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Rooms Without Men

Kailey Brennan

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Rooms Without Men

Kailey Brennan

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Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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My Lover in the Daytime

Danny will never leave his wife for me. Even though he whispers, "I love you" to me while we are naked under the starchy sheets at the Glenmore Inn on Wednesday nights, I know he doesn't.

I have come to learn that he isn't like the others. The others were willing to risk it all, pleading desperate promises. If I stayed with them, they would be faithful only to me. Danny has never said that, and I know he never will. I know that if his wife, Cecelia, walks in and discovers us, Danny will push me away, take his wife's hand and reassure her that I am nothing to him. He won't call, he won't write, and I will be but a memory to him. But that is why I have held on so long. It's a thrill that I can feel all the way to my fingertips like an electric spark.

We are only together at night, hidden by the darkness. I park two blocks away from the motel and glance over my shoulder before shutting the car door. Sometimes I get there first. Other times, he is already there, leaning up against the headboard of the bed, sipping from a plastic cup of Glenlevit scotch. The thrill of finding him there, the uncertainty of it, makes me shed my coat and heels before I can even lock the door. He stares at me, a half smile across his face.

The first time we met at the Glenmore Inn, four months ago, I asked Danny his wife's name. I was lying on my back, the collective sweat from our first lovemaking pooling around my exposed navel. Danny lay on his side, his head propped up on his arm. With his finger, he drew circles with the moisture left on my body. His touch felt surprisingly cool, regardless of the mugginess of the motel room. He didn't stop when I asked him the

question.

"Cecelia," he said, taking his time with her name. He leaned into me and licked my earlobe.

"That's a beautiful name," I said. "Is she beautiful like her name?"

Danny kissed my neck slowly and then with a sudden appetite. I knew he kissed his wife like this, the way his mouth moved up and down my neck with a kind of familiarity. We didn't speak of her again that night, but I kept wondering what she looked like.

Even now, I still think about her. Her name rolls around in my head, sour yet sweet, like a piece of hard candy I'm trying to suck on. She is no longer a faceless, oblivious wife whom I quietly scoff at for not knowing her lovesick husband is not at work like he said. Cecilia has started to take form in my imagination, like a puzzle, piecing her way into existence. I keep seeing remnants of her around me, like the blonde hairs on the back of Danny's jacket or her lipstick tube in the cupholder of his car. As much as I hate to think about her, I can't help but feel delight rise up in my chest as I straddle her husband, feeling him inside me the same way she has. I like to think that when Danny does leave me, he will think of me while he is with his wife, wishing he knew where I was so he could run his hand through my dark hair and kiss my youthful lips once more. I bite my lip whenever I think about it, feeling the thrill rush warmth through my body. It's the only power I have.

Two weeks ago we went for a drive by the beach in Danny's convertible because he likes the smell of the ocean in the breeze. He never takes me anywhere specific, always fast drive-bys and drive-throughs, in case someone sees us. He put the top down for me. The

sky was clear and the moon new, so the stars sparkle bright against the black of the night. The cool air whipped my hair across my face and rippled the floral cotton of my dress. Danny placed his hand on my thigh. Feeling the warmth of his tan skin, as if the sun still radiated from him, mixed with the breeze makes my toes curl in my sandals. Danny put his sunglasses on, despite the dark and he looked like a movie star with his gray hair blowing about the crisp white collar of his button down.

I wondered if Danny drove Cecilia around like this. There was no way she can have looked like I did, with my young, soft face looking up to the sky and my dress blowing away from my tight thighs, flashing a glimpse of my black underwear. Danny might have brought her for drives under the stars, but she could never make his eyes sparkle with desire like they do when he is staring at me.

A week after the drive was when Danny bought me a gift for the first time. It was a pink box, like a hatbox with thick red ribbon around it. He placed it on the nightstand when I got to the motel.

"Wait until after," he said, taking my face in his hands, kissing me fiercely. I was mesmerized by its presence, even when he picked me up and laid me on the bed. When I was allowed to open it, I peeled away the tissue paper slowly, seeking to save this moment. I didn't think he would buy me anything again. I pulled out the bra covered in lace and matching panties. I adored them right away, looking towards the bathroom, wishing to see myself in them.

"Wear them for me next time," he said. He poured himself a drink. I crawled across the bed and sat on top of him.

"Thank you," I said. "You are good to me." I meant it, even though I knew it's what he wanted to hear. Then I asked him where he worked, wondering how he could afford nice things for me and his expensive cologne I could smell in my hair.

"An office," was all he said. I pictured him sitting at a mahogany desk, floor to ceiling windows and a maroon couch in the corner. Cecilia, who had been lost to me in that moment, suddenly crept back in, and I wondered what kind of things Danny bought for her. Probably chocolates and diamond necklaces. I liked what he gave me better.

Today, Danny asked me to meet him earlier than usual. The sun hasn't set yet and I feel exposed walking towards the motel, like everyone I pass can see my secret shining through my skin. Danny is here, fully dressed, standing in the middle of the room, empty-handed.

"Let's go for a drive," he says, taking my hand and leading me out the door. I am so delighted to be driving around in Danny's car in the daylight, that I don't bother to ask where he is taking me.

We pull into a driveway, and I see his last name on the mailbox. I put my thumbnail between my teeth, tasting the tartness of my nail polish.

"Your house?" I say, raising my eyebrows.

"She's not home," he says, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. "I want you in my bed." He kisses me gently, pushing his hand up my leg. As much as I want him, the uncertainty of what I might find inside - her eyes looking at me from the framed photos on the walls or her scent lingering in the sheets -fills me with precaution and I grip the leather car seat. But when Danny opens the car door for me, I get out.

His house looks small from the outside, but upon walking inside I can see it stretches into long hallways and an open-air staircase that spirals through the living room. It is bright and almost entirely furnished in white, from the polished wicker settee in the living room to the glistening cabinets in the kitchen. Danny looks how I have imagined him in his windowed office. I am so used to the seedy lighting of the motel with its dark green walls or the pale yellow glow of his car light, that I can't help but stare, admiring my lover in the daytime. His eyes are a shade of blue I hadn't seen before. With the ambient light around him, they look like sea glass.

"Something to drink?"

