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Steadying

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Steadying

Your mother at twenty-one, a baby constantly at her hip, discovers a love she has not found with anyone before. Years before you are born, she raises your older sister, Annie, above her head, wants to tuck the baby's laughter into her hands, hold it in her palms. Your mother stays at home in a house too large with her first husband, a man you will never meet. She doesn't yet know that he sleeps with his secretary on the weekends, or that in less than a year she will be pregnant again and filing for divorce.

You watch her before you are born, before everything breaks apart: your mother emerald-eyed, laughing. Your mother, waking in the middle of the night to a crying child, hand cupping the baby's head like she might float away. Your mother, happy.

And now you picture her in a little over a year, two small children at her hips, meeting your father outside a gas station. You picture him, a mechanic, with eyes too large and too close together, bending toward your mother, leering at your sisters.

Your mother at twenty-three, with two babies and no husband, smiles at the softness of this man's voice, blushes when he calls her beautiful.

You watch this broken woman and think, Run.

Five months after your mother meets your father, and three months before she is pregnant with you, she moves into his small city apartment with your sisters. She leads your older sister by the hand, feels herself sinking when she admires the tiny living room, the dirty bathroom with a broken faucet.

But, oh, your mother in an upswing! She doesn't yet have a name for what causes her these weeks of happiness and what leaves her in fetal position in her bedroom for weeks after.

Now, her mind pulses joy, shouts of possibility with this man she doesn't know. "Isn't this nice?" she asks your sisters. "You guys can play all day in Mommy's room."

Her pregnancy with you is a solar eclipse: she falls into sadness that causes her to lay on the living room couch all day—unmoving, empty—while your father works. One day before she has told him about you, your father comes home and stands over her. "So where's dinner?"

Your mother can't explain how her heart has slowed, how she wishes she could disappear into the fabric of the carpet and never resurface. She spends her days gazing at your sister, Megan, breathing in the scent of her, pressing her nose to the baby's silk skin and thinking: what's wrong with me?

She looks up at your father with her arm draped under her head, "Go make yourself something."

You try to picture your father, his clenched jaw, balled fists, and your memory erases the irises from his eyes. When he stares down at your mother now, you think he does so with pupils that swallow the whites of his eyes. "I work all day just for you to lay on my couch and eat my food and tell me to make something?"

Your mother smiles curtly, scoops Megan from the carpet, and walks into the kitchen. "Here," she says, tossing white bread onto a stained counter, grabbing peanut butter from the cabinet. "You can make a sandwich."

"I'm not making shit," your father says. "I buy the food and you make it. That's how this works."

With the baby pressed to her side with her right arm, your mother pushes the bread into your father's chest with her left. "You can make a sandwich."

This is the first time your father hits your mother. He pushes her backward, and she falls against the counter. The baby's cheek splits against the granite edge.

Wild-eyed, your mother tries to steady herself. Megan shrieks in her arms, but your mother stills, and her vision blurs, and for a moment she can't hear your father yelling, "Now, look what you did."

You wonder if this is the moment she knew she would leave, if this is when something broke within her. And yet, you see her face redden, words pooling in her mouth like bile, and know she will not leave your father for another ten years.

Why does she stay? Even then, you know the answer: you. Even as the anger blisters her skin, she feels the seed of you within her body, realizes that without him she will be a single mother to three small children with nowhere to go.

In a few weeks, the euphoria pulls her back in: while your father works, your mother buys things for his apartment, decorates, plays on a dirty carpet with your sisters. While your father works, your mother's high will convince her that this is the life she wants, needs: a life with her children, and your father who gives them to her. While your father works, your mother prepares for a life with you.

And then, in a few months, you are born, hands already curled into fists and ready to swing. Your mother will fall in love again, with the angry baby with the mess of hair, the child that lacks her beauty: you will be plain, dark haired, and dark eyed. But in her arms, you laugh with your mother, kick your pudgy feet, and she will think, this is why I stay.

One year before your mother leaves your father, she drinks for the first time. While your father works, your mother paces about her bedroom with shaking hands, stares at your siblings and wonders where she should go. She has a bruise from last night, from where he grabbed her across her waist. It runs along the base of her bottom rib. She runs her fingers around the purpled skin, presses just enough so that she can feel a tinge of pain, and lets go.

Your mother sits at the edge of the bed, hears the bickering of her children in the next room. When she thinks about leaving, her heart swells in her throat, prevents her from breathing. You sit next to her as you both listen to the nine-year-old version of you in the next room, to your siblings. You want to tell her she needs to leave your father, but you know she can't hear you.

She finds your sister, Annie, in the next room, now eleven years old, and tells her to watch the rest of you. She'll be right back, she says.

