

BLOOD

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At midnight the snow slowed to a swirl and a gentle hush swept over the drifts, the bare trees, and the waiting car. Inside sat a woman and her daughter. The mother, leaning back in her seat, watched the flakes fall, both her hands on the steering wheel, her elbows locked. She seemed to be trying to push herself backwards, away from the windshield, the snow, and the night. Her daughter Lucy reclined more comfortably. She slouched, her right arm resting on the inside car door as she twirled locks of penny colored hair around her pointer finger. Every time she released a curl, it bounced and then came to rest on the ridge of her scarf.

“Stop worrying Mom, it’s going to be fine. They should be here soon, shouldn’t they?”

The mother, Sarah, looked over and examined her daughter. She was tall and trim. Although twenty-six, she still carried herself like a child, slouching and leaning whenever her body felt a need to rest or stretch out. At times it made her look awkward, lanky and boyish.

Sarah relaxed her grip on the steering wheel and placed her hands in her lap.

“They should be. When your uncle called he was in West Hatfield and that’s only about ten minutes from here.”

Lucy nodded and continued to stare out the window, twirling her hair. Her moist eyes reflected the white Christmas lights that illuminated the entire parking lot.

Sarah was still attempting to make sense of why she and her daughter were here. It had all happened so fast. She had been at the hospital, working her usual eleven to seven shift when she received a frantic call from her brother, Steve. He said he could not take care of their mother any more, that he had had enough and would she please help him, would she please meet him that night and take over. Sarah’s brother was a man who never asked for help. That was what had persuaded Sarah to meet him on December 26th, at midnight, in the parking lot of a candle store four hours south of her home in northern Vermont.

Lucy unhitched her seatbelt, kicked off her leather boots, and curled her legs up under her, her feet nestled safe beneath her jeaned thighs.

“Grandma must be exhausted. If they’re coming all the way from Philly they’ve had what... at least a five hour drive?”

Sarah nodded slowly. “Yes, about that. Your uncle said he wanted to beat traffic.”

“How long do you think she’ll stay with us?”

Sarah took her eyes off the snow bank ahead of them and looked over at her daughter. She looked bored, the skin below her eyes a little puffy. She blinked hard a few times to clear her thoughts.

“Mom?”

“Yes honey?”

“How long do you think she’ll stay?”

Sarah had no clue. For the past six months their mother had been trying to recover from invasive chemotherapy. The mouth cancer, despite the multiple treatments and experimental procedures, continued to affect her health. And on top of that, she was a difficult woman. When she used to visit, back when she was healthy, she would threaten to leave after only a few days. If she decided to stay, she would sulk in her room and passive-aggressively insult her daughter’s achievements, relationships, and lifestyle habits. Finally, when exhausted, she would demand to leave because she had someplace better to be.

“I don’t know. She’s really sick this time, Lucy. She does tend to be dramatic but when I talked to your uncle on the phone, there was a sense of hopelessness. You know, she told him she wanted to die.”

Lucy twirled another curl. Sarah wondered if this was something she always did. A nervous twitch? The curl fell and tapped the corner of her pink left cheek.

“Yeah, you told me. It’s sad.”

Sarah kept her eyes on that dark pink patch of skin. The rosette gently invaded the fine blonde fuzz of her daughter’s upper jawbone. The rest of her daughter’s skin was white and smooth. With no freckles this far into the winter, she looked tinted in blues and greys.

Several years back, when Lucy was in her third year at the university, she came down with a kidney infection. Sarah remembered

it vividly. When her daughter called her and complained of a pain in her side, both, after a little thought, assumed it was gas, maybe nerves. The following day, when Lucy felt flu-like symptoms, Sarah told her to go to the hospital. By the time she checked into the ER and saw a physician, she was septic. They rushed antibiotics and she remained overnight. Sarah sped the three hours to the hospital and spent the night in a pink plastic chair. Sarah watched her daughter sleep, her skin yellow, her eyes fluttering from the fever dreams, each of her cheeks roseate, the finger prints of infection fading into the pale blue lines of her temple veins.

“Lucy, your cheek is red, are you feeling okay?”

Lucy pulled down the visor mirror and pushed the plastic button for light.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just the heat. It’s a million degrees in here mom.”

“I know. I just want it warm for your grandmother when she gets here. Which should be any minute now.”

Sarah glanced around the parking lot. They were still the only car. The candle store was designed like an outdoor mall. White lights hung from every building. The whole place sparkled. Directly in front of them, on a long stretch of snow between one fake grouping of pines and another, a giant deer stood, made completely of lights. It was posed in a running position, as if it were trying to get away from something.