He is strangely formal, and I can feel his discomfort in the way he speaks. For a moment, I feel like a stranger, until I realize that is in fact what I am, an impostor in his home. This is the first time I have deliberately walked into a situation where Cecilia could find me and Danny could be gone forever. My cheeks begin to grow warm with anticipation and my dress suddenly irritates me, swishing against my legs. I very badly want to rip it off.

"Just some water," I say. My throat is now parched. I feel like I need Danny right now, more than the water. He walks into the kitchen and I stay in the living room. There are no pictures on the walls, since most of them are covered in tall bay windows overlooking the sand dunes that lead down to the water. A small desk sits in the corner with a wooden chair, her purple cardigan draped over it, my first sign that she has indeed been in this house. I push the cardigan off the chair. A fuzzy clump on the polished floor. Her handwriting covers pieces of scrap paper and I notice, how fluid and graceful her cursive is.

I proceed down the hallway towards the many doors that line it, finding spare bedrooms and piles of miscellaneous furniture. The door at the end is wide open and I can see the bed, freshly made with a powder blue comforter and white throw pillows. It calls to me, like a gentle whisper, inviting me to let myself melt into its cool sheets and wait for Danny. But as I approach it, the room to my left, whose door is also open, catches my eye. It is a bathroom, her bathroom, for the curtains are made of lace and her beauty products clutter the ivory counter tops. There is nothing special about the lay out, just a sink with an oval mirror above it, a toilet with a seat cover made of white shag, a shower. The tile floor looks like marble flecked with gold throughout. I take off my shoes before walking inside, feeling a sudden longing to touch the gold with my toes.

"I just have to use the bathroom," I call to Danny before closing the door and I know I am in a forbidden place. I pick through her makeup and find she doesn't own red lipstick. I think about all the red marks I have left all over her husband's body. The cabinet below the sink holds a stack of towels, a bottle of hairspray and hand lotion. They are all name brands I have never heard of. Some are labeled in French. As I rummage behind the towels, I find a box of tampons. I am surprised by this. I had pictured her in her fifties like Danny. I think it would be funny for her to find out about me in this context, seeing my own tampon in the trash, filmed with my young blood as she presses a hand to her abdomen, feeling herself drying up inside. I now know she is younger than I had expected, still able to bring life to this world, still able to bleed like me. I shove them back into their rightful spot, feeling betrayed by my own imagination.

As I stand up, my reflection catches my eye and I admire the way my hair looks. I examine myself from various angles, revering how my dress hugs my body and

accentuates my thin waist and full breasts. I know my body has to be better than Cecelia's. She probably looks in this same mirror with sad eyes as she bunches handfuls of her loose flesh around her stomach or turns around in annoyance at how flat her ass has become. I smile, thinking about us both standing in this same spot, one of us happy and one sad, one losing a man, the other gaining one. I want to show more of myself to her. I pretend she is in the mirror too as I take off my dress, revealing to her the pink lace bra and underwear her husband bought me. I swing my hips back and forth slowly so she can watch me and see what her husband wants. I spin around, letting one of my bra straps fall from my shoulder. I know I am defiling her space, this private part of the house meant only for her. My desire for Danny consumes me and I want to skip down the hallway to him in my nakedness and make him take me on the kitchen floor.

I'm still transfixed on the image of my body in the mirror when I hear the front door slam. Then Danny's muffled voice. I walk to the door and push aside her terrycloth robe that hangs on a hook. It smells sickly of lilies. I place my ear on the door, straining to hear. A voice, faint but clearly feminine.

Is this the moment? Is this when we would meet? Maybe she is just stopping by and will remain unaware of my presence. Maybe Danny's face will stay unchanged as he gently rushes her along and she won't sense the other female lurking in her house. They keep talking and I can tell they are moving about. I suddenly remember I left my shoes outside the bathroom door. I look to the window and think about climbing out. But lovers like me don't escape this way. Lovers like me shouldn't be afraid. We should look beautiful all the time. Their voices grow closer, her footsteps padding down the hallway. Her bare feet make sticky noises on the hardwood floor.

"Honey, whose shoes are these?"

I hear Danny right behind her. He makes a grunting noise, like he has no idea what she is talking about. But he doesn't try to stop her. He doesn't try to distract her, or guide her away from the hallway. His footsteps are now in time with hers, leading her to me. This isn't how she is supposed to find me. I grab my dress off the floor and slide into the shower as quietly as I can, pressing myself against the damp white tile. The floor is cold and wet under my feet. I hold back from pounding my fist into the wall, instead clenching my dress tighter into my chest, furious that this will be my end. She was supposed to find us in bed, in the heat of passion, me naked on top of her husband with my head thrown back. She was supposed to think of me later, when she pathetically pulled Danny from the couch and led him back into the solace of their bed, wishing she could please him like I had.

The door clicks open. I can feel Cecelia's stillness as she takes in the empty room. Has she assumed I existed all along? Is this abrupt visit planned, an attempt to discover the infidelity she has feared this whole time? The shower curtain whips open. The metal curtain rings scrap against the steel rod and I feel it in my teeth. I keep my face calm, intending to look her in the eye. She is short, most of her weight clinging to her hips. The blonde hair that I had been plucking from Danny's clothes, flinging onto the motel floor, sits on the top of her head in a pristine knot. She looks at me with round eyes, taking in my half naked body pressed up against her shower. She's not pretty, but somehow she isn't ugly either. There is something about the simpleness of her face, her pink lips, her smooth skin untouched by makeup that makes her look so natural, so pure.

My mouth tastes sour, and I realize I am afraid after all, fear rising from my

stomach and coating my tongue. I look over at Danny standing in the doorway with an aura of arrogance so thick, I think I can see it looming above him like a cloud. His arms are folded over his chest as he stares at me. His mouth slides into that crooked smile that he knows gets me, and I now wonder if he's brought me here on purpose. Here to humiliate me, to show me that he has been in control this whole time. He lets out a short laugh, full of pity, and I touch the cold tile to steady myself. I realize our definition of what a lover should be has always been the same. Now that he wants this to be over, he wants to leave me in a way that I will always remember, like the men I left before him. But I wasn't going to plead or beg like they did.

