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White Shoulders

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White Shoulders

She smiles when you walk in the door, you her only daughter. She has perched herself as well as she can on her pale, orange little couch, your first pathetic attempt at quilting tucked delicately under her knobby knees. *Mary Tyler Moore* is playing on the television, and when she laughs, she almost looks like Mom again. You've come to make her breakfast, to run her errands, and drop off more medicine that you know she will not take. Also to check and see if she's found a new hiding place for her cigarettes, but you'd rather sell your soul than let her know you've stopped believing in her.

While you're in the kitchen, she asks about you and your husband, how you are getting along. "We're fine," you say, unwilling to share Jim's possessiveness with your dying mother. She asks how the baby is, if you still feel sick in the morning, if she can do anything at all for you. She so badly wants a grandchild. "No, no! Everything is just fine," you say, "Don't worry." You would never tell her you've lost it, and hopefully she'll be gone before she discovers your lie.

~

Her body is a mass of decaying tissues. No one knows where the cancer started; she was too far gone by the time they diagnosed her. Ovaries, kidneys, breasts, pancreas. It had already consumed her, so it has failed to matter where the disease birthed itself. All that really matters is that she has her painkillers, that someone comes to change the hospital bed, and that she never sees your frustration at what she has become. The woman called Betty is gone, gone the way you knew her.

~

You knew her as magic. She was little more than a child herself when she rode horses and jumped picket fences; she competed in rodeos during the Depression when her grandmother beat her with cross words for the sake of a torn white dress. She ran away young, married your father before she should have, never completed her high school degree. She wore a black cocktail dress to her own wedding.

She was a waif of a woman by the time she had you, too small in body and mind to be the grown up you needed her to be. But she would tumble through the grass like a fairy gymnast, cartwheel until you grew dizzy watching her, and fall to the ground giggling. She would take you and your brother to the aquarium and stare at the colorful scales with just as much awe as you did. On holidays, she would wrap the entire house like an enormous present, and make a special cake for every Christmas, Valentines Day, and Labor Day that came along. She made up your games, bought your dog, and pretended never to notice when you dipped a finger into the cake batter for a taste. And always, she smelled of *White Shoulders*, the golden bottle of scent handled as precious as a heartbeat.

~

But it wasn't always fun. She drank. Heavily. She smoked. Incessantly. In the mornings, the air would be thick with smoke as she scrambled eggs and brewed coffee, a cigarette grasped between two red lips. At night, she would have two or three cocktails to lull herself to sleep. She took "uppers" to elevate her moods and "downers" to bring herself back. She didn't know how pathetic it all made her, and she didn't know that she didn't need them.

~

She forgot your eighteenth birthday. No cake. No card. She *made* herself forget. The

night before, the two of you had argued about something that didn't really matter, and she had *made* herself forget your eighteenth birthday. There was no room for anger, so you just closed the door to your room and cried. It was your father who came to comfort you, to say he loved you and that your mother was so very sorry for forgetting.

You cried into him, "How could she forget?"

How could your mother forget?

He didn't have an answer, and she never apologized.

~

And once you found out she was sick, that she had been slowly killing herself with the cigarettes and booze, you realized that there was no saving her. She had killed herself; she had decided to leave you. No one ever taught you this delicate form of etiquette. Do you still call her "mom" when she's abandoned you?

She needs more of our time than you can give and more love than you have the capacity to feel. Your brother is missing in action and barely stops by long enough to take out the trash, and your father, even though he is still in love with the memory of her *White Shoulders*, has his divorce and has flown the coop. It's all up to you now.

~

You carry in the tray of eggs and bacon, scrambled and burnt, the only way she'll eat them now. Her grin widens, showing some of that old spirit between browning teeth and two red lips, as you set the tray gently on her lap. You turn to the morning news, pull a small folding chair to her side, and position the blanket around both of your legs. She smells nostalgic, like nicotine and *White Shoulders*, and for a moment you feel that old love and put your head on her shoulders.

"I miss you," you say.

She smiles and kisses your head. She strokes your hair like she used to do when you were little and having a nightmare. "I'm still here."

~

In a month, she will be gone. You will pack up her clothes, neatly, as though someday she will come back for them. Your brother will come to take out the trash. Your father will send flowers. And when the time comes to finally say goodbye to her shell, you will unleash all of the anger you never let her see. You will shut yourself in the bathroom with your first attempt at quilting stuffed into your face and breath in the *White Shoulders* so deep you grow dizzy. Some day, you swear, you will tell your daughter about her grandmother, the good and the bad, and you will swaddle her in *Elizabeth Arden* and your own bright pink lipstick and promise to never leave.

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