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Things You Left Behind

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Things You Left Behind

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2017 Fiction Editor's Choice Award

THINGS YOU LEFT BEHIND

KELSEY FUSON

I.

You forgot your stuffed frog at a hotel in Chicago when you were six. Her name was Bitsy and she was missing her left eye (you tore it off, actually, because you wanted her to be a pirate frog. You thought that an eye patch would grow in its place, which supposed both that Bitsy was alive and that eye patches were some sort of organic bodily reaction to eye-loss. Your father sighed and rubbed at his forehead when you told him. “Jodie,” he said, “what am I going to do with you?”). You realized that she wasn’t with you an hour down the road and screamed and cried and begged to go back and get her, but your father refused, white-knuckled hands gripping the wheel and voice tight. It’s funny; Bitsy wasn’t even your favorite. That was always Bunny, the pink rabbit with the stuffing coming out of one arm that you threw up on once two years before. Years later, you think that Bitsy had very little to do with anything.

II.

When you were eight, one of your toenails came off during a failed attempt to climb higher in a tree. Your father climbed up after you and carried you down, mumbling meaningless comforts the whole way. Then he cleaned up your bleeding, dirty toe while your mother wiped away your tears. It was the last thing you saw them do together.

III.

You were nine when you left your father a note on the fridge that said you were running away. In reality, you were hiding in the corner of the linen closet downstairs with a Gameboy and Oreos. You wanted him to have to call your mom, for them to look for you together. It was, in retrospect, incredibly selfish of you. Your father searched the neighborhood for hours before he came back to the house, nearly hysterical. You watched through the crack of the door as he reached for the phone and started to dial, then hung up and held his face in his hands for a few minutes. When he found you another hour later, he grounded you for a month. You never told him why you did it.

IV.

Your mother and Josephine took you to an amusement park when you were eleven. You'd been feeling sick for the past few days but you'd been looking forward to this for weeks now so you ignored the ache in your gut and rode your first rollercoaster, your mom on one side and Josephine on the other. The queasiness you hadn't been able to shake hit its peak right as the coaster turned and your vomit was blown right onto Josephine's blouse. You tried to apologize to Josephine, but she laughed it off and went to go clean herself off while your mother bought her a new shirt from one of the vendors. The barf stain never came out.

V.

You left your book report on *Lord of the Flies* in the car when you were thirteen. You were especially pissed because you'd missed your best friend's birthday party to work on it and you were damn proud, so you called your father from the office (you didn't have a cellphone; you couldn't have one until high school so you had to go to the front office and ask the lady at the desk with this gross-looking brown stain on her shirt that you couldn't stop staring at if you could use the phone, please) and asked him to bring it on his lunch break. "You need to be more responsible," he said when he handed it to you an hour later. "I can't be bringing you your shit every other day."

VI.

You took off your favorite red hat to play laser tag and lost track of it when you were fourteen. Your mother and Josephine crawled around on the floor with you to see if it had fallen underneath a bench or something. You never did find it, but Josephine bought you a new one that you honestly liked better. It sits on your dresser to this day, unworn.

VII.

Your mother took you to get your hair cut when you were fifteen. After a disastrous attempt at shorter hair in fourth grade, you'd kept your hair as long as you could, but now you were ready for a change. By the end of it, there were over thirteen inches of hair left on the floor and what was left on your head barely brushed the back of your neck. Your mother clapped her hands together in excitement. "You look gorgeous, baby!" she said. Your father, when he saw it, shook his head and mumbled something under his breath.

VIII.

When you left your phone at the grocery store when you were sixteen, you said nothing and went back to get it later yourself. Your father yelled at you for ignoring his calls and you promised it wouldn't happen again.

IX.

You kissed your girlfriend goodnight in the car two weeks later and your father saw. You thought he would be angry, vicious with his words like he was when he found out your mother had married a woman. Instead he got so, so quiet. He wrung his hands and stammered something that you didn't quite catch (you imagine it was something like "et tu, Brute?" but that's probably just your dramatic side coming out). And things changed. Your father no longer seemed quite able to look you in the eye no matter how hard he tried. So you broke up with Shanice a month later (she didn't cry even a little, but you did. Not in front of your dad or your mother but Josephine, Josephine whose dark skin and darker eyes and soothing strokes of your hair reminded you so much of Shanice that you cried even harder). When you told your father this, he sighed and tried his damndest not to look relieved.

X.

At seventeen, you gave your father a movie that the two of you had gone to see together the year before for Father's Day (it's a sad film, one that had you sobbing in the theater by the end, clinging to your father's hand for comfort. Years later, you found out he'd hated it). But you also sent Josephine a flower arrangement (Anonymously. You weren't really sure why. You weren't really sure why you did any of it) which wound up costing you the money you'd planned to spend on a new skirt. By the time you'd saved up to buy it again, the store had shifted to the fall fashions and the skirt was no longer for sale.

XI.