“God this place is tacky.”

“I know. Grandma loved it though. Remember when we used to go in and fill up those egg carton things with candles? I can’t believe they have a candle called Freshly Mowed Grass.”

Sarah did not respond and a silence fell upon the two women as they waited. Snowflakes continued to fall, so small they could land on eyelashes and go unnoticed. Sarah felt the outside cold seeping in along the door frame, down around her knees. Even under all her warm layers of cotton and wool, she could not get warm. Minutes passed like lights on bedroom walls, consistent yet still foreign.

Sarah turned off the headlights.

“Lucy, why did it take four months for me to agree to care of my mother, my dying mother?”

Lucy shrugged within the bulk of her jacket. Before she could

answer, lights swung towards them, then away.

“I think they’re here Mom.”

They both turned.

A car had rolled in and parked beside them.

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For the following three days, Sarah’s mother Teresa barely spoke. She sat up in the recliner Sarah had moved into her bedroom and watched soaps. The eighty-year-old woman scowled often. She called her son several times a day to complain about how terrible and unloved she felt. She complained and blamed him for dumping her with Sarah. Sarah saw the situation as a dump too. Even though she was a nurse, she wondered if she really was better suited to take care of her mother.

Teresa had also been a nurse. Unlike her daughter, she had only worked in one unit, delivery. She had not been a nurse long either. She had gone to nursing school after her children became teenagers as a way, Sarah speculated, to distract herself and still feel needed. Once, when they were running errands together, she had told Sarah that she liked babies better than anyone else because they couldn’t talk back.

On the fourth morning, as Sarah sipped her coffee and settled down into the breakfast nook, she heard her mother rumbling around in the guestroom above. Sarah began to thumb through one of the many bridal magazines on the table, her coffee perched at her lips. So many gowns. So many dresses. So many shades of white. She couldn’t believe Lucy was getting married. Her daughter, like her, had high cheek bones and long, wide clamshell grey eyes framed with thick brown lashes. She was also planning to wear, as her mother had, a simple white dress.

Two weeks ago they had gone dress shopping and it had been fun. Before picking out a few pieces that they were genuinely interested in, they tried on goofy dresses, the kind overdone with tulle and lace. This helped soften Lucy’s nerves. On one dress, a button on the back had caught and it took an hour for the shopkeeper to free her with a needle. As the attendant had just about finished, she accidentally poked Lucy with the needle, drawing a tiny drop of blood on the white dip of skin between her shoulder blades. A lucky sign, Lucy argued despite the shopkeeper’s look of horror. Lucy tried to explain that chaos was the most dependable form of order but the woman kept shaking her head and rushing around,

obviously a mess.

Sarah heard her mother coming down the farmhouse stairs. She could tell by the sound of slipper treads shuffling over worn wood, the swish of cloth pajamas against old legs, and the squeak of hands occasionally sticking to the cold banister. Sarah closed the bridal magazine quickly and pressed the lip of her coffee cup to her mouth, staring out the window in feigned reverie.

“Good Morning Sarah.”

Sarah turned her head slowly and smiled, with exaggeration, into her cheeks.

“Mornin’ Mom.”

Teresa slowly, sloppily, squeezed into the breakfast nook and sat down on the bench across from her.

“What were you looking at out there Sarah?”

Teresa squinted out the window. She seemed to be preparing herself for another sentence but the pain meds were slowing her down.

“Awful snowy. I don’t know how you manage with all this snow and cold.”

“How’d you sleep?”

Teresa, still in her pajamas, looked older than her actual age. Old and meek. Like a kicked dog, she had a tendency to pull her chin down when she looked up. Sarah had asked her once why she lowered her face that way. She snapped it was the cancer. Something to do with the pain.

“Oh fine. It was a little chilly but I know Richard doesn’t like to put the heat up. Counting every penny he has, I suppose. Sharon’s husband, oh what’s his name? You know, that Jew from New York? He’s the same way.”

The sentence seemed to exhaust Teresa. Sarah didn’t understand why she wasted her energy.

Sarah went to fill her half full coffee cup.

“What’s with all these bridal magazines? Is Lucy picking out a dress already?”

Sarah returned to her seat.

“Yes Mom. The wedding’s in nine months. She wants to take her time in finding the right dress. Plus she’ll need alterations.

