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Escape Home

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ESCAPE HOME

by

LILIANN LYDON KANE

JAMES BRAZIEL, COMMITTEE CHAIR
KERRY MADDEN
DANIEL SIEGEL
GALE TEMPLE

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2014

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2014

ESCAPE HOME

LILIANN LYDON KANE

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

This short story collection represents the various ideas people have of their childhood homes, mixing the nostalgia of childhood with the inability to escape the past.

In “Table Manners,” Dina leaves Philadelphia where she’s seen success in advertising to visit her Alabama family for Thanksgiving. She’s quickly at odds with her mother who values traditional roles of women over achievement in the business world.

“Iron” is a piece of flash fiction that puts the reader right in the moment of an abused wife’s attempted escape. In the midst of her leaving, she realizes she has another difficult choice she has to make.

The lightest story in the collection, “Home Brew,” takes the reader to narrator Pete’s childhood home where he runs into his high school sweetheart. Pete and Laura are struck by the confines of adulthood and how things will never go back to the way they used to be.

“Burned” closes the collection. Rhea Stewart is trying to find direction when she realizes she’s pregnant. Between strained relationships with her mother and boyfriend, she feels she must choose where home for she and her child will be.

Keywords: fiction, prose

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Table Manners

The nice thing about going home for Thanksgiving is that it gives you an excuse to make your trip short. Already, the Alabama humidity started to curl my flat-ironed hair. I missed Philadelphia. I flapped my arms to prevent armpit stains, braced myself, and tapped the brass doorknocker.

“Morning, Dina,” my mom said as she pulled me in for a hug.

I gritted my teeth. “Hi, Mom.”

She held me tightly for a few more awkward seconds as I tapped her back with my fingers, “It’s so good to see you Dee Dee.” She let go of me to pick up my heavy suitcase. After tugging at the handle with a stiff shoulder, huffing with every pull, she eventually remembered it had wheels. Her body bounced as she rolled it inside.

“Aunt Dee Dee,” yelled one of my sister’s six children. I didn’t know his name, but I remembered his bushwhacked hair and snaggle-tooth. My sister Natalie gave me a quick side-hug as she rushed to another room with a baby on her hip.

Connor, Nat’s oldest child whose name I did know, sat on a recliner immersed in the bright flashes of an iPad. “Hey, Connor,” I said as I followed Mom. Connor kept his focus on the tablet, not saying a word. “Hey, Connor,” I said again, louder. I stopped where I was. He looked up, raised his barely visible eyebrow, and looked back down.

Children and screams bounced off various toys scattered around the floor, and the smell of apple juice and graham crackers tickled my nose hairs.

“I’m going to get settled,” I said, snatching the suitcase handle out of Mom’s fingers before walking to my room. At least my door had been shut. The chaos was mostly quarantined to the living room.

My room smelled like the lavender-scented drawer liners inside my chest of drawers. I pulled the top drawer out, rummaged through the meaningless trinkets and wondered if it really smelled like lavender still, or if my room would always smell that way to me.

The photos around the room were at least ten years old. I opened the drawer inside my bedside table and saw the picture of our old family: Mom, Dad, Nat, and me in Maui when Nat was sixteen and I was fourteen—the last trip we took before the divorce. When I got a little older, I realized couples and families took extravagant vacations to see if they could salvage the marriage. What a stupid thing to think. Anyone can solve problems in Hawaii, but everybody has to come back home.

My jewelry box held a few of my nice accessories. My grandmother’s sapphire ring and diamond earrings stayed in the middle of the string of pearls my dad got me for my high school graduation. My sophomore year in college, I stopped wearing them so I wouldn’t be another Southern girl donning her pearls.

Around Halloween this year, Mom told me that Dad was coming to her Thanksgiving dinner. I was shocked. It’d be the first meal of any kind they’d had together in fourteen years. I normally stayed long enough to see each parent separately on holiday breaks, but my work schedule only allowed me one day for Thanksgiving. Although I appreciated Mom’s gesture, I found the idea pretty disturbing.

“Are you nuts?” I said to Dad when I called him later. He laughed and blabbed on about how if you don’t have your family you don’t have anything. I could only focus on my jaw, sore from my mouth hanging open. Mom probably thought I’d ditch the family for pizza and beers with Dad if she didn’t invite him over since he and I are close. And her insight was pretty good, because pizza and beer sounds lots better than sweet tea and turkey to me.

The lime green comforter on my old bed was both blinding and inviting, and the hardwood floor somehow cushioned the soles of my feet as I took my shoes off. I lied down and the humble, creaky mattress was weirdly comfortable. Neon colors flashed under my eyelids as they shut.

Someone tapped on the door light enough to be rain, but I didn’t care who it was. I kept my eyes closed.

“Dee Dee? When you get a chance, I could use some help in the kitchen.”

When you get the chance – which was my mother’s dainty version of *get your ass over here*.

I got up and tripped on the way to the door. I put my hand on the doorknob but didn’t turn it. I waited.

“Thank you, Dee. Feel free to sleep if you’d rather. I don’t mind.” Mom’s codes: if she had left me alone, she really meant I could go back to sleep. If she stayed, she wanted me to get up and help her.

My eyes strained open. I turned the knob. And Mom smiled like Miss America, either clueless or indifferent to how tired I was and how little I wanted to be there.

The grandfather clock clanged twice. I looked at my watch to see three o'clock and I had to laugh at my bad luck – earning an extra hour in hell – as I followed Mom to the kitchen.

A pair of shuffling socks tried to match my stride; my animal instincts told me it was a small child.

“Hi Aunt Dina,” it whispered. I looked down to see Ellen, the only one of my sister’s children I liked.

“Hey sweetheart.” I knelt down to hug her. When we got to the kitchen, she propped herself up on a stool. “How old are you now?”

“Six. And I have a wiggly tooth – look,” she whispered as she jostled the tooth with her tongue.

“Great,” I said, feeling queasy when her gums turned red. “Your Mimi and I are going to do some work in the kitchen.”

“Can I help?”

“We’re using sharp tools right now,” my mom cut in. “You may help later.” Ellen shook her head as she sat down at a table and opened some crayons.

“Mind preparing the mashed potatoes?” Mom asked, calling them *puh tay tuhs*. While I rinsed them off, swishing some grit with the tips of my fingers, I saw Natalie sit down on the porch step with a cup of coffee.

“So how are things in Philadelphia?” Mom asked as I peeled the potatoes, the skins swirling in long strips.

“Fabulous, actually. Just pitched an ad for a company, and they chose to use it.”

“Wow,” Mom replied, mixing the ambrosia. “Was it for that same furniture company you presented to last time?”

“No, but we’re still working with them. This is a local coffee company called Perkules. The catch is that it rhymes with Hercules.”

“That’s a pretty clever name.”

“I know, right?” My lower back ached a little as I arched it. “The slogan I came up with is, ‘Perkules: the kick that can really pick you up.’” The words bounced out of my scratchy throat.

“That sounds great.” Mom was distracted by a grape at the edge of the bowl. “So,” she started again, “have you met anybody?”

“What?”

“You know, are you dating someone?”

My shoulders wilted. “No.”

“Honey,” the serving spoons clanked, “when are you going to let yourself be happy?”

“What are you talking about? I’m very happy.”

“There’s no happy like family happy – getting married, having kids, giving me grandkids.”

Laughter trickled out of my mouth like the grape from the ambrosia. “Six grandkids aren’t enough?” Mom stopped talking and slammed the crystal bowl harder than she should’ve. Amazing how resilient that crystal is. One would think so much pressure would’ve shattered it by now.

As I chopped the potatoes into cold cubes, the starchy juice dotting the tips of my fingers, Mom turned toward me. She stayed quiet for a few seconds then cleared her throat. “Why are you chopping the potatoes, honey? You’re making mashed potatoes, not potato salad.”

“They soften faster since the pieces are smaller.”

“That’s just ridiculous. Any good person mashes up the whole potatoes so you have nice big chunks.” I looked at her while I made three vertical chops on the next potato.

“Well, at least you know how to cook,” Mom sighed. “One of my failures as a mother is knowing Natalie can’t even boil water. Jesus, she can’t even make chicken salad with canned chicken.”

“Yes, I remember having nightmares about her tuna noodle casserole.”

“Ugh. A nightmare, indeed. See there, she can’t cook but still found herself a husband. There is still hope for you.” The persistence my mother had while I held a knife was almost admirable.

