

One life. Lived twice.

Louis  
&  
Louise

Julie Cohen

Orlando had become a woman – there was no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn't. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: it's not there.

—Naomi Alderman, *The Power*

## Daddy's Girl

1978

Louise Dawn Alder was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1978 to Peggy and Irving Alder of Casablanca, Maine.

Peggy was two weeks past her due date and it was hot. August had refused to give way to autumn; the leaves hadn't started to turn yet and the grass was sere and yellow. Peggy lumbered around their house, sweating through her pregnancy smock, drinking glass after glass of lemon iced tea, catching her belly on the corners of furniture and the edges of doorways.

'I want it over with,' she moaned on the telephone to her best friend, Mary Phelps, who had given birth to fraternal twins six months earlier.

'You don't,' Mary said. In the background, there was crying, either from Allie or Benny. 'Keep that baby inside you for as long as you can. At least when they're not born yet you can *sleep*.'

But Peggy couldn't sleep. She was up every hour or so to pee and when she lay in bed, Irving breathing deeply beside her, she was too hot and her tired mind wouldn't stop racing. Did they have the crib set up correctly? What if she

was a terrible mother? Had she packed the right things in her overnight bag?

What if there something wrong with the baby?

‘I don’t even care if it hurts,’ she told Mary.

‘You will care,’ Mary promised her. ‘Ask for all the drugs.’

Peggy knew that one of Mary’s greatest regrets about the whole childbirth experience was that she’d given birth too quickly to Benny to be able to have any drugs, and although Allie wasn’t born for another hour, the doctor had thought Mary had done so well with the first baby that she didn’t need them for the second.

‘I’m worried,’ she whispered, though Irving was at work and there was no one else around to hear her. She wound the phone cord around her fingers, tight.

‘What if it hasn’t been born yet because there’s something wrong?’

‘Is it kicking you? —Oh, Allie, *enough*, you’re sucking me dry, leave some for your brother.’

‘Yes.’ Though how long since the last kick? It had become so normal, being battered from the inside, that Peggy barely noticed any more unless a small foot hooked behind a rib or something and made her gasp with pain. She put her hand on her swollen belly and felt a thump in return.

‘Just did,’ she said with relief.

‘Well, then you’re fine. I bet you anything it’s a girl.’

‘I think it’s a boy.’

‘Nuh-uh. Boys do what they’re supposed to. Look at little Benny, good as gold, while his sister’s got colic, diaper rash, can’t stop eating – it’s your brother’s turn, you little piggy.’

Peggy listened to this with more than a little comfort. Alongside all those

fears she never expressed during the night there was one that didn't even make sense: What if after she had a baby, she wasn't herself any more? As if giving birth would rid her of her own personality, as if suckling an infant would dry up her thoughts and emotions.

But Mary had always been just like this. Sarcastic, tough, with a well of caring underneath. Having twins had made her even more like herself, not less.

'I keep thinking that Irving should have got the car serviced early, because months ago he made an appointment at the garage tomorrow, thinking that the baby would be born by then, but it hasn't been born, and what if it comes while the car is in the garage? How will I get to the hospital?'

'I'll drive you,' said Mary, so promptly she couldn't have even thought it over.

'But you've got Benny and Allie.'

'They fit in a car. Besides, Donnie needs to learn how to look after them sometime, he's their father and he doesn't do a damn thing. Do you know how many diapers he's changed in the six months of their life? Exactly none. Meanwhile, I'm elbow deep in baby shit every day. I dream about it, when I finally get the chance to sleep. And when I'm not dreaming about baby shit, I'm dreaming about a martini. Beefeater and vermouth, on ice, with a twist. You remember how we used to make those?'

Over the line, Peggy heard a lighter flick and Mary drag deep on her cigarette. She remembered the martinis the summer before last at Mary's bridal shower up at Morocco Pond, the two of them making sophisticated drinks and trying to blow smoke rings. Adults, acting self-consciously as adults, in this place where they'd been children.

And now Mary was a mother and Peggy was about to be. Peggy thought about ice-cold gin and lemon oil, lying on the beach in their bikinis, a glass of condensation resting on her flat stomach, cooling the skin, both of them a little breathless thinking about getting married, having their own houses and husbands. It had all seemed impossibly glamorous then.

She wasn't sure she was ready to be a grown-up, now.

She got up from the kitchen chair with a grunt and walked to the window, tweeking aside the flowered cotton curtains she'd sewed herself soon after they'd bought the house. Or, rather, after Irving's parents had bought it for them. They had a big back yard which Irving kept mown and weed-free. He'd already pointed out the space where he wanted to put up a swing set.

This would be the first grandchild in the family. Irving's parents, Vi and David, had always been distant to Peggy when she was dating Irving – they thought their son was too good for her – but as soon as they were married and she and Irving had announced her pregnancy, they were as attentive as anyone could hope for.

Irving was delighted about being a father. He'd flung himself into the idea wholeheartedly, could barely keep his hands off her belly, seemed to find her more attractive than ever before. 'I love you pregnant,' he kept on whispering. 'I want you to be pregnant all the time.'

