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EVOLUTION

KORY M. SHRUM

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Evolution

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
Austin Peay State University

Kory M. Shrum

Spring 2007

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to *The Florida Review* for publication of the following poems: "Despondent as Edna Pontellier" and "Ocean." I would also like to thank Dr. Blas Falconer and Barry Kitterman for their diligent attention and guidance throughout my studies. Without their help and encouragement, I would probably be in medical school and still hate my mother.

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Evolution

Despondent as Edna Pontellier

You can't actually love a story until you read it twice,
turning it over to make the words stick against a surface
that wasn't there before. Kate Chopin calls it freedom.
I have other names for it, relating only to that fall fast
feeling I get when waking to find myself, strange, in her bed

her hands on my back inspecting two freckles aligned
symmetrically. I don't ask her why, I know—there is a shade,
paler than white and the whole world wears it sometimes.

The First Husband

We'd driven five hours, down I-24W to Nashville. My mother was living in my grandmother's house. My father was driving me down to spend the summer with her. I knew we were close when we passed the gray rock walls leading into the city and the large sign near a shopping center which said The Crossroads. I sat up in my seat eagerly as we turned onto Margo Lane. I had missed my mother in the year I hadn't seen her. I missed my grandfather, grandmother and cousins, who'd become more like brothers than cousins to me.

He didn't let go of my hand once I'd climbed down. When we pulled into the driveway, there was a man outside, leaning against a black car. I'd never seen the man or the car. My father came around the truck to my side, opening my door. He held his hand out to help me down. I was so small in comparison to the truck's cab. I was small even for a nine year old. My father wouldn't turn his head, only watching him from the corners of his eyes. This piqued my interest that much more.

He held on to me as we crossed through the chain-link fence and into the house. The house was immediately in an uproar as I entered. My grandmother scooped me up, kissing my cheek no less than a dozen times. It felt good to have a woman hold me. I loved the way she smelled—something like strong perfume and banana bread. Nestling my face in her hair, I breathed her in.

Someone was pulling on my ankles, begging her to let me down. She did reluctantly. Markie hugged me first, wrapping his little arms around my neck. He was three with cute brown curls that his mother, Dana refused to cut. Kevin, the other cousin, sat on the couch eating cereal and watching cartoons. He was only six months my junior and already much taller than me. He made no movements to

come and greet me. But he was hiding his smile poorly and waved over his head in some sort of welcome.

“Where’s Papa?” I asked. I didn’t see my grandfather in the living room.

“He’s taking a nap, baby doll. Want me to make you a sandwich?” Nana asked.

My father answered for me. “We just ate.”

“Well, hey there, Billy. It’s good to see you,” Nana said. Neither of them moved a muscle but their mouths.

“Where’s Momma?” I asked.

“I think she’s in the bathroom,” Markie answered, standing right beside me. He was making me feel a little claustrophobic.

“She is,” Nana confirmed, taking a long draw of her cigarette. She blew smoke into the yellow overhead light.

Markie was holding a book. I didn’t know where he’d gotten it from. I hadn’t even noticed he’d moved. “Will you read me this? Like last time?”

“Not right now,” I said.

“Come on please,” he begged.

“I promise I will but let me get settled. I hadn’t even brought my stuff in yet,” I said, moving away from him. I walked around the counter, crawling into my father’s lap.

Markie dragged his book away pouting more heavily than I’d thought necessary.

“I sure will miss you, kory belle,” he said, stroking my hair. “Who’ll feed the puppies while you’re away?”

I hadn't even thought about the puppies since we'd packed the truck. Panic rose in my chest. "Won't you do it?" I asked, fearfully.

He pinched his face together in fake concentration. "I suppose I can," he said. "But they won't get played with much while you're gone. Actually, I'll probably have found homes for them by the time you get back."

My throat was tightening. I didn't want the puppies to be gone when I came home. I wanted them to be in the pen where I left them. The bathroom door opened then and out came my mother. She was beautiful. Her hair was longer than I'd remembered and blonder too. She was wearing jeans with a hole in the knee as she always did. Her t-shirt's collar had been cut down the middle, so the flaps lay open on each collarbone. She'd told me once she hated collars too close to her neck. Every single one choked her, so every single shirt she owned was cut open like that. She was also wearing a long smock, made of a white knitted material that I didn't know the name of.

I jumped off my father's lap immediately so I could hug her.

"There's my baby," she said. She smelled like cigarettes and hairspray. "You've gotten so damn big, look atcha."

She held me back from her face so she could look at me. "Damn, Billy. What you been feeding this child?"

We both looked at him. My smile faded at the corners. My father didn't look right. There was something about the way his eyes moved over us that scared me. I didn't like it. I writhed against my mother so she'd put me down. She did. But even after I moved away from her, my father's expression didn't change except his eyes

didn't follow me. They stayed fixed on her. My mother didn't seem to notice. She moved around the corner of the cabinet, coming up to Nana's side.

"Thanks for bringing her. I'd have come get her, but my car's still busted," she said.

"Your license is suspended until November," he said. I didn't like his tone. Markie was beside me with his book again.

"That wouldn't have stopped me from getting her if I'd had a car to drive."

"Who's that in the driveway, Momma?" I asked remembering the man we'd seen when pulling up.

"That's Mr. William Reeve," Nana said. "Your momma's *first* husband."

I'd heard little about him. "Why's he in the driveway? Why doesn't he just come in?" I asked.

"I think he wants to give you and your daddy some time alone with your momma. Then he'll come in," Nana said, smiling down at me. I wondered why she and Uncle Mark were the only ones with brown eyes.

My parents had been talking, but I hadn't been listening really. But they had my full attention when my father stood suddenly, half-flying out of his chair. He grabbed my mother's arm roughly and she cried out in pain. He pulled back her sleeve, exposing her inner arm. It was black and blue with more bruises than I'd ever seen in one place. I leaned in closer to look but Nana grabbed my shoulder, pulling me back. My father shifted his weight, blocking my view with his back. But not in enough time for me to see my mother's face.

"Kory, go outside," my father said.

"But—" I protested.

“Don’t argue with me. Just do it.” My father was yelling at me. I started to cry.

“Go on, baby. Listen to your daddy.” This was my mother’s voice. She sounded sad too.

I went out the front door, instead of the back door we’d come in. I sat on the porch. Markie had come with me. Kevin stayed where he was. I wondered if anyone noticed him. Markie brought his book with him. I was reluctant to read it to him. But when the screaming got so loud that I could hear it outside on the porch, even with the door pulled to, I picked up the book. I didn’t want Markie to hear them fighting.

It was a story about a puppy digging a hole under the fence and running away. He got lost in the city but eventually found his way home to his mother, brothers and sisters. I thought the story was dumb, but I loved the pictures. Markie loved everything about it. I read it twice before my father came outside.

“Come on baby,” he said, sweetly. His face was bright red. “We’re going to go get ice cream.”

“Can I come?” Markie asked, his face lighting up.

“No, buddy, I think you better stay here.” My father ruffled his hair.

He took my hand then, leading me away from the house and everyone in it. Once we were in the truck, backing out of the driveway, I saw the man again. Mr. William Reeves, my mother’s first husband, he was still leaning against the car without as much as an upward glance. I saw Kevin in the doorway. He waved. I waved back.

I didn't want to leave them. I wanted to stay. I missed their voices already. Just before we pulled out the drive I saw my mother standing in the driveway. She waved, jogging toward the car. My father didn't stop. But she did.

"You know we're not coming back, don't you?" My dad said softly, once we reached the end of the street.

"I know." After a long pause I asked, "Can we still get ice cream?"

"Sure, baby."

Sibling Rivalry

End with that day. That day I pulled my car into my grandmother's driveway for the last time, with my best friend Jen and dog Napoleon.

"What the fuck is so goddamn funny?" my mother said, lugging her black garbage bag of clothes, cosmetics and shoes into the backseat of my small SUV. "I can't believe you'd treat me this way—make me carry this heavy bag all the way down the driveway, when you could've drove your little ass up to the door—knowing how weak I am after all that's happened to me."

It was this statement that drew Jen's eyes from my face, where she'd been carefully surveying my brow, nose and other features for pain or panic. I watched Jen's eyes roll off my mother's face, fixing on the sixty-four staples protruding from the left side of her skull. The skin beneath was pulled and pinched together in a thick line of red tension.

"Jesus Christ," Jen murmured.

"I need to go by the store," my mother said once her door was closed. Napoleon make a dash toward her, trying for a kiss.

"Gosh, you're an ugly thing," she said, pushing him off her.

"We have to drop Jen off at a friend's first," I said, stealing a glance at them. Napoleon was still trying to kiss her.

"Quit now," she said laughing. "You just need to settle down."

He kept moving toward her, determined. Jen was watching.

"Bless his heart," my mother said finally, Napoleon defeated for the moment. "He's such an ugly little thing."

* * * * *

“Kory, it’s me, Scott, your mom’s fiancé,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

I’d just gotten home, haphazardly throwing my bag into the chair nearest the door. My two bedroom apartment was dark and quiet, amplifying Scott’s voice in my receiver.