“Ellen,” she called and just like that I was snapped out of my gruesome fantasy. “Want to help Aunt Dee Dee squish the potatoes?” She pulled a masher out of a drawer. Ellen’s eyes grew bigger as she nodded her head.

“I don’t use that to mash my potatoes, but you can still help me.” I got the red hand mixer out of the same cabinet it had been in for the last twenty years.

“Good God in Heaven, you’re making *whipped* potatoes? Don’t do that. Everybody likes chunks in their mashed potatoes. It’s a texture thing, honey,” she said.

“If you’d wanted chunks in your potatoes, you should’ve made them yourself. Or gotten the box of instant potatoes and asked Nat to make them with nice, *powdery* chunks.” The masher made a loud clank as I threw it in the sink.

I pulled a foot stool up to the counter and helped Ellen get to the second wrung, trying not to envy the softness of her skin. “Make sure the whisks are touching the bowl,” I said, and I pushed her hand on the top of the mixer, then switched it on with my thumb. Her back jolted when the machine grunted. Then she laughed mischievously, like she had taken over the world with her tiny fingers.

Out the window, all three of us saw a blur of red and heard a human-sized thud.

“Owwwwwww!” we heard from the backyard.

“What was that?” Mom gasped.

“Connor fell out of that big tree,” Ellen said indifferently as she kept whisking the potatoes. I turned off the mixer, and Ellen and I ran behind Mom.

Connor groaned. “I’m fine,” he said.

Mother started rolling up his pants leg as I knelt down on the other side of him. While she moved his stumpy leg up and down and squished random places checking for breaks, he cocked one of his eyebrows up. “Everything’s all right,” Mom said. “Just a nasty scrape. Did you hit your head?”

“Connor, does your head hurt?” I asked. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“A million,” he answered, rolling his eyes.

“We’re trying to help you. Stop being such a little shit,” I said.

“Dina! Don’t you use that language!”

“It’s fine, Mom. At least he’s a cute little shit,” I said, and he cracked a smile. No better way to capture the soul of a problem child than by swearing. Mom started to grin too, wishing Connor wasn’t a little shit, I’m sure.

“Are you OK, baby?” Natalie asked casually, as if Connor fell out of trees all the time.

He nodded his head with a smile still cracking his lips.

“Here is a big Band-aid and boo boo goo,” Ellen said. She handed me the bandage and Neosporin. I squeezed a sizeable amount onto my finger and felt my nose twitch as I rubbed it on his second layer of skin. After peeling back the bandage, trying not to touch the pad with my slick fingertips, I managed to put it on his knee, mashing down the sticky edges.

“You’re better with kids than I give you credit for,” Nat said and smiled sassy. I’d forgotten she was still there.

“Not all animals eat their young,” I said and we chuckled.

“Some animals eat their young?” Connor asked. “Coooooooooooool.”

Nat and I pulled Connor up and walked toward the door. Connor held the door for me as I walked back in the kitchen to finish the mashed, or whipped, potatoes. I could tell it was the first time he realized he liked me, and that was fine. It was the first time I realized I liked him, too.

As it got closer to dinnertime, the adults in the house got tense. The random noises from various children agitated us more easily than before and we all moved like

quick robots, as if a buzzer would go off if everything wasn't ready in time. All the fine china was pulled out and dusted, and the silverware that was actually made of silver had been polished. You would've thought Queen Elizabeth was coming to dinner, but it was only my dad and my mom's mother, who we call Grammy.

Dad and Grammy never got along, even when Mom and Dad were married. On a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner when I was seven, Grammy was angry because Dad didn't want to eat her turkey. Grammy announced that he hadn't gotten any turkey so he said he wasn't feeling well and was getting a small plate. *If you can eat green bean casserole, you can eat turkey*, she said. *You're right*, he responded, *I just don't really care for turkey*. So, she threw him a banana from the kitchen. I still don't get it, but every year since then, she gave him a banana at holiday dinners.

Mom had pulled out the chardonnay. She hadn't started wobbling yet, but she was getting extra giggly. I took a deep breath and prepared to lift the turkey pan.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Mom yelled.

"You're sure feeling spiritual tonight," I grunted as I lumbered toward the dining room table.

"One potholder is red, the other one is orange!"

I sat one end of the turkey down on the counter top. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She repeated herself softly and slowly, "One potholder is red. The other one is orange."

“I understood you, Mother. What I don’t understand is why the colors of these potholders are relevant.”

“They don’t match, sweetheart. Here,” she said as she picked up the opposite pieces of cloth. “Choose. I don’t care, you can choose,” her dry but manicured hands waved them in my face. “But for God’s sake choose the same color.”

I dropped the orange potholder on the floor and grabbed the red one to match the color of my mother’s cheeks.

Natalie finally made herself useful by setting the table. “Dina,” her husband Steve said, “let me get that for you.” He put the turkey in the center.

“Hey everybody, I’m here,” my Grammy shouted, walking through the door. Mother hugged her while balancing a plate of deviled eggs. A few of Nat’s kids scurried toward her. She took a step back when she saw them. I went back in the kitchen and poured a glass of wine.

“Dee, top me off while you’re at it,” Mom said. Her messy fingers smudged the glass when she thrust it into my hand.

When I handed it back, she took in a fast gulp like it was a shot of liquor. “Pour the tea in glasses, then make an extra batch to put on the table.” By the time I made it out of the kitchen, almost everyone was seated and Natalie was arranging the runts at the coveted kids’ table.

“Well hey there, Dina, nice of you to join us,” Grammy said.

“Hello Grammy.” Her arms felt so boney and her shoulders slumped a little. It didn’t stop her from being bitchy, but it did make me realize how quickly things can change.

Dad hadn’t gotten there yet, but Grammy declared she was hungry, so we started eating. “Light or dark meat?” Mom asked as she flopped pieces of turkey back and forth on her pewter serving dish.

“So Dina, are you going to bring a Yankee man home with you for Christmas?” Grammy’s voice clanked against the crystal tea goblets. I had to take a deep breath, wearied by that one fucking question. It seemed odd to me that she and mom were more plagued by me being unmarried than by Natalie having six kids.

“There isn’t a Yankee man in my life right now.”

“Oh, are you seeing a Southerner up there? Or, God Almighty, are you seeing a Yankee *woman*?”

Natalie cackled after she’d taken a sip of her tea – a few droplets spewed from her mouth before she was able to swallow.

“No, Grammy. I’m attracted to men. Just don’t have time for them.” I spooned some squash onto my plate. For some reason, I’ve always imagined Mom or Grammy saying, ‘Just tell me about your life now,’ and actually giving a damn about what I tell them. But Grammy just stared blankly at me for a few seconds and scratched her head with her long, pink fingernails.

There were three strong knocks on the door before it opened. “Hello?” Other than the baby tapping on her high chair, it got quiet enough for us to hear our clothes rub

against our shoulders as we turned to face the door. Dad walked in slowly. I got up and hugged him in the foyer. No one else left the table. At first I felt bad, but then felt awkwardly fabulous reminding everyone that I was the reason he was here.

Light reflected off his wedding band. Its silver color confused me for a second. I had to remind myself that his other wife gave him that one. I couldn't remember her name, either. Luckily, Nat and I were adults when they got married, so I didn't have to form a relationship with her. Mom's shoulders tensed and her chin popped around mechanically as Dad greeted everyone.

"Hi, Susan," he said to Mom. Not Sue or Susie, just Susan. Pet names were a thing of the past, but it still didn't feel right. He stuck out his hand.

Mom reached her hand out. It was shaking slightly as she plastered a smile on her face. "Hello, Tom."

He walked toward Grammy with even more resistance. "Well, hello there, Tom," Grammy said, reaching inside her purse. "Here you are." She handed him a bruised banana.

"Thanks, but no thanks," he said as he handed it back.

"For God's sake," Grammy put it back in her bag.

Instinct or muscle memory led Dad to his old seat at the head of the table. "Oh," he jerked his head back when he saw Steve sitting there, Natalie to his right.

"You're sitting beside Dina, on the other side of Steve." Nat pointed to the empty seat beside me. His knuckles popped as he pulled the chair out; he made a loud thump

when he sat down. I found myself wishing it were summer so that cricket and frog sounds might drown out some of the awkwardness.

“Well, this looks great. Thanks for preparing it, Susan,” Dad said as he strained his long arms to scoop some turkey. Mom looked at him, put a thumb up and kept eating.

“So,” Dad said, widening his eyes, “How is life in Philly?”

