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“Why are you always the last person at the table?” my mom says, annoyed for no good reason. *What’s it to her?*

The real answer to this is actually two-fold. On the one hand, I’m a slow eater, or maybe my mom and sister are just speed eaters, as they’re always finishing their plates before I’ve managed to shove more than a few forkfuls into my mouth. On the other hand, I often find it difficult to stomach whatever concoction my mom usually throws together, which she only bothers to do when Keith is over. Any other time, she retires with a bowl of cereal to her room, and I’m left to heat up some Spaghettio’s or mac and cheese for Kayla and I. Tonight has presented one of those rare opportunities to force down my mom’s

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home cooking, as Keith is staying the night. I look down at the hunk of Miracle Whip coated broccoli still left on my plate, and try my best not to betray my true feelings.

“I don’t know, just savoring it, I guess.”

This answer pleases her, and she leaves me alone. A lifelong habit of fibbing to other people to make them happy has resulted in my mom believing that this specialty of hers, broccoli salad, is second only to pizza on my list of favorite foods. In reality, I can hardly keep it down.

There’s no “movie night” this evening, so I head to my room after finishing dinner and begin a second read-through of *The Man Without a Face*, a novella I sought out initially upon watching the film adaptation directed by and starring Mel Gibson. The movie had struck an immediate cord with me, reminding me in numerous ways of my budding friendship with Nate. The book turned out to be even more amazing than the movie, as source material generally does, and it has since surpassed Stephen King’s *IT* for the title of my favorite book.

Keith’s muffled voice permeates the wall to my right, followed by a giggle and my mom’s voice, pitched high to make herself sound like a child. It nauseates me when she does that, which is any time Keith is around.

After a few moments, the giggles turn to vague utterances and my mom’s metal four-poster bed begins to bang against the other side of my wall.

Ughhhhh, gross.

I know what kind of sounds generally follow the repetitive metal thuds, so I climb out of bed and tiptoe over to my CD player. I power it on, and layer a t-shirt over each of the speakers to dampen the sound.

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Keith *hates* hearing my music through the wall.

Oh, the irony.

* * *

I wake up to a searing pain in my scalp, and realize that something has a hold of my hair. I look up, hardly conscious, and see my mom standing over me in the dark.

“Get up.”

“Huh?”

“Get up!”

Instead of waiting for me to respond, she yanks harder on the chunk of hair in her hand, so hard that she pulls me out of bed and onto the floor. She releases my hair and I reach up to my head, convinced I’ll find a sticky, hot pool of fresh blood coating my scalp, but my hand comes away dry.

“Haven’t I told you not to play music at night when Keith is over? Do you have any idea how pissed he is?!”

“I’m sorry, I covered the speakers. I could barely hear it myself.”

“Well, he could hear it plain as day, and now he’s mad at *me*.”

“That’s stupid,” I say, and immediately regret it.

“That’s what? That’s what?!” My mom draws her leg back and swings it forward into my ribcage. Once, twice, three times. Over and over. Tears I didn’t even feel forming begin to stream down my face, and I start gulping at the air as the increasing pain makes it difficult to expand my lungs.

“When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I’m feeling sad...”

I see movement out in the hallway, and notice Kayla come to a

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stop outside of my room, most likely on her way to the bathroom. “Mommy, stop it!” she yells.

My mom turns to my sister and bellows at her to return to bed, then she turns back to me, taking the sore patch of hair in her hand once more, and kneels down just inches from my face.

“This will never happen again, will it?”

“No,” I say, despite the immense difficulty I’m having drawing air into my lungs.

“Good.” She releases my hair and lets my head drop to the ground. Then she’s gone, like the flash of an early morning dream, slamming my door shut and leaving me on the floor, clutching my side in a shock of pain.

* * *

Morning brings no relief to the pain; in fact, it’s compounded by my stint spent sleeping on the bedroom floor. I rouse with great effort, pulling myself up into a seated position, and lean back against my bed, winded. I listen carefully for any signs of life on the other side of my door, but the only sound is that of my own breathing.

