

My Mother Kim Wagner

As a child, I would look forward to visiting my grandparent's home in New Jersey each summer partially because that meant I could pour over their many photo albums. They kept them on shelves in a spare bedroom, each one labeled in my grandma's curly penmanship, organized chronologically. I had to stand on the arm of a scratchy, striped brown couch in order to reach the albums on the highest shelf. While the sun filtered through translucent drapes, I would sit on that couch and study pictures of my mother, each stage of her life captured in a little, two dimensional rectangle.

She was a smiling toddler with brown curls tied up in pigtails, standing next to a wooden rocking horse, a red glow igniting the scene from the Christmas tree lights behind her. She couldn't have been older than two in that photograph. My mother, born Debra Anne Engelhard, came into the world in the month of May in 1960, the oldest child of two second generation German immigrants, their only daughter. From what the photographs told me, she was a beautiful, happy baby girl.

When I was a child and looking at that photo album full of my mother's baby pictures, my grandmother had said to me, "You look just like your mom when she was young."

My mother smiled at this, reached over and tucked my golden hair behind my ear and said, "Yes, but you're cuter."

I stubbornly un-tucked my hair, but grinned, perhaps blushed a little. What my grandma had said was enough for me. Many more times throughout my life I would hear those words again, each time my pride increasing.

In another photo, she was a chubby adolescent, wearing a juvenile, mod-shaped checkered dress and holding her infant brother in her lap, a look of sheer wonder on her round face. My mother was gently, yet firmly cradling her baby sibling, prepared to offer him all of her protection. Even from such a young age, she was a nurturer. Throughout her adolescence and into her early adulthood, my mother helped raise her younger siblings. While both of her parents worked, she would take care of her two brothers, cooking dinner, cleaning the house, and attempting to shield them from the rage of an on-again-off-again alcoholic father.

After dinner one night, not long ago, a tad too much wine had mixed with my mother's blood and she told me about her father, apparently not the same grandpa that I had known all of my life. Things were different, more complex when she was a kid in the 60s and 70s.

One particular night, she recalled, he had come home from working as a mechanic in a dreadful mood. He drank right away and he drank a lot. As the night progressed, he had only gotten angrier, the stout glass of iced scotch in his hand egging him on. He found a wire, what she thought to be a cable wire, and he beat his children. This incident has been forgiven by my mother, but cannot be forgotten, as it was not a onetime occurrence. As the oldest, she tried her best to limit these occurrences. She would tidy the house after school to limit the stress on her overworked parents, making sure every last thing was in order by the time they got home. Even as a young kid, she saw it as her responsibility to make the lives of her siblings better.

More photos, a set of my mother in her teenage years from one of the many days she spent on the beaches of the Jersey shore. She wore a red bikini, I think, with a few thin ruffles on it. Her wavy hair was down to her shoulders then, a rich dark chocolate color. To me, she was a supermodel. In one particular picture, she was smiling and reclining on a towel, propped up on one of her elbows, her other arm waving at the camera. She was building a tan that would forever, beautifully stain her skin a shade or two darker.

Just a few months ago, my mother and I were lazily drifting in our small, pop-up pool, lying on cheap green and pink plastic rafts from Wal-Mart. The sky was a clear, pale blue, with no clouds relieving us from the strong sun. She had just finished rubbing coconut-scented tanning oil on her arms. Boasting only a five SPF, the oil was intended for bronzing her skin rather than providing any actual barrier between it and UV rays.

“The only thing I miss about living in Joi-sey is the beach,” she said to me, mocking the accent that she had managed to shed.

“Nothing else?” I already knew the answer.

“Nah, just being near the ocean, you know? My parents used to drive us out to Seaside Heights almost every weekend in the summer. Gosh, we would be sitting in traffic for hours. But it was always worth it.”

“Seaside Heights? That’s where they film the *Jersey Shore*, right? That show on MTV.” I smirked at her.

She scoffed. “Those kids don’t even go to the beach. They just get drunk and sleep with each other.”

One more photograph from my grandparent’s albums that has always lingered fondly in my memory is my mother’s high school senior picture. She was suddenly an adult with cropped dark hair, a small smile on her lips. Poised stoically, her brown eyes, free from glasses for this occasion, are fixed on something distant, unidentifiable. She looks dreamy, like a lone high school sweetheart ready to embrace the unknown future, as long as that future did not exist in New Jersey.

“It’s a town full of losers,” she would sing along loudly, in the car, in the kitchen, on the patio, wherever, “and I’m pullin’ outta here to win!”

I like to think that “Thunder Road” is her teenage anthem. My mother had raised my siblings and me on Bruce Springsteen, just as she had raised herself. I used to roll my eyes on the way to school as my mom switched between his albums, telling me how great each one is, and for what reasons.

“Which Springsteen album is your favorite?” I have asked her.

“Oh gosh. You know, it has to be a three-way tie between *Born to Run*, *The River*, and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*,” she will say. “But don’t make me choose!”

It wasn’t until recently that I understood my mother’s relationship with the Boss. She had grown up in New Jersey, like he had. When *Born to Run* was released, she was fifteen, spending her teenage years in a far from satisfactory home.

“I used to own so many records” she told me when we were looking at a few of her ancient albums in her closet one day. “Bruce was my favorite, you know that. I was just like you, though, I loved music. I would lock myself in my room and listen to my records all day.”