“Everything’s great,” I said, and told him about the Perkules ad.

“That’s awesome, kiddo.” He started whispering about one of his sports articles getting published in the New York Times.

“There’s a Yank somewhere in there, Dad,” I said, almost shouting, “Make your way up North.”

“I don’t know, Dee,” he said, “the sports aren’t the same in the north.”

“Come on, football is everything up there. The Pats, Eagles, Giants, and I guess the Jets count.”

“It ain’t the SEC, honey. There’s no Iron Bowl in New England. But I guess if I did move, I’d see you more than a few times a year,” he said, giving me the same guilt trip Mom’s always given me. But his actually made me feel guilty.

“How’s your wife doing?” Mom cut in. “A shame she couldn’t make it tonight.” I popped the cork out of the wine bottle. When I poured, I laughed, thinking of all the times people told me that my mother wouldn’t embarrass me when I got older.

“She’s fine, thank you. I just didn’t think it would be appropriate for her to come.”

“Is she not eating Thanksgiving dinner? Poor woman,” Mom continued. The wine stung my throat on its way down.

“We had Thanksgiving lunch.”

“Good God, did my crown come out?” Grammy searched in her mouth with her finger, then pulled out a chip of something. “No, just a piece of pickle relish.” Natalie handed her a small container of Germ-X.

“Well, I wish she’d come,” Mom said. “I made enough food for her.”

Grammy cut in, “Susan, stop. This is ridiculous.”

Mom ignored Grammy. “She should’ve come, she’s part of the girls’ family.” The blood vessels under my face started heating up after another big swig.

“Dina, pass me the bottle.” Grammy said.

“Which one?”

“Hell, either of them will do at this point.” She filled her tea goblet half way.

“No offense,” Natalie looked at Dad, “but she isn’t part of our family. I think I can speak for Dina and me when I say, thanks for not bringing . . . “

“Jennifer,” Dad said.

“Sure, Jennifer,” Natalie answered.

“Is she the same one I met? No, that’s right, you didn’t marry her.”

“Fifteen years ago?” he bellowed, “You’re wanting to relive a confrontation from fifteen years ago?” I wiped droplets of water off my goblet and unto my forehead.

“It was actually fourteen years ago, Tom.”

“Forgive me for rounding up.”

“Fourteen years ago when I caught you cheating on me,” Mom said.

I dropped my fork while Nat choked down her water. “In our bedroom.” Mom drank all the wine she had in her glass in one gulp. Dad sighed and put his elbow on the table to rest his head. The room seemed silent as I looked at him.

“Whew! These mashed potatoes are divine, Susan. What’s your secret?” Grammy asked.

“They’re not mashed, they’re whipped!” Ellen called from the kids’ table, reminding me the kids were with us, too.

“*You* ought to be whipped,” Grammy said, grimacing at Mom only the way a mother could.

“How could you do that to us?” I practically begged. Half of me couldn’t blame him, I moved hours away from home for a reason. I just didn’t realize he had this side to him. “How could you throw our family away like that?”

“I didn’t try to throw anything away, Dina.”

“You did it to all of us Dad. You screwed all of us.”

“God, you sound just like your mother.”

“That’s funny.” I said.

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“When I piss Mom off, she always tells me I’m just like you.”

“Isn’t that a funny coincidence?” Dad said.

“That you both blame me when you’re mad?” I got up and slammed the chair into the table.

“I was going to say that your mom and I can see the negative side of the other in ourselves. That’s ultimately what this must mean, right?”

“Did you know that? What happened?” I whispered to Nat, but I don’t know why since everyone heard me anyway.

“Yes.”

The pit of my stomach shifted making me wish I hadn’t had a deviled egg. I couldn’t decide if I was angrier at Dad for his infidelity, or at Mom and Nat for keeping this secret from me.

I walked away. My business-savvy told me to do otherwise – to not look like I was taken off guard or unprepared for the situation – but it wasn’t business, it was personal.

When I got inside my bedroom I slammed the door, which I had done a lot as a teenager. I picked up the picture of us in Hawaii, wanting to rip it in half. Something stopped me. I don’t know what it was.

Then someone knocked on the door.

I stayed still.

“Dina? Let me in, Dee,” my mom said.

I walked over to the door, and turned the lock to the right.

I woke up in complete darkness. According to the time on my blinding LED phone screen, two hours had passed. I had five missed calls from my mother, one from my dad. There was also a text from her – **there is more wine if you need it**, it said. Dad

had left a message, “I’m sorry, Dee. Sorry for everything. Call me if you want to. Love you.”

I left my bedroom and almost stepped on a piece of pecan pie right outside the door - Mom’s strange way of apologizing. Used to, she spelled “I’m sorry” in whipped cream on the top of cakes or wrote those words with her fingers on the foggy glass of smoothies. That was all I ever got, and long ago I had stopped waiting for the words “I’m sorry” to come out of her mouth. I brought the pie to the kitchen table, and poured a glass of wine. In between bites and sips I rolled the green crayon Ellen left on the table this afternoon.

“May I join you?” Mom asked as she wobbled in from the living room and grabbed a tight hold of the counter top.

“Sure. I’m probably done with the wine for the night.”

Mom sloshed the wine as she picked up the bottle and started pouring it in my glass. “Oh, please. I just wish I had some liquor, I ran out of my coconut rum a week or so ago.” I didn’t realize Mom was such an alcohol veteran. She drank a glass of wine regularly, but in twenty-eight years, she managed to never let me see her tipsy. “My pecan pie was pretty tasty, if I do say so myself.” I’d also never heard her pronounce it *pee-can*. She was getting more Southern with age, or maybe more Southern with alcohol.

“Yeah, it was really good.” My bird finger ran along the rim of the glass as Mom tapped her toes on the floor in a steady rhythm.

“Dee, look,” she said, closing her eyes and exhaling for a few seconds, “I can’t believe I acted that way. One of those moments that, when I start thinking about what actually happened, I can’t believe it.”

“That definitely makes two of us.”

“I just wanted your Thanksgiving to be perfect. I wanted to be the better person and invite your dad over, and then I just blew up.” The apology was a nice change of pace, but I doubted that she planned the dinner with only good intentions.

“I was really more surprised about this fourteen year secret that everyone at the table knew, except me.”

“Honey, I still can’t believe I said anything.”

“I can’t believe you went fourteen years without saying anything. Even Natalie knew.”

“It just slipped out with her a few years ago, too. We didn’t want either of you to know. As much as I hate your dad, I can admit that he is a good father,” she said as she sliced a piece of pie unevenly and plopped it on her plate. “For the two of you, it doesn’t matter how good of a husband he was. Or wasn’t, as the case may be.”

“I felt like a child again. Like you thought I couldn’t handle that kind of news.”

“You just love your dad so much. You’re a lot like him. And, honestly, it’s easier to tell Natalie stuff because she’s here, for one, and she likes to talk to me,” Mom said. It was her first guilt trip that ever worked.

“But anyway,” she shook her head, “Natalie loves Tom, but he was your partner in crime. I knew you’d be devastated to find out. He screwed up as a husband. Hell, I

screwed up as a wife, and when I do things like I did a few hours ago, I can understand why he wanted to leave. But he didn't screw up as a dad. No mother wants to see the look I saw on my daughter's face tonight. Whether she's eight or twenty-eight." A piece of crust hung off the corner of her bottom lip. It fell off when she took a sip of her wine.

"Well, you have any more secrets for me? Not sure I can make it down for Christmas this year," I said sarcastically as Mom started to laugh.

"Love that sense of humor." She started to cackle. I rolled my eyes. "Well, sure. I've got a secret for you. I don't care that you haven't gotten married yet. Hell, it wouldn't even bother me if you were a lesbian. Those women are pretty smart, never dealing with men. If it weren't for the sex, I could definitely be a lesbian." She let out a huge belch. "I've been waiting on that all night," she said.

"Oh my god," I started laughing, "That's the first time I've ever heard you do that." At that point, I wasn't sure if I was more startled by the drunkenness or the fact that my mother referenced sex like she'd had it recently.

"It's a shame you're not coming for Christmas. I might have farted in front of you," she said as she wiped the corners of her lips.

"Well, on that note, I better get to bed. Early flight tomorrow."

"Can't you stay one more day?"

No way in hell is what I wanted to say, but like Mom, I stayed dainty. "I have work to do."

"Well, you'll have to send me some of that Perky coffee."

