

Pose

She's three years old but looks six, except most toddlers I've ever known smile or hide when someone points a camera at them. She's in a photography studio, probably the cheap one at Sears in the mall. My family photographed her many times as she grew up, probably because she won that infant beauty pageant. A stranger tells her what to do while Mom stares, circling her fingers around her head and laughing. She's just trying to ignore her husband, the man who wonders why the child doesn't call him daddy; he's telling the cameraman which lights to turn on, which to dim, how to tilt the camera to frame the girl's pretty side. Or maybe the child's aunt brought her to that dingy, cloth-covered room this time.

I do not remember. She may have been alone in the room with a camera that took pictures every ten seconds or so. But I know *that's* not true.

The cameraman wants a headshot so only the child's shoulders show, covered by a black silk drape. She has a pink bow in her orange hair, hair that burns like her father's.

Pink and orange are my least favorite colors.

She must be sitting. Her elbows rest on something so her hands can comfortably clasp in prayer beside her head. Her right cheek rests against them.

That cheek must have been cold. My hands get so little circulation. They seem to repel blood, to repel anything that might warm them.

The stranger man coaxes her to turn my head a little to the left, straighten my fingers. *Good. Now a little more to the right and lift your chin ever so slightly.* I'm sure someone told her to smile. Children are meant to look happy in pictures. Or maybe they told her not to smile, to be blank and still and allow them to show people for years what a good girl I was for listening.

I was obedient once.

She's stoic, immovable. Her mother and stepfather have been liv-

ing together for a few years. She doesn't remember what living with her father was like.

Mom once told me that my father picked me up from my Nana's one day—I was maybe two—and when I told him I didn't want to leave, he slapped me and shook me until I ran to Nana crying. She kicked him out of the house and didn't allow him to see me for weeks. But Mom also told me that if I ever truly hated the new dad, I could tell her and she'd leave him. I told her I hated him more than anyone else I'd ever known, but she didn't believe me. Or didn't want to.

Maybe that's why the girl with the pink bow doesn't smile. Her mother broke her promise, and, somehow, she knows she will walk in on mommy crying on the bed, and mommy will scream at her to get out.

My stepfather will snatch the girl's orange ponytail and pull her head to the ground where she will lay apologetically because she played with his arm hair too long, and when her sister tries to defend her, he'll pick her up by the throat and toss her, back first onto the coffee table. Mom will say his name with a little anger in her voice and then comfort the girl who can't breathe.

I have *watched* that small body crouching by a door, scratching at his arms to let go, crying for Mom to do something.

But somehow that little orange-haired toddler knew what was coming before she ever evolved into me.

The studio smells like leather, or sawdust.

It's okay not to smile. You're beautiful staring just beyond the camera, not changing your face for anyone.