

**THE
GLASS
EYE**

a memoir

JEANNIE VANASCO



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*The hero is a feeling, a man seen
As if the eye was an emotion,
As if in seeing we saw our feeling
In the object seen . . .*

From “Examination of the Hero in a Time
of War” by Wallace Stevens

My parents raised me in a white-sided saltbox house, the sort children draw in crayon. Years before we lived there, it had been cut in half and moved across town. We never learned why.

PART ONE

ONE

The night before he died, I promised my dad I would write a book for him. I was harboring profound confidence charged with profound grief.

The day after he died, I was supposed to turn in a paper about *Hamlet*. My professor granted me an extension. I focused on the development of Hamlet's grief for his father, and the question of madness.

One week after he died, I was supposed to take a sociology exam. My professor did not grant me an extension. I did not read the chapter about grief, though I answered the questions about grief correctly.

One month after he died, I wrote on my arms and legs until they turned black: "before I lost him he lost his left eye I left his left eye he is not his glass eye the i left him."

Nine years after he died, in an attempt to organize my thoughts, I started keeping several color-coded binders labeled "Dad,"

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“Mom,” “Jeanne,” and “Mental Illness.” Within each binder are categories, such as “Vision” and “Voice.” “Jeannie” isn’t a binder. I’m “Mental Illness.”

DAD

I remember almost nothing from before my dad lost vision in his left eye—as if my life begins there. Years of my life appear full of shadows, but the night I disappeared is full of light.

My parents and I were playing the Memory Game. The goal was to find among all the cards two that matched. I was four. It was my dad’s turn.

I waited what felt like a long time for him to choose a card as he closed one eye, then the other. When the right eye closed I disappeared.

“I close my right eye,” he told my mom, “and I can’t see Jeanie.”

I closed my left eye, then my right, a game of illusions that moved objects, moving my dad an inch each time.

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In photos, my dad is almost always looking at me, never at the camera. This made it hard to choose his obituary photo. In the newspaper, my mom and I were cropped out of it.

In the original photo, the three of us are at the kitchen table. My dad is sixty-six, my mom is forty-six, and I’m four. In a month,

at that same wooden table, his left eye will stop working, but in the photo his eyes are fine—a deep brown so piercing they seem to look right inside me and know me. What hair he has is white and blends in with the white curtains behind him. His olive skin shows wrinkles. His forehead and cheeks have a greasy shine. He looks strong, thick-waisted but not fat. He wears belted gray slacks and a crisp white button-down shirt. Underneath his shirt likely hangs his gold necklace of the Holy Family. He stands behind my mom, leaning in and smiling. She’s smiling too and holding me on her lap. With her clear tan skin and thick curly blonde hair, she looks young enough, is young enough, to be his daughter.

And then there’s me. At four years old, I want—or will remember wanting—one blue eye the shade of my mom’s, and one brown eye the shade that my dad and I share. But in a month, his eye doctor will tell me, “You have your dad’s eyes,” and I’ll never want a blue eye again. My wavy brown hair is pulled into a ponytail tied with a blue ribbon. My dad likely tied that ribbon. When I was a child, he did my hair—trimmed, brushed, and often braided it. He’d been a barber when he was young, and throughout my childhood he seemed young.

Worried that other children would tease me about his age, he tried to color his hair dark brown the year I started kindergarten; it turned deep red, and until it faded he wore a hat everywhere—including at home.

MOM

Almost every day my mom and I talk on the phone, and almost every day we talk about my dad. He finds his way into the

conversation, or rather we lead him there: “I remember this one time your father . . .” “How did Dad tell the story . . .” “I wish I could have him back.”

She still lives in Sandusky, Ohio, in the house he died in. I live in New York, not far from the house where he was born.

“You only wanted him,” my mom says. “You wouldn’t stop crying unless you had him. You wouldn’t let me put you to bed, read you stories. You were with him all day. You were used to him. I’d call from work and ask what he was doing. ‘I’m making Jeannie animals out of paper.’ Or ‘I’m teaching Jeannie how to twirl spaghetti.’”

She pauses. “He saw how unhappy I was. ‘She needs her mother,’ he told me. So I agreed to quit working. You were a year old. I was worried about money, but he said we could make do on his retirement and Social Security.”

And we did. No one could say I did without. I had dogs and turtles and bunnies. I attended private school. I practiced ballet at a dance studio near the lake, learned how to paint fish and birds on Saturdays in an artist’s home. Every month, I accompanied my dad to the bank where he bought savings bonds in my name.