“Will do,” I said as she reached her floppy arms over my shoulders for a hug. She stayed still longer than normal and I strained my arms to give her an extra squeeze. Spit with wine mixed and trickled down my cheek when she gave me a kiss. When I got in my room, I wiped it off.

My shoes were still crooked beneath my bed, I straightened them and put them under the clothes I was wearing home. All of my joints wanted to pop but couldn’t – too stiff. The picture of us in Hawaii was still on top of my bed, bent in the middle. I flattened the glossy sheet, all of us with red eyes, and put it back in the drawer alongside fruity lip-gloss and gaudy costume jewelry. After looking at it for several seconds, smelling a hint of lavender, I shut the drawer and turned out the light.

The next morning, it felt like drumsticks were pounding my brain. I strained my eyelids so they’d stay above my dry eyes and I rolled my luggage out of my room. My mascara made my lashes stick together. Why had I put it on? I was about to fall asleep on an airplane. At least the soles of my feet seemed grateful that I had packed my tennis shoes on the flight down.

Hearing coffee being poured into mugs made me think I should’ve scheduled a later flight so I could’ve had breakfast with Mom. She walked toward me with a to-go mug.

“For the road?” she asked. All of her makeup looked perfect and her hair flipped in all the right places. The corners of my eyes felt cracked when I squinted, scouring my

mom's face for any sense of a hangover. She looked at my ponytail and I could almost feel the rubber band poking me in response to her once over.

"Sure," I took a sip. The simmering liquid warmed me up. "I need to call a cab. Want to sit on the porch while we wait for it?"

"Sweetheart, I would love, too. But I arranged something else." Right then, my dad walked around the corner.

Mom's goo-goo eyes longed for me to gasp or leap, and wanted me to proclaim her awesomeness as a mother. What I really wanted to do was revert back to my teenage years, stomping my feet as I drudged into my bedroom, slamming the door and hoping I could make the house shake. But I would've missed my flight and been stuck there longer.

"Let me get that, Dee." Dad said, taking my suitcase and rolling it toward the door. He knew not to wait for my response because he would've gotten a 'no.' The suitcase made a loud pop as he rolled it out the door almost fiercely. When I looked at my mom, she cracked that cheesy grin and gave me a hug.

"I love you so much," she said as her coffee breath blew into my face.

Fuck you, I thought as I spread the same dumbass smile. "I love you, too, Mom."

"Maybe you'll change your mind about Christmas."

Not on your life. I walked out slowly, hoping a random happening of fate would stop me from having to ride with him. Once I got out the door, he was already in the driver's seat and had started the car. The steam puffing out of the exhaust pipe told me it was too cold to make a break for it and run.

Iron

I'd never been so grateful to be short and skinny, sneaking around the house with no one hearing me. Despite our bedroom door being shut, Colt's snoring blasted throughout the house. I hadn't slept well for years and never knew how the boys managed to sleep with their dad's locomotive gargles.

The bruise on my cheek stung where Colt had hit me at the dinner table earlier. Ignoring the throb, I slung two gym bags over my shoulder and tiptoed into Wyatt's room. He snorted when I tapped him enough, "What's wrong, Mom?"

"Nothing's wrong. Be quiet. I'm leaving," I said, straining my fingers so they would stop shaking.

"What?"

"I'm leaving. Come with me."

"OK. I mean, I need to pack, or at least put on some clothes."

"Just get dressed real fast. I packed for you." He shuffled through the shirts and shorts in his bag I'd packed earlier.

"OK," he said, picking his cargo shorts off the floor and putting them on.

"I'm going to get your brother." The words seemed as loud as Colt's snoring.

Wyatt pulled his senior homecoming shirt on as he followed me into my fifteen year-old's room. "Stewart." I tapped him. He jumped, a lighter sleeper than Wyatt. "I'm leaving, honey. We're leaving."

"Leaving? What?" he scrunched up his nose and rubbed his head, messing up his already unkempt hair.

“I’m leaving and y’all are coming with me. I packed you a bag. Put on some clothes, something sturdy ‘cause I packed light. Hurry up and be quiet.”

“I don’t want to leave, Mom.”

“Dude,” Wyatt cut in, “doesn’t matter. Do it for mom.”

“This is home,” Stewart whined, “I don’t want to leave.”

“Then we’ll leave you here,” Wyatt said.

I paused. Could I do that? Would I? Stew’s eyes still seemed glossy, a mixture of sleepiness and not believing what he was hearing.

“Let’s go, Mom,” Wyatt said.

Looking at Stewart, I held his hand and rubbed the grooves on his fingertips.

“Stew will be OK. Like I said earlier, he can defend himself. You can’t. He’ll be fine.”

“Your Dad will hear if the car starts,” I said. “He’ll come looking for us. What if he finds us?”

“We’ll go somewhere random. Come on.” Wyatt picked up my hand and tugged. Stewart plunked his head against the headboard and pulled out of my grip.

I took his hand again and began to trace the fortune-teller lines on his palm. “I’m sorry, Stewart,” I said. I kissed his forehead. “I have to do this. I love you.”

Wyatt took my bag off my shoulder and we tiptoed to my car. Everything seemed so loud, how the door closed, how the car cranked. But by the time we were on the road, all that stuck in my mind was how Stewart didn’t even get out of bed.

“Do you think Stew woke your dad up and told him?”

Wyatt looked out the passenger’s side window. “I think he’s gone back to sleep. He’ll look for us around the house tomorrow.”

“You don’t think Colt heard us?”

“No, still sawing logs with one hell of a chainsaw when we left.”

I delayed answering, still struck funny by hearing one of my boys say *hell*, even though it wasn’t the first time. “Yeah, he was. And nobody’s called,” I lit up my phone for the hundredth time.

Tapping the steering wheel, I made a mental to-do list. I pictured it written on a hotel notepad, hoping we would find a place to stop for the night. It was more of an idea list, really. It hadn’t occurred to me ‘til then, how difficult it would be to apply for a job when a hotel room was all I knew to call home. I was grateful I’d had enough sense to apply for my own credit card years ago – the only piece of advice I’d taken from my mom as an adult. *Call Mom* was the second thing on the list. *File a restraining order* was next. I laughed for a moment at my sarcasm; partially because it was funny, partially because it was a good idea.

My foot pressed the gas pedal as soon as the tires hit the interstate. When the speedometer pointer wavered in between 80 and 85, I wondered how fast Colt went on the anger rides he took. I used to wonder if he would ever hit a pole or a tree. Eventually came to realize I’d never be that lucky.

We took exit 181 in Gadsden leading us to a Fairfield Inn and Suites. I parked in a dark corner off to the side of the building.

“I’m proud of you, Mom. You’ve got some balls. I mean—”

“I know what you mean. And thanks.”

“You’re strong.”

“Not strong enough to change your dad. Not strong enough to save him.”

He opened the front door for me, “But you were strong enough to leave. Strong enough to save yourself.”

We smelled the cooks making breakfast when we went to our room; I hadn’t realized ‘til then how late, or early it was. I didn’t sleep at all. Just laid there resting my bones, which at that moment felt heavy but sturdy, like iron.

Home Brew

Little things bring me back to Black Mountain, North Carolina, throughout the year. This time, it was a job. My mom's old neighbor, Mrs. Armstrong, needed her system repaired. Granted she almost wouldn't trust Jesus Christ to do honest work if *He* was the technician despite all of the crosses hanging in her house, but after lots of discussion, Mom convinced Mrs. Armstrong that I would treat her right and Mom promised me that I'd get a good tip if I sweet-talked her. Business is slow in October at Coolidge Heating and Air where I work. The temperature just isn't extreme one way or the other, so I took the job and made the two-hour trip west from Charlotte.

I got Mrs. Armstrong's ductwork done with a day to spare. Mom was out of town at one of her church conferences, so I slept late, then headed to *My Father's Pizza*. By the time I finished my calzone, many of the businesses were already closing. I shook my head. Everything in Black Mountain still shut down at six.

The Dripulator Coffee Bar, however, was open 'til nine. Their service counter was an island in the center of the store. It was round and old with a black top of granite. At one time, the Dripulator had been a soda shop. The place was crowded, like always. Clients were huddled around small tables, talking, reading, or clicking laptops like robots, but most were seated along the island. Not a seat open for me.

I ordered a plain Mountain Roast and stood back a little to people watch, one of my favorite things to do, the smell of sweet cream so thick, the air was turning hazy. Well, not really. It was just getting dark out, and the yellow light was gathering up all the dust in the street, pushing it inside the Dripulator whenever anyone opened the door.