But Peggy didn't particularly like being pregnant. For the first three months she'd vomited constantly, and then her skin had erupted into acne, and her boobs hurt, and then she'd gotten so much bigger, and the weather had become so hot. What if she decided she didn't want any more children after this? Would Irving still love her? Would he even be attracted to her any more, after

this one was born?

They'd got married because she was pregnant. They'd planned to marry anyway, of course, but her pregnancy had made it so that Irving couldn't change his mind. She hadn't done it deliberately...but. They'd eloped to Portland to get married in the city, and had a two-day cold April honeymoon on the coast. Not exactly the huge Catholic wedding that Peggy's mother had expected, or the huge society wedding that Vi Alder had expected.

'Mary,' she began, hesitantly, not even really sure what she was about to ask, only that Mary was the only person she could talk to, the only one who didn't pretend that motherhood was all a perfect walk in the park. 'Do you ever wish—'

She felt something warm gush down her leg, as if she'd wet herself. When Peggy looked down, there was liquid on the linoleum floor.

'Wish what?' asked Mary on the other end.

'I think my waters just broke.'

A small near-silence of cigarette crackle and indrawn breath, as Peggy clutched the phone in both hands, staring down at the growing puddle. For the moment, she had completely forgotten what she was supposed to do, how she was supposed to put down the phone and call Irving at the paper mill so he could come get her and drive her to the hospital.

'I was wrong,' said Mary, at last. 'It's not a girl, it's a boy. Only a male would interrupt a conversation right when it was getting interesting.'

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By hour nineteen of labour, Peggy didn't care about whether she was going to be a good mother or not. The obstetrician had refused to give her an epidural because he said it would stop her contractions, and the gas and air only made her

feel sick.

She was flat on her back on a table, feet in stirrups, clenching her hands and her teeth, hair soaked with sweat, riding the worst contraction yet. For the first few hours she'd experienced a strange elation despite the pain of the contractions and the boredom of waiting for something to actually happen. She walked the corridors of the maternity ward, hearing the cries of other babies and of other mothers. Irving was allowed to walk with her, holding her hand.

As the contractions got worse, she was removed to a private room and Irving was banished to the waiting room to drink coffee and pace. By then, things had started to really hurt and she was glad he was gone. He'd been hovering, trying to make sure she was all right, and it was exhausting trying to pretend for his sake that she wasn't tired and frightened and in pain. At this point she wanted it to be over with, and then she wanted to curl up in a bed under cool sheets and sleep and sleep and sleep, until someone woke her up and presented her with a clean beautiful baby wrapped in a pure-white blanket.

Now, though, Peggy wasn't thinking about getting it over with. The future had ceased to exist. She, Peggy Grenier Alder, once Miss Western Maine, had ceased to exist. She was nothing but a body that was splitting apart in a world of pain and stink and pushing. The words of the obstetrician and nurse were no more than buzzing sounds in her ears. She could be in a medieval hut, with her ankles tied to a torture rack, instead of a high-tech hospital with her feet in metal stirrups.

'It's coming, there's the head!' said the nurse in an excited voice, and Peggy thought *Thank Christ*, and then she thought nothing because she was in a white and red space, eyes closed, pushing.

'Nearly finished now,' said the obstetrician, who had only turned up for the exciting part. 'Here's your baby. One more push, that's a good girl.'

'I can't,' groaned Peggy, but she gripped the nurse's hand and she pushed anyway, and felt a slipping-away, something being taken from her, and her eyes flew open.

'It's a girl,' said the obstetrician.

'Could've told you that,' said the nurse. 'Made you wait for two weeks like a princess, didn't she?'

'Always late for everything,' said the obstetrician, 'just like my wife.'

The baby started to cry.

'You'll have to watch out for this one,' said the nurse, taking the baby as Peggy watched with hungry eyes. 'She's going to run rings around you.'

'She'll wrap her daddy round her little finger,' said the doctor, who'd already diverted his attention to delivering the placenta.

Peggy held out her hands for her daughter and she was placed into her arms, and despite all the fear and pain and sweat, this was a moment that she would remember for the rest of her life. This tiny curled red creature, with slits for eyes and claws for hands, a comma of humanity. Her daughter.

In that moment she had never loved anything or anyone so much. This was a piece of her, another girl like her, who one day would open her arms, tired and sweaty, to welcome her own child.

She barely noticed as the obstetrician left and as the nurse tidied up. She was too busy gazing at this little thing. Ten fingernails, each paper-thin. Eyes complete with eyelashes. They'd decided to call the baby Dawn, if it was a girl, because it was the start of their new life. But at that moment Peggy wasn't

thinking of a name at all. She was thinking: *I made this. This little person.*

But then the nurse said, 'I'll go and get Daddy,' and Peggy snapped to attention.

'Not yet,' she said. 'I can't let him see me like this, I'm a wreck.'

'Believe me, he's only going to have eyes for Daddy's girl.'

'Can you give me my makeup bag from my overnight case? And my hairbrush?'

The nurse (frizzy hair in a bun, no makeup, broken veins on her cheeks – Peggy hadn't been able to notice before, but she did now) rolled her eyes. She rummaged through the bag, extracted Peggy's flowered makeup case and a pink hairbrush, and held them out to Peggy, who had her hands full with the baby. The nurse, who'd clearly seen it all before, took the baby and put her into the bassinet by the side of the bed while Peggy opened her compact mirror and saw what a sight she looked. *You'll never get a man looking like that*, her mother's voice said in her ear.

