

Title: You were B. Year: 2025

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom

I was born six years after B., my sister, died. She was almost two years old. The discovery came as hazy as the circumstances of her death, though looking back, the clues had always been there. My middle name, for one—B., the same name as my dead sister, though I wouldn't understand the connection for decades. My sister reminded me years later that our mother used to tell us stories when we were little, fragments really, about a baby who died, told the way mothers sometimes share hard truths through the safety of what sounds like fiction. We'd listened the way good daughters do, half-believing, our small bodies curled against her warmth, filing it away with all the other mysterious pieces of adult life we didn't yet understand: the smell of her lotion, bright and citrusy, the rhythm of her breathing, the weight of words we sensed meant more than we could grasp. The almost-full truth would emerge decades later, not in whispered bedtime stories but in hospital rooms where pain strips away pretense, and during late-night arguments that somehow become confessions. My mother was seventy when she began sharing certain details, the words coming in pieces, extracted gradually through careful questioning and patient waiting.

To understand the context of my mother's silence, I have to go back further, to the life she left behind over fifty years ago. She was born in Asmara, Eritrea, but grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, part of the generation that lived through Eritrea's illegal annexation by Ethiopia, a political reality that would shape her understanding of displacement and belonging long before she ever set foot in America. She was seventeen-years old when she left everything she knew for a scholarship to study in the United States. In Addis Ababa, she had been the smartest of her mother's surviving daughters, the one with promise. Her father worked for a printing press, and

the family moved in circles where education was valued, where sending a daughter to America for college was seen as an investment in the future. My mother spoke Tigrinya from her Eritrean roots, Amharic from her years in Addis, a little bit of Italian from the colonial influence, and English from her schooling. She was polyglot and precocious, used to being one of the brightest people in the room.

But intelligence and academic success couldn't prepare her for the isolation of being seventeen and thousands of miles from everything familiar. The Ethiopia she left was on the cusp of revolution; Emperor Haile Selassie I would be overthrown in 1974, just a year after she arrived in Alabama. The country she had called home was disappearing even as she was trying to make a new home in a place that felt impossibly foreign. She was already carrying the weight of one displacement—from Eritrea to Ethiopia—when she took on another, from Ethiopia to America. She had never experienced the particular loneliness of being one of only a handful of international students at Selma University, a small Christian historically black college in Selma, Alabama. Had never been so far from the social structures and family networks that had always anchored her sense of self.

When she talks about those early days now, she mentions the food most often: how nothing tasted right, how she was always slightly hungry not just for familiar flavors but for the social rituals that surrounded eating at home. The coffee ceremonies, the injera shared from a common plate, the way meals were communal events that lasted for hours. Even with the other Eritrean and Ethiopian students on campus, even with the friendships she made, there was something about American meals that felt rushed and solitary, missing the deeper rhythms of home. She was homesick in a way that felt physical, like a constant low-grade fever. She wrote letters home that took weeks to arrive and longer to be answered. International phone calls were

expensive and complicated to arrange. She was more isolated than any seventeen-year-old should be, carrying the weight of her family's expectations along with her own dreams of becoming someone who could change the world.

The assault had happened before she ever left Ethiopia, in those final weeks before her departure for Alabama. It was a different world then—1970s Ethiopia that I envision like 1950s America, all Technicolor innocence and otherworldly glamour. She and a girlfriend would have coffee or go to movies with some wealthy man, the kind of socializing that seemed harmless in a world where young women were still expected to be chaperoned and protected. She has never told me his name, and I have never asked. Some silences are too deep to break. She carried that trauma with her across the ocean, along with her suitcase and her dreams. The isolation she felt at Selma wasn't just homesickness; it was the particular loneliness of someone who had already been violated, who was trying to start over in a place where no one knew her story, where she could pretend, for a while, that it had never happened.

Baby B.'s birth was stark: my seventeen-year-old mother, a college freshman from Ethiopia, laboring alone in a dormitory shower stall in 1973. She had been in America for about seven months, navigating the Alabama drawl of her fellow classmates at Selma University, a historically black college, learning not just the language but the rhythms of the American South—the cadence of conversation, the unspoken rules of belonging in a place so far from everything she'd known. At seventeen, she mistook the early signs for stomach problems, maybe homesickness from her first year of college. When the pain hit that night, sharp and relentless, she made her way to the communal bathroom thinking she might vomit. The other girls were at dinner, or studying, or doing whatever college freshmen do when they're not about to give birth without knowing it.

I've tried to imagine what it would have been like, but it's too painful. My first experience with birth—I was twenty-six, married (unhappily), and I had an emergency C-section because my soon-to-be firstborn's umbilical cord was emerging before she was. A prolapsed umbilical cord, which happens in one in every three hundred births. From the NIH: "Umbilical cord prolapse is when the umbilical cord exits the cervical os before the fetal presenting part. Compression of the cord results in vasoconstriction and resultant fetal hypoxia, which can lead to fetal death or disability if not rapidly diagnosed and managed." There were doctors, there was my mom, there were bright lights and competent hands guiding me through the crisis. But my mother was alone on that cold tile, discovering she was about to become a mother in the most terrifying way possible. What must that moment have been like, realizing what was happening as it was happening? No preparation, no plan, no understanding of what her body was doing. Just seventeen, thousands of miles from home, with only the echo of her own breathing in that empty bathroom.

Getting the full story has been like archaeological work—careful excavation of memories my mother has spent over fifty years burying. I don't want to retraumatize her, so the details come in fragments, usually when we're fighting about something else entirely. What I know: The baby was put into foster care. My mother didn't fully understand what she was signing. There was paperwork she couldn't parse, officials who spoke in bureaucratic language she was still learning to decode. Someone found her, eventually. Someone heard something. But who? When? These details remain buried under decades of necessary forgetting.

I know that Billie was there for the after. Auntie Billie was seven years older than my mom, a force of nature who blazed her own trails at an early age. She had some role at Selma working with the international students at Selma, and there was something about my mother that

drew her to serve as her American big sister. Billie grew up in a sharecropping family in Choctaw County, Alabama, and became a member of the first class of African Americans to graduate from Judson College in Marion, Alabama, where she earned her undergraduate degree. Then she was among the first African Americans to graduate from Samford when she earned her Juris Doctor from Cumberland School of Law in 1979. Billie's life's work was about moving people forward through her art, ideas, and activism. Billie was the one who helped my mother navigate the aftermath, who understood the systems and language that my mother was still learning. In a time and place where young Black women had few advocates, Billie became that fierce protection my mother needed. But Billie died a few years ago, taking with her any chance I had of asking her about those days, about what she witnessed, about how she helped my mother survive.

My mother's younger sister was also there—not for the birth of B. but for the death. My aunt had come to the country as a fifteen-year-old just a week before B.'s death. She was confused too, trying to navigate her own displacement while witnessing her sister's trauma. She was probably the one who told my grandmother about B., the mole who broke the silence my mother was trying to maintain. But I can't ask her either. I made the decision years ago to cut contact with my aunt when my mother was in the hospital, battling cancer and Guillain-Barré. I was tired of her toxic ways, her unhealthy dependence on my mother, years of betrayal. When she called asking about my mother's condition, I sent her straight to voicemail. Some bridges you burn to protect the people you love most.

I don't know their names or faces, but I think about B.'s foster family often. Were they the kind of people who took in babies because they loved children, or because they needed the state payments? Did they know about the circumstances of her birth, about my mother's age and