“For your college someday,” he said.

DAD

I remember only one visit to my dad’s eye doctor—though my mom tells me there were more.

My dad sat in the middle of a white room, peering into a coal-black lens machine with his left eye. A circle of lights shone over him. I stayed at my mom’s feet with a coloring book.

His doctor leaned cautiously into him, prodding the eye with a wand of light.

The doctor left the room and returned with a nurse. She motioned for me to follow her into the hallway. I did, and she closed the door behind us.

“Your grandfather is a brave man,” she said.

She told me to stay where I was and disappeared into another room before I could say, “He’s my dad.”

I cracked open the door and looked at him. The doctor was pressing a needle into my dad’s eye, and my dad didn’t flinch.

MOM

“How did Dad accept the loss of his eye?” I ask my mom. “Did he accept it?”

“Yes, I think so. I don’t know if you remember how he used to throw up constantly and couldn’t walk up and down the steps. We had that sofa bed in the living room and he had to sleep down there all the time. It was like a pressure that built in his eye. He either had to live with it or have the eye taken out. So he said, ‘Let’s have the eye taken out.’”

I remember the hospital felt a long way from home.

I remember we stopped on the way and ate hamburgers in what used to be a bank. Chandeliers hung above us.

“Do you remember the priest in his room, the other patient?” she asks.

“No.”

“The priest told your dad, ‘I don’t know if I could accept that,’ and your dad said, ‘Well, what difference does it make if I

accept it? It’s not going to change it.’ He was very brave about it. Your dad was very brave.”

DAD

Almost every week when I was a child, my parents either walked or drove me to the library, a turreted limestone building. One small room, on the grown-up side, featured a glass floor.

“You won’t fall through,” my parents took turns promising.

My dad would offer me his hand, and I’d tap my foot against the glass and say something like, “Next time.”

But I wanted to walk bravely across the glass. And I want to say his loss of his left eye gave me courage. I knew his surgery meant he was brave, because that’s what his nurses and doctors told me.

But I forget my immediate feelings about conquering the glass floor, about seeing—for the first time—the room’s books about wars, physics, and clouds. I remember, though, waving at my dad from across the room, and returning to him.

MOM

“Degenerative eye disease, maybe?” my mom says on the phone. “Advanced glaucoma? The doctor said it happens to something like one in a million people.”

“What happened exactly?”

“Your dad’s tear ducts were closed and clotted with blood, and the doctors couldn’t get them to drain. I don’t know what you call it.”

“Try to remember.”

“I can’t.”

DAD

Not long after he lost his eye, I lost one of my front teeth. My parents told me to put it underneath my pillow.

For the tooth fairy, they said.

In the morning, instead of my tooth I found a one-hundred-dollar bill. I ran down the steps, two at a time.

“The tooth fairy gave me a hundred dollars!” I shouted.

My parents exchanged looks.

“Wow,” my mom said. “I bet the tooth fairy thought she gave you ten dollars.”

My dad opened his wallet.

“Her mistake,” I said.

MOM

He built me toys and shelves.

“He wanted to prove himself,” my mom says after I call again, asking about his eye. “One morning—this was a few weeks after his surgery—he started building you a dollhouse. I was washing dishes when he came inside with a piece of wood stuck in his stomach. ‘I almost lost my hand,’ he told me. You weren’t there. You were in school.”

“Was it serious?” I ask.

“The wood wasn’t in deep. I helped him pull it out. But it hurt his confidence.”

At our next garage sale, his saw shared a table with clothes I’d outgrown. I was assigning prices with our sticker gun.

“How much for the saw?” I asked him.

The question seemed so inconsequential then.

DAD

I watched a woman paint my dad’s new eye. Spools of red thread, shiny blades, small jars of paint, and brushes thinner than my watercolor brushes were arranged on her long desk.

It was important the new eye look like, rather than be, an exact match, because no one’s eyes match perfectly.

As she painted, she looked at my dad’s real eye, then down at the glass eye, then back at his real eye.

“What do you think?” she asked me when it was finished.

I looked at my dad, then down at his new eye.

MOM

I call my mom again.

“Am I remembering right?” I ask her. “Did I watch someone paint Dad’s new eye?”

“You watched,” my mom says. “And I remember what you said when it was done: ‘It looks real.’”

DAD

“I can’t see out of my left eye,” I told him after he received his glass eye. “Do you think I need a glass eye?”

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“Are you lying?” he asked gently.