The guy behind the counter had an arm sleeved with tattoos. He prepared a little girl's hot cocoa and her mother's hazel nut coffee with the gentlest motions. He even dabbed some whipped topping on the little girl's nose. She blushed and put some on her mother's nose.

A few more people came in, a middle-aged couple—the guy kept looking at the tile floor to make sure his steps were going right—and a group of students from Montreat College a few minutes South.

The espresso maker started moaning. My head felt like it was vibrating back and forth, the strong coffee blending with the sweet syrups. The tattooed barista was almost too mellow for the grunting machine and the sharp coffee. Back in Charlotte the baristas at the Starbucks I went to were like machines, mass-producing for their clients who were in a constant, stimulated hurry. I liked the Dripolator better, but this town was a relic, and I was glad I had left it.

I knew the next head of curly brown hair that walked in - my high school sweetheart, Laura Pate. I didn't have to stop and wonder if she was married. The twinkly boulder on her finger made the yellow dust light sparkle.

"What can I get you?" the barista asked.

She clicked her fingernails on the counter. "I just want a nice, strong cup of coffee."

"Our Mountain Brew is a medium roast and the Home Brew is bold. It just depends on what you're in the mood for. Both will do the trick," he answered as he made waves with his right hand.

“All right, I’ll take a small Home Brew,” she said.

“Coming right up.”

Laura moved off to the side, then she saw me. I’d run into her once a few years back, around Christmas at the BiLo off State 453. We darted in opposite directions the moment we noticed one another and I hurried through the grocery aisles like we were playing tag, and I was looking for a good place to hide. But she didn’t chase after me.

This time was different. We had no choice but to acknowledge one another, so I put up my hand.

“Here’s your Home Brew, Ma’am,” the barista rapped on the counter.

“Oh, thanks,” Laura said. She grabbed her cup, then slowly walked in my direction. I looked down at the empty cherry wood table next to me.

“Pete?”

“Hey, Laura.” I popped my head back up. “You’re more than welcome to sit here.”

She was waiting to see what I was going to do. I sat down, and she took a few seconds more, then smoothed the butt and thighs of her jeans like she was sitting in a skirt. “What are you doing with yourself these days? Are you still in Black Mountain?”

“No, I moved to Charlotte. Been there a good while working for a heating and air company. What about you?”

“I’m a fiction librarian at the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library,” she said and sipped her coffee.

“No kidding? Had no clue you were in Charlotte, too. What part do you live in?”

“We have a loft uptown.” She pointed to the twinkly boulder.

“Congratulations, although I’m sure it’s way past due.”

“We got married five years ago.”

“What’s your husband’s job?”

“He writes and takes pictures for the Observer.” She tapped her fingers on the wood again. Laura was beautiful, but her tapping always made me anxious, made me feel like she was tapping on my spine. “Well, how ‘bout you? I’m sure you’ve swept some lucky woman off her feet by now.”

I twisted left, then right. “Nope. No sweeping.” I took a long sip and let the coffee’s heat burn my throat all the way down. “So, a librarian? I can see that. What exactly do you do?”

“I stay aware of new literature in young adult fiction, try to get current authors for readings, and help people find resources relevant to their literature papers.”

“Wow,” I exaggerated, which made her laugh like I used to make her laugh. “I think you just made HVAC work seem interesting.”

“Surely there’s *something* interesting about that line of work.” She rolled her eyes.

My cheeks sizzled and turned pink. I hated how cocky she could be about her academic achievements. Always using fancy, long sentences to explain something really simple. Or explaining different things to me like historical references in movies, just assuming I didn’t understand them.

“Wait, Pete. That didn’t come out right at all.”

“No it didn’t. But you’re right. Nothing interesting. The women don’t trust me. I mean, I get questioned when I change out air filters. And the men think they can do it better than I can, even though they called me. I get to play with roaches and rodents under houses and in attics. Not very interesting, I promise. And not much luxury either.”

“How is your mom doing?” she asked.

“She’s fine. Same old, you know. That woman’s got a hell of lot of church in her still.”

Laura tried not to laugh. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“I know,” I said.

“Tell her I said hey.” Laura and my mom always got along well. There were some days when Laura would even help mom get dinner going. Laura was a great cook.

“I think I need to leave now,” she said.

The sun was past setting. The yellow dust light all gone. “I just woke up,” I told her.

“What?”

“I slept all day. That’s crazy to do at my age, but . . .” I shook my head. “Need me to walk you to your car? Where did you park?”

“Over by the outdoors shop.”

“That’s a mile away, I don’t want you walking by yourself at night.”

“Nothing will happen to me. Not in this town.”

“Just let me,” I said, and she nodded.

We got up, coffee in hand. I opened the door and she stood there, looking at me. Then she swished her prissy hand trying to shoo me out, “Come on, Pete, let’s go.”

“Laura, I’m holding the door for you.”

She bit her bottom lip and walked through the doorway.

A little girl ran by us, squealing. She stopped at the corner, reached into her bag of Cheerios, and chucked her version of a handful at a bird’s head.

“No, no, sweetie,” her mother interrupted. “Don’t throw food *at* the bird, throw it *to* the bird. Watch.” She reached into the bag, got one “o,” and tossed it. The bird’s head and feet wobbled toward the cereal – the child’s giggles were low, then high as the bird ate the “o.”

We crossed the street past a vintage toy store. Next to that was the Black Mountain Yarn Shop. It opened when we were juniors at Owen High School and out of nowhere, knitting became ‘the thing to do.’ I started to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“I was just thinking about your brief stint with knitting, and that hat you made me.”

“That was the ugliest thing. But you were the one idiotic enough to *wear* it.”

“It wasn’t ugly. It just looked homemade.” Truth be told, it was ugly. But after weeks of seeing her head and fingers move with the constant tick of those needles, and seeing her perk up when she realized she was making progress, I couldn’t put the hat away. The navy blue yarn was as knotted up and confused as we were back then. I still

have it somewhere. It's in some box so I don't have to look at it all the time, but I've never thrown it out.

We passed My Father's Pizza. There's nothing great about my Father's except the fact that your pizza is made to order and pretty tasty. But it's where we had our first date. The wood planked floors and walls were nice-enough décor for two awkward teenagers. Her laugh made my insides squish together then, and that was enough for me to want to kiss her goodnight.

We ate at My Father's a lot after that. I even took her there for our first "anniversary" when we celebrated dating a year. Looking back, that seemed pretty cheap of me, but I don't recall her caring.

On our anniversary I drove her to my house because my mom was out of town. Laura kept knocking her arms against the furniture and apologizing on our way to my room. I was nervous, too, but I recovered fast the one time I tripped over the rug. It didn't get any better when the clothes started coming off. And when her shirt snagged on the necklace I had bought her, and the necklace broke, I just held her.

"It's okay," I said.

She pushed me away so she could finish undressing. Her chest puffed in and out so much it looked like she'd finished swimming across the Nantahala River, but eventually, our sweaty and tangled mess felt natural. I took her home that night, walked her to her door, feeling like I knew a piece of her that no one else knew.

I don't know if my mom ever figured out we had made love in the house, but if she did, she didn't care. Five years ago she mailed me Laura's wedding announcement

when it was in the paper. I wasn't sure whether she was keeping me updated or letting me know what I was missing. Either way, the brief wave of nausea that climbed up my throat that day made me throw the clipping away right after I read it.

Laura stopped and inhaled the heavy vanilla fragrance that was coming from Kilwin's Ice Cream Parlor.

"Been in here lately?" I asked her.

"Yeah, whenever I come home. My Father's is dinner one night. Kilwin's is the dessert."

"How is Mr. Preston doing?" I asked. Mr. Preston was one of the regular soda jerks several years ago.

"He's still here, but getting older. Works the register and handles the books now, mostly – gotten too weak to scoop out the ice cream."

A few shops down from Kilwin's in front of a retro thrift store was a plain wooden bench, so old and dried out it should be petrified by now. The last time I sat on it, I broke Laura's heart. The taps of my feet on the sidewalk got softer. Maybe if I was quiet enough, we'd just pass it by. But she slowed her pace the closer we got. When we were right behind it, she turned and placed her hands on the back, and stopped.

"Why did you do it?"

"Why did I do what?" I said.

"I know it was a long time ago and we're both happy now. But I've just always wondered why you broke up with me."

I sighed.

“If you don’t want to tell me, or if you don’t even remember, that’s fine.”