Teresa raised an eyebrow, as if confused. Her jaw and cheeks were

a little swollen this morning, giving her a clownish appearance. She pulled a magazine towards her and opened it where the mail-in subscription form divided the glossy pages.

“I can’t believe you’re doing all this.”

Sarah, in mid sip, tightened her mouth on the lip of her coffee cup before swallowing.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s not your wedding, Sarah.”

Teresa flipped a page. She placed her palm to the bottom of her jaw.

“Let me guess, you’re going to help Lucy pick out a dress.”

Sarah looked down.

“She asked for my help, Mom.”

“Well, the least you can do is go to that boutique on Southerland Street in Burlington. They have beautiful gowns. Let her pick her own, mhm?”

Sarah let out her breath, slow and long, pushing her coffee cup away from her.

“We have everything planned already Mom.”

Teresa bunched her brows.

“What’s with your attitude?”

“No attitude. I just woke up, okay?”

“I’m trying to help you Sarah, that’s all. No need to get snippy at me.”

“Help Mom? Really? Where were you when I got married and I needed your help? You said you couldn’t come to my wedding because you were taking that test for your night class. I was twenty-three! It would have been nice if you had offered your help then.”

Sarah leaned back in her chair. Her mother sat there, her face blank, her one hand gently holding the yellow feeding tube on her lap. The other hand returned to the bottom of her jaw.

“I’m sorry Momma. I didn’t mean to snap. We’ll check out that boutique.”

Teresa stood awkwardly, squeezed out of the bench, and began slowly back towards the stairs. Before she began to climb, she stopped and turned her head slightly, her chin down, her eyes on the floor near Sarah’s

feet.

“You know, Sarah, sometimes you’re so hard to love.”

As Teresa climbed back to her room, Sarah continued thumbing through the magazines, glaring at all the women in white, her stomach aching, as if inside it sat a large chunk of ice.

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The following afternoon Teresa refused to get out of bed. First Sarah tried to be calm and comforting but it did not work so then she tried to be stern and authoritative. That also did not work. The old woman lay still and grey within her faded paisley sheets, her eyes closed, her thin dry lips parted slightly, as if she fell asleep while whispering. When Sarah woke her and demanded to know what was wrong, why wasn’t she getting up, the old woman replied that she had too much pain in her mouth. That her head was going to blow off.

Sarah was going to be late for work. She called to see if another nurse could cover her for an hour or two and then went back to sit by her mother. Teresa’s room was simple yet comfortable. Sarah had sown and put up red calico curtains; she had hung family photos of grandchildren and relatives and friends to fill the walls’ blank spaces. A TV in the corner remained constantly on low to provide respite from the hollow quiet of illness.

“Mom, I understand you’re having pain, but you really need to make an effort to get up because if you lie in bed all day, you’ll become more and more deconditioned and it’ll only be harder for you to get going again.”

Teresa opened her eyes. She placed both her hands on her temples and began to rub with the tips of her fingers.

“It hurts Sarah, it hurts so much. Please help me.”

“Mom, I don’t have time for a head massage. I have to get to work. You just had more pain meds so you should feel better soon.”

“Please Sarah.”

Sarah sighed. She stood and placed both hands on her mother’s forehead. She then gently worked her way back through the grey curls, massaging the oily skin. She pressed her fingertips just hard enough to move the flesh, to feel it slide slightly over the hard bone beneath.

She watched her mother’s face relax. Her mouth dipped into a

half moon, a little spittle slipped into the corners. Her breathing changed and Sarah knew the methadone must be kicking in. She wondered where the pain would go, where her mother went, slipping into a fog of no feeling, no consciousness. Sarah continued to massage for another minute, her mother's head tilted so that the crown lightly touched her stomach. She looked so vulnerable. So frail and pathetic. Sarah quickly stepped back, removing her hands from the old woman's hair. What else could she do? She was relieved when her mother did not wake. Sarah sniffed her fingertips but smelled nothing. Downstairs she could hear the aid she had hired making tea.

As Sarah sped down the empty interstate, she found herself looking forward to her night at work. Another eight hours away from her mother. She let her eyes stray from the grey monotony of the highway. It was beautiful outside. Late afternoon sunlight fell over the white Vermont fields. The leafless trees, naked veins of purple and blue, as if full of blood, reached up towards the white clouds. These branches were exposed, the clouds round and full. It looked as if any minute the landscape would puncture the heavens and all would bleed out into a brilliant red sunset.

