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## Through Windows

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## Through Windows

He had never been particularly fond of mac and cheese. So – for the life of him – he couldn't figure out why he kept going back. Or why she kept insisting on making him the nasty stuff. Weren't gray-haired ladies supposed to be great cooks? Wasn't it, like, a law?

But Janet wasn't a typical milk-and-cookies grandma. And since he was there, he might as well eat the macaroni. So when she placed the gooey orange mess in front of him, he dug in.

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She wondered how long he would stay today. Every time he came, she told herself it would be the last time; the boy should be at home, not hiding with her. But. Then she would see the hurt lurking beneath the I-don't-give-a-shit expression, and she would find herself in front of the stove and a wannabe tough guy with skinny arms sticking out of the baggy sleeves of his sweatshirt at her table. In times of crisis, her own mother had always turned to food. And though macaroni may be a sad excuse for a home cooked meal, she had heard kids these days thrived on it.

Watching him systematically devour the processed fluorescent junk on his plate – why did kids love such foul stuff? – she wanted to ask him how he was doing, how the school day was, if he had another fight with...

Instead of succumbing to her desire to question, she pulled a chipped ceramic mug from the sink and poured the last of her coffee before sitting down across from him.

Since he was only halfway finished with his food, she figured it was a safe enough time to start talking. He had never left without cleaning his plate first.

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It was a rhythm. Scrape the sticky noodles off the plate, fork to mouth, chew, and swallow.

Scrape. Chew. Swallow. Scra-

“How was school, Ben?”

Scrape.

“Fine.”

“Did you even go?”

“Of course.” Chew. Actually, he had fallen asleep first period and cut the fifth. But still, it counted.

Janet gave him one of her “you don’t fool me” looks over her bifocals. But she stayed silent, sipping her coffee, rather than giving him the third degree like his mother would have.

Swallow.

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“How was school today?”

“Fine.”

“What did you learn?”

“Stuff.”

“Come on, Benji. Talk to me.”

“Don’t call me Benji.”

“But-”

“Just don’t, Mom. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

That much was true. Instead of the little boy who snuggled beside her while she read bedtime stories, before her stood a disillusioned teen. And dammit if he didn’t stand just like his father. Weight balanced on one leg with an easy, confident grace that made it seem as if he had all the answers...

Answers. Now there was something she could use a little more of these days.

By the time Sophie came around, they were already pretending not to have problems. And, like other countless, hopeless women before her, she thought the baby would turn things around...until his answers stopped coming.

*Are you happy? Will we be okay? Where are you going? Why won't you talk to me?*

*Do you love me?*

But before her was not the man she had fallen for, depended on, and been disappointed by; this was her boy. Her baby with the proud stance, crossed arms, hard eyes. No bedtime story could make things okay.

She moved to pull him toward her, to erase the painful similari-

ties and cradle his head like the baby boy he once was, but he jerked away.

“Benji-”

“Don’t.”

She dropped her empty arms. What cruel fate made her keep watching the men in her life walk away?

*This is the last story, Benji.*

*No. One more. Please.*

But he wasn’t a baby anymore. The door slammed.

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“So. Did you learn anything?”

“No.”

“Oh, you must have learned something.” His macaroni was almost gone; she was anxious to get him talking, but she sipped her coffee slowly. “Are you telling me you gained nothing of value at all today?”

“I told you, no. Please stop asking. You’re not my mother.”

“No.” Was she holding on to him too much? Trying to make him the child she never had? “No, I’m not.”

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He tried to keep most of the sand off his clothes – unlike Sophie, he didn’t have play clothes on – but why bother? Sophie had a knack for getting sand everywhere. Plus, though she seemed pretty content to entertain herself, she shouldn’t have to play alone. If it hadn’t been for his mom, he could have been out in the sandbox sooner. He’d just have to make up for it.

He shaped Sophie’s pile of sand into a castle-ish pile; he didn’t know what Sophie was doing exactly, except getting sand in his hair.

“How’s that new bike of yours? You haven’t told me yet.” Their mom had just bought her a bike complete with handle bar streamers and a basket. Sophie, being Sophie, had already managed to tangle the streamers.

“Aw, come on, Benji.” Though only in kindergarten, she had mastered the teenage tone.

“What do you mean, ‘come on?’” He ducked as the sand flinging got more intense and noticed her play shirt was actually his old tee ball uniform. Must have been in his room again.

“Alexandra made fun of me for using training wheels.”

“Well, what does Alexandra know?”

“She knows how to really ride a bike. Her daddy taught her how to use two wheels, and she said training wheels are for babies.”

“Babies, huh...” He forgot to avoid the sand as he remembered when he learned to ride. How the bike had tipped once he realized his dad wasn’t holding on. How his mom had been there, bandage in hand, to scoop him up. How it was the last time he remembered his parents smiling at each other... “Don’t worry, Soph, I’ll teach you to ride.”