“I want to be like you,” I said.

TWO

I’ve written hundreds of pages about my dad: poems, essays, short stories, a novel, several versions of a memoir—all titled *The Glass Eye*.

Here on my writing desk is an anatomical model of the human eye. Lifting off its upper hemisphere reveals painted veins that look like blue and pink branches. The white body inside the eye is mostly transparent, mostly scratched. According to the gold label on the pinewood stand, the eye was crafted by a Chicago company that also manufactured maps and globes. It makes sense; my dad’s eye is my world.

But why does his eye matter?

Only after he died did it obsess me. Describing my dad through the metaphor of his eye comes easy; encapsulating him in plain language feels impossible.

My dad’s eye was plastic, but sometimes I call it glass. Glass implies the ability to be broken.

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What if I write a book about the history of artificial eyes?

What if I write a book that avoids even mentioning the eye?

What if I write the book I want to write, the one about my love for my dad?

What other book is there?

I need to pan out, not focus so much on his eye. I haven't even described the town where we lived. My dad loved Sandusky.

DAD

If you spread out a map of Sandusky, Ohio, you can see that at many intersections you can turn left or slightly left, continue straight, or turn slightly right or right. Twenty-five thousand people live there, but every summer more than three million visit for Cedar Point, the local amusement park. When passing car accidents in town, I often looked at the license plates; they almost always belonged to cars registered elsewhere. A former city manager once told me that some of the streets form the Masonic symbol. I noticed MASON printed on several limestone and sandstone buildings after that. My dad, when he was young, drove a taxi in New York, yet when he first moved into the house where my mom has lived much of her adult life, he often would get lost in town.

MOM

"This one morning," she tells me on the phone, "maybe the same week he moved in, he left the house to pick up milk and came home five hours later. He couldn't remember our address or our phone number."

The house had belonged to her and her first husband, who she married at eighteen.

“Did it bother Dad,” I ask her, “that you’d lived here with someone else?”

“No, but originally we’d planned to move to Arizona, or someplace warm like that, after we married. But then you were born, and he immediately started putting away money for you. It made sense to stay. And he loved this house.”

“What did he love about it?”

“He liked that it was in a quiet neighborhood. Rarely did a car go by. The double garage gave him plenty of room to build things. The yard had enough room for a nice garden, your playhouse, your swing set. If you remember, we’d play badminton in the backyard, the three of us, behind the garage. He loved sitting on the back porch, drinking a glass of scotch, and looking out at all the flowers and shrubs. He wanted to be buried in the backyard.”

•

Whenever my friends called our house tiny, I tried to ignore them. They lived in sparsely furnished houses with pale furniture and tall ceilings and pet gates. No one wore shoes past the front door. Their living rooms were off-limits. Their family rooms looked like their living rooms—only friendlier. Their coffee tables absolutely required coasters. Our coasters sat underneath one side of our furniture. Sometimes we used blocks of wood.

“We have them because our house is crooked,” my mom explained when I asked why no one else kept their coasters there.

We never could hang a picture straight. So as a kid, when I drew landscapes, I started with a crooked horizon.

DAD

“You know there’s a 216 West Boalt?” visitors to our garage sales often told us.

We lived at 216 East Boalt Street. West Boalt and East Boalt never meet, and the sign for West Boalt says only Boalt Street.

“New York has the grid,” I once overheard my dad explain, and I was briefly reminded that he’d lived there; he rarely mentioned it.

“Do you miss it?” I once asked him.

“Not at all,” he answered. “Sandusky is heaven.”

•

“Across from the baseball field and IAB,” we often included in our garage sale listings in the *Sandusky Register*. After the newspaper raised its ad rates, charging by the letter, we shortened our directions to “near IAB.” Most people in town knew that IAB stood for Italian American Beneficial Club.

MOM

“Little Italy my ass,” I heard my mom mumble the night she tore the green Welcome to Little Italy sign out of the ground. I was seven and couldn’t understand why the sign made her so angry. I liked it. The city had placed it right by our driveway, next to the stop sign on the corner where we lived. I ran inside and told my dad what she was doing.

“Go tell her the cops are going to come for her,” he said. “That’s city property.”

I begged my mom to leave the sign alone.

“The police!” I yelled.

“Go back inside or they’ll take you too,” she said.

The next evening, at our kitchen table, I asked my parents why they were so quiet.

“I’m angry at your father,” she said.

“When people are angry,” he explained to me, “they say things they’ll come to regret.”