Sarah switched on her defrost to clear off the remaining clusters of ice crystals on the bottom of her windshield. They were pretty and she liked how they fit together. Although the spread of white ice belonged to a whole, it also branched out into separate opaque mosaics, beautiful and fragile. The natural world had a sense of kinship, a respect for individuality. Sarah liked that there was order here, some kind of pattern.

By the time Sarah began to take her exit, her windshield was clear. She glanced up at the walls of dolostone on either side of her. They were draped in light blue ice. The snow at their bases was thin and muddied, grey from the snowplows and the late December weather. As she continued to slow in preparation for her turn off the exit ramp, she noticed, to the right, a deer sitting.

The first thought that came to Sarah's mind: did deer sit? If they did, then why had it chosen to sit there, amongst winter's offal of downed plow markers, beer bottles, and busted tires? Something felt wrong. Without thinking, Sarah pulled onto the breakdown lane and backed up, her flashers pulsing.

When she stepped out of her car, winter burned her cheeks and nose. She tucked her mittened hands into her coat pockets and used her shoulder to close the car door. As she walked around the car, she expected the animal to jump up and run, to be startled by her curiosity. But it did not. It remained seated, its upper body goldbrown against the colorless background. Once Sarah stepped over the initial snowy ridge between the breakdown lane and the side, keeping her distance a good twenty feet, she saw the rest of the animal.

The young doe sat in a pool of herself. Red stained the immediate snow beneath her to an oily black while the edges of the pool glowed with red. Her hind legs were too far from her body. Sarah's eyes followed the long limbs to the bloodied haunches, once speckled. She saw her organs, intestines, and innards spill out, now mangled and crushed into what was once white.

Sarah felt as if she were in a dream. She began to approach and as she did so, the doe began to scream. The sound was throaty and tongue-pattered, like a lamb or goat. As it continued to scream, it glanced towards a patch of maples, its eyes wide and wet. Sarah followed her glances and saw, deeper in the forest, a larger deer, standing, staring. Sarah turned to the highway as a car sped along the exit ramp. It was gone as fast as it had approached. Another car passed soon after. Then another. And another. Four total since she had pulled over, switched on her flashers, and stood in the break down lane. Would no one stop to help?

When Sarah reached the animal, she saw how small it actually was. It could not be more than seven or eight months old. Although it no longer had spots, it looked like a large fawn. While Sarah stared down at it, it began to pant. Her pink tongue peeked out the side of her softly foaming mouth. Sarah wondered how long it would take for this animal to die. Men ran through battlefields carrying their organs in their dirtied hands. People lost limbs, torn off, blown off, gnawed off, and survived. But this was bad. The doe would either bleed to death, or be found by a predator once night fell.

A fifth car passed. The doe took a long look at Sarah up close and began screaming again. It screamed as hard as it possibly could. It kicked out its front legs which caused her to scream even louder. It was then Sarah turned, threw off her hat and screamed herself. She screamed into

the wind, which muffled her voice. When she turned back to the doe she found it staring at her.

“WHAT! WHAT! What do you want me to do?”

Without waiting for any kind of response, Sarah bent down, ignoring the animal’s frantic cries, and attempted to scoop her up as if she were a dog. An arm under the soft chest, an arm around the wet limp haunches, Sarah lifted slowly, small grunts of exertion escaping through her clenched teeth. As she did so, strands of intestines spiraled down, just like Lucy’s curls, towards the ground. One leg, attached to the animal by a few inches of skin, hung limply and Sarah was unable to scoop it up with the rest of her.

Sarah half carried, half dragged the animal away from the road, past the edge of the dolostone wall, and set her down near the bare maples. As she did so, she noticed the heaviness of her breathing, the burning ache in her shoulders and back. As Sarah listened to the doe continue to baw for her mother, she could see, in the far distance, another car approaching.

Sarah jumped up and ran towards the road. This time she walked into the middle and waved both her arms above her head. The car slowed and stopped. A State Trooper.

He stepped out of his car and put a hand on his hip. Sarah ran up to him spitting out her words like broken teeth after a fight.

“There’s a deer. She’s been hit. I need you to help me. She’s really suffering. No one would stop and help me. I didn’t know what to do.”

The trooper remained calm.

“Okay Ma’am. You need to get out of the road. You’re putting yourself in danger.”

“I’m fine, officer. Look—”

“I see her up there.” He interrupted, his mustache barely moving as he spoke. He looked Sarah over.

“I got a call from the driver that hit her. I can take care of it from here.”

“I moved her because she was close to the road, I didn’t want us to get hit and -”

“Us?”