“Your mom is in the Vanderbilt ICU. They just brought her out of surgery and they’ve been trying to get ahold of you.”

I hadn’t received any calls that I’d known of.

“They won’t tell anyone anything, except you. Something about you being her guardian because she’s not married and she ain’t got no other kids.”

“I’ll be there in two hours,” I said, hanging up.

* * * * *

“I know the food’s terrible but you have to stay,” I said, sitting on the end of my mother’s bed. I’d brought her magazines and cigarettes. They’d moved her from the hospital to the rehabilitation center a week after her surgery.

“It’s so good to see you, baby,” she pulled me into a hug. “Come down with me, while I smoke.”

This was how each visit was spent. I’d arrive with a pack of smokes and spend two hours with her talking about when I was a baby, how good I was, how much she had wanted me.

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“Do you think you’ll have kids?” she asked, balancing a filter between her lips as she lifted the lighter, igniting the cigarette’s thin white paper and packed tobacco.

“I want kids,” I answered truthfully. “But I’m nowhere near done with school.”

“Scott has two kids, two boys,” she said, blowing grey smoke between her lips toward the pink magnolia buds hanging above our heads. The air smelled like rain.

“You love him?” I asked.

“I love him,” she repeated making it sound more like a question than an answer. “But I’m not *in love* with him. He’s controlling and well,” she paused blowing more smoke into the air. “I’m too independent for that.”

* * * * *

I was staring at my mother’s corpse.

“Are you Kory?” the nurse asked.

I nodded. My pulse remained high in my throat making speech impossible.

“The doctor wants to speak with you. This way.” She stepped beyond the privacy curtain, out the sliding glass door to the hallway.

I glanced back to the bed and my mother’s swollen face. No, not really dead, I thought, but I couldn’t call her alive either.

In the hall, I followed the nurse. First I tried to remember her name. Passing all the other rooms, I looked in. All the bodies lay lifelessly with so many cords and tubes falling from their forms. I remembered a documentary about life support

systems and how the tubes, though appearing like a tangled mess, were in fact strategically arranged to keep support the body until it could regulate itself again. But she's already dead, I thought. Even if she survives this, she's dead.

A man in a white coat was speaking to me, his mouth moving up and down but I hadn't heard his words.

"She'll live," he said. We were sitting at a table in a bright room. The light hurt my eyes. I would close them for long moments before opening them again.

"What happened?" I asked. My voice sounded foreign, electronic.

"We only have the police report and the fiancé's story to go on. But what we've gathered is that your mother and her brother, Mark got into an argument over drugs and he hit her in the head repeatedly with a glass ashtray."

I said something.

"Your grandmother said it was all an accident—that somehow your mother was hurt when she fell. But I know this injury couldn't possibly have happened from your mother falling down. Her skull was caved in on the left side. I had to cut into her skull and remove some of the mass and blood there. If we hadn't operated immediately, she would be dead. As her legal guardian, we need you to leave contact information, sign documents for consent to treatment and make a list of who is and isn't allowed to see her."

I threw up on the floor.

* * * * *

I went shopping. She needed clothes mostly. I'd washed her scrubs twice since they'd moved her to Stallworth, bringing them back to her freshly laundered, but I noticed she didn't have any underwear. Within fifteen minutes my basket was full. I'd selected two packets of soft white socks, cropped just above the ankles. For pants, I'd chosen only pajama bottoms and sweat materials—not only because I didn't know her size, but also because it seemed the only thing she wanted to wear. Besides the underwear, I also purchased three bras, a can of Folgers's Mocha Cappuccino, a carton of cigarettes and two magazines: The National Enquirer and US Weekly. I'd decided to hang curtains, wash the sheets on the spare bed and vacuum. I wanted her to be comfortable. I folded the clothes I bought, arranging them by garment type into each of the spare room's empty dresser drawers. I changed the Glade Plug-in, making the room smell like apple pie. Once the floor was vacuumed, I readjusted the rug because I thought it looked crooked.

I had to use a kitchen chair to hang the curtains. They weren't actually curtains, just thick pieces of matching materials to keep the light out. I couldn't afford curtains for the room's four windows, but this would do for now. The chair itself had thin metal legs which wobbled under my weight. I covered two windows easily, with a sage colored blanket. I'd managed to tack up the right side of the other fabric, meant to conceal the remaining windows, without complication but I needed one more nail on the left side. I extended myself too far and the chair collapsed beneath me. My hip landed against the frame, living a long dark red line. The next morning, my leg was a deep purplish-black and remained that way for a month.

* * * * *

It was my day with Autumn. We sat curled around the coffee table with two coloring books and a box of crayons between us.

I answered the phone on the second ring.

"May I speak to Ms. Shrum, please?" a woman's voice asked.

"This is she."

"Yes, Ms. Shrum, this is Peggy Harroway, your mother's nurse here at the Sycamore rehabilitation center."

"Yes." My stomach was climbing up the back of my throat again.

"I'm just calling to inform you that your mother has left the hospital against medical advice. She removed her wristband and snuck out with two unidentified persons."

"Two unidentified persons?" I asked. I was coloring the grass blue.

"She had two visitors sign in to visit her just before she left. You want me to give you their names?"

"Yes, please," I said.

"Hold on one second, Ma'am." Waiting music seeped through the phone.

"How's this?" Autumn held up her picture of Miss Piggy for me to see.

"Beautiful," I said. "Don't forget to color her eyes."

She turned the picture away from me, toward her own face for examination.

"Oh yeah." She returned her page to the table.

"Ms. Shrum?" A voice was in the phone again.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"The names are Lisa and David."

I bit the tip of my tongue so hard, I cried out. Autumn jerked in her seat. Her eyes were wide and doe like.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Autumn is twelve. My “little” from the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Program. We’d decided to spend the afternoon with a box of crayons and ice cream—the good kind with a thick fudge swirl inside and tiny peanut butter filled rabbits.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’m fine.”

* * * * *

“So Lisa is your mom’s ex?” Jen asked, shoving a chip in her mouth. “The woman you lived with when your mom was in jail, right?”

“Right.” I turned on my blinker taking exit 105.

“So she’s a heroin addict now and that’s why we’re picking up your mom?”

“Right again,” I answered, switching radio stations.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Jen said. I had to admit a part of me agreed—a big part of me, in fact.

“My mom knows she can never get better in that environment. But I can give her that—a home without drama—a place to get her life in order.”

“But you told me your mom has been an addict and alcoholic all your life,” Jen said, her tone low and cautious.

“So?” The first heat of anger colored my face. I knew my ears were red.

“So what makes you think she’ll change this time?”

“Because waking up in the hospital with sixty-four staples in your head should be a hell of an eye opener.” I was trying to keep my aggression in check. I wasn’t angry with Jen.

“I just don’t see how this can change things.”

“A person has to want to change,” I said. “Maybe she’s finally ready to change.”

She opened her mouth to say something but stopped. Her lips failed a smile. “Maybe this time is different.”

My mom wasn’t at Lisa’s hotel. In fact, it turned out that after two hours of loitering—spent at Old Stone Fort Park, playing on the swings and hiking with Jen and Napoleon—my mom wasn’t even in Manchester. We had to travel I-24 W for another hour, back the way we came to Nashville. She was at her brother Mark’s house.

* * * * *

I’d just dropped Jen off in Nashville. Which left me alone in the car with my mother. Not alone exactly, Napoleon was still in the backseat sleeping.

“You sure have a fuckin’ attitude, young lady.” My mother spat out the words. “Don’t forget, I’m the mother and you’re the child.”

I turned on the air conditioner.

She turned it off.

“Mom, if we are going to live together we better work out some kind of plan because I’m not going to fight with you every day like this. Do you even really want to come stay with me?”

“Of course I do,” she said.

“Then why are you fighting with me?”

“You’re the one who wouldn’t pull up to the house,” she screamed.

“That’s because Mark’s in there.”

“I’m sorry,” she said without meaning it.

My knuckles were white against the steering wheel.

“Baby,” she cooed, pushing a stray strand of my hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not upset,” I lied. “But damn, Momma. Come on. I just want you to appreciate what I’m trying to do for you.”

“I do, baby,” she said. “I do appreciate you.”

We were silent for several breaths, the anger filling the air like electric static.

“Can we stop at this gas station?” she asked. “I need to piss before we get on the interstate.”

She came out of the gas station with a brown paper bag. My heart hammered against my rib cage with such fury, I felt sick.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked, my words made of something other than air.

“Something that won’t last me two days.” She removed a can and placed it in between her legs. She tried to open a stick of beef jerky with her teeth but couldn’t. She handed it to me.

The ocean was in my ears. I couldn’t hear anything but the hammer of my own pulse. I looked down at the jerky. Opening my father’s switchblade, I handed it back to her, with the meat ready.

My thumb was bleeding. I wrapped a napkin around it, watching the other side turn pink. My mother didn't notice, arranging her purchases in her lap.

I took her back—straight back to my grandmother's driveway. The place I'd picked her up from half an hour before. I removed her bag from the car and placed it into the yard, half propping it against the tree I'd fallen from when I was seven.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I can't do this," I said. I repeated it three times. "I can't go through this with you again."