Shortly after they married, they made a pact that if either of them was angry at the other, they’d say nothing until their anger had cooled. Usually, if my mom was angry, she’d reorganize kitchen drawers and cabinets, and my dad and I knew better than to ask where the forks had gone. If she felt stressed, she’d rearrange our furniture. This time, though, she hadn’t moved the couch or the silverware. This time she’d yanked a heavy metal sign—pole and all—out of the ground.

“What are you angry about?” I asked.

My dad and I looked at her for an answer.

“Do you know?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Well, I don’t remember,” she said.

They laughed, and I laughed, and our uneven house became idyllic again.

DAD

Late summer nights when I was a child, my parents sat on the rusted aluminum glider on our back porch and told stories about their lives. My mom as a girl once put her little “tattletale” sister on a slow-moving train.

“She was sucking her thumb and waving from a train car when a neighbor saw and went running to my mother,” she said, “and did I ever get beat.”

My dad learned how to cut hair when he was a boy by practicing on homeless men—“bums,” he called them, with a fondness in his voice.

“Okay. Time for bed,” they’d say and I’d pretend to go upstairs.

Then I’d sneak back down, hide with my mutt, Gigi, in the pantry, press my ear against the screen door, and listen. That was when they told the good stories: my mom chased her abusive first husband from the house with a butcher knife; my dad was arrested for gambling with his mafia friends when he was seventeen, and his father refused to bail him out of jail. Later, when my dad was out of earshot, I’d ask my mom about his stories.

“Dad told it to me,” I’d lie. “Can you remind me how it goes?”

She said that when he was in junior high, he started sweeping hair at his father’s barbershop. His father told him, “Never open the door to the back room.” So one day my dad pretended he was sweeping hair by the door, and cracked it open—just enough to see in. A man was roped to a chair with his mouth gagged. His hand was in a vise that another man slowly turned. A third man sat in the corner, eating a sandwich. My dad closed the door and returned to sweeping hair.

“What’s a vise?” I asked my mom.

“You know, sort of like the thing your dad has on his workbench, that he uses to hold down wood while he cuts it,” my mom explained. “Only this was something a little different. They ground up the guy’s hand in it.”

Another story I overheard and that my mom later confirmed: after my dad caught his first wife in bed with her cousin's husband, his friends offered to throw her off a roof. "We'll frame it as a suicide," they told him. My dad refused: "I can't. That's the mother of my children." I remember thinking: *My dad is an upstanding man. I didn't think: Of course you shouldn't throw your adulterous spouse off a roof.*

MOM

Just as I did when I was a child, I ask my mom for more stories about my dad.

"He painted warships in Brooklyn during World War II," she reminds me, "and developed throat cancer from the asbestos the navy used."

Before I was born, doctors removed his left vocal cord to prevent the cancer from spreading. I wish I had a recording of his voice. I remember standing in a hard hat and tool belt, watching my dad sand a piece of wood. He said something to me, and his voice disappeared into the sound of sandpaper.

"He knew how scratchy his voice sounded," my mom says. "He was careful not to raise his voice, especially around you—he was afraid of scaring you. Then he was afraid of the eye falling out and scaring you. Poor guy."

This reminds her of a story.

"One evening we were eating spaghetti at the kitchen table and his eye fell out and rolled across the table. 'Dad, your eye popped out,' you told him and kept on eating," my mom says. "You were just a kid. It didn't faze you."

"I don't really remember that," I say.

"I do. He felt so awful about it. I told him, 'She loves you. She doesn't care.'"

DAD

At Cedar Point, my dad went on the rides with me—even the one where we raced in separate potato sacks down a giant sloping slide. Sometimes people pointed and laughed. "Look at that old man," they'd say. For the fast rides and the tall ones, my mom usually waited at the bottom. After the Blue Streak, the park's oldest roller coaster, he was covering his left eye with his hand.

"Is it still there?" he asked my mom.

"It's there," she said, and they both laughed.

•

But more than the amusement park, the Erie County Landfill was my favorite place when I was a kid.

"The dump, the dump, the dump," I'd say as I buckled myself into the car.

Because my parents' friends knew how much I loved the landfill, and even though each resident was allotted only so many free trips there, they gave us some of their free tickets. I loved seeing what people threw away. I remember wondering if the trash looked as beautiful to my dad as it did to me.

"Well she's not too hard to please," he told my mom.