Cecilia lets out a loud sigh, and I pull my eyes away from Danny. After thinking of her so much these past few months, I search for clues in her appearance, trying to find evidence that she has known of my own existence. Are the purple shadows under her eyes from lack of sleep, waiting for Danny in the middle of the night? Is that small stain on her shirt from spilling her coffee this morning, too lost in worried thought to steady her mug? Has she neglected to put lipstick on because it doesn't matter, knowing the lip prints that cling to Danny's collared shirts don't match the colors she owns anyway? She suddenly reaches out her hand. I take it without hesitation, accepting her offer to avoid anymore of this stoic silence. As I touch her, her hand firm and cool, I am aware of her physicality, her real body that I have been piecing together for so long. She helps me out of the shower, and I try to back towards the door without stepping on her toes. She moves away, still holding my hand as if she is about to spin me around like we are dance partners. I leave wet footprints across her bathroom floor.

There is nothing left for me to say, and I fear what might come out of Danny's mouth

if I stay any longer. I keep backing away, stumbling out of the bathroom and grab my shoes. I don't look at either of them before running. I run down the hallway, through the living room, and out of their home, letting the door slam behind me.

I pull my dress over my head as I run down the sidewalk. I wonder what Cecilia is saying to Danny. I can't picture either of them yelling. Danny is probably swearing under his breath, running his hand through his hair. I slow down now that I am off their street and the sidewalk feels warm on my bare feet. Despite the sound of the cars driving by, the singing of the birds, the hum of the summer day, I can only hear Cecilia's deep sigh. I wonder if she can still feel my hand in hers, if she cleaned up my footprints.

Mixed Blood

Around the time my mother asked me to clean out the basement, I started having dreams about my father killing me. In the first one, he grabbed a knife off the kitchen table and stabbed me in the chest. I woke up suddenly, my heart racing so hard I heard it pulsing in my ears. The expression on his face, teeth bared, eyes widened, seemed to hover under my eyelids as I tried to go back to sleep. The next morning, my body felt heavy, weighed down by a guilty conscience. I kept telling myself that dreams don't mean anything, that they can't be controlled, but I felt responsible.

That day, my mother told me I needed to help her clean out the basement. She was leaning up against the kitchen counter, the one where the knife had been in my dream.

"I need your help," she said. "I need you to go down there for me."

She looked small, as if the kitchen had grown around her. Her lifeless hair lay limp at her shoulders took over her face, like vines choking a tree trunk.

"I had a dream about dad," I said.

I wanted her to listen, hoping that if I recited the dream it would go away, leave my memory through my mouth.

"I can't hear about that right now, Emma," she said. "Can you just try to sort out some of that stuff down there?"

I told her I would, but when she went upstairs, I left. I already knew what was down there.

My father left us over a month ago. He told me it was my mother's fault. I had sat on the

stairs and watched through the wooden spindles, as he put on his coat. I felt like a little girl, trapped in my 20-year-old body curled up on the step, waiting for him to look at me. But he didn't. He slammed the front door so hard the windows rattled. When he called me a week later, I was sitting on the living room floor watching TV. He asked why I hadn't come over to see him. His voice through the phone sounded broken from a bad connection, but it still made me tense. I pressed the phone closer to my ear to hear him.

"I'm not ready yet," I had said.

"Well, let me know when you are."

After I hung up the phone, I bit my lip, forcing back the guilt and anger rising up inside me simultaneously, as if trying to beat each other in a race. I haven't talk to him since.

The night after the first dream, I had a second. In the dream, I was driving down the highway when I passed a truck that looked like his. He was in the driver's seat, staring at me though the passenger window. He pulled out a gun and aimed it at me. I saw him pull the trigger, my body slump forward and my car crash into the trees lining the road. That night, I let out a loud gasp as I woke. I sat up, rubbing my eyes, trying to wipe away the vision of my lifeless body, of my father with a gun. I walked around my room, pacing like a mental patient, desperately trying to think of something else.

When I came down for breakfast the next morning, my mother told me I looked tired.

"I had another dream."

"Oh, God," was all she said. Before she left the room, she turned around.

"Emma, please get the basement done today. I don't want to keep asking you."

I decided to get it over with after breakfast. I had to face it sometime. Armed with cleaning sprays and a box of black trash bags, I opened the basement door. The smell of sawdust, mixed with the sting of paint thinner, hit me as soon as I stepped through the doorway. I used to love the smell of the basement because it reminded me of my father. Now, as I descended the shaky, unfinished stairs, I knew why my mother didn't want to go down there. It was eerily quiet and still without him, like he had died down here and his ghost was hoarding his belongings.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I felt around the rough concrete walls for the light switch. The sudden brightness seemed to make the mess around me glow. There was junk everywhere. All his work equipment was stored down there, along with years and years of scraps he'd acquired. There were leftover pieces of the oak flooring that he bought to replace the stained beige carpet in the living room. A pile of pressure-treated lumber that he had used to extend the back deck leaned up against the wall. Some pieces still had their white price tags stapled on. Cardboard from birthday presents, corkboard that had been torn, sheetrock ruined with nail marks and staples—all piled in messy stacks. "Hey, you never know when you might need it," he would say. He never threw anything away. When I was young, I always loved that about him. Whenever I needed a few small pieces of wood to make a fence for my toy animals or a nail, just the right size, to hang a picture I made in art class, he always had it. All I had to do was follow my father down into the basement and watch him shuffle through the piles of junk until he produced just what I had asked for. I would take it from his hand with a smile and a thank you and bounce back up the stairs to my project.

Now, as I surveyed the room and took in everything he had saved over the years,

from rusty nails to plastic buckets still lined with hard plaster, I hated it. The father in my dreams started moving to the forefront of my mind, and all of a sudden I felt afraid to be down there alone. I began looking around for a pleasant thought to distract me, something to remind me that my father wasn't really a monster. I placed the trash bags and cleaning supplies at the foot of the stairs. The alcove underneath them was full of piles of tar colored shingles and two-by-fours, blocking the space I use to crawl in.

When I was a child, I use to wait for my father to come down in that space. At first, I would stand, looking up to watch his feet coming down, and when as he was about to reach the landing, I would get on my hands and knees until I was directly underneath where he stood. I reached my hand though the gap in the steps to grab his ankle, letting out a playful roar as I took hold of him.