“You will?”

Her gap-toothed smile and sandy pigtails killed him. For the tiniest moment, he wondered how anyone could walk away from this girl.

“Kids! Dinner!” His mother’s voice, floating out the kitchen window.

No way he was going back in there now.

“Listen, can you tell Mom that I’ll be back later? I’m not hungry.”

“Did you and Mom get mad again?”

“No, of course not, Soph. I just have some things to do, that’s all.” He set Sophie on her sneakered feet, brushed the sand from her clothes.

“Go inside.”

“Oka-ay,” she sing-songed. “But you owe me. Big time.”

“Don’t I ever.” He watched Sophie, sandy baseball shirt and all, bounce up the steps. How could he? Why did he walk away?

Before he could think too much, he escaped to Janet’s.

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She sipped the dregs of her coffee and remembered when his parents moved in just across the street, still tanned and googly-eyed from their honeymoon. Her eyes were sharper back then, and it only took the one mandatory “welcome to the neighborhood” visit to notice the bump beneath the stretchy shirt.

Now the result of that bump was sitting at her kitchen table, methodically spearing his last few noodles with the prongs of his fork.

He jerked his head in the way teenage boys with too-long hair do. Who ever decided twitching was cool? She noticed some grains of sand fly off the shoulders of his sweatshirt. Her eyes were still good

enough; no one could send her off to a home just yet.

“Playing with your sister again?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” He looked down at his plate, but he had finished all but the leftover cheese goo, which was fast congealing into orange cement. “We were in the sandbox.”

The first time today he had voluntarily offered her more information. “Sandbox, huh. Were there castles involved?”

“I guess you could call it that.” And he smiled. A real, un-sarcastic, un-tough guy, genuine smile.

She hid her own smile behind her coffee cup. “You going to put that plate in the sink or what? I’m old. I’m not about to do it for you.”

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No matter what he told – okay, yelled – at his mother, he did not want to be left alone. Not really. Alone made him remember the days just after the divorce. When his mom cried a lot, and Sophie cried a lot because she was a baby and that’s what babies do, and he was supposed to be “Mommy’s Big Boy” but he sat in his room and cried where no one could see. That is how he wound up eating macaroni the first time. He and his mom had been fighting when he snapped. Couldn’t stand to be in the same room, the same house, as her any longer. But out of the house, alone, was almost as bad. He had been walking directionless, reliving his dad’s car getting smaller and smaller, when a screen door opened.

“You like macaroni?”

No. “I guess so, Mrs—”

“Forget the ‘Mrs.’ Call me Janet. Come in.”

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The memory of the old is long, the observation of the lonely uncannily perceptive. At least, that is what she had come to believe. Or how she justified her snooping. Either way, it was true.

From a front porch vantage point, she had watched newlyweds plant rosebushes and kiss while pushing a stroller. Through windows she was a secret witness to blowout fights, slammed doors, and a pregnant mother crying in her pajamas and shredding petals on the doorstep. Yet despite everything, Ben was at her table and still smiling. She could just about hug him.

As long as he was here, he was not off with his friends. She had seen them, a gaggle of flat brim hats and low-hanging jeans. But more importantly, if he was eating mac and cheese, he was not fighting with his mom. Stewing about their latest argument, yes. Actually fighting, no. She knew Ben was at a crucial point. With the cynicism of a boy who refused to believe the “but Mommy and Daddy still love you very much” line, he could lose his temper in seconds just talking with his mother. But he could also play with Sophie for hours when most boys his age would have brushed her off to play video games. That little girl had no idea how important she was. No idea her sandy pigtails were keeping her family together.

Time to make her move.

“So...lose any tough guy points for playing in the sandbox with your little sister?”

“What?”

Okay, maybe a different move. “Does she get in the middle of you and your mother often?”

“Yeah...I guess.” He looked down, but this time there was no macaroni to keep him occupied.

“There are worse things in life than swallowing your pride.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He was defensive now. Typical.

“I mean that maybe the most important thing for your sister is to have one man in her life who stays under the same roof.”

“Oh yeah?” He shoved away from the table, stood up. And it was almost like the double of the man she had watched walk over crushed petals without looking back.

Almost.

Ben looked back, out her windows and across the street to his house. She could tell by the softening of his features – and the fact that she had seen this same expression many, many times before – he was thinking about Sophie. He wouldn’t just walk away. Well, he would. He did. Hence the macaroni; he obviously didn’t come for gourmet food or her dazzling company. But he always went back. And, for now, that was enough. He may not see it. His mom certainly did not see it. But she saw.

“You know, I don’t know why I come here. I don’t even like

macaroni.”

“Neither do I.” But she knew he didn’t hear her.

It was enough. At least, that’s what she told herself as the screen door slammed, and she watched to see which way he would go.

-Tierney Chlan  
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