"Do what?" She lazily chewed jerky, chasing it with beer. I simply stared at her.

"What do you want from me, Kory? What do you expect from me?"

I was crying, working hard to keep my voice from breaking. "I expect you to keep your promises."

I forced myself to look at her. "I want you to love me enough not to expect me to go through this with you again."

"If you don't know I love you, then that's fucked up," she said, opening the beer and taking a long swig.

"Yes it is," I said.

"Fine, then. Just leave me here." She got out of the car.

I watched her form sashay up the driveway, her brown bag in tow. Her cat Sushi met her in the drive, following her to the house. My mother left her clothes in the yard. She didn't look back. And this is where it all began.

For Adrienne

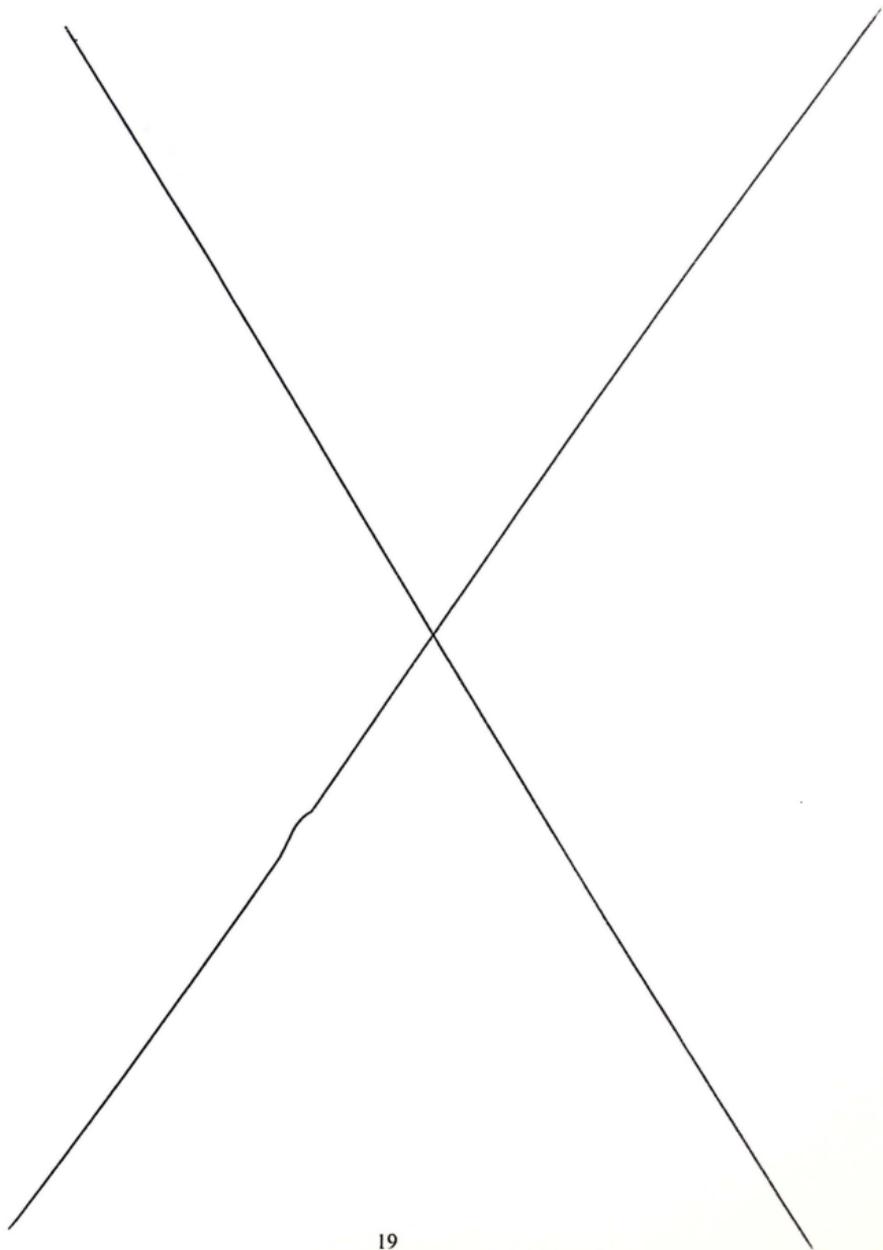
We were boys, flat-chested, breasts exposed. We'd ride our bikes six miles to Carter's market. Buy cold Dr. Peppers and ice cream on sticks. Saturdays were spent with our feet in the creek, or waist deep in river

water. Boys found us once. Remember how we ran, hid behind two Sweetgum trees? Then emerged, monsters, our skin splotched in mud, leaves in our hair. You asked me to come back and I did, braved my mother's—for

a girl who'd curl my hair, paint my nails. By the window, looking out through cold glass, you were the first one to call me beautiful. I hear you have a baby now, that you pawned your television for

small white rocks. I think you know he doesn't love you. I can still see the shape of your mouth, the chocolate on it. I hear you singing to me, our backs against the grass. We didn't care the sky was coming down. Sometimes

I still feel the air push past you. You moved faster than I could, turning your head back toward me. You'd call to me laughing and just before I gave up, you'd put your feet down on pavement and wait for me.



Ocean

When I found her I asked her why she smelled like the ocean. She'd been trying, nearly an hour, using mostly her fingertips in tight, circular motions, feeling wet, burnt and longing for contracting kisses between her thighs but they wouldn't come no matter how long she tried varying her speed, pressure, it made no difference, that's when she asked me to help her and I tried until I found what she wanted, giving it over without question, until she lay silent, asleep. I followed stray beams of sunlight out her bedroom window into the vacant backyard with grass so high the sky moved back to make room for it and when I laid my hand on her chest, I wished for breath as slow, steady, rhythmic.

In Case of Emergency: Pull This Lever

I knew better than to climb into the trunk of her car. You don't grow up in an environment like mine and not have a sixth sense about these things. You know when things are about to go terribly wrong. That feeling in your gut speaks English. But sometimes, you just don't listen.

* * * *

"Come on, it's perfect," Sam said, touching my chin. She'd been grinning from ear to ear for ten minutes.

"I don't know," I said, pulling the strap of my backpack higher up my shoulder. "It doesn't sound very safe."

"I wouldn't let anything happen to you, baby" she said, emptying her backpack into her locker. "You know that."

"Yeah, I know. But what if you get into a wreck?" I was looking at her face. I'd learned not to look at people passing us in the hall. I learned not to hear them too. But sometimes a word or two slipped in, words like *dyke*.

"I won't," she said, refilling her bag with things that had to go home. Notes were left in lockers and presents— like rainbow erasers, stickers.

"You don't know that," I said, letting my pack fall to the ground. I couldn't hold it anymore. "If you wreck and die then I'll suffocate in there."

"I'll drive really careful. I promise."

“Or if someone rear-ended you and I died but you didn’t then they’d think you murdered me and stuffed me in the truck to hide my body. They’d never believe I *voluntarily* got in your trunk. They’d send you to prison for sure.”

“Baby,” she said. She leaned her back against her locker and pulled me to her by my shoulders. She kissed the skin between my cheek and ear. I had to close my eyes. “Don’t you trust me?” She pulled back from me.

“Yes.” I meant it.

“I get off work at nine.”

* * * *

I didn’t have to sneak out. I told my mother what we were doing and she laughed. Lisa, her girlfriend, didn’t think it was as funny but she didn’t object to my traveling fifteen minutes across town in the trunk of my girlfriend’s car either. They went to bed early, worked early—my mother at a magazine factory binding pages and Lisa at a printing warehouse. She smoothed ink through stretched stencils with a squeegee, pressing designs into shirts. The hour between their bedtime and Sam’s arrival seemed like forever. I sat in the dark, on my bed, staring through my window’s open slats. It gave me a full view of the driveway. When Sam’s headlights finally pulled into the driveway, I went to the front door, unlocking the screen for her. She followed me to my room, neither of us speaking until the door was closed.

“They don’t care if I come with you,” I said.

“They usually don’t care.” Sam moved to kiss me and I let her. She smelled

like Pizza. She always did when she came over at night, having just worked a part-time shift at Pizza Hut. Except sometimes between classes, night was the only time we could see each other. Her parents forbid Sam from being gay. So she lied about her work schedule, lengthening the start and stop times to our advantage.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

I grabbed my overnight bag packed with PJs, clothes for tomorrow and the essentials: my toothbrush, deodorant and perfume, the Curve that Sam had bought me for my birthday. Catching a glimpse of my mother’s slouching form on the couch, I pulled the blanket off the chair and draped it over her. After locking the door, I crunched through gravel to Sam’s trunk. She popped it with a lever from the inside, somewhere near the driver’s seat. Then she came to the back to help me in. The first thing I noticed was the pillow.

“So you’ll be more comfortable.” She smiled.

“Thanks,” I muttered. I shoved my bag and my backpack into the trunk’s far corner. It was bizarre to look at her from my back, lying flat in the trunk with the lid angled overhead. Her hands held it that way with her body silhouetted against stars. She was beautiful before she slammed the lid shut a foot above my face.