•

And I loved seeing my dad unwrap the presents I gave him. One Christmas, I made him a wooden plaque out of scrap wood I found in the garage. I wrote in marker: “Best Dad,” or something like that. I put it inside an old power-tool box and wrapped it. After unwrapping it and seeing the power-tool box, he said, “You shouldn’t have.”

I worried he’d be disappointed when he found the wooden plaque instead of a power tool. I shyly told him to look inside the box. He did, and he started to cry.

“Now this is amazing,” he said.

When he died, the plaque was still hanging above his workstation in the garage. I can’t look at what I made him. At some point, it may end up in the garbage, at the landfill—where he and I shook our heads at what people threw away.

•

Our garage was my dad’s magician’s hat. My mom helped him carry out new, amazing objects: bookshelves taller than them, rose arches, birdhouses with as many as eight different entrances, dollhouses shaped like our house. Too enormous to fit through our back door, my favorite dollhouse required him to remove the door from its hinges. In summer months, the dollhouse stayed outside. One day he mounted it on wheels.

A “mobile home,” he called it.

The roof, made of real asphalt like ours, lifted off to reveal an attic. He added screens and shutters to all the windows. He wallpapered each room. He used free samples of linoleum and

carpet from a local flooring store; the saleswoman assumed we were redecorating our house. He even made a staircase and cut a hole in the second floor.

“I don’t want to make your dolls have to fly from floor to floor,” he said.

Before our garage sales, I parked the dollhouse out of view, usually on our back porch. At one sale, however, a woman noticed the dollhouse from our driveway. I was walking around with my sticker gun, lowering prices, when I saw her playing with the blue shutters. I ran over.

“This for sale?” she asked.

“No,” I told her. “My dad made it.”

She removed a pen and checkbook from her purse and offered me \$1,000.

“It’s not for sale,” I said.

“Where’s your dad?”

I pointed at him.

“That old man in the eye patch?”

“He made it,” I said, “and with only one eye.”

She stooped and patted me on the shoulder.

“You’re very lucky,” she said and walked away.

My dad came over and asked what she had wanted. I told him.

“Go get her! I’ll make you a new one.”

But she’d already left.

•

He built a one-room house for me in the backyard; he fenced in a private yard behind it and taught me how to manage my own

garden. I had my own mailbox where my dad regularly delivered letters that he and my mom had written. He made a cement walkway leading to our back porch and before the cement dried we wrote “Dad and Jeannie,” drew a heart. We left our handprints.

•

He made our red picket fence out of scrap wood from a lumberyard where on its opening day I rode a pony and won a goldfish.

•

Passersby slowed down their cars and pointed at our yard. Finches always seemed to be splashing in our birdbaths, and strange colorful flowers appeared unexpectedly.

“Did you plant that?” my parents asked one another.

The answer was often no.

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One afternoon, I was in the driveway, practicing how to ride a bike.

“Don’t go too close to the street,” my dad told me.

I was bad at braking, and he’d run and catch up with me. Mostly, though, my dad kept pace, but when he spotted a sports car speeding toward our corner with no clear intention of obeying the stop sign, he shouted and ran toward the car. The driver slammed his brakes. I was in the middle of the driveway. I jumped off my bike, chased after my dad, and watched as he

reached one hand through the driver’s open window and said, “You’d be worth going to prison for.” He pointed at me, and then at the stop sign. That evening, he began building a long lattice fence to stretch across our driveway. A few days later, he mounted the fence on wheels. He demonstrated how it worked. My mom and I clapped.

Now, when I think of the fence, I think of Jeanne.

THREE

In the Memory Game you're expected to find two matching cards. My dad's left eye and his right didn't perfectly match. The *i* and the eye don't perfectly match, but they sound the same. Jeanne and Jeannie sound the same, but we don't perfectly match. I could write this story chronologically and divide it into three parts titled "eye," "i," and "I."

But I worry that I lose authority as a storyteller if I recall memories from age four. I could preface some of those memories with "I remember." Or, in memoir, is such subjectivity implied? Like "I see" and "I hear," "I remember" is almost always an unnecessary filter. Maybe I can preface the more detailed memories with "I remember"—a defense against any reader who thinks, *There's no way she remembers playing the Memory Game when she was four, or It couldn't have been the Memory Game—it's so symbolic. It feels forced.*

Do I need to be more selective with direct dialogue, or introduce hindsight perspective, or lean on my mom's memories? I'll keep

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some of her in the present tense. I'll show how I often ask her questions, such as: "Did it happen this way?" "What was his illness called?" "Did Dad accept the loss of his eye?" But if I excerpt conversations with her that concern only him, then it looks like I care less about her life stories.

