stop*, I order my five-year-old, *this minute*. When she races by, I grab her arm and Newton’s Law of Motion moves my long fingernails across her chest. I can barely stand the week it takes for the scratches to heal.

The fear in her eyes sounds an alarm. I pull from my purse the number of a therapist whose card I picked up at her kindergarten open house. Sporting white Keds with ankle socks and the tightly-wound “curly perm” of the early 1990s, I sit on the therapist’s royal blue couch, confessing, “I yell at my kids too much.” When she asks about my own parents, her eyes widen as I describe the dent in my father’s forehead. Prefrontal cortex. Center of self-control. Brain damage? But he only loses control with his family, I tell her. Plus it doesn’t matter; I’m past all that.

When my parents visit my family and me in Detroit and then Cincinnati and then St. Louis, I make sure to stock up on my father’s pretzels, bourbon and diet ginger ale. Drinking heavily is a new habit. Day one, he drinks all evening after a day of trying to read to rowdy children. Day two, the sharp rustle of his hand in the pretzel bag warns me the beast is near. Day three, he holes up in the guest bedroom. Day four, as my parents pull away from the house, air rushes from my lungs like the zigzagging exhale of a freed balloon.

When we visit them in Birmingham, the smoky tension in my childhood home grows thicker every time my father pours a drink and then another and another. *My house, my rules*, I can hear him thinking. My children haven’t learned to watch themselves for that one wrong glance. When he snaps at my youngest for taking his spot on the couch, I freeze. I don’t defend my son. Afterward, I burn with anger and smolder with guilt.

Years later, another visit, my father and brother trade insults on a bourbon-fueled night and my father kicks Ted out of the house. When my father insists I take his side, I storm out too. I’m forty-four and I’ve had it. He’s not endearing. He’s not a vulnerable Vulcan unaware of his bare butt. He’s just an ass.

My father and I don’t talk for five years. After he’s diagnosed with stomach cancer, my stomach roils at the thought of seeing him but something compels me to book a flight to Birmingham.

There’s little of the beast left in this old man whose new suspenders hold up pants that fit him fifty pounds ago. He tells me he’s proud of me. Our last words to each other are “I love you.” I *do* love him. Hate doesn’t snuff out love, it just makes the love hurt.

At a gathering after his funeral, I’m seated next to a tall

stack of family albums plucked from a basement shelf where they've sat for years. I lift up a red one, start flipping pages. A picture of me in my Easter dress. One in front of the Christmas tree. Another, cradling my cat. The photos are old, scratched, the plastic overlay yellowed and cracked, the damage of four decades.

But looking closer, it's more than just time. On Easter, at Christmas, tiny lines crisscross my three- and seven- and ten-year-old face. Knife cuts. Turning the page to the family portrait when I was 13, I suck in my breath. Where am I? The top half of the picture is missing, leaving only my seated parents intact.

My head is gone. Severed at the neck. All that remains is my blood-red jumper and the cross that failed to protect me. Stuck in time, my weary parents still smile although my father's lips have taken on a sinister curl. As always, my mother seems blissfully unaware of her daughter's fate.

Staring at the jagged image, I picture my father, alone in his basement lounge chair, bourbon and ginger ale in one hand, pocketknife on his keyring in the other, bearing down, *No child's gonna run my life.*

As I stare at the pictures, my mother, cousins and childhood friends tell stories, wave their hands, laugh, *Remember how we used to go to that one place? Order the salad? Swear we were full?*

"Yes, I remember," I say, closing the album and returning it to the stack.

Over the next few days the album is a magnet pulling me back again and again. My fingers run over the mutilated plastic over each photo like a medium rubbing a garment belonging to the deceased. Who was this man? My stomach feels as if my father's cored me like an apple. As I study the gouges in my eyes and nicks across my nose, I flinch at the

force of each knife cut, nurse each gash like a fresh wound. But I don't cry. Maybe I won't give him the satisfaction even though he's dead.

The story of the photos becomes the story of my father's death and in some ways, the story of my childhood. *Look, wasn't he terrible?* Visible at last, the scars I could never point to, the proof I always lacked when I said my father was abusive. The evidence I needed to show everyone who doubted my story – and by "everyone" I mostly mean myself.

But lately something else gurgles up from the wounded images. Something oddly medicinal, a truth as deep as the abuse. With his knife, my father has cut away the myths of my childhood, revealed the things my mother wouldn't say. That he wasn't fine. That we weren't fine. That images of shiny hair and straight teeth and smiling families can be sliced away by something as crude and insignificant as a drunken hand.

Even Vulcan isn't immune from damage. When he was nearly 100 years old, inspectors found significant deterioration wrought by time and weather. Interior bolts holding him together were corroded, wearing away. He was removed from his pedestal and meticulously restored over five years, a \$14 million project.

I still don't know what caused the damage to my father, whether it was the dent in his head or something else. Maybe there was never a tricycle. Maybe his underwear was bloody because someone sexually abused him. Maybe they punched him in the head wearing a heavy ring or hit him with a hammer or who knows what to make sure he wouldn't tell. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

A wound and then a scar. The damage unchecked, unhealed, unrestored, corroding his insides. Mercurochrome and bourbon providing a temporary salve. Cancer finishing the job.

As I study the gouges in my eyes and nicks across my nose,
I flinch at the force of each knife cut, nurse each gash
like a fresh wound. But I don't cry.