* * * *

Riding in the trunk of a car isn’t as bad as you might think. Not only do you get to enjoy the music blasting through the back of the speakers, but you get to listen to all the interesting commotion of the cars surrounding you, while jostling to every bump in the road. Besides, I had a feeling I might get a little bored in my concealment,

so I brought a book and a flashlight. While Sam sped down Highway 53 toward Summitville, a small well-to-do subdivision just outside Manchester, I rested semi-comfortably in the trunk of her car, reading about Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter extraordinaire.

Thankfully, we reached her parent's house on Fox Chase Rd without incident. But it startled me when Sam lifted the lid suddenly, letting the light from a street post pour into the car. I clicked the flashlight off as fast as I could.

"I'll be back to get you as soon as she leaves." She grabbed her backpack which had been resting next to mine. Then shut the lid.

I clicked the flashlight back on.

* * * *

Sam's parents worked different shifts. Her mother worked in a Fuji plant processing film. She usually left the house at 10:30 each night so she'd have adequate time to drive to Tullahoma and work the third shift. Sam's dad was a manager at the Nissan plant. He left for work at 6 a.m., usually getting up for coffee between 4:30 and 5. Since his shift started so early, he was in bed by 9. So once her mother left for work, Sam was able to walk me right through the front door, past her father's closed bedroom and into her room. Once he left for work we had ninety minutes to shower, eat and slip out before her mother got home.

* * * *

I saw her headlights through the cracks lining the trunk as her radio amplified then softened in her passing. My heart sped up considerably. Within two minutes Sam was holding the lid open helping me out. I didn't say a word. Neither did she. I left my backpack in the trunk, along with the flashlight and book and tiptoed toward the house. I remember how dark everything looked, how the walkway to her house made the whole night smell fragrant with its magnolia bushes. We crept inside. The door creaked behind us as she shut us in. My muscles didn't relax until her bedroom was locked from the inside.

I opened my mouth to laugh, relieved, but she put her hand over my mouth and shook her head. So I closed it. She crossed the room to a large black radio which rested on top of a dresser. She turned it on and Sarah McLachlan's voice seeped through the speakers. We whispered.

"I like your room," I said. I was nervous. It felt like we'd been dating six hours instead of six months.

"Thanks" she said. "If you remind me, I'll play you that song I wrote for you before we go to school in the morning." She pointed at her guitar. "I can't do it now."

"No, that'd be bad," I said.

"You want to change? Get comfortable?"

I did. But when I opened the bag and removed my pajamas, holding them awkwardly in my hand, I realized something. I'd have to get naked to put them on. I'd never changed in front of her before. I'd never changed in front of anyone before. I was choking.

First I tried to be slick, taking a seat on the bed. I unfastened my bra, pulling the straps through the arm holes and then out through the bottom without even lifting

my shirt. But the next step was trickier. I pulled my legs up on the bed, so that my butt and everything else was hidden. Then I slipped off my pants, keeping my legs up, and pulled my boxers on in the same position. I managed to keep everything concealed. Sam watched me, amused, before leaning forward to whisper in my ear.

“This might be easier for you if I turned around,” she said.

“Yes, please,” I said, trying not to sound so desperate.

She turned around crossing her arms against her chest in mock offense. I waited a moment, unsure of her sincerity before lifting my shirt over my head and letting it fall to the floor. This was her queue. She whirled around, pouncing on me, pinning my arms over my head.

“Ah ha,” she said, still whispering. “Look at those. My goodness! Why would you try to hide them?”

My throat was hot.

“Kory?” She eased off of me slowly. “Hey, I was just playing. I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“I’m not crying,” I said, softly.

“Then what’s this?” She wiped at my cheek with her finger, holding it in the light so I could see.

I didn’t answer. She took my night shirt from the bed where it’d fallen. She didn’t extend it toward me. Instead she bundled the sleeves and angled the arm holes in front of my face, so that I could slip my arms through. I was staring at her eyes. She was careful not to look below my chin, easing the shirt over my head and smoothing it to my waist.

“There,” she said. “Better?”

I stood so she could pull the sheets back. They were cool against my face. I snuggled into the pillows, Sam slipping in beside me.

“You’re not mad at me are you?” she asked.

“No,” I said, pressing my face into her neck. It was soft and smelled like soap.

She rolled on top of me, pulling the sheets up over her shoulders.

“Are you still glad you came?” she said.

“Yes,” I said. But she couldn’t hear me with her head under the covers.

* * * *

It became a ritual. I would sneak into her house as many as four times a week. Sometimes via the trunk of her car but when she didn’t work in the evening, I’d call a cab after eleven and travel alone with a stranger to her house. The driver was always a man. I’d ask him to stop a house down, turn the headlights off so he wouldn’t wake my “aunt.” Sometimes he listened. Sometimes he didn’t. I’d become so used to this mode of transportation that I’d leave my book and flashlight in the trunk of her car, expecting to return to the next riveting chapter the following night. She gave me my book and flashlight back when we broke up the first time.

* * * *

“I’m telling you something is wrong with her,” I said. I was on the phone, talking to my best friend Tricia. “I think she’s cheating on me.”

“Don’t be crazy,” Tricia said. “She loves you.”

I found out later that Sam had been at Tricia’s that day. That Sam was holding her hand while Tricia spoke to me. I found out other things too.

* * * *

“So you and Sam are back together?” Mom asked.

“Yes. I took her back today,” I said, throwing my backpack onto the couch. I almost hit Coco, our chocolate poodle.

“Good. I like her,” Mom said. She threw back her head, making room for her beer bottle. “She’s a sweet girl.”

“Are you going to see her tonight?” Lisa asked. Her tone was more strained than my mom’s. I could tell she wasn’t as happy by the news.

“Yeah. She’ll be here after work.”

And she was, just like before. But when she opened the trunk I noticed the pillow was gone.

“I forgot,” she said.

“It’s cool. Don’t worry about it,” I said. My guts turned over.

“Hurry up and get in,” she said. “It’s about to rain.”

Around 10:30, I saw her headlights through the thick cracks lining the lid as her radio amplified then softened in her passing. I waited for Sam to come within seconds, as she had before but she didn’t. I spent minutes listening to rain hit the trunk, became lost in the rhythm of water washing metal, closed my eyes and fell

asleep. When I opened them, it was still raining. I think the thunder woke me. I pushed a button on my watch illuminating the time. 2:05 am.

Something was wrong. Once Sam's dad had stayed up a little later, causing Sam to have to wait longer before retrieving me—but nothing could delay her for four hours. I lay in panic first, trying to reason with myself that there must be some logical explanation. But it's hard to use logic when you've got to pee. Finally, I took action. I remembered seeing a release latch on the inside, once before when I'd still have my flashlight.

I pushed my hands against the lid, feeling for it. I ran my hand down its base until I found a piece of metal protruding awkwardly. I examined it in the dark, letting my fingers trace it until I had an idea of how it opened. My first two pulls had been wrong. But on the third attempt I heard the lever clink then lift away from its base. I pushed against the lid lifting it high enough so I could climb out. I didn't shut the lid all the way. I pulled my bag to the edge of the trunk, wedging it in the opening so the lid could rest against it without shutting.

I jumped when a large bolt of lightning cut through the sky, enveloping Sam's house in menacing white light. Loud thunder followed. I went to her window first. It was at the end of the covered porch. Its frame dark. I knocked softly. No answer. I gradually knocked as loud as I dared before giving up. There was no movement from inside. Next, I went to the front door, gently creaking open the heavy metal screen, trying the handle. It was locked. So I ran around the house to the side door which led to the garage. It was locked too. I had no other options. I ran around to the side of the house, the side most hidden from the neighbor's and peed. I couldn't

hold it anymore. The intense burning in my stomach was only making the situation feel worse.

It thundered loudly and I fell forward into the mud. I pulled up my pants quickly and ran back to the car, climbing back inside. I eased the lid down on top of me, but didn't latch it. I was wet, so the air coming through was only making me colder, but I didn't want to suffocate. I wasn't sure I could actually suffocate in her trunk, but I wasn't brave enough to chance it. I couldn't get comfortable enough to fall back asleep until I'd had myself a good cry.

* * * *

"I hear you spent the night in a trunk?" Tricia sneered at me from across the lunch table. I hit her in the face with my tray and got detention.

Sam and I stayed together, on and off until I was 20. I didn't love her most the time but thinking I did was enough.

A New Kind of Love

“So why do you have to leave and do homework?” I asked these questions with false innocence, watching carefully, calculating Sara’s responses. I blame my inability to trust people on my mother. My mother is a compulsive liar. As it turns out, so are a lot of people.

“I never get to see you, anymore. Why can’t you stay with me a little longer?” I asked. I clenched her leg in my grasp, giving her thigh a playful squeeze. I bit my lower lip, as I cocked my head and smiled, staring with the stillness of a tiger in the Indian jungle. I was silent but intent.

“It isn’t that I don’t like spending time with you,” she said. “It’s just that finals are coming up and if I don’t do well my parents will beat the hell out of me.” I received a mixed look of fake concentration and purposeful staring. Only a liar would turn down a sexual invite, I thought.