When my mom starts in on me the way she did last night, I split into two. There’s my body, and then there’s me. I still react outwardly to the pain, and god forbid I didn’t, or my mom may worry she’s not getting her message across. But mentally, I go to a happy place. Sometimes it’s playing “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music* in my head. Other times, it’s me silently egging her on, like it’s a game of chicken. And as long as I don’t let her break me on the inside, I’ve won.

I always win.

I turn and squint at the digital alarm clock sitting on my desk by

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the window. 1:30 in the afternoon. Mom must have left for work by now. She sells insurance during the week, but on the weekends and some weekday nights, she waits tables at a nearby restaurant and bar.

I take a deep breath and clutch on to my mattress for support, then push myself up and onto my feet, wincing as my ribs begin to throb in protest. My entertainment center feels light years away, but I make my way over to it, and reach behind my CD player to retrieve a slim, black Five Star notebook. I ease myself into my desk chair, and thumb through the notebook to find a clean page. Pulling the cap off a pen with my teeth, I scrawl yesterday's date at the top of the page, and begin to describe the events of last night, starting with my poorly made decision to try to soothe away the sounds of my mom and Keith having sex, and ending with the final blow of my mom's foot to my ribcage.

I began keeping this log of my mom's abuse when she began to regularly deny it, incidents such as the time she made me kneel facing the wall for *hours* and yanked me up by my ears any time I started to slouch, and the time she grabbed my sister by her face and shoved her head into the coat rack hanging by the front door. I'd witnessed this latter incident first hand, and when my sister brought it up a few days later to explain her sudden tendency to flinch whenever my mom walked by, my mom had acted affronted, insisting it never happened. Since then, the log has become a way to assure ourselves that we're not going crazy and imagining it all.

I make my way out to the living room and find my sister curled up on the couch, watching TV at a volume that would hardly qualify as a whisper. She looks up and appraises me, her lips pursed to the side as she chews on the inside of her cheek, a habit she inherited from our mom.

"Hey," she says.

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“Hey.” I look over at the TV. “Can you even hear that?”

“I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t worry, I saw what she did.”

Even though the pain left no doubt in my mind that it had happened, a small part of me is still relieved to hear her say this.

“Good. Did she say anything this morning?”

“Just that I should keep quiet and let you sleep.”

I furrow my eyebrows and consider this. “Weird.”

I bundle up and go out on the balcony, feeling stifled by the air inside, and sit down to continue my reading from last night. The main character, Chuck, has a difficult mother, and although she doesn’t hit him, the parallels are enough to make me feel less alone. I have my sister, of course, but even she admits that our mom saves the worst of her anger for me. Maybe because I chose to leave that day back in June, when she was pleading with me to stay, while my sister hadn’t been given any say in the matter, and thus, no opportunity for betrayal. A traitor, that’s what she thinks of me.

I hear the low rumble of Nate’s balcony door sliding open beneath me, and after a moment, a wispy plume of smoke rises and lingers in the crisp afternoon air. I climb from my seat quietly and kneel down, then reach my arm through the wrought iron bars of the balcony railing and wave my hand spastically.

“That you, Morgz?”

I stand up fast, and exhale through clenched teeth, having forgotten for a moment about the pain. Clutching my side, I peek over the railing to see Nate looking up at me.

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“Howdie,” I say, smiling for the first time since I got up this morning.

“Hey, girl. Watchu doin’?”

“Just reading.”

“It’s cold out,” he says, taking another drag of his cigarette.

“I don’t mind.”

He turns his head and blows out another puff of smoke, then turns back to me.

“I’m getting ready to dismantle George. Wanna come pay your respects?”

“Nooooo, not George!”

“Hey, you know I’d leave him up year around, but...” He inclines his head toward his apartment. “The boss wouldn’t have it.”

I smirk at this, knowing full well how much Kelly loathes the sight of George.

“Oh, hey, Morgan,” Kelly says, opening their front door. “Nate’s out on the balcony taking down his Halloween decorations, finally.”

“Yeah, I know. I came to sit with George in his final moments.”

Kelly’s eyes roll back and she shakes her head and laughs. “I don’t know how you guys get excited over that hideous thing.”