“The deer and myself.”

She looked down at her coat which was now covered completely

in blood.

“Okay Ma’am-”

“I tried, officer.”

The trooper shrugged.

“We see this all the time. Go pull yourself together. You look terrible with all that mess on ya. Go home and change. There’s nothing you can do.”

Sarah pushed a clump of hair out of her face.

Suddenly she felt the cold again.

She couldn’t remember where she had thrown her hat.

As she climbed into her Subaru, she glanced in her mirror at the officer climbing through the snow towards the doe. He moved rigidly. Unattached. Although Sarah couldn’t hear it, she knew the doe was still screaming. Still screaming for her deer mother off in the woods, watching. There was spittle in the corners of her mouth, her eyes closed, little grey curls on her forehead, oily skin underneath. Sarah turned on the engine and continued to drive the exit ramp. She made a left onto the road that would take her back to the interstate’s on-ramp. She would go back to the house to wash her coat and change her pants, her socks, her shoes. All she could smell was the blood.

Three days later Teresa died in a hospital bed alone except for a young nurse wearing Mickey Mouse scrubs. She had not been paying attention to her patient, distracted by the fifth episode of Rosanne playing out on the television in the corner of the room. By the time she realized the silence behind her, the tips of Teresa’s toes had gone cold.

The funeral was a week later. After the service, Sarah went over to her mother’s house, her childhood home, and began going through her things. Everything had to be divided up and decided upon. Good clothes to the thrift, bad ones to the dumpster; antique furniture to be divided amongst the siblings, her fine china and glass dolls, to whomever wanted them. Lucy had come down to Philadelphia also. She was quiet and matter-of-fact before and during the service. She did not cry. Now, as they began to move around boxes, she insisted on consuming as much coffee as possible, as if the familiarity of the drink mixed with caffeine would somehow power them both through and keep them warm. For, although

they wore sweaters, they were still freezing, their hands hurting as they piled up books and photo albums, boxes of knick knacks too embedded in memory to be easily thrown away. Then Lucy found a box of letters in the bedroom closet.

They were filed in chronological order and tied up in bunches with red ribbons. Each envelope was roughly the same size and yellowed in color. There were at least a hundred of them. Lucy pulled the box down from the closet and began thumbing through.

“Look, there are letters she wrote to Pop Pop in here also. He must have saved his and she put them all together.”

She opened one and read:

Dear Love,

Today was hard. I miss you terribly. But I did think about our future, how we will buy a nice house and have a nice family together and it made me very happy. I will write again tomorrow.

As always, all my love,

Teresa

Beneath the words she had drawn a silly house. It looked like a child’s drawing. The date read 1953. She had only been eighteen.

“There’s so much here Mom. All her private stuff. In this box.”

Sarah could not join her, could not read them with her. Not yet anyways. She had almost had enough. She hadn’t cried yet because, in frankness, she wasn’t so much sad upon her mother’s death as she was sad about the finality of hope. Never would she feel her mother’s love given freely, just existing over her like the ceiling of a room, unnoticed, keeping in the warmth. She would forever know her mother by her absence, by what Sarah was unable to obtain. Sarah just sat on the edge of her mother’s queen bed, and fiddled with a tangled necklace. She suddenly felt weak and tired and stuck. She kept pulling at the necklace but nothing was working, nothing was coming loose. Lucy folded the letter and placed it back in the box.

“Hey Mom, want to pack up that rug?”

Lucy pointed to a floral rug, the only item left in the office off the side of the bedroom.

“Then we’ll feel accomplished because we completely emptied and cleaned one room.”

The clock on the vanity chimed 5:45pm.

“Why don’t you get the clothes and I’ll vacuum? Once I’m done, we’ll roll it up and get out of here. We can stop at the diner for eggs and home fries.”

Sarah nodded and began stuffing sweaters and blouses, the tags still attached, into cloth shopping bags. When she finished, she sat back on the bed and watched Lucy through the arched doorway.

The vacuum was roaring as she pushed it back and forth over the thickly braided rug. And then, for the first time, Sarah noticed that her daughter vacuumed just like Teresa, one hand on the back of her hip as she thrust the machine sporadically around the rug. No order. No pattern. No methodical back and forth. It was all random and chaotic and yet somehow it worked. The rug began to look clean. Occasionally Lucy would stop, prop the vacuum up, and pluck a penny or a bobby pin from the floor. But then she would continue, nonchalantly, to suck up all the curly grey hairs, the last organic remains.