“I fell back into the driver seat of my ’88 Celica. The leather was hot and sticky in the May heat. I sat up, so that I didn’t have to feel the uncomfortable leather against my bare skin. My sky-blue halter top didn’t cover my shoulders or upper back.

I knew she as staring at me, her body in a relaxed slouch that seemed so carefree and confident. I was first attracted to her chin-length, messy hair full of soft brown curls, and her big pouty lips. A model straight off some New York billboard. I didn’t want to look back at Sara just yet, so I stared down the long, gravel road that stretched out in front of me.

“Lover’s Lane” is what we called it, some copycat name from some movie. But I didn’t know which one. The description is accurate enough, though. The kids

who could drive their cars to Central High parked out here—on this side street and stayed in the cars long after classes were over. Our parents didn't care. At least my mother didn't. Her shift at Merlin's Factory didn't end until eleven at night. And the bar stayed open until two.

I could see my best friend Anna leaning against the glinting hood of her boyfriend Bryan's car. She caught sight of me and waved. I waved too, motioning her to come over. I loved her new hair cut, short in a pixie style, with dark blonde highlights throughout her burgundy hair. My car window was already down to let out the piling heat which seemed to accumulate in my dashboard and seats throughout the day.

"What's up, girl?" Anna said. She gave me a quick hug through the open window, hitting her head against the frame. We both laughed. Her expression sank suddenly. "Why the long face, Lexi?"

She bent down, folding her arms on the door frame, bringing us eye to eye. Sara shifted her weight uncomfortably. I knew she wanted to leave but I ignored her.

I spoke to Anna. "Just thought you should know your boy is in detention, *again*."

"Hmmm," she bit her bottom lip. "He disappeared after 6th period. I just assumed he was being his usual charming self. He told me he'd walk me to class today."

Anna looked at the brown brick school building behind us before she looked back at me. "Figures," she muttered.

"Sara's leaving," I said. "You want a ride home?"

“Yes, please,” she said. “Just let me leave a note of Bryan’s window.” Anna darted forward flinging her backpack off her shoulder to retrieve a small heart-shaped notepad which contained light pink paper. I turned my attention back to Sara.

“You’re not mad at me?” she asked. “You understand then?” It was a stupid question but I said yes. I understood I was being lied to.

“Great,” she said. I got a quick peck on the cheek before she left. I watched Anna wave to Sara before climbing back into my car.

“Are you sure you don’t mind taking me home?” Anna asked as she shoved her backpack into the backseat, missing my head by a quarter of an inch.

“Of course I don’t mind. But I’m not taking you straight home. Is that ok?”

“Sure! Who the hell wants to spend this beautiful day locked up in a stuffy house?”

“Good.”

“Can I ask where we’re going?” She turned toward me with her back to the window leaning forward. She made me think of a fairy with wings fluttering for mischief. I had to laugh a little.

“I’m giving Sara a headstart. I’m pretty sure she’s lying to me,” I said. My eyes fixated on the back of Sara’s car. I peered through the dust and dirt kicked up by her tires until she pulled onto the main road.

“What’s she lying about?” Anna asked.

“Her ass ain’t going home to study. I’ll bet a bag of double stuffed Oreos on it.”

“What are you going to do? Call her house in a few minutes to see if she’s there?”

“You want to cruise around first?” I asked. I had to squint at her because the sun had fallen low enough to pass beneath my visor.

She nodded. “We could go by the new Russell Stover Outlet. Jessica Thompson says they sell chocolate by the pound and for really, really cheap. I could definitely go for some chocolate.”

“What about Tammy? You want to swing by and get her? I know she’s got to be home by now. I think the bus drops her off at, like, 3:45.”

“She’ll be happy to get out of the house and away from that crazy step-dad of hers.”

It took us ten minutes to reach Tammy’s neighborhood. When we reached the street, I heard Anna gasp. I turned to ask her “what?” but then I saw it. Five houses down in Tammy’s driveway was Sara’s car

I couldn’t breathe.

“Oh my god that fucker!” Anna’s face went completely red. “Well, don’t you worry ‘cause Tam’s our girl and I bet she’s tellin’ that bitch bucket to take a hike right now!”

“Probably,” I muttered. The knot in my stomach had a pulse.

“Let’s check it out. Park somewhere and we can peek through her bedroom window.” Anna couldn’t hide her excitement. It was a decent enough plan in my opinion.

“Ok,” I agreed.

I parked the car on a side street where it couldn’t be seen. Luckily, there were plenty of shrubs and trees to help us on our way. But I imagined we looked silly to

anyone watching. We reached Tammy's window, heart pounding. Without breath, I made Anna look first.

"They aren't in there," she said.

"What?" I pecked in but Anna was right. They weren't in there. Tammy's slightly tousled bed made my stomach turn but otherwise the room looked untouched. I slouched down beneath Tammy's window feeling the cool earth beneath my fingertips. It made me feel a little better—this grounding process between me and the Earth.

"Go look and see if her car is still here," I said. "I hope they didn't sneak right past us, while we're back here being Sherlock and Watson."

Anna smiled at my joke, as terrible as it was, and darted around the corner out of sight. It seemed like forever before she returned.

"No. They're still here." Anna looked thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe they are just planning something for you. That'd explain the secrecy and the lie."

"They why didn't they include you?" I asked. "Tammy and I are close but you and I are closer. Even if we are all best friends."

"Maybe Sara is planning something for your anniversary?"

"Who the hell celebrates two years and three months? Anna put her finger over my lips with a wide-eyed look to remind me to keep it down. A funny tickling sensation crawled over my skin, centering at my mouth as she touched me. I'd had warm sensations around Anna in the past. But I always pushed them aside and tried to ignore them. I pushed this feeling aside too and forced myself to speak. "The point is there is no reason for her to have lied to come over here. No reason for them to get together to talk. No reason at all."

The look on Anna's face told me I was right. She pulled me into a huge hug that I desperately needed. But before I could think of Anna's perfume or how warm her body felt, the moment was cut short by Tammy's giggling voice. Both Anna and I ducked farther out of sight, listening carefully. Tammy continued to giggle in a way that made me grow more and more furious with each peep from her disgusting little mouth. Best friend or not I was getting pissed. I knew what I was going to see when I looked through that window and sure enough I did. Tammy lay beneath Sara as they kissed.

Even though purple was my favorite color, I hated it now. It was the color of her sheets that matched her walls. I hated her carpet was the shade of blue that matched Sara's eyes. I hated everything as I tore past Anna and beat the front door of Tammy's house until the thin silver ring of my left hand cut into my knuckles.

Tammy's eyes looked like shiny half-dollars when she opened the door. She hadn't expected me. Of course she hadn't. And there was some satisfaction in her fear. Before I could punch her in the face, Anna beat me to it.

"You little whore!" she said. "How dare you betray Lexi! You backstabbing bitch I hope that leaves the biggest bruise on your fat fucking face."

"Now it was me who was all but carrying Anna back to the car. I hadn't said a word. I managed to get Anna to the car and unlocked it.

"Oh my God, Lexi. I'm so sorry. I would never have thought. Just forget them those fucking assholes."

I found no comfort in her words. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Anna didn't ask me any questions, which was good because I wasn't going to answer them if she did. I walked back to Tammy's house and knocked on the door

again. This time without any fury left in me. No one answered the door. I knocked a few more times and tried the handle before giving up and returning to the car. I just wanted to give Sara back her ring. I had to settle for slipping it into my pocket. At least there it was out of sight.

At the Russell Stover store. I bought three pounds of chocolate for five bucks. A good deal, I thought. Anna decided to stay the night with me. She called her mom to tell her she would be by for clothes. That it was a “girl emergency.” My mom wasn’t home yet, since it was still early in the evening. And I knew she’d go to the bar after work. She usually did. So I saw little point in asking her if it was ok for Anna to stay.

“I can’t believe those two.” Anna was still going on about Tammy and Sara. I didn’t want to talk about it. I shoved piece after piece of chocolate into my mouth to prevent myself from crying.

I let Anna drive my car. She was a better driver than me. She wasn’t as emotionally stressed as I was either.

“It’s a good thing Sara is graduating this year. That way you don’t have to look at her sorry ass anymore. Finals are the week after next. Then graduation and after that, no more Sara.”