Fortunately, nearly a year of waking before Irving did every morning and doing her makeup in a dimly-lit bathroom meant that she was skilled in making the best of what she had. There wasn't much that could be done to her hair, but she brushed out the tangles and smoothed it back away from her face, and then quickly applied powder and blush to her face and a few careful swipes of mascara. Pink lipstick, and she was a blushing new mommy, like in the pages of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Or close enough, maybe, to pass.

'Okay,' she said. She pulled the sheet up over her lower half. Her stomach was barely any smaller than it had been yesterday, but maybe Irving wouldn't notice that part.

She took the baby back. She'd held Mary's twins before but her own baby felt different. When Irving came into the room, she smiled up at him. A modern Madonna and child.

He didn't even look at her. His eyes were fixed immediately on the baby. He crossed the room quickly and stood gazing down at the child.

Suddenly, Peggy saw the baby as an outsider would. Wrinkles at the wrists, nose a stub, sparse hair slicked to its head, a curled-up pink little thing. It was ugly, her daughter was ugly, and Peggy was ugly, this girl-child had sucked all the prettiness out of her, had sucked out everything, and in that moment Peggy was sure that Irving was going to walk out of the room in disgust and never come back.

'She's beautiful,' Irving said.

And just like that, with a marvellous cool rush of relief, Peggy saw he was right. The baby was beautiful. All babies looked like that: squished and red. She hadn't done anything wrong.

'She looks like you,' said Irving.

'Do you think so?' asked Peggy doubtfully. 'I don't think she really looks like me. She looks more like you.'

'Maybe a little.'

Irving reached down to take the baby, and Peggy handed her over, feeling as if she was bestowing some great gift. As soon as the baby was in her father's arms, she squirmed, squinted, and wrinkled her soft forehead, and Peggy saw who she looked like.

'The painting,' she said. And it was true: in that moment, their daughter, who was less than an hour old, looked exactly like the portrait of Louis Alder,

Irving's illustrious great-great-grandfather – founder of the Casablanca Paper Company – which hung at the top of the stairs in Irving's parents' house.

Irving burst into laughter, which made the baby widen her eyes. 'Louis! Yes, she looks like Louis Alder. Poor thing.' He held his daughter up to his face, nose touching. 'My little Lou.'

The baby made a little squeaking sound.

'She knows her Daddy,' said Peggy.

'Daddy's girl,' he said, tucking the baby into the crook of his arm and rocking her. He looked as if he'd been born to this – unlike Peggy, who'd felt happy but also decidedly awkward with her baby in her arms.

'We could name her Lou,' Peggy said.

'Lou's not a girl's name.'

'Louise is.'

'We were going to call her Dawn if she was a girl.'

'Louise Dawn.'

Irving glanced up at Peggy from the baby, and his face was full of wonder. 'It would make Dad happy, I suppose.'

Peggy heard what he wasn't saying, maybe what had never even occurred to him to say. She heard *My parents have never liked you and they're going to be upset that you gave birth to a girl who can't carry on the Alder name.* She heard Vi Alder saying, after they came back from their elopment, practically through gritted teeth, *Welcome to the family.* She heard her own mother saying, *You should get this one to marry you, because you'll never get a chance like Irving Alder again. He may not be rich now, but he will be.*

'Louise Dawn,' Peggy said. 'Definitely.'

## **Mummy's Boy**

**1978**

'Hey Irv, that baby born yet?'

Irving paused on his way across the lunch room. Donnie Phelps, Mike Beaulieu, Ed Venskis and Brian Theriault were all sitting at the same table, sandwich wrappers and cans of Coke strewn on the surface. For a moment he was back at Casablanca High School, a skinny teenage bookworm confronted by a table full of jocks. Donnie, Mike and Brian had all been in the same class as him; Ed was two years older. There was a time when he would have scuttled by them, head down, hoping that they wouldn't notice him.

Now, of course, things were different. He stopped and smiled. 'Not yet,' he said to Donnie. 'Peggy is just about going crazy.'

'When was it supposed to be born?' asked Ed. Like the other three, he wore a plaid flannel shirt over a t-shirt, even though it had to be eighty degrees outside. The four of them all wore baseball hats: Mike and Donnie had Red Sox hats, Brian wore a Casablanca Paper Company hat with the CPC green pine tree logo on front, and Ed had a novelty hat that said ASK ME IF I GIVE A SHIT.

Offensive logos were against company rules, technically, but no one seemed to follow that rule. Irving looked at Ed's chin instead of his hat and said, 'Two weeks ago. She's really feeling the heat.'

'You've gotta be climbing the walls waiting, eh,' said Brian. 'Nat was a week late having BJ and I almost moved out, she was so grouchy. Had to sleep on the couch.'

'You still sleep on the couch,' said Mike, elbowing him. 'Nat don't like your snoring.'

'Your wife don't mind it.'