You left your graduation cap on the floor when you were eighteen and running to hug your mother and Josephine (your father wasn't there; he refused to be in the same room with them and they refused not to come). You didn't really care, but Josephine picked it up for you even so. "I'll keep this for you," she said, "in case you want it in the future." You appreciated the thought, but you didn't care in the future either.

XII.

That night, your mother and Josephine took you out to dinner and your mother proposed a toast. "To Jodie," she said, "my brilliant baby girl who's going to college in the fall!" They both smiled and clapped a little too loudly, drawing attention to your table as you waved for them to quiet down. At some point, your class ring (which was too big anyway; you'd never really known your ring size) flew off your finger and across the restaurant without you noticing. Your mother was the one to point its absence out to you, and she was the one to search the most ardently. It was Josephine who found it, though, and your mother looked vaguely upset about that.

XIII.

At twenty, a kid who'd just gotten his learner's permit mixed up the brake with the gas and t-boned you in an intersection. Luckily for you, he wasn't going very fast, but you did break your arm and wound up having surgery to remove your spleen. You woke up hours later to your father and Josephine sitting by your bed. It was the first time you'd ever seen the two of them in the same room and it was almost surreal. "Your mother was out of the state when we heard," Josephine said when you asked about her, "but she'll be here soon." Upon hearing this news, your father kissed you on the forehead and told you he'd be back in the morning.

XIV.

Your father took you and your college boyfriend Dante to a bar on the night of your twenty-first birthday. He ordered you a Bud Lite and a steak. You never liked beer, though—you preferred screwdrivers, or a good mojito—and earlier that year you'd become a vegetarian. Still, you sipped at it awkwardly, ignoring the taste as best you could, and cut the steak into tiny pieces on your plate. Dante looked like he was about to say something to your father, but you shook your head at him. When you got back on campus, you threw your to-go box in the garbage and bought some Easy Mac from the convenience store.

XV.

Dante broke up with you three weeks later. He came by with a box of stuff you'd left in his room over the past eight months—some books, a teapot, twelve CDs (which he made fun of you for still listening to in this age of pirated music, but the CD versions just sounded better than the MP3 files), a stick of deodorant and a toothbrush, five hair clips of varying size, and your fuzziest pair of socks. He didn't give you back your red pen with a plastic heart at the top, though. You weren't sure if he did it on purpose or if he'd just forgotten until you saw him using it in the library the next day. You never mentioned it to him.

XVI.

You got blackout drunk one night when you were twenty-four and left Shanice a voicemail. You have no idea what you said, but when you tried to text her and apologize you found out your number had been blocked.

XVII.

You and your father went to your cousin's wedding when you were twenty-six. Your father brought a date, a beautiful Latina woman twice his size. Conversely, you've always thought your cousin was rather ugly (and felt horrible for thinking it, too, since she was never anything but nice to you). As she walked down the aisle, she wobbled in her heels and fell on top of you, dislodging the carefully placed bobby pins holding your hair up. As your cousin picked herself back up and the crowd tittered around you, you were desperately holding your hair with one hand and searching for your missing pins with the other. Your father's date leaned over and hissed, "Just let it fall. You're making a scene." You didn't let your hair go, but you didn't find the bobby pins either.

XVIII.

One week later, you were in New York trying to exit the subway when someone stepped on your shoe and it came off. When the crowd cleared, you saw a willowy brunette standing there, offering it up to you. "Sorry about that," she said. For a moment, you indulged yourself in a Cinderella-esque fantasy that this would lead to some grand love story. Then you took the shoe and you never saw her again.

XIX.

You left a white rose on your mother's coffin when you were twenty-eight. Josephine was supposed to give a eulogy but when the time came her legs wouldn't support her so you went and spoke in her place. As you turned to face the assembled crowd, you saw what you thought might be your father slipping out the back.

XX.

You were twenty-nine and cooking scrambled eggs for dinner when Josephine called. It was their anniversary, her and your mother, and she needed someone to talk to. You walked away from the stove as Josephine sobbed softly in your ear. “She loved you so much,” she said with a sniffle. “You know that, right?” You told her you did. The eggs were long since burnt once you got back to them.

XXI.

You were thirty before you first brought your girlfriend, Amara, to meet your father. You’d dated quite a few people of varying genders in the years since Shanice and Dante but they’d never lasted long enough for you to bother mentioning to anyone. Your father at dinner was polite, but tense; he asked all the right questions (How did you two meet? What’s your family like? What do you do for a living?), yet he sounded like someone was holding a gun to his head. He honestly tried, though, more than he ever had before, and the reality of it left you so bone-achingly sad. You pretended to get a text from your boss asking you to come in and left your father alone at the table.

XXII.

At thirty-two, you and Josephine were addressing invitations for your upcoming wedding to Amara. The invitation for your father sat apart from the rest, addressed and stamped. You were hesitant to send it—not because you didn’t want him there but because he might’ve refused to come. You told Josephine this and she did not assure you otherwise (you would never have believed her anyway). Instead, she opened her desk drawer and dropped his invitation in. “It’ll be here whenever you’re ready,” she said. Before it closed, you caught a glimpse of your high school graduation cap, still sitting in her desk fourteen years later.