I'll write another book after this, a book for her.

JEANNE

Not once did my dad say Jeanne's name in my eighteen years with him. My mom did when I was eight.

I was dancing in my bedroom with an unlit candle when she called me downstairs. My teacher, Sister Paulina, had asked three second-grade girls to lead our First Communion ceremony with a dance. The dance required me to hold a candle above my head, and I was terrified of setting the church on fire. I practiced at home almost every day for a month.

When I walked into the living room, my dad was in his chair, holding a small white box. As my mom explained that he had a dead daughter named Jeanne (pronounced the same as my name) "without an *i*," he opened the box and looked away. Inside was a medal Jeanne had received from a church "for being a good person," my mom said. My dad said nothing. I said nothing. I stared at the medal.

Later that day, in the basement, my mom told me Jeanne had died in a car accident when she was sixteen. I sat on the steps as my mom folded clothes and confided what she knew.

Two other girls were in the car. The car could seat three people in front. Jeanne sat between the driver and the other passenger. The driver tried to pass a car, then hesitated and tried to pull

back into her lane. She lost control and the car crashed. Jeanne was the only one who died.

“Your father blames himself,” my mom said. “He can’t talk about it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“He gave her permission to go out that night.”

Jeanne had asked him if she could see a movie with her friends. He asked what her mother had said. “She said to ask you.” He said it was fine, she could see the movie. He had no idea his first wife had already said no. He and his first wife weren’t speaking.

“Did you know his first wife?” I asked.

“No, he was divorced long before I met him. All this happened in New York.”

It happened near Newburgh, where he and his first family had lived. I knew only Ohio. In my mind all of New York was made of skyscrapers, taxicabs, and car accidents.

“What did Jeanne look like?”

My mom said she’d never seen a photo.

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I painted portraits of Jeanne in watercolor. I titled them *Jeanne*. My art teacher told me she was disappointed that “such a good student could misspell her name.” From then on, I included an *i*.

•

“I wanted to tell you about Jeanne before that,” my mom says, after I ask why she told me when she did. “But your dad, he worried

that you’d misinterpret his intentions. I told him, ‘She’s going to find out someday. Don’t you think it’s better she hear it from us?’”

“Did Dad have any photos of Jeanne?”

“No. He told me his ex-wife wouldn’t let him have any. But for some reason, she gave him the medal.”

•

Throughout my baby scrapbook, I’m referred to as “Barbara Jean,” “Jean,” “Jeanie,” and “Jeannie.” In one letter, my dad calls me “My Darling Daughter Barbara Jean.” In a letter to my mom, he calls me “Jeanie” and “Jeannie.” My parents had planned to name me Jeanne.

“That or Jean Marie, actually,” my mom says. “Her given name was Jean Marie. She went by Jeanne. Your father simply saw the name as a sign of respect. He even spoke with a priest about our naming you after her, and the priest encouraged him to do so, provided he never compare you. ‘I would never do that,’ your father said.”

But while my mom was asleep after having just given birth, he named me Barbara Jean, after my mom. When he told her what he’d done, she said, “That’s no name for a baby.” She thought Barbara was too old-fashioned. That, and two Barbaras in one house would be confusing.

“When I told him I wasn’t calling you Barbara, he got this sad look on his face. He meant to do something sweet,” she says. “He always had good intentions.”

Legally my name remained Barbara Jean, but my parents called me Jeannie. My dad added the *i*.

“Just said he was adding an *z*,” my mom says. “He never explained it.”

•

I remember the spring day that I stood alone in the corner of the school playground, thinking about Jeanne. Cars passed by with their windows open. I often wondered if my dad thought about Jeanne every time he drove our car. A classmate, another second-grade girl, asked what I was doing.

“My half sister died,” I told her.

“I have a stepsister.”

I tried to explain the difference between a half sibling and a stepsibling.

“We share the same dad,” I said.

“I didn’t know you had a half sister.”

“Four of them,” I said, or maybe I said “three.” I didn’t know if Jeanne counted, or if she counted more because she was dead.

•

I have no clear memory of learning about Jeanne’s sisters—Carol, Arlene, and Debbie—but I know my parents told me about them before I learned about Jeanne. Arlene is the only one I knew throughout my childhood. She lived in New York. She visited us four times in Ohio—five, if you count when our dad was dying.

“Arlene is beautiful,” I told my mom after Arlene’s first visit.

