

Future Family Outcast

I am the daughter of an outcast who was the daughter of an outcast. My family tree is one of resilient roots and broken branches, with members regrettably removed only to reunite later in life. Love was both the undoing and renewing of my family. Stories about family fights that turned into a newfound family were told to me as cautionary tales, trauma woven into words that spanned generations. No one who knows me well says I am settled.

Beginnings are rarely realized, and my grandmother's start happened long after her birth. Sandra Seeger–Sandy–met my grandfather, Thomas Bingen, on a blind date. She dazzled him with her endless kindness and sharp wit. She could cut into conversations effortlessly with a timely joke or sarcastic comment. She charmed my grandfather and convinced him that no other woman on the earth would make him as happy as she would. As she did.

However, in addition to her many strengths, she was also lamentably Lutheran. While not an issue in the political fabric of yesteryear, the matter of her religion was a rigid rule that the son of a Catholic was reticent to break. My great grandmother was a strong woman in her own right, raising Thomas and his seven siblings in my great grandfather's absence. Yet, she was easily persuaded by her priest, who said that his marriage to Sandra would be immoral, iniquitous, illicit.

Thomas Eugene Bingen was a devout being. At one point in his life, his aspiration was to become a monk. Nevertheless, he was also a human being. So, in an unprecedented act, my grandfather eloped with my grandmother to Tennessee.

His siblings were told he was dead, or at least that was their interpretation of the news that their brother was “dead to them.” My great uncle Mark would later say that instance was one of great despair. Thomas loved Sandra so dearly, that he sacrificed his family for the one he would make with her. So, my grandparents set off to create a new life with only the love they had for one another. They found an apartment, owned a protective German Shepherd, and slowly reconnected with the rest of the Bingen siblings, who were relieved to know that their brother was alive.

Time passed. The Catholic priest who advised my great grandmother to cast out her son and daughter-in-law was long-gone, and my mother was born. Michele was a gorgeous baby girl with a thick head of dark brown hair. She was, as her name origin posits, a gift from God. With her birth came the reunification of my family. My great grandmother acquiesced that Thomas was a son again, Sandy her new daughter, and my mother a godsend.

Little did my grandparents know my mother would be such a handful. Michele was a rebel. She and her sisters were in constant motion, with my mom at the center. She paved the way for new experiences that no doubt aged my grandparents. Michele, nicknamed Missy, was meant for a life in the spotlight, old photos showed her dramatically posing in front of each state landmark from when her family traveled cross country. She was a true product of the 80s, hair reaching landmark heights and her tongue stained with lime green vodka. Funnily enough, we would find a full bottle of that radioactive liquid in my grandparents' basement years later.

My mom was first in most categories—first born, first to get coal in her stocking, first to get married, and first to get divorced. Michele had met him in high school and, true to the stereotype of all high school sweethearts, got married right after her graduation. While the 19-year-old had reservations about the union, least of all the fact that his last name rhymed with her first, Sandy had told my mother to follow through.

Missy loved her mom. Their love language was bickering, and they both constantly talked over each other. Despite the fondness they held for one another, when my mother approached her with the news of the divorce, my grandma made a choice. While the Catholic religion had been the first barrier for my family, the Lutheran religion would become the second. After all, divorce is considered a sin, one that Christianity dictates you cannot return from. Despite this, my mom chose her future family over her present.

Thus, the cycle continued. My mother lived an existence in isolation from her parents. She endured missed conversations and milestones. Hurt permeated her soul, but she continued to live on. In time, family fashioned a solution once again. My parents met, fell in love, and I was born. I was the perfect peacemaker, and my family was whole once more.

As a child, all I've ever known is familial love. My grandmother was my best friend who let me monopolize her attention whenever I asked. My mother is my role model who continues to support me with my constantly changing whims. People who know of them know me; their traits are intertwined in the fabric of my being. While both showed me how formative family is, they also revealed its fragility.

Often, I wonder what I'll do to restart the cycle. I know I will make decisions that will upset the balance. Sometimes I wonder if I am destined to be discontented, stuck in this endless revolution. However, history has taught me that no matter how far I stray, family will find me. No matter how far I wander, I will return. Family is never stagnant. It evolves and strengthens from its struggle.

I am a Seeger. I am a Bingen. I am a Vraney. I am to be determined.