“Look, you were practically moving across the state,” I said. “It never would’ve worked out.”

“We would’ve had statistics against us, sure. Young kids a few hours away from each other. But that spiel you gave me was so ridiculous, ‘Maybe this won’t come as a huge surprise to you, but I think it’s best if we called things off between us.’”

“You remember the words. Hell, I don’t even remember the words.” Funny thing was, I thought that line was brilliant when I said it.

“Then, you went into that whole distance thing.”

“My ‘huge surprise’ line was pretty stupid.”

“And it was a surprise, just in case you wondered. I never saw it coming. We fucked the night before, then, boom.”

“If it was such a surprise, you could’ve said something other than what you did. Remember? You gave me a hug and then you told me, ‘Well, it’s been real.’”

“Did I say that?” Laura started to laugh. “Damn, that was good.”

“Yeah, it was. And what you said told me my reason for breaking up with you was right. Because you were too good for me.”

“What? What in the hell are you talking about?” She stepped away from me.

“What did I ever do to make you feel so inferior?”

“You were about to move to college. My honor graduate, scholarship-earning girlfriend moving hours away from me. That put me in my place. It wasn’t your fault. You deserved to go away to school and I deserved to stay home and find work.”

“Over-achieving in college to work in a library. I can see how that’s really intimidating.”

“It was intimidating at the time. And the way you talked about your work at the library—”

“All I really do is shelve, alphabetize, and collect inventory for a living.”

“I’m sure that’s not all you do. And I’ve had the same job for the last ten years. Working for the exact same company, the exact same position.”

“Then we’re both stuck, aren’t we, doing stupid little jobs.”

“We didn’t picture it this way then, Laura, you and your high-brow talk. I didn’t know what you wanted to do, and if I did, I wouldn’t have understood it. What I’m doing right now doesn’t surprise me. I always had a feeling I’d end up doing something blue-collar.”

“Don’t belittle me,” she said and started walking. Fast. I sped up. When I reached her, she turned to me. “There’s nothing wrong with working with your hands, Pete.”

“And what would that offer *you* in a relationship?”

“That’s actually not what I look for in a relationship, the benefit I’d get out of it. But if my sink leaked or something broke, honestly it would be nice to have somebody who could repair it - unlike my husband, who can’t even fix a damn sandwich.”

“I really don’t want to get into why you’re pissed off at your husband.”

“I’m not pissed off at him. He’s a good guy. The honeymoon’s just been over for a while. My little photojournalist likes to stay locked up in his coup, and things just aren’t what they used to be. I miss being tired but giddy – broke, but happy.”

I hugged her. Her cold skin was shivering, like it always did. And I knew she was waiting for me to warm her up. So I wiggled around until it felt like I had a mold of her imprinted on my body and she fit perfectly there. I felt her chest rise. Her head popped up.

“It’s probably time to get home.”

I tucked strands of her dark hair behind her pearl-studded ear. We walked to her car. It had gotten darker—there was no moon up—and her blue Honda was the only car in the lot.

“It was great seeing you, again,” I said. I reached one arm out to hug her.

Her hands trembled as they grabbed my chin, and I suddenly remembered the feeling of her soft fingers against my scratchy skin. She kissed me, her lips covering mine at first. I didn’t want to enjoy it or continue, but sweet hair spray and floral perfume combined with God knows what, made the scent that was unmistakably Laura.

“Wait,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out, glancing to the left and right, looking for nighttime wanderers, looking for the man who could be Laura’s husband. When I didn’t see anyone, I said, “Well, OK. I’m not really sorry.”

“Good,” she said. “That was actually pretty nice. And you know,” she said, grabbing my hand, “this could be the last time we see each other.”

I couldn't tell whether the comment roused or upset me, but I picked her up to meet me this time and kissed her again.

Laura slid down, "Do you want to get in the car?" My hand fumbled unsuccessfully behind me for the door handle.

"Hold on," she said, her hands still shaking as they dipped into her purse for the keys. Then I heard a click. Laura opened the door and pushed me in. She began straddling me and kissing me.

Laura grabbed my hands and led them to the back of her waist. Then she began to raise her arms. I peeled off layers of her clothes, dizzied by the familiarity of doing so. She tried to cover her torso with her hands, but I replaced them with mine. Skin hung off her hips more than it did ten years ago, and it was beautiful – womanly instead of girly. Her hands wandered then found their way to the same places they used to find.

But I could feel her wedding ring scratch, and I flinched. She stretched her hand out in front of her the way newly engaged women do. She looked back and forth, to me, then her finger. She looked back at me for several seconds, then took her ring off and put it under the back windshield before she started kissing me again.

The love-making was familiar and awkward like we were sixteen and adults all at once. I feel pretty confident we defied the laws of physics that night by proving that two full-grown adults can enjoy each other's company in the backseat of a midsize vehicle.

Laura dressed in the front seat while I dressed in the back. I had to finagle to get my shirt back over my head and hit different sides of the car when I moved. During the

old days we would have laughed, but circumstances were different now. The car wreaked of awkwardness. I was dressed before she was so I stepped out to let her finish. She came out, her hair matted down in some places, exploding in others. “Oh my god, have you seen my ring?”

“Yeah, one second.” I opened the back door and reached to the console by the back windshield. I grabbed the ring that I never could have afforded for her. Right when I tried to hand it over, she held her left hand out to me. It didn’t make any sort of nervous jitter, and I slid the ring on her finger and she squeezed mine for a second before she let go. Everything about Laura was plain and beautiful.

“It was great to see you,” she said and grabbed the top of my shoulders. She started clearing her throat, which is her strange little disguise that keeps her from crying.

“Good luck with everything in Charlotte. Let me know if I need to fix your sink.”

“Charlotte’s not Black Mountain,” she said, and I nodded. I understood.

We told each other goodbye. Her car started and I walked in the opposite direction. A minute or so later, I passed downtown, dark, closed, and silent.

Burned

Rhea struck a match to light a beach-scented candle, hoping in a few minutes her mother's doublewide would smell like somewhere she wanted to be. While her mom Sally waited for some bacon to crisp, Rhea stuffed a towel under the door of her bedroom to hide the smell. Her mother didn't allow damn candles in her house.

Rhea let the match flicker, the stick stable between her left thumb and pointer finger. Taking a big breath, she inhaled the sulfur. It smelled like burnt marshmallows. The fire made curves in the matchstick as it glided closer to her finger. She loved when the match's flame lasted long enough to gently singe the tip of her thumb before the sting became a welt. Enduring the sting and knowing just when to put the flame out made her feel powerful.

Life could have turned out different. She had been a high-achiever in high school just two years ago. The school's guidance counselor slipped her scholarship applications everywhere she could, knowing assistance would probably be the only way Rhea would find herself in college. Her mother was always supportive, and pushed her – sometimes too hard – to excel. But the best offer Rhea got was about half a year's tuition at Athens State. Her mom's modest means influenced her 'no loan' policy on life, except for the loan on the doublewide. Rhea bought her first car outright in cash when she was sixteen, so half a year's tuition didn't cut it. Instead, she enrolled in Calhoun Community College.

The whorls of her thumbprints reddened and the flare pricked her finger. She wafted the match up and down until she put out the fire. "If you keep that up, one day,

you'll *really* get burned," her mother told her before, "and you'll have no one to blame but yourself." That's exactly who Rhea blamed.

Eight weeks beforehand, urine zigzagged down Rhea's thigh. Her heart squeezed so tight she thought it might stop. Nausea spread from her abdomen to her throat. Two minutes feel eternal when a white plastic stick reveals someone's future: parallel lines or perpendicular? Rhea's were perpendicular - a plus sign. Rhea waddled to the kitchen counter with her pants still hanging at her ankles to check the guide on the box. "Shit."

Her nurse friend Betty had told her that she was pregnant. "Nausea, low fever, lower back pain, aches – all really strong signs. Carrying a baby puts you in a diseased state. Your body spends nine months trying to remove it," Betty had said.

After the sign, Rhea almost had it removed herself. Thanks to some Google results at her two-month marker, she kept thinking of the clear vacuum bouncing off sterile, indifferent walls putting her in fear of pain – the pain in her body and the pain of never being able to forgive herself.

"Breakfast is ready," her mother yelled. Rhea rubbed her hand on her jeans to get the pain out and smelled the candle she had yet to light.

"I'll be right there," she said and sighed as she put the candle and the matches up.