“What?! He’s awesome!” I say, stepping inside, then I make my way over to the balcony door and slide it open. “Boo.”

“Hey, girly,” Nate says, as he pulls down a section of decorative cobwebs and stuffs them into a large Ziploc bag. “You ready?”

“I guess so,” I say, frowning.

Kelly pokes her head out behind me.

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“Nate, I’m going to take Sammy and go to the store. Do you want anything?”

“I’m good, babe.”

Nate picks up a flathead screwdriver and angles it toward the black plastic coupling holding George’s head to the top of his spine, and Kelly disappears back inside, sliding the door shut behind her.

“Anything you wanna say?”

“George,” I say, taking a strand of his stringy, grey wig in my hand, “you’re the most beautiful and badass animatronic skeleton I’ve ever known. Actually, you’re probably the only one I’ve ever known. Some people may only value you for one month of out the year, but I’ll treasure you always.”

“Damn, girl, I might cry.”

I grin, pleased with the effectiveness of my eulogy. Nate loosens the coupling, then gives George’s head a good yank, and it comes off in his hand.

“Think fast!” he yells, tossing the head at me.

I shriek in surprise, but move quickly to catch George’s disembodied head in the crook of my arm. The sudden movement sets fire to my ribs, and I grasp my side, gritting my teeth against a yelp of pain.

“Are you ok? I didn’t mean to toss it so hard,” Nate says, making a subtle movement in my direction.

“You didn’t, I’m fine.”

“Bye, Daddy!” Sammy waves up to Nate from the sidewalk below.

“Bye, honey! Be good for your mom!”

Nate watches Kelly and Sammy climb into their car, then he turns back to me, his eyes tracing down to the hand still clutching my side. He swallows hard.

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“That have anything to do with all the commotion I heard last night?”

I look away, embarrassed. Of course, if I can hear Kelly and him shouting through the floor of my apartment, they can definitely hear what goes on in *our* apartment.

“Did that guy hit you, her boyfriend?” Nate asks, his voice tinged with anger.

I look at him again and shake my head slowly.

“My mom.”

He processes for a moment. “Does that happen a lot?”

My lip begins to tremble and I nod. I’ve never admitted this to anyone before. Not when my mom habitually reminds us that “what happens in this house, stays in this house,” and I’ve been too afraid to find out what happens if that rule is violated. Not that Jamie and Kyle aren’t fully aware of my mom’s strict rules or odd behavior, but I’m always careful to censor or skirt around the grittier details.

“Come inside with me a sec.”

I follow Nate into the apartment and wait for him as he disappears around the corner. My chest is uncomfortably tight, and I do my best to swallow back the nervousness growing there.

“Here girly.”

Nate hands me a bag of ice wrapped in a paper towel, so I shrug out of my jacket, and tug at the left side of my shirt, revealing a pool of sunset shades tattooed vividly over my ribs.

“Jesus.”

I allow my eyes to drift up and meet Nate’s, which are now damp with tears, and he forces a comforting smile.

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“Here, come sit down.”

Nate walks over to the couch and takes a seat, patting the cushion beside him. I walk over and carefully lower myself next to him, then tuck the bag of ice under my shirt, recoiling briefly as the cold comes into contact with my skin.

“Do you wanna watch something?”

I look up at him and shake my head, and tears begin to trickle down my cheeks. Nate wraps his arm around my shoulder and eases me against his side. My body begins to shudder and heave as I permit myself to cry.

How long has it been since someone touched me in anything but anger?

I nuzzle my face into Nate’s chest, and don’t even wince when he reaches up to stroke the top of my head, still raw from last night.

“Please don’t say anything to anyone,” I say, wiping my face.

“Morgan, I think I have to.”

“No, please.” I prop myself up on my knees and face him. “She’ll kill me for telling. Please.”

Nate looks sick to his stomach.

“Ok. I promise.”

“Not even Kelly?”

He looks at me for a long moment, before shaking his head slowly.

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

I lean forward and wrap my arms around him in a tight hug, desperate to prolong the warm comfort of his body pressed against mine.