Irving stood awkwardly by, half a smile on his face. He wasn't these men's boss; he wasn't anyone's boss, not yet anyway, although some people treated him as if he were, and in any case they worked on the machines and he was in Engineering. But he wasn't their colleague, either. Donnie's wife, Mary, was Peggy's best friend so he saw Donnie outside of work pretty regularly: barbecues, days at Morocco Pond, and once, when they moved into their house, an ill-conceived dinner party where Peggy burned the pot roast and Mary drank too much wine. On all of those occasions, the girls chattered like they always had since age five, and Irving stood awkwardly next to Donnie, each holding a can of Budweiser, and tried to think of something to say. Once they'd exhausted the topic of the Red Sox or the Patriots or the Celtics or the Bruins, they didn't have much else to cover. They'd never talked at school, so they didn't have any reminiscences to fall back on. They didn't even know the same people at work. Usually Donnie would put on the TV.

How much easier it would be if they didn't have to pretend to like each other for the girls' sake. If Irving could say 'I know our wives like each other but

you once stood by while your friend Duane Roy beat the shit out of me for wearing glasses, and I haven't forgotten that, even if you have.'

But that wouldn't wash with Peggy. Peggy wanted everyone to get along and be friends. So for Peggy's sake, he read the sports pages before the get-togethers so he'd have something to say.

At least Donnie had never actively picked on Irving at school. He'd never cared. If Donnie had felt anything, it was annoyance that he had to wait to go to football practice so that his friend could teach a nerd a lesson.

But now they would have something in common. They'd both be dads. Their kids would play with each other as they grew up. Irving liked Donnie's twins, Allison and Benedict; although he couldn't think of anything to say to their father, he could spend hours happily chattering nonsense to the babies.

Donnie seemed mostly to ignore his kids, though, so maybe they wouldn't be swapping stories of first words and teething.

The plastic box with the lunch he'd packed this morning was greasy in his fingers. Donnie and co. didn't seem to bring their lunch in plastic boxes; from the detritus on the table it was all paper bags and Saran wrap. Irving's father had always come home at noon for a proper cooked lunch, and still did. 'I don't understand why Peggy doesn't cook for you,' Irving's mother said all the time, and Irving always said, 'Oh, I don't mind a sandwich. I usually work through lunch anyway.'

He wished he'd worked through lunch today, too. It was much less awkward eating lunch in between calculations, typing with one hand while he held a sandwich in the other. Standing in front of these guys, he might as well be holding the Howdy Doody lunch pail that he'd carried in fifth grade.

‘Anyway,’ he said, because it seemed rude to walk away, ‘the baby will come sooner or later, no matter what.’

‘Sit down,’ said Donnie, jerking his head to a spare seat. ‘You’re making me nervous, standing there.’

Irving sat.

‘You know the best way to get those babies out,’ said Brian. ‘Do what got ‘em in there in the first place.’

‘Worked with Mary,’ said Donnie. He took a bite of ham sandwich on white bread and spoke as he chewed. ‘Might be why they came out three weeks early.’

Irving felt himself blushing. ‘Well, I—’

‘With Peggy it’s no hardship, huh,’ Mike said. ‘I remember when she was a beauty queen. You got lucky there, man. Never would’ve saw that coming.’

He flushed harder, with anger this time, but they were all smiling and it was all done in the spirit of camaraderie, right? They weren’t in high school any more, and he wasn’t the skinny little nerd with the Howdy Doody lunchbox any more, either. He had a degree in electrical engineering, a wife, and a kid on the way. These guys were just shooting the shit. They were co-workers, husbands and fathers, and they’d known each other all their lives. If he couldn’t take a little teasing...

‘Anyway,’ Irving said, ‘I’ve waited my whole life to become a dad, I guess I can wait a little longer.’

They all laughed, and he almost flinched.

They’re not laughing at you, he told himself. Why would they?

But they were. He knew it as surely as he’d known it ten years ago. He’d

grown up, he'd been away to college – MIT, no less – he'd married a beautiful girl and now was about to be a parent. He'd changed, but nothing ever changed in Casablanca.

He unwrapped his sandwich: peanut butter and jelly. He'd made it himself; Peggy was far too pregnant to get out of bed to make his breakfast or pack his lunch, and besides, he didn't mind peanut butter and jelly, he wasn't choosy about food. Just as well, as Peggy wasn't the world's best cook. Not a patch on his mother...but he hadn't married Peggy for her cooking.

He thought about her in their bed this morning. She wore only a pair of white pregnancy underwear and one of his white undershirts, stretched tight over her belly. Irving still found the height and width difference between him and his wife fascinating: he could not get used to how small and delicate she was, even when pregnant, how graceful her wrists and ankles were, her long slim neck. He often took her hand in his to marvel at the size difference. He was not a big man, never had been, but next to her he felt large and protective.

This morning, she'd been turned away from him and if he hadn't known she was pregnant, two weeks overdue, he wouldn't have been able to tell. He'd snuggled up to her, knees folded into her knees, arm around her waist, pushing the t-shirt up so his hand could rest on her naked belly. Sometimes when he did this he could feel the baby kicking but not this morning; this morning he felt only the slightly damp warmth of her skin. He buried his face in her hair, felt her breathing, smelled the sweat on her neck and he wanted to trail his hand up the curve of her belly to find her soft, pregnancy-swollen breast, but Peggy had made it clear to him over the past couple of weeks that she felt too much like a whale to feel sexy.

