

Ambulance

by Pia Ehrhardt

Once you start telling the truth it's hard to quit. You look around and reasons are everywhere. It's like a new appliance, truth-telling, a can opener that's so good you barely have to turn it.

On the phone my sister asks me why I don't come out and see her in San Francisco. She thinks I need a break. Instead of saying I'm busy with work and family I tell her I hate the people in San Francisco, don't see what's so great about steep hills, what's so great about wearing a sweater, and the fog is cold. I make her cry.

On the phone with my mother I ask her why she had an affair thirty-three years ago when she was pregnant with my sister. She says, how do you know? Dad, I say. When I first found out, I just pictured her as someone else's mom, screwing with a big belly, but now I'd like to know why. She says, none of your damn business, and what difference does it make now? I'm not sure. Maybe stuff changes for the better when you bump it.

Our father died in January. He had a heart attack in the kitchen and coded in the hall of the hospital. I was in the house borrowing a crock pot when he fell. I rode in the ambulance and watched the EMT's work. He was conscious and talked non-stop, told them his medical history, told the driver not to take the Interstate. I got car sick, not being able to look out the window and grab a horizon line. My dad was rambling about my mom. He said he should've forgiven her, and I said I'd tell her for him, but he said, no, because he still didn't.

I call my mother back and ask her again, and she says, all right, she had an affair because my father was screwing a neighbor, and being pregnant she didn't have to worry about getting pregnant. I ask if she's sure, and she pushes back, wants to know when I'm going to stop being daddy's girl. Fair question. I'd like to know myself.

I call my sister back and tell her I'm jealous of her house, her polished wood floors, because I live on skinny carpet in an

apartment and I'm pissed she got ahead of me on money when I was always the best at things, except for getting in trouble. She still gets in trouble. Guys stalk her, obscene phone calls come in from phone booths, there'll be a woman at work who calls late at night to talk about their boss, but really wants my sister to be her lover. And my sister knows this, and encourages it, so that she can feel what it's like to not return the feelings, because my sister can't do this with me. She loves so easy. I wish I did.

I call my mother and ask if this was her only affair, and she says she didn't love anyone after my father, but my mother likes to say half of what she knows. She must be reading my mind, because she says, no, she never slept with another man. Why not? I ask, but it sounds like a dare, and she hangs up quickly.

My sister calls and tells me to zip it about the truth because I'm digging up trouble that's under control, and civilized people don't speak whatever comes into their heads. I don't agree with that, and I say so. Truth is a leveler, but everyone has to play, or this one's naked and that one's dressed for snow. She says the truth hurts, and I answer, exactly, and she says, bitch.

I imagine my sister in my mom's stomach, and that guy's dick in my mother. I call my sister and tell her this, ask if she thinks about this, too, and I can hear her pull back, like I've flicked her in the eyeball. What are you doing? she says, but it's all plea and no question. I don't know.

The truth may hurt, but it's no surprise, it's just a printed receipt.

Maybe I'll ask my husband to keep our son for a few days and go to San Francisco.

My mother and sister have never asked, but I get them on three-way-dial and tell them about the ambulance ride, how dad talked and made add-ons to his will. There was no paper to write it down. My memory's terrible. I only remember stuff I never use. How to measure a hypotenuse. The capital of Kentucky. The words to "Nights In White Satin." They played this at my sister's wedding, and it seemed so dumb then.

I didn't care if he forgave my mom. I took a pen from the tech's pocket and wrote what my dad was saying on my arm. He told me what to do with his car and the safety deposit box at the bank, about papers on his desk. I didn't ask him if he loved me, although I would have if I'd been telling the truth then, because that's why I jumped in the ambulance. I wanted to know. He said I should be nicer to my sister. I said, what do you mean? He said, you play her like a drum, cut that shit out. I tell her this on the phone. I have to. I didn't tell him: I love you, please, don't die.