At four months pregnant, the disease required monthly doctor's appointments. During each appointment while absent-mindedly flipping through a magazine, Rhea absorbed the assortment of gynecological situations: eighteen year-olds or women in their twenties, wide-eyed before having to face the stirrups; expectant mothers with bright,

dumb smiles continually rubbing their bellies; and middle-aged women using one hand to hold a book, the other waving a magazine back and forth like a fan. The middle-aged women looked at Rhea, smiling first, then chuckling, like they were relieved Rhea was the pregnant one. There were usually several mommies-to-be with their husbands or partners by their sides.

Rhea's mother Sally was by her side for this appointment. Chris, the baby's father, had gone to the first one with her, but his expression matched the *huh?* look he had when she told him she was pregnant. She just couldn't deal with that every time.

As much as she wanted to prod a mocking finger at the other women in the waiting room, she couldn't help feeling jealous of their pregnant giddiness, of the present dads, and that all of their babies were probably sought and wanted. She was envious of the loving gaze people gave the other pregnant women's bellies, different from the looks of pity people gave her as if this was just an 'accident.' She wondered what cutesy shit these women did when they told their families they were expecting – 'I'm pregnant!' cookies? Older kids in brother/big sister shirts?

Telling her mother she'd been knocked up was the scariest moment of her life. She had practiced whispering some sort of speech in her bedroom, and when she finally decided to tell her – after what must have been gallons of throw up and not fitting into any of her jeans - she'd expected yelling and stomping, any sort of loud, angry release. What she got was much worse: tears and silence, iciness and shame. "You could've got yourself out of this life," her mother whispered so quietly Rhea wondered if she was meant to hear it. "I worked so hard so you could get out."

“Momma,” Rhea started but stopped herself. Rhea knew Sally had worked hard, but at the time that made no difference; everything was hard. Even in high school she was pulled in different directions; made fun of by the kids in her trailer park for being interested in school, but also made fun of (or even worse, pitied) by the rich kids in her honors classes for shopping at Wal-Mart.

When she started community college, the pressure of answering the rich kids’ challenge just wasn’t there anymore. She managed an A/B average in her classes, but went out with different friends every night after getting off work, and started going through men like she went through matches. Not too long before she got pregnant, she’d ‘settled’ down with a guy named Joe for about six months, but he let her go because she exhausted him; he told her that if she ever started to pace herself, he wouldn’t mind seeing what happened between the two of them. When she asked him what he meant by that, he said, “Sitting down and talking to you, spending time with you when a party’s not on your mind.”

She met Chris a few nights after Joe broke things off. Two of her friends from work went with her to a local dive bar where fake I.D.’s were widely accepted if they were even checked. Chris was the first man to approach her that night, and like all class acts there, was ready with a pick-up line. “You must be from Tennessee,” he said.

“No,” Rhea answered, “I’m from right here.”

“No kidding? You *got to* be from Tennessee, ‘cause you’re the only ten I see.”

Rhea and her crew rolled their eyes in tandem, but he continued, putting his oily and evidently roided arm around her shoulder as he leaned onto the bar. His Southern drawl paired well with Cash's "Ring of Fire."

He bought her a drink Rhea later learned was a called a Sweet Blue Mother Fucker – a mixture of different flavored liquors and Sprite that are somehow turned a pool blue color. After wincing at the sweetness on her first sip, Chris learned that Rhea had taken her liquor hard and straight for a while, so he ordered her some Crown. After a few drinks too many and enjoying the attention more than the conversation, Chris walked her out, and the drunk, disabling kissing started. After that, all Rhea really remembered was the smell of asbestos in his apartment, and waking up around nine AM in his creaky, double-size bed. Both of them wanted another warm body around, so they went out every now and then. Nothing serious—they had both agreed on that. Then Rhea found out she was pregnant.

His reaction was surprised but stand-offish. Rhea wasn't too worried about the way he felt. All she cared about was having somebody to help her out, having a normal two-parent home for her child. It didn't matter that she didn't care for its dad.

When he started 'oohing and ahing' at different elements of her first prenatal doctor's appointment – specifically the destination of the ultrasound wand – Rhea decided she wanted Sally to go with her to her doctor's appointments and meetings with the advisor. As her pregnancy progressed, hindsight's bitchiness kept reminding her that if she had 'paced herself,' or at least had cared enough to get on the pill, she'd be meeting with her school advisor about scheduling tests instead of maternity leave.

“Rhea Mullins?” one of the nurses called her.

Sally patted her leg as they both got up.

Rhea sat in the examination chair, rubbing her fingers that were still tender from the match burn that morning. Sally stood beside her as they waited for the sonographer, “How did your midterm go in that math class?”

“Good. Made an A, finally.”

“That’s great, honey. I knew you would do well if you’d just...” Sally stopped.

“Slow down? Or pace myself?”

“I didn’t mean to go there, I’m sorry. I’m just happy that things are coming together some.”

“Yeah, you’ve made it pretty clear that you think my chances of finishing school are slim. I guess these forty weeks at least give me a chance to work my GPA back up, huh?”

“I’m just proud of you, Rhea,” Sally said as her shoulders made her body wilt a little.

“Good afternoon,” the sonographer said. She prepared her equipment silently. She had walked in at a bad time. Rhea jumped as the cold, clear gel gathered on her belly, but the sonographer calmly circled the probe around, connecting Rhea to the machine; Rhea started feeling like a machine herself, living simply to foster the jellybean inside. The image on the screen wasn’t a jellybean anymore, though. There was a defined silhouette of its head – Sally reached over Rhea and touched the tip of its nose on the

screen. Its lower extremities were still a little blurry. The heartbeat thumped, matching the signal below the picture of the baby's body. The baby was still for the most part, but would wiggle every once in a while; a quiet fidget to get more comfortable during its sleep.

"The baby looks all right? And the heart sounds normal, right?" Sally asked, not able to peel her eyes off the machine.

"Yes, the baby is doing just fine," the sonographer answered.

"I've been a little worried just because Rhea keeps saying she hasn't felt it move around yet." Sally turned to Rhea.

"No, I haven't felt anything besides queasiness. I guess I might be feeling it and not know what it is."

"Oh honey," Sally said, grabbing Rhea's hand, "you would know it if you felt it, and you will never forget it. I just don't remember how far along I was when I felt you wiggling around, so it just worries me. You not feeling anything at this point."

"That happens a lot," the sonographer answered, and Sally sighed in relief nodding her head, "In fact, some women go five or six months without feeling a thing. Rhea's baby is really calm right now. As the baby grows and moves around a little more, she'll feel little flutters – kind of like a gas bubble that won't pop."

Even while she watched the life inside of her moving, there was no wiggle in her belly or tick in her own heart indicating she was going to be a mother. Life still went on like normal, going to school, going to work, coming home. No inkling of unconditional love, no feeling that she would ever want to die simply so the bean could live.

Hearing a quiet snort, she looked over and saw her mother crying. Rhea looked at the nurse and pursed her lips, hoping she'd do something to comfort her mom. The nurse paused and leaned her head to the left as she smiled. Never knowing what to do during Sally's display of menopausal affection, Rhea rubbed her mother's hand and looked back at the screen. Sally's other hand rubbed the bump, wanting the sign of life that Rhea still wasn't anticipating.

"I wonder what the baby will call me?" Sally asked while she drove them down a quiet road on their way home.

"Haven't really thought about it, honestly," Rhea said as she picked the jagged edges of blue polish off her fingernail, "What names do you like?"

"I've always thought Nana sounded sweet. Not a big fan of Grandma, since that's every grandmother's name. But it might not be my choice."

"I don't care what you want your name to be," Rhea said.

"I didn't say you did," Sally snapped back. "There are lots of times when the baby chooses the grandparents' names."

"What are you talking about?"

"Babies end up naming their grandparents just based on what they can say at the time, or things they hear. Don't you know why you call my mother 'Honey'?"

"No, guess not."

“‘Cause that’s what you always heard your Pops call her. Suppose you just thought it was her name or something’. She thought it was real darling, though, so she let it stick.”

“That’s funny,” Rhea answered, quietly but sincerely.

“When the baby comes along, it just isn’t about you anymore. I don’t say that to scare you.” Sally waved her hand in the air.

“I know, Mama.”

“But it’s just true. I’m glad that advisor of yours at school is a mother. She can guide you from her personal experience rather than just thinking you’ll be ready to study and work right after that baby pops out. I’m really not shaking my ‘shame, shame’ finger at you anymore; this baby is going to be a blessing. It’s just that everything you do for yourself, even eating and taking a bath, is going to come after everything with the baby.”

