

From: Our Stories, Our Voices  
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## IN OUR GENES

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My mother is really big on genealogy. She has her family traced back to Charlemagne. Her side has French princesses, William Penn, and some-number-of-great-grandparents who arrived on the *Mayflower*. Every time she finds the name of a new relative, she can trace someone new, and someone new again. It never stops.

My mother was born in rural North Carolina in 1957, raised by a young mother who gave her the initials KKK and such sage advice growing up as, "Never put money in your mouth; a Black person might have touched it" (and you better believe she did not say "Black person"). I joke that that's why she got engaged when she was seventeen—not to my father, but to a nice Southern boy—to try to change her last name as soon as possible.

### In Our Genes

But she didn't marry that nice Southern boy. She married a second-generation Jewish guy named Saul, who was in North Carolina for law school, and became the first person in her family, going back thousands and thousands of years, to marry a non-Christian.

She has, of course, tried to do my dad's genealogy. It's a lot more difficult and a lot more depressing. Contrasting my mom, who's had family in America since the moment white people starting stomping around, my dad's grandparents were immigrants. His grandmother came from Hungary to get away from her abusive father. His grandfather came from Russia to get away from the pogroms. Everyone they left behind either lived through the Holocaust, or didn't.

My mom traded her KKK initials for a clunky Jewish last name and learned the Hanukkah blessing—or most of it; she still gets tongue-tied at the end—but she never converted. They had two kids—my older sister, and me.

Traditionally, Judaism is matrilineal. People like to tell me this like it's going to be new information. (Reform Judaism has accepted children with Jewish fathers since 1983—eight years before I was born—but people who are sticklers for rules and tradition don't tend to respect my branch of Judaism anyway.) Of the four members of my family, I'm the only practicing Jew. My mother says that instead of having two half-Jewish kids, they had one Jewish kid and one non-Jewish kid.

It was actually kind of a shock to me the first time she said



this, because the fact that I actually practiced Judaism wasn't something I'd ever shared with her. My first semester of college I fell in with a bunch of Jewish friends who had all been raised distinctively Jewish but loved me despite my non-bat-mitzvahed ass, and I went to Hillel with them. I felt self-conscious that I was the only one who needed the Hebrew transliteration, but I kept going. I hadn't told my mother any of this—she wears her disdain for religion with the pride only a Southern atheist can—but she let out this little quip about having one Jewish child and one non-Jewish when we were a couple margaritas deep with a few panelists I'd just been on a women-in-publishing panel with. She'd come up to New York with me because I was nineteen and she was my best friend.

It was an incredible moment, and it was heartwarming and it was confirming, this shock of being seen. When I tell her nowadays about going to temple, she still doesn't understand why I do it, but it doesn't surprise her. She's known me, after all, for longer than I've known me.

Which was part of what made it so surprising when I came over to her house to see her, at twenty years old, and told her I was in a relationship with a girl, and she looked at me like her world had dropped out from under her. I'd been with girls for a year; she really didn't know?

Or was it that it really took her nineteen years to come to terms with having a Jewish child, and I hadn't yet given her that for having a queer one?

Seriously, nineteen fucking years?

I've been thinking about my mother a lot lately. About the people she came from, who either didn't notice (her theory) or intentionally chose (you gotta wonder . . .) to give her the initials they gave her. About where she grew up and what she was told. And how, despite all that, she married my father. She knit pink hats for the Women's March in 2017. She has stood beside me and cheered "Black lives matter" like she was someone who was not raised to believe that they did not.

I think about the discomfort on her face when I want to talk about anti-Semitism. It's very hard for her to accept that that is still happening in the world, because she was raised on a diet of steady, subtle racism, not hate crimes. I can't ever tell her about getting harassed online, because her immediate question is, *What did you do?* because she has never been a target simply for existing. She's not present online the way I am. She doesn't know people outside of our liberal community and her mother, whom she very rarely speaks to.

A few years ago, when her father was dying, she had to go down to North Carolina a lot. Her parents had a nasty divorce—he was a Connecticut liberal; I honestly don't know how they lasted five minutes around each other, never mind a twenty-five-year marriage—but, ever the devoted daughter, my mother still stayed at my grandmother's house when she went down to see her dad. More often than not, the trips would involve them screaming at each other about politics, and my mother would



come home insecure, asking me if I *really* liked her haircut, because her mother had spent all week criticizing it. I fall apart when my mother criticizes me too, but that's just about the only similarity in our relationships.

My mother has come so far.

But then she asks me what I did to deserve getting harassed online, and she rolls her eyes if someone mentions the Holocaust, and she stands there gaping when I tell her I'm dating a girl . . .

I get so mad.

She was a stay-at-home mom. She did PTA. She packed my lunch every day all through high school. I love my dad with everything in me, but between her and my sister and the incredible women I have dated, I am a woman who has been grown by women.

(This, by the way, is why I will never understand women who say they "don't need feminism" while they sit on the shoulders of women who did, but okay.)

My mom has come so far. Look at that shitty town in North Carolina. Look at what they named her. Look at the generations and generations and generations of people who never would have looked twice at my father, or worse.

She did not think, when she married my father, that she would have kids who'd get death threats for having his last name, but I do. I have a block list on Twitter thirteen thousand names long, and I still get a few threats a week for my sin of being online with my name. My mother's on Twitter now too,

with our last name, and I worry about her. Nothing's happened to her yet.

And she will fight for gay rights all day long, but she never thought it would be for the baby she carried and brought home from the hospital and made lunches for every day. I know. It's hard for me to understand my queerness as a shock, but I try to think about if I have children, what ways they'll have to shock me. What they'll discover about themselves that right now I don't even know is an option.

I want my mother to be perfect. But more than that, I want her to be enough. I want all of the work that she's done, all of the incredible growing up she has had to do alone—my mother is a woman who was grown into the amazing person she is by and large by one woman and that woman is *herself*—to be enough, because maybe she can't do any more. She has come so, so far.

She just has this daughter she wasn't prepared for.

And isn't that kind of what's happening to a lot of us right now?

My mother was not prepared for me. And it was a lot easier to judge her for that before this year. Because I was not prepared. And unless someone has every possible intersection of every possible marginalized person, there is something going on right now that they were not prepared for either.

At the Women's March, beside my mother, I looked around at signs about refugees and the Dakota Access Pipeline. I talk to teenagers on Twitter who are struggling to have their genders



and sexualities validated and protected. These are the people that I was not expecting in my life. These are the mothers and sisters and daughters that I was not trained for. I might be more marginalized than my mother, but I'm more privileged than a *lot* of others. And I might not be related to the people I trip over when I fail to use the right words or see things from the right perspective, but that doesn't make my mistakes less hurtful.

What if I can't be good enough either?

But I have to be. I have to be better.

Look at how far my mother came. Look at the head start I have.

I am on the shoulders of every single woman who came before me. I am on the strong, sign-wielding back of a woman who did so much heavy lifting, who overcame so much shit, to start me off in a place where I can nitpick her advocacy.

Which I will do, at the same time I appreciate her, because this is my job. This is what daughters have to do. We have to go even further. Be even better. And teach the next ones to be better than us. This is the definition of progress.

Hundreds of years in the future, when some girl is doing her genealogy, make her goddamn proud.