"You got me!"

I knew he walked down the stairs slowly on purpose, but I loved the sound of his deep laughter echoing through the stairwell.

Now, I decided to clear a path to the back wall so I could start making some progress. An off-white drip cloth was spread out under a stack of paint cans, each with different color paint dried to the outside. Three of the cans were left over paint from my rooms over the years. I could mark the timeline of my girlhood through the colors that stained the outside of the cans. He had saved the wooden paint stirrers among the other paint cans, each stained with the paint from our kitchen, living room and upstairs bathroom. I picked at the thick, dried pink paint and watched the pieces fall to the ground. My father would always let me help him paint. I would line the baseboards with blue masking tape and

position the drip cloth right up against the wall. One time he let me open the paint can with the metal opener, showing me how to pull at the lip of the lid slowly, but with force. I finally popped it open and in my excitement dropped the metal opener into the paint. I was surprised when he laughed. "We will find it when we get to the bottom of the can, I guess." I wondered, now, if it was still in there. As I picked up the paint can off the stack, one of them fell to the floor. I screamed, a nervous little yell that left me feeling foolish as it echoed though the silent space.

I took a deep breath and moved to the far end, the darkest corner. We kept forgetting to replace the light bulb. I began clearing away the long sheets of cardboard that leaned up against the wall, when I found it. The door, with its gold hinges and matching doorknob. It was made of that cheap wood that comes pre-painted, the kind I was surprised my father bought. I think the doors were the only thing in our house that he hadn't built. The indent in the middle was right at my eye level. I reached up and traced the rough wood, running my finger over the spots that had turned to a rust color now. This is what I didn't want to see. This is what started it all, filtering into our family slowly like a poisonous gas. I chewed my bottom lip, holding back the anxious feeling that had just hit the bottom of my stomach. I wondered why he would want to save such a memory.

I was thirteen when my father stopped laughing with me. I was too old to hide under the stairs anymore or make forts out of scraps of cardboard. I was old enough to see what was happening between my parents, what had been happening for years, what I had been too naive to see. When my father would yell, I would panic. I would try to slow down my

breathing by closing my eyes, but it only made his voice seem louder. The power, the rage that it contained made me realize I had no control over what would happen next. When it stopped, I focused more on my relief instead of why it had happened. His words were usually aimed at my mother in an attempt to beat her down without actually touching her.

One morning, when he was getting ready for work, gathering up his tools from the basement, I went down after him. I sat on the bottom of the stairs, still in my pajamas, a glass of water in my hands.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?" he said, not looking at me.

"Why were you yelling at mom the other day?"

"We got in a fight."

"I know, but why do you need to yell? And call her names?"

I looked down at my hands. The water made ripples in the glass, and I realized I was shaking.

He stopped, turning towards me. "Did your mother tell you to say this?"

"No."

"She's always feeding you with thoughts against me. I'm sick of it." He slammed a screwdriver down onto the closed lid of his toolbox, breathing hard through his nose. I scurried up the steps.

Later that night, I was in my room reading when I heard the familiar noise of my parents raised voices behind their bedroom door. I crept down the hall as my father's got louder.

Suddenly, I heard a noise, a loud crack that made my stomach lurch with fear. He hit her, I remember thinking. He finally hit her. The bedroom door flew open, exposing me in the hallway as my dad stormed out, carrying the duffle bag he used when he went skiing in New Hampshire. I stood still up against the wall. His anger was so thick in the air I almost thought I could smell it as he breezed by me.

"What are you doing?" I managed to squeak.

"I'm leaving," he said, pointing his finger towards the bedroom door. "Blame her." He stomped down the stairs, slamming the front door behind him. I ran into my mother's room. She sat on the bed, her face streaked with tears and black mascara.

"What was that sound?" I asked. My vision was slightly blurred by my tears and my mother looked like a child sitting there. She pointed to the master bathroom. The door still looked stunned somehow, like it hadn't expected the blow. It wasn't open all the way, but it wasn't closed either, hanging somewhere in the middle. The indentation in the center was the size of a fist. I walked closer to it and saw the blood, like little paint strokes on the wood. I had been so sure it was my mother. I would have felt relief if I wasn't still afraid. He had never done anything like this before. A feeling, like I was floating out to sea, being tugged aimlessly by some uncertain current, fell over me. I didn't know where to touch her, if I should hug her or not.

As I sat there, I thought about my father's bleeding knuckles. I wondered if he would put a bandage on them before he went to sleep. I hoped he felt foolish.

He came back home a few days later and apologized to my mom. He didn't say much to me. I guess I was supposed to accept him by default. He took the door off the hinges and asked me to help him take it down into basement. I was afraid to say no. I watched

him lean it up against the back wall. I searched his face for some kind of sorrow or apology for what he had done. But his face remained blank, like the door was part of a home renovation.

Now, almost seven years later, the door was in front of me. My father gone again, his daughter still a passing thought. My hands were shaking. I wrapped my arms around the door and tried to lift it. It was awkward and still heavy despite its cheap quality. I pulled upward with all my might, but I still couldn't raise it. I stopped, resting my head against it, feeling the grooved wood from his fist on my forehead. I wished my father would hug me, like I was hugging this door. I wished he wasn't haunting my dreams, his image distorted by my morbid imagination. I braced myself to try again, yelling out in frustration.

"Emma, you okay? Do you need help down there?"

I slammed the door back up against the wall, wiping my brow. "No, I'm fine," I called.

I began to walk away, but I didn't know what to do with myself. I started pacing, like I had the night before. Was it really so bad? I thought. Did I really need to be scared of him, even all these years later? I shouldn't be scared of my own father.

I turned around, looking at the door again. My father's face hovered, like a ghost before it, almost daring me to do something about it. I clenched my fists, feeling my nails bite into my skin. I took a deep breath and slammed my fist into the door. The wood made a loud crack against the concrete wall, and pain sprang up through my hand and into the tendons of my wrist.

"Shit!" I yelled out in pain. I looked down at my hand, now scraped and bleeding.

The indent that my father had made was now spotted with my blood, bright and red and new. I stared at it, taking in what I had just done. I didn't hate him. But I was still afraid of what he could do.