Arlene’s dark brown eyes matched her hair. Thick and wavy, it fell just past her shoulders. Later I’d show photographs of Arlene

to boys I liked; I wanted them to think that I’d be beautiful someday, like her.

“She was a model once,” my mom said. “I think she modeled wedding dresses for a catalogue.”

Arlene often called, wrote letters. She mailed me unusual presents: hangers with illustrated wooden cat heads, vials of sand from Jerusalem, a pair of earrings that looked like pale orange pearls. She even trained her cockatiel to say “Happy birthday, Jeannie.” She sent a video of it. I wrote thank-you letters; they went through several drafts. I wanted my cursive to look perfect.

Carol and Debbie I’d never seen, not even in photographs. Debbie was a hairdresser in New York, and Carol owned a candy shop in Rhode Island. Carol, the oldest, was my mom’s age. Beyond that, I knew nothing.

Once, while my dad was on the downstairs rotary, I listened through the upstairs rotary. I was in the second grade and often eavesdropped. I could hear one of his daughters—not Arlene, I’d have recognized her voice—yelling. My dad mentioned me, and she yelled more. I quietly set the phone on my bedroom carpet. I could still hear her. When no more sound came from the receiver, I looked through the grate in my bedroom floor. My dad was at the dining room table, his head in his hands.

“They were mad your father had his first marriage annulled,” my mom explains. “It was after your First Communion. You asked him why he couldn’t take Communion with you. He said it was because he was divorced. It’s a man-made rule—that you can’t take Communion if you’ve been divorced. If you annul the marriage, the church basically says the marriage never existed.

His daughters took it personally. He didn't mean anything against them. He wasn't disowning them. He did it for you."

•

Jeanne would come between me and almost everything I did. I studied harder. I researched the lives of the saints and how I might model their behavior. I sat before my bedroom mirror with a notebook and documented my appearance and what exactly I needed to fix. I needed to be a smart, kind, beautiful daughter.

I tried not to hear her name when he said my own.

•

I followed my parents to their graves. Rain made it difficult to find our way.

"Where do I walk?" I asked, afraid of disrespecting the dead.

My mom told me to follow her. We passed a smaller fenced-in area where fresh flowers and toys were at almost every grave.

"The children's cemetery," she explained.

My dad stood farther ahead of us, underneath a tree. He motioned us toward him.

I looked down at two headstones printed with my parents' names and birth years: "Terry J Vanasco, 1922," and "Barbara J Vanasco, 1942."

"Where do I go?" I asked.

"You might have a husband someday," my mom said. "You'll want to be buried next to him."

"But I want to be with you and Dad."

•

I call my mom, ask if she remembers that day in the cemetery.

"We took you to see the graves?"

"That's what I remember," I say.

DAD

After Jeanne died, my dad bought burial plots for himself and his wife next to the plot for Jeanne. When he and his first wife divorced, she demanded that he forfeit his plot because she didn't want him buried next to their daughter. He agreed. Soon after the divorce, he went to court again, this time for beating up "a bum" on the street.

"Why should you be alive?" my dad asked him. "You're not working and my daughter's dead."

The judge remembered my dad and let him go.

My dad's sister Anna told all this to my mom, who at some point shared it with me. I don't know if I learned this story before or after seeing my parents' headstones, but the two stories juxtaposed together make sense, writing-wise. Still, I call my mom, ask if she remembers when she told me about my dad losing his burial plot.

"I don't," she says, "but did I ever tell you: when I went with your dad to his father's funeral—this was a couple years before you were born—the funeral director told me about your dad losing his cemetery plot. The director said, 'In all the years I've worked here, I've never heard of anything like it—denying a man burial next to his daughter.' Your dad's ex-wife eventually

did offer him the plot—this was when you were a little girl—but your dad refused it. He said, ‘I have a family here.’”

MOM

It was my parents’ twelfth wedding anniversary. I was ten. A snowstorm swept through Sandusky. We had plans to celebrate at home that night. We were in our car leaving the grocery parking lot when my mom abruptly told him to stop the car.

She left it, slammed her door, and opened mine.

“We’re walking home,” she told me.

My dad looked back at me.

“Come on,” she said. “I’m teaching you a lesson.”

“What did I do?” I asked.

“I’m teaching you you don’t need a man.”

I told her there was a snowstorm. It was too cold to walk home. Our house felt far away.

“Stay with him if you want,” she said and began to leave us.

I apologized to my dad and ran after her.

My dad slowly followed in the car with the front passenger window down.