However, Tammy would be a senior in the fall with me and Anna. I’d still have to look at her for two whole semesters. Anna didn’t bring that part up. A summer storm moved in, the air magnetic and charged. Heat lightning spider-webbed itself against the black sky. The stars hid from its frantic grasps. Thunder rolled, barely audible as a low tumble in the distance. I fell into the hypnotic rhythm of it. Streetlights mirrored against wet pavement and a cooling breeze tossed my hair against

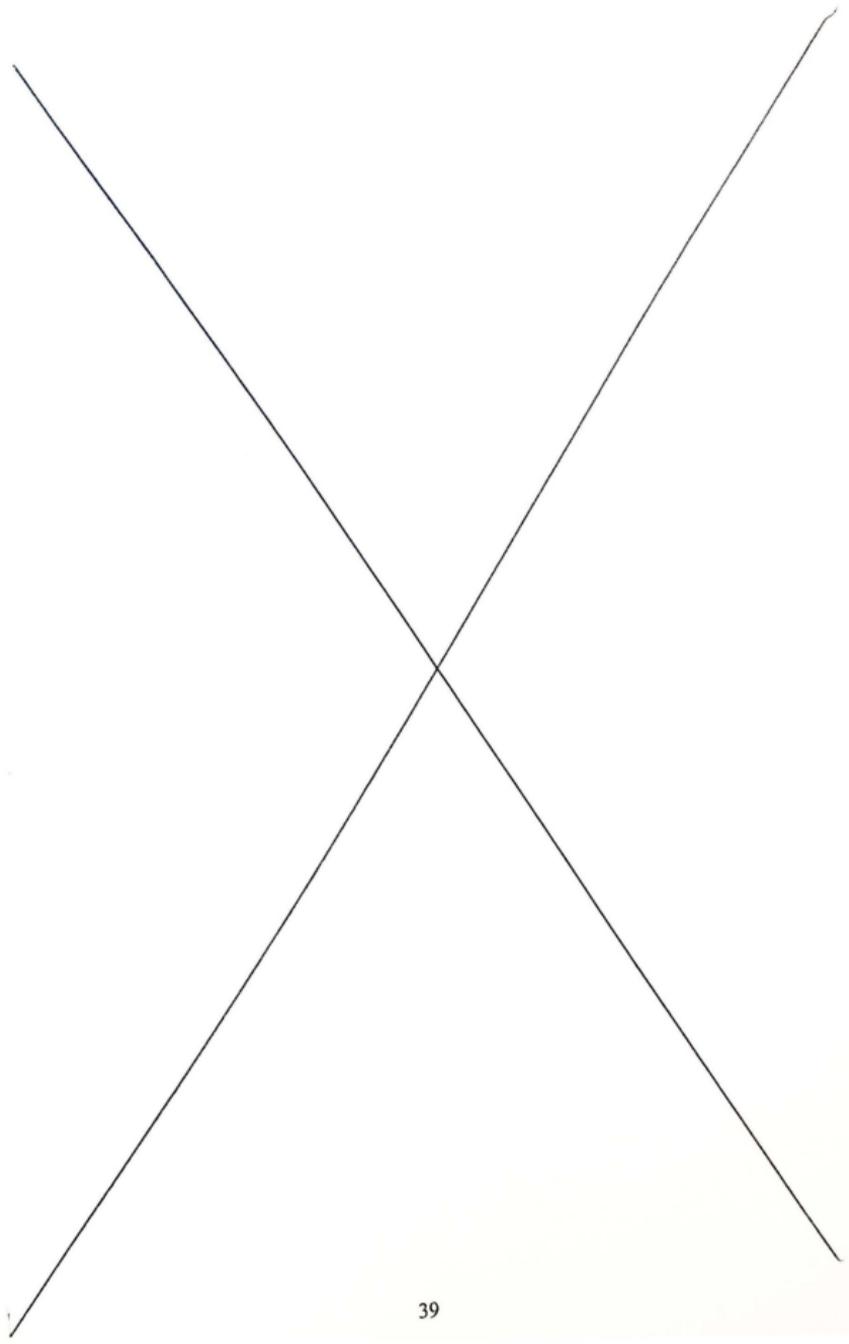
my cheeks. I could hear the water spin off the tires and hit the roadway in a soothing repetition.

Anna swore as we pulled into my driveway. I looked at her first before following her slack-jawed, fixed gaze to the porch of my trailer. Sara sat there with a bouquet of roses. For a moment Anna just looked at me.

Her eyes held my gaze. The tickle came again but I refused to ignore it this time. I followed it as it clawed up my throat to my lips, pulling me out of my seat over to Anna. We slipped into a soft kiss in one fluid movement. The most graceful thing I'd ever done in my life. I thought she would resist or freak out or something. Her lips did tense before softening against mine. An eternity passed. I began to panic. I feared the worst. I wondered if I could lose everyone I cared about in the same day. I pulled back from her.

She was smiling. I let out a nervous, relieved laugh.

"You know," Anna said, running her fingers through my hair. "I can't be your girlfriend if the two of you get back together."



Stitched

She's the flower, pressed, in back
of the journal my mother burned

when I was twelve so I'd forget
everything that happened before

my father kissed a man, pretending
to pretend it was a woman.

He's punished her for learning
to love as he's loved, in that

"shut your eyes because—"
kind of way, like the times I kissed

girls but didn't call it practice.
I can use her severed half

to make a doll just like her,
stuffed tight with cotton, turning

the fabric inside out so the seams
will never show. Even so,

you still won't touch her. And that
is why I can't tell you more than this.

ACCEPTANCE

He wouldn't look at her. He spoke with his back toward her, eyes on his hands. "Daddy, I'm in love. I'm happy. For the first time in my life, I'm perfectly content."

An acrid smell smothered the kitchen. The knife held loose in his bulky right hand was pressed against a poised tomato. She stood behind him, near the sink.

"It isn't natural." His neck turned, folding in on itself creating deep creases. Something moved inside her—blazed like cold liquid to fill each fiber. Her face was hot. She knew better than to open her mouth just yet. Only a string of unladylike vulgarity would pour out.

She shoved her fingernails into the tight flesh of her palm. She pushed until the skin softened, breaking open. She opened her right hand, visually tracing the four tiny crescent imprints. The one beneath her index finger bled, a thin line of crimson filling the indentation. She exhaled the sting between her lips, a long, forceful breath.

With a steady voice she spoke. "I wanted you to know. I don't want to be a liar. I don't want to hide parts of my life from you."

He turned to face her, looking through her again, talking as if she wasn't really there. He was tall, broad-shouldered with a girth that women couldn't achieve. His chest sound and firm beneath a rounded face and soft jaw.

"I thought it was a phase. When you were young and you told me, I thought you'd outgrow it. I thought you experimented because of your mother—because she ran around with those dykes." He puffed his chest like a gorilla. There was too much white in his eyes.

"I'm not like my mother." Another wave of anger tried to crest against them. She pushed past his bitterness.

"Living with her must have made you believe this lifestyle is acceptable. It's not."

It broke, that small clasp residing deep within her, hidden but essential, carefully holding together each strand of her self-control.

"My mother is a whore and I'm nothing like her," she whispered.

"Then why are you a dyke—if you're nothing like her?" he said. His words rang with finality. She left.

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The cellblock looked dingy. Maybe it was the grey cylinder block walls that thwarted the sunlight. Or maybe sunlight had no reason to be in a place like this. Frankie Birmingham crept through the hollow halls of Kentucky's State Penitentiary like a ghost. His thinning form was little more than an apparition of his former self. The chains on his wrists and ankles clanked against the concrete floor as he shuffled his feet. With a guard flanking each side he moved. Despite the chiding voices of those around, prison mates and guards, he heard nothing, saw nothing, was nothing.

Eight years, he thought. Eight years.

They wouldn't remove the chains until his cell door was closed and locked behind him. He had to extend his wrists through the metal bars to have the cuffs unlocked. Another man, fuller with more muscle than Frankie leaned against the wall with a tattered book in hand. He was trying to read it in the faded yellow light of an

overhead lamp. He looked up, watched Frankie move toward the bottom bunk and collapse on the stiff mattress.

“You’re back already?” Tommy Lloyd asked. He closed his book after slipping a small sliver of paper in place to mark it. “I thought they’d keep you for much longer for that little stunt.”

Frankie didn’t answer. He didn’t move. His shoulders were cold. The thin fabric of his jumpsuit felt awkward and ill-placed. But he refused to move for the blankets. He refused to cover himself.

“Not much for conversation, huh? That’s fine. Just don’t go stabbing me, alright?” Tommy said. He reopened his book, removed the book mark and began reading again.

* * *

It’d been three years since he was incarcerated. His figure was full again, his muscles large. He’d spent nearly every day in the yard lifting weights with Tommy. This day was no exception. Tommy spotted Frankie as he bench-pressed 250.

“You really rape that girl?” Frankie asked. The bar was lowered to his chest. He exhaled, pushing the bar up toward Tommy’s waiting hands.

“Yeah. But the bitch was a tease,” Tommy said. “And everyone else had their turn with her, so it’s not like it mattered much. What about you? You really kill your little brother?”

Frankie was silent until he ended his rep. With Tommy's help he slipped the bar back into place. He stared into the sky for a moment, his hand resting against his chest.

"Yeah," he said finally. "I did."

* * *

"So, you told him? What happened?" Lane sat across from her, gently kicking the table with his swinging feet.

"Could you stop that?" Marie said. She held her forehead with her fingertips. She had a headache. One of those pounding ones, centered just behind her eyes. Excedrin commercials call them tension headaches.

"Sorry." He reached under the table to pat her thigh lightly. "What did he say?"

"That I'm not really a lesbian. That I just think I am because I grew up with my mom."

"I thought your mom lives with that guy in Gulf Shores, the one who owns a hotel or something." He made slurping noises with his straw before plunging it back into his milkshake. She watched him whirl it clockwise, churning the thick white goop. It was making her feel sick.