Rhea nodded her head and pressed at her belly, trying to make the little bean move where she could feel it, “How did Pops get his name?”

“He scared you when you were little, all men did. He just called himself Pops around you all the time. You know, ‘Pops loves you, sunny Rhea.’ Things like that. I’m sure you just got that name stuck in your head. Have you thought about baby names yet?”

“Been trying’ to,” Rhea said, popping the joints of her fingers. “Chris said if it’s a girl he wants to name her Edith, after his mama.”

“What do you think about that?” Sally asked.

“I hate it cause I don’t like his mama,” Rhea chuckled. “I don’t have any ideas yet. Maybe once I know the sex, I’ll figure it out.” She twisted and turned at the waist.

“You feeling OK? You look like you’re in pain,” Sally said.

“I’m all right, my back’s just killing’ me. I left that squishy pillow I sit on at Chris’s weeks ago. And, well, I want it. His place is right down the road.” She pointed out the window.

“We can go get it.”

Rhea nodded and moved in discomfort. Her nose turned up at the ache.

Sally drove modestly, as if she were carrying important cargo she didn’t want tossed around. After riding down a county road, Sally turned into the lot of Chris’ apartment complex.

“Whose car is that?” Sally asked, eyeing a Ford Taurus parked behind Chris’ Tacoma.

Rhea shrugged, humming an *I don’t know* as she clicked the door open and walked to the front of the car. The bumper bore an airbrushed vanity plate with a picture of a cheetah’s face. Curious, she tilted her head to the side, but a twinge of pain throbbing from her lower back reminded her of her purpose.

Instead of ringing the doorbell, Rhea turned the doorknob back and forth slowly. It opened and she let herself in. She heard water running and explosive laughter in the kitchen. An imaginary voice encouraged her to go unnoticed for a minute, but her hand slid off the knob, and the door snapped shut.

“Dammit,” Rhea said. The cackling continued, so she kept going, too, her heart squeezing tight again when she made the floor creak or pop. She walked to the wall opposite of the kitchen. Trying to see but remain unseen shortened her breath.

“What’re you doing?” a female voice said through squeaking chuckles.

“Exactly what you want, honey,” Chris answered, his Southern accent drawing out every syllable, pulling at the words like they were weeds. Rhea winced when she saw Chris’ lips touch the woman’s neck. High-pitched giggles bounced off the kitchen walls and Chris said, “Yeah, you got to be from Tennessee.”

Rhea couldn’t help laughing at the combination of chuckles and gum popping. “Dumbass,” she whispered under her breath, but not softly enough.

“Who the hell are you?” the woman asked, smacking her gum as she craned her neck to see who was on the other side of the doorframe.

“I’m his baby mama. Lucky me. Who the hell are you?”

The other girl’s mouth hung open. She shook her head and got a hold of herself when she heard the gum fall on the floor. Chris was frozen like he was posing for a mug shot.

“Excuse us, Lisa.” As he walked her to the door, he bumped Rhea’s shoulder.

Not sure whether she was angry or nervous, Rhea rapped her overgrown nails on the doorframe. Hums of urgent conversation mumbled outside the door.

Chris cleared his throat harshly as he walked back in, making Rhea queasy as she imagined a salty loogie gliding down his throat. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted my pillow,” she said. “You know, that donut looking thing I sit on.” Chris walked toward the couch silently while she battled with staying quiet or speaking up.

“So,” she decided to speak up, “are you just leaving the baby and me to figure things out on our own?”

“You know Rhea, this whole baby scene just isn’t my thing.”

Rhea let out a cackle. “It’s not my thing either, and quite honestly, I never pictured myself having a baby with someone, well, like you. But here we are.”

“You were the one who said you didn’t want things to get serious. And here you are leaving your pillow at my house like you live here or something.”

“I don’t want things to get serious. I don’t even really like you that much, but I don’t want to do this by myself.”

“Why not? Afraid you’ll get lonely? Or afraid people will look at you knocked up and alone, afraid they’ll think you’re a whore?”

Rhea took in a deep breath, but had nothing to say. The heat in her cheeks drained out and her whole body tingled. Almost involuntarily, she slapped him across the face and for a second saw her handprint outlined in red on his right cheek. She waved her hand back and forth and wiggled her fingers, trying to shake away the sting.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Rhea had no idea what she had done, but she’d learned that acting like you did know could get you further in life. “You, calling me a whore,” was all she knew to say. Ne’er do well, strong-willed, and every once in a while, bitch – those were the names people had labeled her with before, and those names were doable – being known as a strong-willed bitch usually had something to do with going after what she wanted. But it

was the only time she'd been called a whore – to her face, anyway. She knew there was no good way to dance around that description.

“You’re just as responsible for this as I am.” She pushed his shoulders once. “You’re leaving me to do this by myself,” she pushed him again, “And you call me that?” She pushed him a third time, discouraged that she wasn’t strong enough to move his upper body – he’d only taken steps back because she’d taken steps toward him.

“Pipe down, girl,” he took her hands off his shoulders.

Even though she noticed his firm grip and the low, scruffy tone of his voice, Rhea said, “Or what?” Rhea punched him in the stomach and was, again, flustered when Chris didn’t even flinch.

Chris grabbed and pulled the neckline of her shirt. Millimeters away from him, she was amazed that his small pupils didn’t waver from focusing on hers; it made her uneasy to feel her eyelashes brush against his when she blinked. They’d never gotten that close, even during sex.

“Hello?” Sally opened the door, “Shouldn’t take this long to get a pillow,” she said as she walked in. “Oh my god.”

Rushing over to the two of them, Sally pulled at Chris’ fingers with one hand and swatted his shoulders with the other. “Get your hands off my daughter.”

He said, “I guess not keeping your hands to yourself runs in the family.”

Rhea gasped when she saw Sally pull the neck of his shirt. “And your family doesn’t take too kindly to picking on somebody your own size,” Sally said.

Chris pulled her hands off his chest and pushed her to the ground by her stomach. The sound of her mother hitting the linoleum terrified her. Sally was the one who examined wounds, applied bandages, and helped Rhea get up again.

Without thinking any further, Rhea ran to the kitchen drawers. When she slid the third one open she found the silverware. She grabbed a steak knife, slammed the drawer shut, then pushed and pinned Chris to the ground, “Don’t you dare hurt my mother!” Rhea screamed through heavy gasps. She raised the knife and Chris flopped his arm around incoherently.

“Don’t do it. You’re better than that,” Sally said.

But Rhea wondered, *chest or stomach?* Then, she felt little flutters in her belly. They made her a little queasy but they felt more like butterflies than vomit. The flutters didn’t stop, only slowed down – like a gas bubble that wouldn’t pop. It was her baby.

She looked over at her left hand clutching the knife; her tense arm relaxed and her eyes widened at the situation she had put herself in. Her gas bubble kept moseying around, so she knew it was still there. She dropped the knife and jumped when it clanked on the floor. Rhea rubbed the lower part of her belly and pushed herself up as quickly as her tender back would let her. Rhea grabbed Sally’s hand and pulled her up. They ran to the door. When Rhea opened it, Chris yelled, “Get the hell out of my house.” She led her mother out the door, shaking inconsistently like the little body inside of her. Her hand shook, too, as she got into the car.

Rhea’s deep breathing calmed slowly as she walked inside her house, Sally

right behind her. In the freezer, Rhea grabbed a bag of frozen vegetables and wrapped them in a dishtowel. Sally had turned on the news to calm herself down, but turned it off when she heard the anchor talking about a murder downtown.

“Here you are.” Rhea sat beside Sally on the couch, helping her get the make-shift icepack on the right spot on her back. When it was in place, Sally wiggled to get comfortable on Rhea’s donut pillow.

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“I know, Mama,” Rhea said as she kissed her mother’s forehead.

Rhea got leftovers out to microwave for their dinner; the smell of onion in the pot roast made Rhea ill. Trudging in the kitchen, dragging her feet on the floor, she got the beach-scented candle—a scent strong enough to vaporize the onion, but not strong enough to make her vomit. She sat it on the dining room table. As she struck the match, she sniffed the musty, sweet fragrance and lit the candle. She knew her mother was watching her, but Sally wasn’t saying anything, wasn’t stopping Rhea.

“Thank you,” Rhea said. Watching the flicker fray the match, she wondered if the glow would make it down to her finger this time. Then she felt the little bubble—her little baby—and extinguished the flame before she could find out.