“It’s a blizzard,” he said.

She ignored him.

I asked her why she was angry, and she ignored me.

He pleaded for us to get in the car. Home was at least two miles away.

She yelled at him to leave us alone. He looked at me, and I looked down at my boots. When I looked up, our car was disappearing into the falling snow.

“What if he dies in a car accident?” I asked.

“He’ll be fine.”

“But there’s ice.”

“He won’t die.”

I watched my breath chill before me and disappear.

We walked in silence along the shoulder of Milan Road. When I looked behind us, snow had already covered our tracks. Snow plows rumbled by. A few cars came and went. A man offered us a ride and my mom waved him off.

“We’re almost home,” she lied.

The man drove away.

“Your father doesn’t trust me,” she said.

The friendly man who worked in checkout at the grocery store, my dad thought was too friendly, she explained.

My dad often told us to wait in the car while he checked out. I always thought he was being a gentleman, bringing the groceries to us.

“Your father doesn’t trust anyone,” she said.

“What about me?”

“You’re different.”

•

When we reached our house, he was at the kitchen table, his head in his hands.

“Dad,” I said.

I yanked off my boots and ran to him.

My mom walked past us and into the basement. He followed her, and I went into the bathroom and lifted the door to the laundry chute. I heard my dad apologize.

That evening at dinner, they smiled at one another and held hands.

•

“Sometimes he drove me nuts with his possessiveness,” my mom says when I ask about the snowstorm. “His father was the same way, apparently. Your dad’s mother would go to the grocery store, and your dad’s father would time her. Your dad thought it was horrible, but then he went and did the same sort of thing to me.” She pauses. “After you left for college, your dad and I were on the back porch—and he asked if I regretted our marriage. ‘Of course not,’ I told him. ‘Why would you ask me that?’ He said he knew how unreasonable he’d been. He said he was sorry. He said he was afraid of losing me. Your dad would have been happy, just the three of us, in a cabin out in the woods. He said you and I were all he needed.”

FOUR

I open a cardboard box packed with my journals and medical records. The journals contain a mess of fragments and diagrams and outlines. On one page is a circle of arrows, and inside the circle is a handwritten sentence in tiny script: “I can’t write.” Strips of paper are glued or stapled to some pages. On each strip is a typed sentence from past writing projects.

One strip reads: “A strip of Italian widows.” A blue arrow points to some notes in the right margin: “strip of paper/strip of street” and “East Boalt/I bolted East.” After my dad died, only Italian widows lived on East Boalt Street. On that same page, I drew my childhood home and wrote “Metaphor” on all the windows. I cut an opening where the front door would be. Behind the door, stapled on the next page, is a letter, which I photocopied, from my dad to my mom:

Sweetheart,

Would you believe I asked our daughter if she would make me an Easter card for you, because I didn't feel well enough

JEANNIE VANASCO

to go out to buy you one. Her reply was "Don't worry Dad. I'll make one for you." So that was why we were very secretive when you walked in the room and I was spelling her the word WIFE. She sure is something for just a little 6 yr. old. She's more like 16 yrs. PS: I think we should have Jeannie make all our holiday and birthday cards and the money can be put away for her education.

Your Ever Loving Husband

The only part visible through the door: "Don't worry Dad."

Some of my sentences are crossed out, but I don't know why: "~~We lived a few blocks away from the railroad tracks. At night, train whistles lulled me to sleep.~~" On the next page, I sketched our staircase and wrote memories climbing across and up its steps. Underneath the staircase I wrote "I can't sleep I can't sleep I can't sleep."

How can I capture mania on the page and still make sense?

And forget the medical records. I lied to my doctors so many times I can't trust those.

MENTAL ILLNESS

I remember standing on the top of our stairway when I was eleven, or maybe twelve, and hearing an unfamiliar voice. It said *Jeannie*, or maybe *Jeanne*. My mind filled with loud, hurried thoughts, and just as suddenly emptied, like a flock of birds scattering from a field. I looked at my portraits framed on the wall, the chronology of my childhood. The farther down I looked, the younger I became.

I called out for my mom. She appeared at the bottom of the steps, holding a rag.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I asked if she had called my name, and she said no. She was cleaning the kitchen floor.

"Where's Dad?"

He was in the garage, building a birdhouse, she said.

"What's wrong?" she repeated.

Had the voice called for me, or for my dead half sister?

"Nothing," I answered.

MOM

I call my mom just to chat, and she mentions she's reading a book about feng shui.