"Mom loves whoever can afford it. It doesn't matter the gender. I don't think she has ever been gay, just willing." Her voice sounded distant to her.

"What did you say? You're mumbling again," he said.

"Nothing."

She hadn't touched her food. The diner bustled with customers cheerfully chatting. Some of them simply sat quietly in their cushioned shit-brown booths, shoving food into their gaping mouths. Too much light poured through the huge windows. Marie wanted to be in bed with her fifteen pillows. She wanted darkness.

"The problem is you're just too damn stubborn, both of you. You're like rams locking horns," Lane said.

She loved Lane. He'd been her best friend since junior high. He walked and talked with ten times more confidence than she'd ever possessed. Maybe his confidence, his self-assured egotism was just a guy thing.

"You watch too much Discovery Channel," Marie said. She poked at her burger with a fork. It didn't move.

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Frankie reclined on the bunk, looking at his daughter's picture. In this picture, a girl no older than two had a head full of bright curls and deep blue eyes like Frankie's. He looked frailer in the picture but his grin was wide, reaching his eyes. He hadn't smiled like that in years. The photo had just come in the mail that day with a colored picture of a duck with a little duck behind it. Marie had drawn arrows to the big duck which she'd labeled "Daddy" and an arrow to the little duck labeled "Marie." Frankie taped the thin photograph to the wall beside his bed with off-white masking tape and slipped the drawing under his pillow.

"That your daughter in the picture?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah. Marie," he said.

“She looks a lot like you.” Tommy bent toward the photo, inspecting it.

“You look happy.”

Frankie smiled to himself. “I was.”

Tommy sat on the bed beside Frankie. “Don’t let the other guys see it. You know what they’ll say.”

Frankie lowered his voice to a mocking tone. “That’s a pretty little girl you’ve got there. You should let me play with her, Frankie. I’ll show her a good time.”

“Bastard perverts,” Tommy said. “We should beat their asses some more.”

“I would but I’m tired of being in the fucking hole,” Frankie said.

“Yeah and I don’t want you going crazy on them like you did your brother,”

Tommy said. “Besides guys get a little crazy when there’s no pussy around.”

“What?”

“No pussy. I wish there was one pussy in here and I’d tear that shit up.”

“Fuck yeah, man. If that bitch wasn’t divorcing me maybe I’d have conjugal visits,” Frankie said.

“What the fuck is up with conjugal visits?” Tommy slapped his thighs. “I don’t think that shit is fair.”

“It’s not. If we have to go without pussy, all these motherfuckers should. Or maybe there could be a system that a man can be visited by his wife as long as he shares her pussy with whoever else might want it. Take Mickey Granger’s wife for example. That bitch is hot.”

“Fuck yeah she is with those long ass legs. I think her tits are fake though.”

“I’d be, like, did you bring enough for the whole class, Mikey?”

Both men laughed.

“At least there are other ways to take care of our needs, man,” Tommy said.

Frankie was silent, staring for a minute. He didn't like the way this conversation was going. “Man, I ain't no fucking fag.”

“Fuck no, man. That's not what I'm saying.” Tommy half-turned on Frankie's bed. “It's just our situation, man. It's nothing like that. Haven't you ever thought about it?”

“Fuck no, I haven't thought about it.” Frankie sat upright. Tommy's face broke into a grin. He leaned forward to kiss Frankie.

“What the fuck, man?” Frankie pushed hard against Tommy's chest, preventing the kiss.

Tommy tried again, still smiling.

Frankie hit him hard in the jaw. Tommy's smile faded. He slammed into Frankie's chest, knocking the air out of him. Then Tommy pressed all his weight against the Frankie, half-pinning him to the bed.

“Calm the fuck down,” Tommy said. “I just wanted...”

“I know what the fuck you wanted,” Frankie said, spitting out his words. “And that's not what the fuck I want.”

“Chill, man.” Tommy struggled to hold the other man down. The bed screamed beneath them, the metal coils shifting this way and that.

“Get the fuck off me,” Frankie said.

“No,” Tommy said.

“Get the fuck off me!” Frankie said.

Tommy didn't listen to Frankie's protests. Instead he shifted his weight carefully, holding Frankie more firmly. Then he used his free hand to open Frankie's

jumpsuit. Frankie's protests grew louder, his fists swinging wildly as he tried but failed to strike the other man.

Tommy used his hand first to stroke the shaft of Frankie's dick. Frankie still fought but his voice grew quiet until his only protests were the red-pulsing of his face and ragged breath. And when Tommy lowered his lips to the other man's groin the sounds from Frankie's mouth changed entirely. The only thing he could look at was his daughter's picture taped to the wall.

* * *

Marie tried to call her mom three times but every time she got her voicemail. *Why the hell did she ask me to call her right back if she wasn't going to be available?* she thought. Her mom answered the fourth call.

"Hey baby girl," she said. "Momma's so sorry about making you wait. But I was with a client."

"I won't ask about your definition of client," she said, trying to keep her tone friendly, but certainly failing.

"Don't sass me, little girl," she said. Marie couldn't believe her accent had gotten so bad. She'd always had a thick southern drawl but it seemed worse now. Maybe living in Alabama did that to a person.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" she asked. Marie shifted her weight uncomfortably. Not like her mother could see her in her apartment, tucked into an overstuffed chair by the window.

"Sure do," she said. Marie could hear her lighting a cigarette. Her muffled words coming through a filter, the sound of a lighter striking, followed by a deep inhalation and loud sigh. "What's up?"

"I told Dad about Brooke," she said. "He doesn't seem... *thrilled*."

"Ah," she said. "That doesn't surprised me, baby. Your daddy's a bit, well he's your daddy."

"Yeah, well I was hoping you could tell me how to warm him up to the idea. I want him to be okay with it."

"Not sure I can help you there, sugar. Your daddy's had a hard life. He shuts out everything he don't agree with."

"I noticed," Marie said.

"It's just to protect his heart, baby girl," she said. She took another drag, blowing static into the phone. "And he has a big one."

She laughed. "He does, does he?"

"Where do you think you get it from, honey?"

"Well, you of course. You seem to have lots of love to give."

It was her mother's turn to laugh. "Oh, baby girl. You callin' your momma a slut?"

"No," Marie said quickly. "That's not what I meant."

"Mmmhmm. Well the difference between me and your daddy is this, I like change. Meeting people, seeing places and getting around is what makes me happy, baby girl. I can't feel tied down or burdened for too long. Whereas your daddy, he's a bit different. He hates change. When he gets into something he's got to stay in it for as long as he can."

"I see," Marie said. But she wasn't really sure she did.

"Just bear with him, sugar," she said. "I've no doubt he loves you to death.

He just might have a hard time adjusting to the idea. He's protective. But you know I love you, don't you girl?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Good girl," she said. Marie imagined her kissing the receiver with bright red lips.

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"So you're leaving then?" Frankie said. He was looking at his hands which held the photograph of his daughter. His elbows rested against his knees. Tommy was speaking.

"Yeah, just spoke with my parole board. You didn't expect me to stay in here forever did you?" He laughed.

"Well no but—"

"Besides," Tommy said, plopping down on the bunk beside Frankie. "My term is much shorter than yours. Rape doesn't really equate to murder."

Frankie's throat was tight with thin, contracting flesh. His chest burned. "I'm glad to hear it, man."

"Hey don't worry about it," Tommy said. "They approved your appeal, didn't they? You'll be out in a year, I bet."

"Less," he answered. "Fifty weeks if they acquit me."

Tommy just sat on the bunk, looking Frankie over. "Hey, I know," he said finally.

"You want to *freshen up* before we hit the yard?"

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Tommy left the penitentiary on a rainy day. It was over a year before Frankie saw him again. They'd agreed to meet at Frankie's apartment. He'd just set up a nice little place in a good neighborhood near Marie's school. She was asleep in the next room, her pink and white bedroom, when Tommy finally knocked on the door. Frankie felt as though he'd waited forever, looking through the kitchen window at the street for several hours. His heart would speed up, hammering loudly in his chest every time tires rolled by or a car door closed.

When Frankie opened the door, they embraced. Slapping each other on the backs as men do, they laughed.

"Man, we're getting fat," Tommy said. They pulled back from each other.

"Speak for yourself," Frankie said. "I can still bench two eighty."

"Shit," Tommy said.

Frankie moved away from the door so he could enter. Tommy closed it behind him.

"I'll show you if you want," Frankie said. He pointed to a bench in the corner of the living room. Weights rested on the floor on either side.

"Nah, I can't have you showing me up." Tommy waved his hand.

"It's good to see you," Frankie said after a pause. "Come on in and get settled."

They watched a boxing match and drank beer. They shared stories of what they'd done since they'd last seen each other. Tommy had a wife now and a baby girl of his own. Frankie talked a lot about Marie. Tommy said she was beautiful when they looked in on her, quietly hovering in the doorway as she slept. Her arm draped around a doll with curls like hers. She'd turned ten the month before.

"Things seem real different now," Tommy said.

"A good kind of different though," said Frankie.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Hey you ever 'freshen up' since you've been out?" Frankie asked. His heart was pounding.

