Amos Alta Francis Mitchell Clinton
1890-1991

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I. "Amos for my own great-grandfather, the preacher. His mother was full-blood Indian. They say she was just beautiful, but that Amos was homely and loud when he preached. His daddy was a soldier in the old war, and scarred in some battle, only suffering jounced in the wagon, so he was left by his mates with the Indian braves and the beautiful Indian maid. I like to think she loved him first, wrapped him in robes and rubbed three weed on his wounds, ministered and made him hers before he even knew.

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Amos: The only thing that saved me was being a minister, gave me grace, mostly undeserved, that half-breed boy of the cripple Francis and his Indian maid. I'm sure some still saw me that way by how they scowled. Crouched down in the back pews, they squinted and saw feathers, white and brown, falling down my back as I broke bread or baptized their summer babies. They imagined blood when I finished the cup of wine, saw it stain my lips, and not theirs. many were saved from self-hatred by thinking thoughts like these.

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II. "Alta" for my mother, I might want to think. Her name was Alma, and that's one letter from the same. She bore more girls than boys — seven to four — and none of the names were prettier than mine and hers. But what's a girl named Amos to do with a pretty middle name? Still, it was Alta, instead of Norma or Lorna or poor, poor Edith. Edith—now that's a name! Mother gave it to the youngest girl, the one with pretty hair but awfully crooked teeth. We used to say she could eat watermelon through a picket fence, and I think mama never forgave herself that Edith could have had more boys if she had a prettier name.

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Sketch  Spring 1992
Alma: I just wanted my last girl to be beautiful, is all. Wanted her golden curls to fall down her back when I brushed them. Wanted to dress her in dresses and bows and lace. The rest were nearly boys — brown and rowdy, rolling outside and loud. Quiet — that’s all I prayed for in the last — quiet like the house sat so tight while the rest slept. Carrying her, I would sit on the stump outside and cry, Let his one be mine. I know it was just all the bugs in the fields, singing, but once I thought I heard the swollen earth rolling inside herself and whispering, edith, edith, edith.

III. “Francis” was my father’s name, of course. He made honey for half the state — five wide counties at least — and everyone knew the Francis family for that. The honey was in the big cellar that stank from the barrels of sauerkraut that he also kept hidden in the dark. Up and down those cellar steps, into the dirt and out, I carried so many jars for my father. He used to take me to town and we would park by a store, set up our wares in the back of our wagon, and smoke, people staring at the brown little girl with the pipe. Father would laugh and say, “This here girl’s my best son!”

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Francis: There was no way to keep my girl from being mine. She was that way from the day she was born — a beautiful baby, but bold — screaming all the time we would hold her, rolling on logs and falling on her knees without crying. Oh her mother was trying — hemming on lacy collars, telling her a beautiful woman can’t have bumps on her knees — hard, white scars — brushing her hair until it popped and sparked. But Amos—I called her Amos or Amy—would start that squeal. Jerk back from the brush and push out her lip. Watching, I would fight down the urge to cheer, could feel it rising in me like my chest were a rain gauge and my daughter was some hard August rain.
IV. “Mitchell” was my first husband’s name—John Mitchell. People thought it odd that I married him, but they didn’t know all his ways—how he would make beer on the coldest days when the house was shut tight and the smell of malt made us crazy, light-headed and drunk before the first cold taste. He would play the harmonica and dance under the trees with his girls—Cora and Lora—twins. They weren’t even mine but I loved them hard, like I knew my own would never survive. Mama said her girls were nearly boys, so I wasn’t surprised and I kept his name another ten after he died. Pneumonia. He and our little John died three days apart, leaving the baby Clarence and those eleven year old girls.

John: Had I known all being married would bring to Alta, I would have walked away that first day I saw her at the Mayor’s parade. she and her friend Mary were in blue, and bright-eyed, hair back, curls damp against their faces, sun in their eyes, scoffing at the mayor’s two fat girls riding in that new gray car. “They are going to squash it!” And Mary hushing her, Alta hands on her hips — those same hips I would feel years later when she would ease herself on me and whisper, “Remember me like the first day, John.” And I would see those hips that I held—handfuls of her—those hips slim beneath her blue gingham dress as she stood on the corner, laughing, arm shielding her eyes from the light.

V. “Clinton” was the name of the man who married me next. We were working at the same farm—he out in the fields, and I cooking indoors where the men came three times a day. I filled bowl after bowl and the other girls would serve. Standing in the hot kitchen, I could hear the men laughing, imagined them scraping their forks on the plates and winking. During Harvest we all had to pack up and go to the fields, take those sweaty men chicken and bread and tea. Clinton was cutting nearest the kitchen and circled around when he saw me come with lunch. Later he would tell the story, say it was the best sight he had ever seen, and laugh that he meant the chicken and tea, not me. Winked and said he married me for my honey wheat bread. It was my mother’s recipe, but I never told him that.

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Clinton: She just wasn’t the kind of woman you could say you loved. She was too tough, made you feel she was powerful, talking about her Great-Grandfather Amos and how his Indian blood was in hers. She was wild at times. Once fevered, she thought the cure would be to smoke three weed or to taste blood—said she heard things at night, like the earth was whispering to her and she couldn’t pull the world tight enough to keep it quiet. Walking with me at night, she would stop, stretch her arms high, say, “You don’t feel it, do you?” and slowly circle around me. She was up at three to have the house sit still awhile—smoking that pipe and thinking, probably, how strange that she had ended up with me in our gray town, nothing more than Amos Alta Francis Mitchell Clinton.