The blood on my hand felt wet but I didn't wipe it away. I wondered if my father's old blood from the door was now on my hand. As I put my mouth over the small gashes, running my tongue over my torn skin, I searched for a different taste, something that would distinguish my blood from his. The more I sucked at my open wound, the more I realized I was trying to feeding off the only life he could give me in that moment.

Mother of Sorrows

Laura hadn't been home in three years. She stood at the bottom of the gravel driveway and looked up at the house she had thought she'd never see again. With shoulders hunched and teeth clenched, she made her way up the path that was still lined with the shrubs that never seemed to make it through the summer. Walking by, she kicked one of them, letting the brittle leaves fall and litter the walkway. A small shovel stood propped on the first brick step, as if to show that her mother, Louisa, had made an attempt to tend to the shrubs and weeds. Next to them, a pile of crushed cigarette butts. Laura pictured her mother holding the shovel loosely in one hand, a cigarette in the other, halfheartedly stabbing at the weeds between puffs. Laura had called her mother, just two days before, to ask her if she could come home for a little while. She had put the phone call off for as long as she could, dreading the sound of her mother's hoarse voice with its subtle hints of mockery.

Laura had left, those three years ago, professing to the steering wheel as she sped out of the driveway that she would never be back. She had forgone holidays and birthdays, coming up with trivial excuses why she couldn't be there. She never told her mother or Robbie, her older brother, about David, the man she'd clung to like a life preserver for the past two years. After they had moved in together, Laura hadn't wanted to taint what they had by showing him where she really came from.

Now, as Laura ascended the steps to the landing and adjusted her duffel bag, she was actually grateful she hadn't told her mother about David. She wouldn't have to tell her

why he was gone. She took a deep breath as she knocked on the door, bracing herself for the sarcastic welcome she knew her mother would give her. The door flew open, sending a cloud of cigarette smoke into Laura's face, as Louisa gathered her in a tight hug. Laura's stomach turned with the familiar scent of the smoke and vanilla soap.

"And so the prodigal daughter returns," Louisa said. Laura kept her arms by her side, trying to keep her bag hooked on her arm.

"Hey, Ma," she said, trying not to breathe in too deeply. "Jesus. Could you put that thing out?"

"Oh, you and the cigarettes." She took a deep puff and flicked the butt out onto the lawn. "Come on in. That's all you brought with you?"

Laura took in the carpeted stairs, littered with various shoes and folded laundry. Her mother put her hand on the small of Laura's back, guiding her out of the foyer and into the living room. Laura stopped suddenly, resisting her mother's gentle push. You've got to be fucking kidding me, she thought. The house looked exactly the same. The same off-white carpet in the living room that made its way through the foyer and up the stairs. The striped couch, which had already seemed worn out when she was a child, was still there now looking even more tired, as it sagged in the same spots. She walked slowly behind her mother, taking in the crystal ashtray, overflowing with cigarettes. The stack of *Better Home* magazines her mother never read cluttering the oak stained coffee table. The throw blanket, stained in the left corner from the time she got the stomach bug when she was nine was still draped over the beige recliner. As if the smell wasn't enough, seeing the living room in the exact state she had left it made her jaw tighten again.

"I see you've done a lot with the place," she said.

"Don't be a wise ass." Louisa swatted her arm at Laura and walked towards the kitchen. Laura followed, moving timidly. The familiarity made her skittish. As she crossed the threshold between the living room and the kitchen, she threw her bag down, rubbing her arm that ached under its weight.

"You just missed dinner. I could heat something up for you," Louisa said, already opening the refrigerator. The fridge door was still splattered with her mother's magnet collection. Years ago, Laura's father had brought Louisa back decorative magnets with the names of the different states he would drive through while making deliveries. He drove an eighteen-wheeler for a beer distributor, staying on the road for weeks at a time. The magnets were usually shaped like the state they were featuring, the state's name written in bold cursive. There were a few like the Tennessee one that was shaped like a cowboy boot or the Empire State building for New York. Over time, her father repeated a lot of the same stops on his truck route, but he would still buy her mother a magnet. Laura noticed the cluster towards the top of the fridge of about six or seven New Jersey magnets, all featuring the goldfinch, their state bird. She never knew why her mother kept all of them. Her father hadn't been around in almost fifteen years. When she was young, Laura wished her father would bring her home something, so she knew he remembered her. She used to look at those magnets with envy. Now, she saw how plastic and pathetic they looked littering her mother's refrigerator.

"I'm actually not hungry, Ma."

"Well, it's there if you want it."

The old flooring and the oak cabinets made the kitchen look dark, even in the middle of the day. It was a small kitchen, dating itself to the late 70's, probably when it was last

remodeled. It invoked the essence of "country" that was all the rage then, with its oak stained cabinets, with black pulls and tan Formica countertops. The walls were painted a deep red, which only made the kitchen darker. The antique accents, like the black metal bird plaque above the sliding glass door or the small rounded portrait of the Virgin Mary between the two windows over the sink, were all still in place. Laura envisioned pulling each piece off the wall to reveal a deeper red, like blood, underneath. Whenever Laura would think about her mother, this was the background she would see behind her, lined with a thin layer of smoke from Louisa's cigarette and the Virgin Mary's pale face staring back from her stationary position.

"Where's Robbie?" Laura asked.

"I never know where your brother is. I stopped keeping tabs on him awhile ago."

Laura liked it when Robbie was in the room while she was with her mother. He lightened the tension.

"You know I'm probably just going to go to bed. I've been driving all day," Laura said. She picked up her bag and headed down the hall. As she opened up the door to her old bedroom, the only one on the main floor, her mother called her name.

"It's good to have you home," she said.

Laura nodded and gave her a tight smile.

"Glad you have finally decided to grace us with your holier-than-thou presence."

Louisa put a cigarette in her mouth, snapping the lighter before blowing a puff of smoke down the hallway.

• • •

Laura couldn't sleep. Her old room felt foreign despite the familiar rattling of her window

and the cotton scent of her comforter. She wanted to be next to David in his bed, being lulled to sleep by his steady breathing.