She'd said it with a strange look, as if she thought he was odd to find her so attractive when she was pregnant. Irving thought it probably was odd. He had no idea if other men felt this way about their pregnant wives.

He wished he could ask someone, but who could he ask? He glanced at the men sitting at the table with him, and then looked back down at his sandwich.

Irving had never heard a man ask another man for advice about sex, or whether something was normal. Men joked about sex, like Donnie just did, they joked about it all the time, but he never joined in. He didn't want to talk about his private life over sandwich wrappers, as if it were no more important than baseball.

He got the distinct feeling that women talked about it all the time. Peggy and Mary often stopped talking abruptly when he entered the room.

'Mr Alder!'

It was Melanie from the office, at the door to the lunchroom. Irving looked up for his father, who never came in here. The lunchroom was for the working men, not the mill owner. But Melanie was walking towards him.

'Mr Alder!' she said. 'Your wife called! She's gone to the hospital to have the baby!'

Cheers and whistles erupted from the eating men.

'All right Alder!'

'Way to go, Irv!'

Mike Beaulieu punched him on the shoulder.

Irving left his lunch on the table. As he walked across the room, hands patted him on the back. His stomach churned, his skin was cold. But he wasn't scared. He felt tall, strong, like he could do anything.

He felt like a man.

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It was so hot that the sulfur scent of the mill reached even here, in the waiting room of the hospital. He couldn't hear Peggy, though. She was separated from him by two doors, a corridor, and several white-clad nurses who didn't allow fathers in the delivery room.

In the cartoons, fathers-to-be paced back and forth, distracted and distressed while their wives gave birth. They had cigars and champagne ready for the big moment, a bouquet of flowers for their wife.

Irving had the *Lewiston Daily Sun*. It was the only newspaper the hospital shop had. He didn't smoke or drink, beyond the odd can of Bud. And he'd never been a pacer. He was going to buy Peggy a bunch of flowers, the biggest one he could find, but they didn't sell those in the hospital shop, so he bought a teddy bear instead, and then he waited.

He sat in the plastic chair underneath the window. Every hour or so he went out and used the pay phone to call Peggy's parents and his parents to tell them that the baby hadn't been born yet, and no, they shouldn't come down, he'd call them as soon as anything happened. Twice he had to go to the hospital shop again to get more change for the phone. He got plenty, because the shop closed at five. He bought some potato chips and a Snickers bar and a Coke, though he wasn't hungry and besides, his mother had stopped by about six o'clock to drop off some sandwiches. (Chicken salad and devilled ham. She thought peanut butter was common.)

Aside from the smell, this beige room could be anywhere in the world. He could be waiting in New York, or Paris, or Vancouver. He could have a job

building bridges in South America, or building a dam in California. Waiting was the same anywhere.

He could be living any of the dozens of lives he'd pictured for himself, any of the dreams he'd been so determined to follow before he met Peggy Grenier in her little bikini on Morocco Pond and instead of ignoring him she'd looked up at him and smiled, and he'd fallen so deep in love with her that he'd asked her out there and then. It was the bravest thing he'd ever done.

Irving Alder had wanted to leave Casablanca from the age of about seven. He'd wanted to escape the rotten-egg scent of the mill, the thundering pulp trucks, the small-minded baseball-cap-wearing bullies, the snowy winters that made each house a sealed-in island. In another place, he thought, he could be courageous, he could be self-assured and popular, valued instead of derided for being smart. Seen for himself instead of as the son of David Alder and the heir apparent to the Casablanca Paper Company.

At MIT for four years he'd finally found people like him, who wanted to talk about mathematics and physics and computers, who had a curiosity about the world and how it worked, who had ambitions greater than getting a good job at the mill and making enough money to buy a house and a truck and retire to Florida. People who thought that family traditions were less important than intellect.

But then he'd come home for the summer and Peggy Grenier had said she'd go to the movies with him, and from that moment, Irving didn't have a single dream that didn't involve her. He'd been applying for jobs in California, was ready to fly over for an interview, when she got pregnant. And how could he take her halfway across the country, away from all her family and friends, when

she was going to have a baby?

Staying in Casablanca, taking the job his dad found for him at the mill, living less than a mile from his parents, seemed like a small price to pay for Peggy and for this baby that was going to be born.

At about two in the morning he dropped off to sleep, stretched across three chairs pushed together. It was a strange half-awake sleep, like the kind he used to have in the library sometimes when he was studying. He dreamed he left the waiting room and walked down the corridor, pushing aside a phalanx of nurses to burst into the delivery suite where Peggy lay, sweating, her face screwed up in pain. 'Let me give birth to the baby,' he said in his dream, lying down next to her and opening his arms. 'I'll do it. You can rest now.' He put his feet up in the stirrups (in his dream he was still wearing his shoes, brown Hush Puppies) and he pushed.

'Mr Alder,' said the nurse, and Irving opened his eyes. He scrambled to sit up.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. You have a son.'

A son. A child. A son.

'Can I see him?'

'Of course.' The nurse led him down the corridor and opened the door for him and there they were: Peggy, cradling their son to her breast. The most natural thing in the world.

Irving wanted to cry. He wanted to scream and laugh and float. He approached the bed with wings on his feet.

'He's perfect,' he said.

Every little finger, every little toe. A crease between his smoky eyes, pouted-up lips.