Tommy laughed. "Fuck no, man. It's been all pussy since I've been out. Why, you been fagging it up?"

"Hell no," Frankie said. His face was hot. "I was just thinking about what was different, that being one hell of a difference."

"I'd say so man," Tommy said. He was staring at the wall, his shoulders tense. "I'd better head out."

"So soon?" Frankie said. "But you just got here and you drove all that way."

Tommy shifted his weight. "I'm dog tired man. And I've already rented a room so I could get up and head out early."

"Ok, sure man. Whatever," he said. They walked towards the door where Tommy had entered hours before. "Thanks for coming."

"It was nice. Hey, maybe our girls can meet sometime," he said. He turned in the doorway, looking awkward with his hands in his pockets and only the eerie orange streetlights as a source of illumination.

Frankie moved to hug the other man goodbye but stopped as Tommy tensed. He extended his hand instead and Tommy smiled. The contact was brief, both palms sweaty.

Frankie stood by the door for twenty minutes, leaning against its frame long after Tommy's engine had purred to life and the shifting gravel signaled his departure. When Frankie did finally shuffle away from the door, he didn't go to his bedroom but instead went to Marie's.

He stood dark in her doorway, thinking of his baby brother John. John moved into their old place with Frankie and his wife just after Marie was born. One night he woke up, his heart pounding. He climbed from his bed and descended the loft's stairs to the lower bedroom where Marie slept. When he found John in the room, Marie's genitals exposed, he lost it. The next thing he remembered was his wife's screams and John's lifeless body in his grip.

Now that seemed like forever ago. Marie no longer slept in a crib but a twin bed. Frankie sighed, rubbed the back of his neck and stretched his arms overhead. He was able to climb into Marie's bed easily, sandwiching himself between his daughter and the wall.

Marie opened her eyes. "Daddy?"

"Yeah, baby," he answered, smoothing the hair back from her soft cheeks. "Go back to sleep."

She closed her eyes, snuggling in closer. With her hot breath on his face, sleep finally overtook him.

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Lane was helping her pack. Her apartment was beginning to look bare with all the furniture sold or moved and most everything else in cardboard boxes. The cat had been moved to Brooke's that morning with the television and computer. But Marie needed Lane to help load the rest.

"So is he still being a prick?" Lane asked, stretching a long, thick strand of clear tape against the top folds of a box.

"Don't call him a prick," she said. "He's not a prick."

Lane shrugged his shoulders, before sealing another box. "Ok. How did your mom put it? Oh yeah. Is he still a change-aphobe?"

"I haven't exactly told him we're moving in together—just that I love her," she said. "But yes, he still seems pretty freaked out by it."

"Do you think your mom is right about him?" Lane asked.

"Probably," she said. She'd started stacking the boxes in a pyramid against an empty wall. She couldn't get over how stark white everything looked without its furnishings. "If mom understands anything, its people."

"So do you really think he'll warm up to the idea of you living with your *lesbian lover*?" Lane flicked his tongue between his lips. Marie laughed.

"Quit." She threw a pillow at him. "Maybe he will, maybe he won't. I just wish I understood why it upset him so much. He's not really a religious guy, so I don't think it's a Jesus thing. Maybe if I understood his perspective I could be more sympathetic to his feelings. But right now I just feel rejected."

"Ask him to explain it to you," Lane said. He was turning around in circles looking for the black magic marker.

"Oh that'll go over real well," she said. "I'll pass on that, thanks."

"Do you think he loves you?" Lane asked. He met my eyes.

"Yes, I do," she said. She didn't even have to think about it.

"And you love him?" he asked.

"More than anyone," she answered.

"Then don't worry about it," Lane said. "If you love each other and I believe you do, you'll find a way to work it out."

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"Just use the hose to spray off the floor. Once all the dirt is loose you can just sweep it out with this." Marie's dad handed her a broom. A long-handled one with a wide head on the end, the kind you push.

She'd shown up the following Saturday, as usual, to help him around the house and with the yard. She'd had been there all day, cutting the grass and pulling weeds. She washed both carports, the barn (cleaning down the nests and shit on the floors, sweeping out the dust and dirt collected in corners) and all three cars. It wasn't until Marie had rinsed clean the last dish following dinner that he grabbed her.

Not with violence but she still jumped, surprised when his hand clasped her wrist. He wrapped his huge, bulky arms around her, holding her against his chest. She closed her eyes. For a long moment they stood there, in the middle of the kitchen, hugging. Marie finally softened, her throat burning. He made her feel so small.

"Everything's fine, Dad," she said. He didn't hear her.

His voice was low, almost a whisper.

"It's hard to tell time in a place like that."

"I'm sorry," she said. If he heard her, he ignored her, continuing to speak without a pause.

"Then, one day I was free. It was like waking from a dream. The earth beneath my feet was moving again. It was like the moment was so beautiful—so perfect, I could barely breathe," he said. He pulled her away from his chest, holding her at arm's length by the shoulders, shaking her.

"I never want you to suffer that kind of degradation. I never want you to suffer like that, in the darkness, with nothing to your name, with no one," he said. It sounded like a command.

He was hurting her. Slowly, Marie reached up, tugging on his right hand softly. She knew she could never match him physically, barely 5'1 and one hundred and twenty-five pounds. He gripped harder, bruising her shoulder.

"Dad," she said. She tried to sound firm but calm. Lane was the one who knew how to calm wild animals. But he wasn't there and she was scared. "Dad, please let me go."

Something changed in his eyes, the glossy shimmer receded. He could see her.

"Am I being punished?" he asked, still holding her shoulders but not tightly.

"It's not about you," she said. "This is my life."

He slapped her.

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She went straight to Brooke's house with the last of the boxes. Marie smiled the instant she saw her. Brooke's beautiful eyes caught and held the porch light, making them look more amber than brown. She stood there, illuminated in her doorway. Smiling, Brooke reached out for her. Wrapping her arms around Marie's neck, she planted soft, sticky kisses on her cheek and ear. Marie squeezed her, desperate to have her close. Brooke's brows furrowed together, meeting in the middle.

"What's wrong, baby?" Brooke asked. She took Marie's cheeks in her hands, wiped at them with her thumbs. "Come on, come inside."

Brooke held her for an hour while Marie cried. Marie lay in Brooke's lap as she rocked her, humming some tune Marie didn't recognize. It was beautiful. Marie sat up to watch her sing.

Marie told her everything. How her father cried and slapped her and how he blamed her mother. Brooke nodded, pushing up the sleeve of Marie's shirt, exposing the light purple bruise. She bent forward and kissed it while she spoke. *How had she known exactly where it was?* Marie thought. *I'd never said where he hurt me.*

As Marie spoke, Brooke danced around her, undressing and redressing her with a simple white shirt and green flannel boxers. She retrieved a glass of water for the bedside table, just like Marie liked it, with two ice cubes. Three were too many. They stung her lips. Brooke put Gwen in the bed, a small stuffed penguin that Marie had won for her at the carnival four years ago. That was just after they'd met. Actually she didn't win it. The male-carney working the water gun booth gave it to Marie before she could walk away. She'd tried 43 times to win Brooke the penguin. After 86 dollars she'd given up. The man, laughing, tore it from the top shelf and tossed it to her. Brooke laughed for three days.

Marie was still crying, laughing, and ranting as Brooke turned down the bed sheets, motioning for her to climb into bed with her. Snuggled, Brooke's warm breath in Marie's neck she finally spoke.

"I'm so sorry, baby." Brooke played with her hair, whispering in her ear.

"I just want the world to let me love you," Marie said. "I need the only man I love to let me love you. Is that really too much? "

"I love you, Marie."

Brooke moved against her, settling beneath the sheets. Marie scooted down, inching their bodies to even up. Then she leaned and planted a kiss on her cheek. Then kissed again and again, closer to her mouth each time. Brooke's hair cascaded on each side of Marie's face. Brooke's body holding Marie down—the sheer weight of it. There, beneath her in darkness, Marie felt the earth move again. There, beneath her in darkness, Marie could barely breathe.

Evolution

The seamen took the boat out, roared
so far beyond the dock that the water wasn't grey anymore
but the translucent blue of unsettled ice.
They dropped their nets into the water,
pulled out starfish, to collect them on the deck,
let the sun dry out their pores. Once the deck
was so full that the planks disappeared,
they gathered them in their hands, one starfish
at a time and felt their calloused hides stretch
between their palms. They pulled hard on opposite limbs,
one crushed in each grip, and tore the starfish
into smaller pieces, separating each limb
before tossing the fragments overboard, grabbing another
and beginning again, not stopping
'til the planks were clean though wet and slick
like the sailor's hands. They did this to be rid of them,
did it to save their crop. The men called it— *control*.
They didn't know starfish regenerate. If torn
from their center, leaving a remnant of core still attached
to its limb, a starfish can remake itself, grow
stronger limbs and be whole again. In this way the starfish
had won. And the sailors knew it, when they returned

after two summers to find thousands of stars in the water.
But what about the stars that couldn't grow back,
the ones torn free from their centers? The ones
that couldn't grow because they had no sense of their past—
no sense of what or who they had come from?