With your father's car, your mother drives half a mile to a local liquor store, parks around the corner. You want to lock the doors, you want to reach across her body and hold her in place. Though she can't feel you, you long to close her hands within your own, to stand in front of the store doors and block her entry. You want to tell her, go home.

When your mother exits the store with a small bottle of vodka in a brown paper bag, she looks around nervously and stuffs it into her bag. She gets in the car and waits for her breathing to slow. She drives home, her heart oozing through her ribs, her head ringing. Your mother wonders why she feels guilty for an act she hasn't committed yet. She tells herself that she just needs to take a second for herself, to relax, but still she can't shake a feeling of wrongdoing. You wonder if you could tell her about all the years to come, about all the things she will lose, if she wouldn't pour the bottle down the gutter and break the glass.

In the driveway, your mother stares at the bottle in her lap, breaks the seal and brings it to her nose. She sips from it, purses her lips and shakes her head,

and thinks, I deserve this. And then she feels her body slow, warm. She has forgotten what it's like to be calm. She finishes the bottle with her keys still in the ignition.

In the final year before your father leaves, your mother stuffs bottles of vodka under her bed, waits until he works, then finishes one and passes out on the couch. She hopes she will wake to a life without him, to a life where she no longer needs to decide what she wants.

One Monday evening, while you and your siblings wait in the back of the car, she meets a man outside of a liquor store. This man brushes your mother's arm with his own, whispers in her ear, pays for her bottle. "I've never seen anyone so beautiful around here before," he says, and your mother feels the swelling, the longing, her need to be needed.

In the final year before your father leaves, your mother leaves you and your siblings at home, stays at this man's apartment, and returns home before your father knows she's gone.

At ten years old, this is the start of an anger that you will harbor for years, the spark of a fire you will feed until it consumes you whole. Ten-year-old you bristles at your mother's absence. For years you will think, what better way to leave one man than to jump into the arms of another?

But the you watching her now wonders if your mother meets this new man and sees escape, if she knows she can't be alone with three small children and no money. You wonder if this is the only way she knows how to leave. You wonder if she thinks this man will be different.

You wonder when your mother asks this man to live with her a week after your father leaves if she sees him as survival. You wonder when he hits her for the first time, if she looks at her children and her empty bank account and closes her mouth. You wonder if all of those years you hated your mother for not leaving him, if she hated you just as much for making her stay.

When you are thirteen, your mother sits in a therapist's office, palms pressed together. She wants to tell someone how she can sleep for an entire day and still feel tired, how some days she wants to melt into the walls or disappear behind the shower curtain. How she will spend weeks in fetal position on the living room floor, a bottle in her hand, and then fill suddenly with happiness, with gratitude for her life.

You sit next to your mother and listen to the way she hurts, want her to know you're next to her even though you know you're not.

The therapist, an older woman with graying hair, listens to your mother speak, nods her head. When your mother quiets, this woman asks your mother if she's ever heard of bipolar disorder.

Stomach acid rises in your mother's throat, and you watch her body stiffen. "No," she says. "I'm not sick. I'm just tired."

You don't know if she hears these words and feels like she's falling or like she's finally being caught.

After forty-five minutes, your mother makes another appointment that she will miss. The words *manic depression* and *illness* break against her skull, and your mother will drive home and drink until she can't remember them anymore.

When you are sixteen, your mother crawls into your room, kneels before your bed, clasps her hands in prayer. "You know what I used to call you as a baby? A bull. You were so tough. You would fall over again and again and never cry," she whispers.

Next to your bedside, your mother is so tiny, so sunken. You imagine her as a ghost: skin drooping around crumbling bones, body caving in. Her entire body, concave, skeletal, except her stomach, which alcohol has stretched outward, convex and stubborn.

"One time I left you outside in the car while I took in the groceries, and it was so, so hot out. And I came back out for you, and you were as red as a tomato, but you still had that serious little pout on."

Some part of you knows that your mother's shaking hands ache for your own, but you smell the vodka on her breath, and anger turns you to stone. "I think you should go to bed."

You wouldn't know that she was crying if it weren't for one small, shaky breath, and her grief ignites you.

"I swear to God I will never drink again," she says, and you train your eyes on the fault lines of the ceiling. Some part of you still longs for a fight, wishes to corner her and yell, to pull the bottles from every spot she has tried to hide them. But now you only pity this wispy old woman with the beer belly, and you turn away from her.

"I think you should go to bed."

Your mother lingers at your bedside, and you know she waits for you to turn toward her, to close her tired hands within your own. You know that when she leaves your room she will finish whatever bottle she started. You know she hopes that you will stop her.