It’s no wonder that she spent so much time in that secluded bedroom, replacing the fine needle of her record player onto those precious albums over and over again, Springsteen beckoning to her with the sweet promise of escape. Of course she would want to run away with him, leave the Garden State behind, even if it did make her a tramp. She did make it out of her childhood hometown eventually. And although she didn’t leave in the passenger seat of her idol’s car, she did leave with him forever etched into her heart.

Now, in our own albums, the ones my mother created with her own little family, she is behind the camera. My brother, sister, and I are lined up in front of a dark, wooden hutch in our old living room, the place where photo sessions were always conducted. We are holding up paper turkeys, but they don’t look much like turkeys at all. They are shaped like our small hands, with

brown, red, and orange magic marker scribbled on them. Paper pilgrim hats are crookedly taped around our small blonde heads. Big smiles, squinted eyes, we have our arms outstretched, showing off the crappy crafts to our proud mother.

She often made crafts with us - popsicle stick reindeer on Christmas, huge construction paper eggs blanketed in messy glitter and rhinestones on Easter, and finger painted American flags on the Fourth of July. We would sit with her in the sandbox, together creating our own miniature world by repeatedly packing dark sand into castle-shaped buckets. She sewed a Pocahontas costume for me out of burlap-like material, hand-painting red, yellow, and blue zigzags on the fabric when we couldn't afford store-bought Halloween costumes. She taught us the names of the trees in our backyard and how to tell when strawberries were ready to be picked. She kissed our beestings, smeared antibiotic ointment on our cuts, and rubbed our backs as we reluctantly gulped down chalky, pink Pepto-Bismol. She placed little notes in our school lunches, every single day, drawing a silly, simple caricature of herself next to the words "I love you." Every time that she has said goodnight to me, every time that she has ended a phone conversation with me, and every time that we have parted ways, she has told me that she loves me.

In one of our most recent photo albums, there is a picture of my mother in an oversized, orange Tiger's shirt, posing next to one of the smooth, monstrous feline statues outside of Comerica Park. She's thinner than she should be in this photograph, the tips of her collarbones peeking out of the neckline of her t-shirt. Her hair doesn't look right either. The wig is too straight, too dark, and styled too stiffly. She's smiling, though, smiling big.

In the summer of 2006, my mother was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Multiple cancerous lymph nodes were found in her chest. She told us at dinner one night. It was the first time I had seen my father cry.

Sometime in the first month of her treatment, I was alone in the car with my father. She was on both of our minds, of course. We eased to a halt when a red light commanded us to do so. Silence thickened as the wheels came to a stop, the engine resting for a moment.

"Is she going to be okay?" I hesitantly asked him. "You can be honest with me." He looked at me. "Yeah, of course she is. Your mom's a fighter." He tried to chuckle. "If anything she's a fighter. Don't worry. She'll beat this."

Don't worry. My father has always been the level-headed one in our family, the one who can calmly, rationally assess any situation. *Don't worry*, he has always said to us. When our black Labrador broke her leg after tripping down the porch steps, when money was too tight and he had to work nights as a gas station attendant, when we had to move from Illinois to Missouri and from Missouri to Michigan, he told us *don't worry*. And we hadn't worried. But on that day at the stoplight, his words did not assure me as they usually did. His sky blue eyes betrayed him, exposing his hypocrisy. They were full of worry.

What if we lost her?

"It's the good Hodgkin's, though," I remember her saying. "Really, I'm blessed that it was caught in the early stages. All we have to do is keep praying. It's in God's hands now."

So she ordered silky, colorful head scarves online, made friends with the other patients and her chemotherapy nurses, and playfully blamed her natural forgetfulness on her "chemo brain."

When she shaved her head, she put on an impromptu fashion show, strutting down the hallway in her flannel pajama pants and rubbing the new, dark stubble that covered her scalp. She laughed when she told me that she wouldn't have to pluck her eyebrows anymore. Some days she couldn't leave her bed. Some days she spent hours in the bathroom, retching into the toilet. But

she never wallowed in self-pity, at least not outwardly. She never lost hope and never let the rest of us lose hope.

And just last month, after a routine appointment with her oncologist full of only good news, my brother, sister, and I brought home a cake for our mother with the words “6 Years in Remission” written on it in blue icing.

Despite spending every summer of her youth ingesting the strong sun’s rays on the beaches of the Jersey shore, my mother looks younger than her current age of 52. It is not as if she doesn’t have wrinkles and it is not as if one cannot tell that she dyes her hair. She simply projects a special kind of distracting warmth. There is a genuine kindness behind her coffee bean brown eyes, a kindness that enables her to strike up a conversation with a stranger she meets in a grocery store, then calling the stranger sweetheart as she says goodbye and wheels her shopping cart away. And when you meet those eyes, hidden behind glasses whose frames have shrunk over the years, you do not notice the crow’s feet or the dark roots branching out from the part in her fluffy, bronze hair.

While some people who consistently tan appear a ghastly orange color, my mother’s affinity for the sun’s harmful rays only makes her more radiant. Her skin has become the color of honey in a jar, perhaps with a few small, sticky globs of molasses mixed in. Even though the constant UV ray exposure has made her top epidermic layer a tad leathery, there isn’t a necessary unattractiveness attached to this. Instead, when I study her dark, pigmented skin, I think of the many pictures of her as a young girl, smiling in a bathing suit with her back facing the Atlantic Ocean. Or I imagine her sitting cross-legged in our old, square sandbox, wearing a spaghetti-strapped tank top. Or sometimes I still see her lounging underneath the sun on the patio, with Bruce Springsteen huskily singing in the background. My mother has never worried about wrinkles or freckles or skin cancer. She has never feared the sun, that powerful star, the center of our universe.