Laura liked to pretend she was a different person. When she met David, she tried to pretend that she was a woman who didn't give a fuck. But on the inside, she felt lost. She figured if she shrugged enough, spat out some sarcastic remark enough or maybe even flipped people off more, they wouldn't see the eagerness seeping through her skin. It worked for a little while when she first met David, right after she found an eviction noticed taped to her apartment door, angry lettering telling her she had a month to get out.

David came to the restaurant she worked at every Tuesday. He sat at the same table, the one closest to the back window with a folder, as he diligently worked between bits of his Italian sandwich. The waitresses rotated sections every week so Laura waited on him a few times. She liked his smile, the way he would always look at her when she asked him a question. She tried not to smile back. She found herself tugging at her ill-fitted uniform before approaching him, cursing the person who designed such unflattering shirts.

One day, he asked her out on a date as she refilled his water glass.

"Why?" she said, surprising herself.

"What do you mean why? Because I want to take you out. Buy you dinner."

She held the water pitcher to her chest, pretending to think about his invitation. There was something about him, the way he kept his eyes on her, the confidence of saying what was on his mind; it made her believe she could trust him. She suddenly felt warm, like someone had turned up the heat in the room.

"Sure," she said with an exaggerated sigh. "When?"

She was even more surprised when he asked to see her again after their first dinner together, mainly because she liked him so much too. Before she knew it they had been seeing each other regularly for over two weeks.

David was twenty-seven. He had his own apartment that he had hired an interior decorator to fill with beach landscape paintings, full-length curtains and a cushioned mat to put by the kitchen sink. He had a job that paid him regularly, one he could stay in town for. When Laura told him about her eviction notice on their third week of seeing each other, he offered her the second bedroom in his apartment until she saved up enough. Laura knew it was too soon to move in with him, but she was realizing her desire to be with him was clouding her judgment, leaving her in a permanent fog causing her to forget customer orders and spill hot coffee on unsuspecting laps at work. Her manager fired her, the day before she moved in with David, after she had left the freezer open in the back room, spoiling all the meat. She flipped him off and pushed a pile of menus over, forcing back the feeling of failure.

On the day she moved in, she marveled at how clean and fresh his apartment smelled, at how modern and new it felt. They tiptoed around each other that first night, both getting use to each other in this new setting. He kissed her goodnight in her doorway, tasting like toothpaste. She put her hand on the back of his head, lightly taking a fist full of hair. David leaned his body up against hers, and she didn't care that her head was pressing into the doorframe. Then suddenly he pulled away.

"You should probably get some sleep."

"Yeah, I guess I should," she said.

He kissed her again before letting her go and shutting his door behind him.

Laura was too aware of David in the next room to sleep. She thought she might be falling in love with him, and the feeling made her antsy. But she liked the way David kissed her. He touched her face, feeling the softness of her cheek, before pulling her close to him. On their dates, he would look at her from across the table with a playful smile, as if finding happiness and amusement in her being with him. Laura would fidget in her chair and dart her eyes away from his. She felt the hard defense she upheld with her mother, with her family, slowly melt away. She was afraid of what David would think if he saw it.

That night, she crept out of her bed and opened the door to David's room. She pulled back his white comforter and slid into the space next to him. He woke up and turned on his side towards her, his eyes squinting from sleep. Laura burrowed herself into his warm chest and wrapped her legs around him. She waited a moment, feeling his body against hers, before pulling off his gray t-shirt. When he didn't stop her, she pulled at his underwear, taking those off too. She looked into his eyes, wondering if she would see anything different. He put both hands on her face, gently kissing her. She wanted to cry. She held back the urge, feeling her chest tighten. As David peeled off her clothes, she closed her eyes, and pleaded with God to never let him go away.

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Laura woke in her old room and went straight to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Visions of David's face, glowing like an angel's against her darkened room, kept her tossing and turning for most of the night. Louisa was sitting at the table, her chair turned to the side so her body was facing Laura as she walked in. Growing up, Laura always thought

Louisa sat there that way because she was waiting for her. With her husband gone, whether he was home or not, Louisa didn't have anyone else to talk to. When Laura was a teenager, she could feel the anger rise in the back of her throat when she walked down the hall and saw her mother there, lips pursed, displaying her indifference. But the way her body was positioned, so eager for Laura to sit down with her Frosted Flakes and start a conversation, made Laura want to crawl away from her mother's distant desperation.

Now, that same feeling of defiance rose in Laura's chest when she saw Louisa sitting in the same spot with her legs crossed, cigarette in hand, her top leg bopping up and down to an inaudible rhythm. She wanted to take her coffee in the living room and turn on the TV. But you are an adult now, she thought. Sit with the old lady.

"How'd you sleep, Laura?"

"All right." She poured her coffee into the mug that her mother had left out.

"There's milk in the fridge. You know I don't drink it, but I bought a little carton for you."

"Thanks." Laura sat down across from her at the table, her eye drifting to the ashtray next to her mother's own mug of coffee.

"I'm almost done with this one. Don't start your bitching," she said, taking one more exaggerated puff before stabling it out.

"I didn't say anything," Laura said.

"I know what that smart-ass look on your face means. I raised you, didn't I?"

Laura hadn't wanted to come home because of this. Even though her mother had aged, the lines around her eyes more severe and more grayness in her brittle blonde hair, Louisa had remained content shut up in her house for years, sitting at the same kitchen table

Laura crawled under as a toddler. Laura was terrified of succumbing to the same fate her mother had chosen.

For as long as Laura could remember, Louisa never had a job. Laura realized this around the time she noticed her father was gone. She didn't know much about her father. Even though she was blossoming into a girl of eleven, aware and perceptive, her father was a stranger to her. He would be gone for weeks at a time in his eighteen-wheeler, sleeping at truck stops and buying magnets for Louisa. When he was home, Laura stayed out of his way. He usually hogged the TV, moving his recliner up close with the fold out TV tray next to him to hold his Budweiser cans. It drove Louisa crazy. She yelled at him, telling him to get off the couch and help her raise their children. He would grunt and take another beer, sending Louisa in a frenzy that involved her making dinner loudly, slamming down pots and pans in between curse words. Sometimes Laura would stand in the doorway where he couldn't see her. She would stare at the side of her father's bearded cheek, his red rounded nose and wrinkled forehead, which always seemed to be folded in a constant state of frustration or confusion. Even from afar, Laura noticed the dirt and grease spots etched into the cracks of his callused, dry hands, as they lay uselessly over the arm of his chair. He looked so stupid to her, like he didn't know how to speak. She wanted him to notice her spying on him, to call her name and ask her to sit with him. She didn't know what she would say to him if he did. But she hoped she could say something interesting on the spot.