We've made this, Irving thought in wonder. This human being.

'It's a boy,' Peggy said. 'We've got a son.'

He reached out his arms and Peggy put the baby in them. He was solid, real. He squirmed in Irving's arms and scrunched up his face and beside him, Peggy laughed.

'Oh my God,' she said. 'He looks like that painting in your parents' house.'

He laughed. He felt dizzy, as if the world had broken itself up and rearranged itself around a single point, this child in his arms. 'Little Louis Alder,' he said.

'We...we could call him Lou,' said Peggy, sounding almost tentative. 'If you wanted.'

'After my great-great-grandfather, the paper tycoon? It seems like a big name to put on a little baby.'

'Well, at least it's better than Irving.'

He tore his eyes from the baby and looked at his wife. She looked tired, but beautiful, and she was smiling at him.

They were a family now, he thought. A real family.

'Wouldn't your parents like it?' she said. 'If we named him after Louis Alder? We could even use Louis David, after your dad.'

Her words wavered at the end, as if she were uncertain, as if she didn't know if he would be pleased that she wanted to carry on the family name.

A wave of love swept through him and Irving realised that no matter what his dreams had once been, nothing in the world could compare to this moment,

right now, with his wife and his son. He'd never felt part of Casablanca so much as he did right then, a present that was linked inexorably with the past, generations and generations of his family going back in this same place.

It was time to put those dreams of leaving aside. Their future, all of theirs, was right here. Together. The proof was this little boy in his arms.

'Louis David,' he said. 'Welcome to Casablanca.'

## **Louis & Louise**

**1978-1982**

In this moment of birth, Louis and Louise are the same person in two different lives. They are separated only by the gender announced by the doctor, and a final 'e'. Their genitals are different but their faces are the same – and really, in most lights and most expressions they look more like Irving than his great-great-grandfather, and there's some Peggy in there, too, especially when they're asleep. When Peggy and her baby are asleep together, Lou with their head on their mother's naked breast, their peaceful closed eyes, relaxed mouths are identical.

Louis and Louise aren't twins – not like Mary's fraternal twins Allie and Benny, whom we will know much better, in time. Peggy and Irving Alder only ever have one child. Peggy, who fell pregnant so easily the first time, never carries another baby to term. Louis and Louise at conception are one egg and one sperm. Except in this version of life, the sperm carries the X chromosome and in that version, the sperm carries the Y. Sperm and egg meet and begin to divide and multiply.

As a foetus, Lou's sex is at first indistinguishable. At seven weeks' gestation, their genitals begin to develop. Unseen inside Peggy's body in 1978, with an uncomplicated pregnancy, they could be any sex. They could be any

gender. There are so many other things about them, equally unseen, that are also true. Eye colour, hair colour, the curve of their smile, myopia, a mole on their thigh, a propensity to hay fever, their future love for salty food and science fiction, the steady beat of their heart.

But when Lou is born, their biological sex is the first thing that anyone sees. The first question anyone asks. The beginning of every single choice made about this person, even before they have the power to make choices for themselves.

At this moment of birth, even before they've taken their first breath and cried their first cry, Lou Alder is the nexus of all their parents' dreams.

But those dreams are different for son and for daughter.

Louise will go home and be put into pink. (When it comes in, her hair is bright red; it will clash horribly.) Louis will be put into blue, which goes better with red hair. The grandparents will arrive with gifts: dolls or teddies, dresses or a tiny baseball mitt. See them sitting in Peggy and Irving's living room in this new house, drinking tea and trying to make friends with each other for the sake of the baby. David Alder wears a suit and tie despite the heat, which hasn't broken yet. Bob Grenier is in work pants and a plaid shirt so new out of the package that it still has creases. Vi Alder wears a twin set and pearls and Yvette Grenier has on her best polyester slacks and a sleeveless blouse. They are all from Casablanca, born and raised, but they might as well be from different worlds. Bob Grenier's father emigrated from Québec to cut timber for the Casablanca paper mill, and Bob has worked on Machine Two in the mill since he was seventeen years old. David Alder's father inherited the mill from his father George, whose father Louis Alder of the Pennsylvania Alders founded it in 1862. Yvette is the daughter of a

lumberman, and Vi is the daughter of a man who owned a chain of shoe shops across Western Maine until he sold them to his son and retired to Key West. Yvette notices that Vi lifts her pinky when drinking tea, like she thinks she's the Queen, and Vi has to keep herself from flinching when Bob coughs a big gob of smoker's phlegm into his handkerchief and then picks up the baby without washing his hands. Peggy's parents spend more than they can afford on their gifts, and they still look shabby and cheap next to Irving's parents', which were bought in Portland in Macy's.

Lou is both couples' first grandchild. Maybe this is the child that will give them something to talk about. Maybe this is the child that will give them common ground. Erase these differences once and for all between owner and worker, white and blue collar, Catholic and Protestant.

They're doing their best, the grandparents, with their dolls and their mitts, their dresses and bears, and they're handing down stories and histories and limitations. Steadily fencing in those infinite dreams.