You wait with your back toward her, listening for the soft shuffling of her bare feet on the carpeting, the hush of her leaving you.

At sixteen, you wake to your mother's red hair, her figure bending toward you, "Wake up, we gotta go."

On a summer morning before birds have awoken, you press your face into a pillow. “What time is it?”

“Seven. Up, up, up! You can’t sleep all day.”

Beside you, your dog looks up to you groggily, rests his head back down. You knead his ear in your palm, blink sleep from your eyes, “Okay, okay. I’m up.”

You slide your feet into torn flip-flops, stay in pajama shorts. The dog lies against your pillow as if to mock you, and you stick your tongue at him and mumble, “You can lay there now but I’m taking that spot back.”

In the car with your mother, you press your temple to the warmth of the window, to the sun filtering through the glass, while she drives to local garage sales. You gaze at old furniture, at boxes of oxidized jewelry, at torn paperbacks, and yards full of broken baby toys. Your mother buys a lamp with a torn shade, a silver ring with a missing stone, a cedar cuckoo clock. She picks through these treasures and whispers to you, “Isn’t this nice? Isn’t this pretty?” like it’s a secret only the two of you can share.

On her good days, in her good weeks, you can pretend your mother has always been sober, that her happiness isn’t a temporary one. She will drive around and buy things she doesn’t need. On these days, she will charge up her credit cards at malls and boutiques, purchasing clothes she’ll forget she owns, jewelry she will lose. But you ignore your unease, her giddiness, because she has chosen to spend her good day with you, because you will relive these hours again and again when she is drunk and crawling into your room.

This is how it begins: at eighteen, you spend one of your last nights at home before you leave for college. You lock your door, and though you hear your mother on the other side, you turn toward the wall.

In the middle of the night, you realize that when you leave, your mother will be alone for the very first time. This is the guilt that pushes you to your feet, that leads you to your mother’s bedroom.

When you open her door, you smell it: the bite of liquor, the sting of vodka. You hear her shuffling inside the bathroom, and when you press your ear to the door you hear the soft ache of her crying. You debate walking in or walking away. You know that your mother is drunk on the other side of the door. You want to hate her and push her away, but you also know you can’t, you won’t.

When you open your mother’s bathroom door, you find her hands pressed together between her thighs, blood drying against her forearm. “What happened?”

“I hurt myself,” she says, and you pull on her arms until you see lines clawed into the pale insides of her wrists.

“What did you do? Why would you do this?” you yell at her, your heart at the back of your tongue. Your mother starts crying, apologizing, and you see her suddenly as a scared child, a woman who will lose her life over losing you.

You grab a towel, wet it in the sink and dab at her wrists, wipe away the blood. “Hey, look. You see this? It’s not that deep, okay? You’re okay.” Your mother sobs deeply, uncontrollably. Your synapses fire in your brain, and every muscle tells you move, now, but you still with fear. “Hey, look at me. How much did you drink?”

The room spins around you. Your mother doesn’t answer, and you want to shake her until she does, then go back into your room and keep the door locked until the sun rises. Your vision blurs, but you place your arm on your mother’s shoulder, and you hear yourself say, “Come on, we have to go,” even though you don’t know where there is to go.

You wrap a towel around your mother’s wrists and lead her outside to the car door. You help her into the passenger seat, reach across her body, and buckle her in. You repeat, “You’re okay, you’re okay,” and you drive her to the hospital.

Your mother spends eight days in a psychiatric hospital, and when you pick her up she shows you a prescription for lithium.

She starts to cry on the way home. “Do you hate me?” she asks.

You pull the car over on the side of the road, and stare ahead, grip the steering wheel. “I don’t hate you.”

“You’re leaving me,” she says, her freckled hands shaking.

“Where do you think I’m going?”

“You want to forget I exist.”

You focus on her green eyes, feel your heart swell. “I love you. I just don’t understand you sometimes.”

“I’m gonna get better,” she says, hand resting on your thigh. “I’m not gonna drink anymore. But you can’t leave me.”

You see the fear in your mother’s eyes, and realize that she thinks when you go to school you will never come back. And though some part of you wants to escape, there’s another part of you that sees this small, scared woman and wants to cry with her. You enclose her hands in your own. “I’m not leaving. I’m going to school, but you know I’m not leaving you.” And though you don’t know if your mother really will get better, if she will stop drinking, you feel her fear and know that she wants to. You hug her, steady her body against your own as she cries.

“You can’t leave me,” you say. “You can’t scare me like that. You can’t hurt yourself like that.”

When your mother quiets, you sit in silence with your head against the seat. “How the fuck did we get here?” you say.

And when your mother begins to tell you her story, you hold onto her arm and listen.