It was summer time when Laura realized her father was gone for good. She was sitting on the railing of the back deck, drinking a Coke. Her bare feet were dirty and she was picking the pink nail polish off her toenails with her thumb. The dirt under her nails

reminded her of her father's hands, and Laura realized she hadn't seen the man in the living room in a long time.

"Hey, Ma, when is Dad coming home?" she yelled. Laura could make out Louisa's figure through the window screen, washing dishes.

"Laura, get off that railing. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Did you hear what I said?" Laura said, jumping down and spilling a splash of Coke on her arm.

"He's not coming back."

"Why?"

"Because he is a lazy do nothing, that's why."

There was something in her mother's voice that made Laura think she didn't mean it. She went inside and leaned up against the counter as Louisa continued to scrub the dishes in her gloved hands. Her mouth was stuck in a grimace and it looked like she was about to cry. Laura stared at her profile, hoping to see a fat tear slip out. Louisa took a deep breath and the sadness was replaced with her normal tight frown.

"You didn't want him to leave, did you Ma?"

Laura thought her words would make Louisa break down and sob. Maybe drop the plate and break it in the porcelain sink. She wanted to see her mother cry. She wanted to know that she could.

"I don't know what I want," was all Louisa said. She snapped her gloves off and searched her pockets for her cigarettes with a shaky hand. Laura felt the eyes of the Virgin Mary gazing at her from above the sink. The soft blue of the fabric she wore around her head and the gentle position of her hands over her heart made Laura feel

guilty for finding amusement in her mother's sadness. Laura lowered her eyes as a silent apology to the Blessed Mother and turned to go back to the deck. It suddenly dawned on her that, without her father, there wouldn't be anyone in the house who made money.

"How are we going to get money?" Laura asked, twisted around to face her mother.

"What do you mean?" Louisa lit a cigarette as she said this, so only her top lip moved.

"Will you get a job?" Laura could hear the slight inflection of fear in her own voice. She couldn't picture her mother going to work.

"You really shouldn't worry about that."

Laura stared hard at her mother, willing her to tell.

"Alright, fine," Louisa said. "Your father has agreed to keep paying for you and Robbie, for the things you need and for the house."

Laura looked over at the magnets on the fridge. She wanted to pluck them off, one by one. Instead, she retreated to the railing on the deck, trying to decide if she would miss him or not.

• • •

Now Louisa was still living off her phantom husband's money, smoking a pack of cigarettes a day and taking care of her adult children. It was this idle reliance on others that Laura had wanted to flee, to avoid, and yet here she was—under her mother's roof.

When Laura joined her at the table, Louisa let out a long sigh, like she did right before she had a lot to say. She narrowed her eyes at her daughter and placed her hand under her chin.

"So are you going to tell me why you're here?"

She could see in Louisa's eyes that she was focused and prepared to listen. But the tightness in her lip and the crease in her brow, like a marble statue, left Laura knowing that whatever came out of her mouth would be met with a cold comment or a wave of the hand. She didn't want to tell Louisa the truth just yet.

"My apartment caught on fire. I barely made it out alive."

Louisa rolled her eyes and slapped the hand that was holding up her chin down onto her lap.

"Don't be a wise ass."

"What if it's true?"

"It's not. Don't you think I would've heard about that?"

The basement door flew open, and Robbie emerged shirtless in a pair of gray sweatpants.

"What are you yelling about now, Ma?" he said.

His brown hair stuck up in the back and laid flat along his forehead. He squinted at his mother and sister as he walked in his bare feet to the refrigerator.

"Well look who's still living in the basement," said Laura.

"Fuck off," Robbie said. She could tell he was saying it with a smile. Robbie reminded Laura of David in the way just his presence alone could make her feel at ease. Robbie could smile at her and Laura could feel her self unclench her teeth, relaxing her jaw. When they were children and Louisa's temper would flare up, or their father was home, Robbie would beckon Laura into his room. He would let her choose from the stack of board games piled up by his bed. Laura's favorite was Mancala. She liked the feel of the wooden game board, how smooth the hollowed out pits where the marbles were kept,

felt against her fingers. Even now, she can recall the smell of the stained wood, how it engulfed the room when taking it out the box. The two played the game until the house was quiet again.

When they were both in high school, Robbie started taking pills. He struggled with his addiction for years after, living his life high and alone without Laura. The day she left, Robbie had decided to check into rehab for the third time. He had asked her for a ride, but she said no. Her car was packed up and running in the driveway but this escape was about her, not him. Seeing her brother now, looking much better than the last time she had seen him, thin and hollow eyed, she regretted that she hadn't helped him.

His back looked toned and muscular as he leaned into the fridge. When he turned around to face them, she noticed the large tattoo that took up the left side of his chest and spread into his shoulder and bicep. It looked like an intricate fighting scene of some sort. She could only see the outline of a man, with a sword held high above his head. Robbie's jaw was clean-shaven, which Laura always thought looked best on him.

"Your sister is moving back home," Louisa said.

"Temporarily," said Laura.

"Well, lucky us," said Robbie as he hoisted himself onto the kitchen counter, giving Laura a big grin. Laura smiled back and wrinkled her nose.

"Although she won't tell her mother why she came back," Louisa said.

"I just told you, Ma."

"What did you tell her?" asked Robbie.

"My roommate tried to stab me in the middle of the night."

Louisa slammed her hand on the table and walked out of the kitchen. Robbie laughed as

Laura's smile of victory crept across her face. The way her mother overreacted always satisfied both of them. Louisa marched up the stairs to her bedroom and closed the door.

"It's too easy to fuck with her," said Robbie. "That woman is crazy."

"I know," Laura moaned, rubbing her face with her hands. "I can't believe I'm back here."

Robbie peeled a banana. "So what's his name?" he said.

"Who?"

"The guy that kicked you out."

Laura looked up at her brother, a wide smile stretched across his face as he swung his legs back and forth.