But this happens to everyone, and it's all done out of love. We want our children to live in the world we know, to fit in, to do what's expected of them, because that is how you are happy. You can't dream *anything*; you have to dream what's possible. Louis Alder will inherit a controlling share in Casablanca Paper Company, which is riches almost unimaginable for his maternal grandparents who still have mortgage payments to make on their compact two-bedroom house; Louise Alder...well, that's not so straightforward, but it's the seventies after all, nearly the eighties – feminism isn't a dirty word, why can't a woman run a mill one day? And maybe she'll have a brother, or marry someone and produce another heir, even though he'll have a different surname.

Lou doesn't understand any of this yet. Lou's world is milk and warmth, familiar voices and softness, blurred colours and the pattern of faces, the wet squish of a soiled diaper and the utter comfort of a breast. They're a hungry baby. When Irving picks up Lou they try to suckle from him, too.

Their favourite toy, both Louise and Louis's, is a small stuffed chicken which is neither pink nor blue but yellow and red. Their first word is 'Ick', which means 'chicken'.

Ick, cuddled and sucked, gets steadily more threadbare and dirty despite frequent visits to Peggy's state of the art washing machine. Lou, in pink or blue, learns to walk, but what they really love to do is to run. And climb. They defeat crib rails, Peggy's stair gates; once Peggy leaves Lou outside on the lawn for less than five minutes to answer the phone and when she comes back Lou has climbed to the top of the big rock in the back of their yard and is sitting there, happy as a clam, only a few inches away from tumbling off and breaking their head open.

'He can do anything, that boy,' says Grandma Alder.

'She'll give you trouble when she's a teenager, that girl,' says Memère Grenier.

Lou learns to whistle at three years old. A real lips-pursed, full-lunged, whistle. Loud blasts of it, like a sailor. They tuck Ick into bed every night. They help Peggy paint the walls of their house, working with a tiny brush beside their mother. Four days later they find a red crayon and draw their family on the newly white wall: three round blobs, Mummy, Daddy and Lou.

Lou wants a baby brother or sister but one doesn't come. Sometimes Lou hears their parents whispering in the kitchen at night, but they don't understand

the words.

There are other words they understand, though. Words like 'pretty' or 'strong'. Words like 'sweet' or 'clever'. 'Boy' or 'girl'; 'tomboy' or 'sissy'. They decide they don't like pink or blue and only let their mother dress them in red or yellow or purple, which *really* clashes with their hair. They still climb rocks, and trees when they can. But Louis only cuddles Ick at night now, and when Louise whistles, she shapes it into a tune.

**Louise**

**2010**

It's 3.10 pm and Lou sits behind her desk, looking through her students' final assignments as the sun streams through the barred windows of the Brooklyn middle school where she's taught for the past six years. *My Summer Adventure* was the title, but some of the kids have put their own titles on their stories.

*My Battle With The Giant Space Ants*

*How I Burned Down Brooklyn*

*Summer School At Hogwarts*

She should have marked the assignments and given them back straight away so the kids could take them home, stuffing them into backpacks full of drawings and geography projects, but she wants to have time to actually read them, to hold onto the school year for a little bit longer. She likes this class, 8G, and the kids probably wouldn't want their assignments back anyway. They have bigger things on their minds than English assignments. They're on their way to their real summer adventures, and high school after that.

*This summer is going to be the best summer ever. That's because this summre is when Justin Bieber is going to fall in love with me. Let me tell you about how this will happn. First let me tell you what I look like I have long raven black hair with blue and purple streaks and my eyes are large and violet. I always dress in thighhigh black leathr boots and lacey dresses with rips in them and evryone says*

*I am beautiful but I don't know it. One day I woke up and my mom said Sydney you have a letter and when I opened it it said I had won a round trip ticket to Las Vegas and I was so excited because this is where Justin lives. OMG will I finally meet him!?!?!?!?*

Lou smiles. This year, Akia Hassan has written every single assignment Lou has given her, no matter the presumptive topic, about how Justin Bieber will fall in love with her. The essays aren't usually very coherent, and Lou has tried in vain to get Akia to use spellcheck more and OMG less, but she has to admire the eighth-grader's dedication to Mr Bieber, especially when the title of the essay has been something like 'Small Steps We Can All Take To Reduce Global Warming'.

She leafs to the last page to find out how many children Akia/Sydney and Justin will have in their blissfully happy marriage (it varies between one and six) and instead of the usual heart-embellished THE END that Akia puts on her papers, instead it says *I no Ill never marry Justin Bieber but thank u 4 letting me pretend all year. I will miss you Ms A!*

Lou blinks back tears.

She hates the last day of school. All of the students are always so happy, and even the most nostalgic of her fellow teachers look forward to six weeks of vacation. But for Lou, it's a letting go of the little world she's inhabited for the past ten months. Not an adventure but a loss.

She sighs and takes a pink cardboard folder from her desk drawer. She'll end up keeping these essays, probably under her bed, with all the others. Dana will tease her for it, and Lou will say 'When you're grown up, you'll understand,' though she hopes, deep inside, that Dana never will understand. That Dana will

find it much easier to step forward, to let go. And that Dana will have to do much less of it than Lou has done.

'Lou?'

'Dad?' The response is immediate, spoken before she looks up, even though her father has never been in her classroom before, her school before, and she hasn't seen him since December 26th. Her dad is in the doorway. She knows it as much by the sight of him as the emotion in her chest: something balanced on an edge halfway between happiness and guilt.

