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Shoes

Julia Segeleon

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Shoes

She wakes up to the sound of the BeeGees and knows she is an adult. She can feel it. It is a Tuesday, and Monday is in the dust. It occurred to her the night before, when her parents talked about the problems at her dad's work in front of her. They were speaking in hushed tones when she walked in the kitchen, and her dad went quiet when he saw her approach. Her mom said, "It's all right; she's old enough to know not to tell anyone." Anne felt herself grow bigger, taller at the words.

A few minutes later, her sister Jan walked in. Her dad stopped talking again, and this time her mom didn't say anything. Anne winked at them as she ushered Jan back downstairs. Her dad came to her room later and said that now that Anne is bigger, they expect her not repeat things like this in public. Anne understands why they didn't want Jan to overhear. Jan is a baby. She is also a pest. Everyone thinks so, but Anne goes right out and says it.

Anne is ready to wear bright blue eye shadow like her friend Taylor and go to movies with boys and stay up as late as she wants, but the first thing she does as an adult is has juice and toast. That morning, Jan repeats everything Anne says:

"Can you pass the orange juice?"

"Can you pass the orange juice?" Jan makes a face.

"Jan! Pass the orange juice!"

"Jan! Pass the orange juice!" Anne gets frustrated tears in her eyes and she feels the triumph of the morning deflate. Jan peers at her curiously. "Are you going to see MaaaaaatTTTTy today?" Jan asks teasingly, dragging out the name of a boy in Anne's class in a singsong voice. Anne is upset, so she goes upstairs to find her mom, who is putting on her makeup in the bathroom. "Mom, Jan copies me all the time. She's such a brat! Make her stop!"

"She looks up to you Anne. Be kind to her. She just wants to be like you."

They set off for the bus. Anne is mad, so she speeds in front of

Jan. Her steps are loud and they crunch on the gravel road.

“Hey, wait up!” Jan calls. Anne pretends not to hear her. In her haste to stay ahead, Anne trips on a rock.

“Damn,” she shouts. The word tastes hard and flat and sweet as it leaves her mouth. It seems to hang in the air around her. This is her first time with swear words. Anne has only heard adults say them. Her dad says them when he drinks too much or that one time when he got a thorn stuck in his thumb.

“I’m tell-ing!!” Jan yells.

This is the last straw. Anne feels hot fury swell in her throat until it feels like a burning mass, like she might choke if it stays inside, and her vision goes red, she is so angry, until the raw, iron words split her lips, brief bursts of hot fire that leave her throat cold and sour: “I hate you.” She gets on the bus and walks to the back, where the big kids sit. Jan sits in the front seat.

It is seventh period, the last of the day. Anne is worried. She knows Jan will tell, not just about the swear word, but about those other words. She knows her mom will be mad.

Mrs. Hoff enters the room. She wears red lips and blonde curls and black heels that click and clack across the floor and Anne thinks to herself, she probably says damn all the time.

Mrs. Hoff says they will watch a movie. She is still talking, but Anne is busy coming up with excuses to tell her mom. I can’t take it, she will say, I’m too old for her. She doesn’t get what middle school is like; she’s still in fourth grade.

The movie starts. She sees the black and white images spark on the screen. Mom will understand, Anne thinks.

The bell rings and the boys and girls file out of the room. Anne doesn’t know where to look. She sees Mr. Lock and Grace and Matt, the boy she has a crush on, and all the while burned on the back of her eyelids the world is dizzy and black and white, she sees smoke and sharp cheekbones and a stiff military coat, and NO JEWS ALLOWED, and most of all, oh most of all, she sees a pile of shoes, and all she can think is

how cold all of those feet must be, down buried in the ground, next to the worms and dirt, and how sore their hearts must be from all that walking.

She gets on the bus and sits down. It's not just that it's sad. It doesn't make sense. She thinks of her dad's hands, and the way they fold soft over her head, even though they look so big. She thinks about her mom, and the way her fingers stroke the sheets, clean and safe, as they tuck her in at night. And then she thinks about her sister's face, as the odd and cold words twisted and stretched the air between them that morning.

Jan gets on the bus. Anne waves and tries to catch her eye, but Jan avoids her gaze and sinks into the front seat. Anne feels something strange fumble in her throat and her eyes grow wet and she curls her fingers around her body as if to hold it all in, her nails sharp against her ribs, and all she wants to do is go back, back to the time before she woke up and realized she was new, before she saw the bus and the shoes, because now she thinks she understands and as the bus pulls away from the curb and she counts the seats in between them, it is too late.

-Julia Segeleon
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