"Fuck you," she said. That sent Robbie's head back in another fit of laughter. She tried to stop smiling, but the sound of Robbie's glee made it impossible to keep a straight face. "How did you know?"

"I can't think of another reason that would bring you back here. You said you were never coming back."

"If you tell Ma I will kill you. The last thing I need for her to do is talk to me about keeping a man."

Robbie jumped down off the counter and joined her at the table.

"She still talks to him, you know," he said.

"Who?"

"Dad."

Laura breathed in hard. She was about to say how pathetic Louisa was, how she would never speak to someone who left like her father did. Then she thought of David's

crooked smile and his brown eyes. She heard his smooth voice, like the voice of God, echo through her ears. She felt the pain of never hearing it again burn in her stomach. She would go back to him if she could. Part of her thought she would do anything to get him to love her again. Was that how her mother felt? Did she still cry, some nights, even after all these years? Laura rested her head on the cool tabletop. For the first time in Laura's life, she understood her mother. She understood what she wanted.

• • •

Laura knew it was her fault that David was gone. She knew it was unrealistic to expect David to make her feel needed constantly. For the two years they were together, there were times when her chest felt compressed, like the air was slowly leaking out of her, when he retreated to the living room after work instead of kissing her hello. Following him to the couch and wrapping his arms around her waist usually put a smile on his face, and Laura would let out a small sigh of relief. She knew it annoyed him, by the way his arms felt stiff as she melted like a child into his chest. She knew she needed to give him space, but she wanted this too much. She knew now that's why it ended so suddenly.

The night she called her mother and told her she was coming home was the last time she saw David. He hadn't said much to Laura that morning over breakfast. She had resisted the urge to flip him off when he closed the door behind him. When he came home from work that night, Laura was in the kitchen, slicing pieces of celery. She didn't acknowledge his entrance, looking out the window instead.

"Hey, hon," he said, sitting down at the kitchen table, untying his shoes.

"Hi," she said, not turning to look at him.

He let out a sigh. She knew he knew. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She wanted her coldness to affect him, to make him see that she could be strong without him. But even as she was acting, she knew she wasn't convincing. She knew he could see her pain in her hunched shoulders and hear it in her quiet voice.

"Laura, you've been like this on and off of the past few days. What is it?"

"I miss you," she said, facing him.

"I'm always here," he said, gesturing to the room around them.

"No, I miss the old you. Something is different. I can feel it."

David rubbed his face with his hands. When he looked up at her, Laura saw that his eyes were not filled with compassion but with irritation. His brows were folded down and his lips pursed as if he were going to spit. Laura immediately felt the defensiveness she so often reserved for Louisa straightening her spine. This was the moment she feared, when David saw just how desperately she needed him. She only knew how to be hostile back.

"You clearly don't give a shit about us."

David shook his head. "I don't know what you want from me."

"You should figure it out," she said, folding her arms over her chest. He ran his fingers through his hair in a quick motion.

"That's not how it works, Laura." How could she fix it now? He could see just how pathetic she really was. She thought about her mother bent over the kitchen sink, holding back her tears, unable to allow herself to cry for the man she loved. She wanted to cry in front of David, to say she was sorry, to tell him how much she loved him, how much she cared for him. But fear crept back into her mind like a spider, searching for a place to burrow.

"I don't know how it works," she said. "I never have."

David sat in the living room while she packed her things. As she shoved her clothes into her duffel bag she thought about her father and wondered what Louisa had done, all those years before, when he packed his things. She heard David sniffing in the other room, holding back from crying in front of her, too.

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Now that Louisa had stormed out and Robbie had discovered her secret, Laura sat back in the kitchen, still in the t-shirt and cotton shorts she had slept in. Robbie had left for the gym, playfully squeezing her shoulder on his way out. She ruffled his hair and rolled her eyes. After he left, Laura heard her mother moving around upstairs.

"Ma, I need to talk to you," she yelled. Laura didn't know exactly what she was going to say, but she wanted to tell her mother the truth somehow. She suddenly felt nervous, her stomach hollow and uneasy.

Louisa joined her daughter at the table, sitting in the same chairs they had drank their coffee in that morning. "What is it?" she said.

Her voice sounded tired to Laura, missing some of its usual hostility. Her makeup was on now, the foundation caking in the creases around her mouth. It reminded Laura of the cracks the earth made in a dried desert. She wanted to reach over and smooth the makeup out. She kept her arms wrapped around herself.

"Why did Dad leave you?"

She surprised herself at the question, but Louisa simply pulled a cigarette out of the pack and lit it. She took a few drags before answering, exhaling the smoke away from

Laura.

"He never told me why," Louisa said.

"But do you think you know?"

When Louisa remained silent, Laura's eyes drifted up to the Virgin Mary hung on the wall. Her pale yellow halo seemed to glow in the shadows of the kitchen, bringing light to the place Louisa had darkened. Laura felt a sudden sense of comfort in the knowledge that the picture had always been there, looking down on her mother.

"He gave me that, you know?" Louisa said. "Before all the magnets, before you were born, he brought me that after his first trip away."

Laura walked across the kitchen, drawn to the picture as if the Virgin herself was taking her by the hand. Laura tugged the portrait free from the wall. It peeled off like dried paint. Laura flipped it over in her hands. "Mary, Mother of Sorrows," was written in black cursive on the wooden backing.

"I know he had a reason, Laura. For leaving me. "

Laura sat back down at the table, the picture cradled in her arms. The space left in its place looked dark and bloody like she had imagined. If the shape of the frame had been narrower at the bottom, fuller at the top, the impression on the wall would have looked more like a human heart. Laura pictured the portrait pulsing, pumping life into Louisa's house.

"I loved someone, too," Laura said. "I think I ruined it."

Louisa moved her eyes to the table, still inhaling and exhaling her cigarette slowly.

"I just wanted you to know the truth, why I am here. I didn't want to be like you, Ma. I tried so hard to never be like you."

Louisa slid her free arm across the table and grabbed Laura's hand. She squeezed tightly, nodding her head. Laura felt the wrinkled skin of her mother's hand, how it seemed to move loosely in her palm. Laura placed the picture between them, and smoke rolled over Mary's glowing halo. The Mother of Sorrows stared back, her hands over her heart, her eyes shining with tears.