'Hi,' she says, standing up. 'What are you doing here?'

He steps into the classroom. He's wearing the same style of short-sleeved white button-up white shirt he's worn all her life, but he has new glasses. At least she thinks they're new glasses. Aren't they?

'I wanted to see you,' he says, and Lou comes out from behind her desk and hugs him. He hugs her back, hard. She's about an inch taller than him, a fact which always takes her by surprise.

'Did you fly down?'

'I drove.'

'You drove six hours just to see me?'

Irving shrugs his narrow shoulders. 'You're my little girl. And besides, I like driving.' He keeps his hand on her elbow, as if he wants to keep touching her. 'I thought they wouldn't let me in the building and I would have to wait for you outside. There are metal detectors! In a school. It's not like Casablanca.'

'No, it's not.' At the mention of their home town, Lou pulls back from him so they aren't touching. 'But they let you in?'

'I told them I was your dad. I guess I looked harmless.'

You *are* harmless, she thinks, and can't help hugging him again. 'What are you doing here?'

'I need to talk with you about something. In person.'

'What?'

This time, he's the first to let go. He walks to her desk and looks at the stacks of essays. 'Looks like you still have a lot of work to do over the summer.'

'It's only a vacation for the kids, not the teachers.'

'I've always wondered what your school looked like.'

She follows his gaze around the classroom. She's taught in this same room for five years, but there are a lot of things she's never really noticed about it until she sees it through her dad's eyes. How small it is. How the paint is peeling. The grilles over the window. The sound of traffic and music and shouting outside: all the noise of Brooklyn, loud even over the rattle of the ancient air-conditioner.

How different that must seem to her dad, who went to elementary school in a white clapboard schoolhouse by the Pennacook river, with a wide fenced-in playground built around a big glacial rock that the kids used to climb so they could eat their packed lunches on top of it. Pettingill Primary. Lou went to that school, too, until third grade when they opened the new Casablanca Elementary in a modern building.

'I don't pay much attention to the room,' she says, in defense, of – what? Her school? Her life? Herself? 'It's the kids that make it interesting.'

'I bet they do.' He runs his finger over the top of a kid's desk next to him: someone's carved I ♥OMAR and then filled in the heart with red pen.

'It's a different environment,' she tells him, 'but the kids aren't that different than I was, at that age. Probably you, too.'

'Where's Dana?' he asks. 'She's finished with school by now too, isn't she?'

'Her school got out at two thirty.'

'Where is she, then? Does she come here to wait for you?'

'No, she's got soccer practice, and then she takes a bus home. She's got a key for the apartment in case I don't get back before her.'

She says it defiantly, because she knows what her mother would say to the idea of a twelve-year-old girl taking the bus by herself through Brooklyn, let alone being in an apartment alone, but Irving merely blinks behind his glasses and says, 'Well, she'll be there when we get there, will she?'

'Her practice doesn't finish till four thirty, so we'll probably beat her home.'

Her dad squints up his nose as if he's about to sneeze. 'It will be good to see her. I bet she's grown. It's hard to tell in pictures.'

'She grows about half an inch every time I look at her, it seems. She's got a good appetite.'

'Just like you used to.' He takes off his glasses to polish them and she realises: he doesn't look different because of new glasses. His hair has gone grey. All of it. Over Christmas there was still quite a bit of brown, but less than six months later and it's all gone, turned to silver and white.

It's seven hours' drive from central Maine to Brooklyn. More than that with traffic and road construction in Connecticut, and there's always traffic and road construction in Connecticut.

'Are you okay, Dad?' she asks.

'I'm fine.'

'This is a long way for you to come to discuss my students' work.'

‘Well, I wanted to see you and Dana, obviously. The student work is a bonus.’

All the chairs are upside down on the desks, legs up like black antennae. She takes one of them down and sits on it. ‘Tell me what’s up, Dad. Why did you drive down here without telling me you were coming? Why did you come to my school instead of the apartment? I mean, you’re welcome, of course, but you never do these things. We’re not a family who drops in on each other.’

‘I wanted to talk with you on your own, without Dana. And it’s not something you can say over the telephone, what I need to tell you.’

*Oh God, he’s leaving my mother and I’m going to be responsible for her now.*

There’s no reason for her to think that – either that her parents are splitting up, or that Lou will end up being responsible for her mother in any way. It’s unlikely that her mother would even let her, anyway; it’s not as if they’re close. And Lou doesn’t see enough of her parents’ relationship to know how stable it is on a daily basis.

Dana’s friend Farah’s parents are in the process of splitting up, and she and Dana talked about it a couple of nights ago over Chinese food and *Star Trek Voyager* reruns. ‘She’s really messed up,’ Dana told her. ‘She wasn’t in school two days last week. She says she doesn’t even know who she is any more. It sort of makes me glad.’

‘Glad of what?’ Lou asked.

‘Glad I don’t have a dad,’ Dana said, snagging noodles with chopsticks. ‘Farah thinks her parents hate her and they’re splitting up because of her. She keeps on going through everything she’s done, trying to figure out what went wrong. At least if my dad doesn’t know I exist, he can’t possibly hate me. One

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# LOUIS & LOUISE

Julie Cohen

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