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Amanda Jean Briggs

Grace

A framed oil portrait hangs over my mother's bed. Clothed in a white sheath, she presides over a garden resplendent with throaty lilies and opalescent narcissi. I'm on the ground at her feet, forever seventeen, legs skewed beneath the scalloped hem of a dress two sizes too big. The dress once belonged to my maternal grandmother, an immaculate, impenetrable woman who, at the age of seventy-four, was half a foot taller than I. No matter; my mother, her lips bristling with straight pins, tethered the linen folds, which smelt distantly of baby powder and cedar chips, down my spine. Arguing was pointless.

I'm thirty-three now, still single, still living in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in a rented condo a mile from the house where I grew up. I work out of my kitchen these days, customizing curtains and upholstery for an interior design business run by Mrs. Tamplin, one of my mother's friends. Too old for long hair and frosted eye shadow, I buy cardigans and pleated wool slacks on sale at Talbot's to please her and my mother, women who deliberate the ins and outs of ladylike behavior, who supervise their daughters' garden clubs and crowd their living rooms with bowls of lavender potpourri. My mother, bedridden these last six months by back pain, says my generation hasn't the foggiest idea what the word duty means. She insists we're irresponsible, self-absorbed.

"Can you believe Ruth Stewart's daughter? Can you believe she had the gall to sell her mother's house to a *stranger*?" My mother huffs; this is where she tugs the comforter over the top of her ruffled nightgown. "Ruth was my best friend and next door neighbor for thirty-odd years. That woman who's there now? She mows the lawn in a bronze bikini with sequins across the bottom. You can see all the way to France. If Ruth were alive, she would have a fit and fall in it."

Nearly sixty, my mother detests technology, has combated time the way a woman like her will: she's employed the plastic surgeon's knife to obliterate its signs. Over the last five years, young Dr. McBride, whose father bequeathed him a bevy of Ferragamo-shod patients and an office on Metro Medical Drive has lifted my mother's lips, boosted her cheeks, tucked her eyes and tightened the skin around her neck. Dr. McBride's office is part of a slanting complex that stands in the shadow of Cape Fear Valley Hospital.

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Before she took to her bed, my mother and I used to journey every summer to this outpost in her Cadillac, to this modern Shangri La of scalpels and sutures. My mother, an inky full-length mink coat pulled over her blazer despite the heat, sat next to me while I wound the black car down narrow streets, past shorn housing divisions (Huntington Park, Kingsford, Vanstory Hills) and strip malls withering in the mustard haze. Rarely was there a moment of silence: had I heard about Mrs. Tamplin's thirty-something son-in-law, my mother wanted to know? Was I aware that he had hung himself last Tuesday night with one of his father's snakeskin belts? Did I know that his wife Judith and the law firm's rickety janitor had found him hanging over a desk in his high, old Richmond office? And was I aware that Mary Ann Arnold had left her husband and a passel of children and run off with Mrs. Lawson's stringy-haired daughter-in-law from Vermont? According to Ruth Stewart, the two lovers were holed up in an airport motel somewhere on the outskirts of Greensboro. George Arnold was absolutely beside himself. And really, what in God's name were those two thinking anyway, pulling a crazy stunt like that, my mother wanted to know?

Now, when I look back on these grim monologues—on the last five years of my life even—it's as if everything has been consumed by these trips. I finger this thought, like so many of the others, as carefully as one would the keys of a piano mined by a faceless army, one whose erratic retreats and subsequent retrenchments seem cruel, relentless. Despite this, despite the fact that my fingertips may stray across the wrong key at any moment, I cannot resist asking myself why. Why, when I recall my mother's car drifting down Fayetteville's streets like a parade float blown horribly off course, didn't I stomp on the brake, kill the engine, fling open the door, find my own way home? Why? Because, invariably, at some point during each trip, I would catch sight of my mother's face in the rearview mirror—the spidery veins blossoming from the outer corner of each almond-shaped eye, the irises the color of rain, the stiff licks of hair protruding from each temple—and she would appear as she did when I was a child, a slender figure lingering behind the screen door in our kitchen on Skye Drive, the tan length of her collarbone rising from a creamy sundress, and it was all I could do to keep the Cadillac from running right off the road.

Somehow we always made it to Dr. McBride's office. And while he inked a web of purple lines over my mother's face with his felt-tipped physician's pen, I sat in the empty waiting room with a stiff copy of *Architectural Digest* spread across my lap. I never opened it. I stared out the window overlooking the parking lot, eyes fixed on the teal-garbed physician assistants dotted across the glittering, car-clotted asphalt. Most had cell phones pressed up against their mouths, and their lips moved silently, frantically in the

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burning air. Like the white beam of a microscope, the midday sun bore down on the women's faces, and under such scrutiny their maroon lips were reduced to a jumble of right angles; it was as if the world had been drained of all the sonorous, curving circles and semicircles that I loved. But despite all this, nothing in Fayetteville has changed really since the day Mrs. Lyon arrived to photograph my mother and me for the portrait she would paint.

When Mrs. Lyon mounted the brick steps leading up to our front porch, it was late September. Around her, the world, under the spell of Indian summer, shimmered with light, a smooth yellow light whose undulations were ripe with pinesap and the first twisting autumnal smoke. Mrs. Lyon whipped open our screen door and clasped the hand my mother proffered her. My mother eyeballed her. *How could you leave the house looking like that?* Mrs. Lyon, product of an established Raleigh family, only smiled, oblivious to the unspoken reprimand. Clad in a lavender T-shirt with I LUV 2 LAF! scrawled across the front in curvy black script, she let her forty-something breasts go free, a fact of life her husband, a Korean stand-up comic, no doubt appreciated. A woman who ditched nursing school to paint, she spent the next hour traipsing across our kitchen assembling a tripod, her cracked heels bulging over turquoise flip flops.

Her beauty was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Indistinguishable from her pupils, her irises bespoke a line I'd read in a book whose title I've since forgotten. Dark eyes bear more secrets than light eyes. The faces of the women she'd painted inhabited them, each intimate detail preserved, though she'd never lain across from them in bed, never pressed a single finger to the hollow of their neck. Yet she was conscious of the mysteries and idiosyncrasies of the flesh; she knew its curves, crevices and kinks. And somewhere, behind those black eyes, on a dove-colored fold of tissue buried in her brain, this knowledge—its light iridescent—lit that darkness from within. I smiled when Mrs. Lyon said that behind each subtlety lurked yet another layer of exquisite specificity.

After she finished photographing us, Mrs. Lyon explained how she would use the pictures to create special flowers to match our faces. My mother, perched on one of the mahogany chairs clustered about our kitchen table, glanced up at her. An envelope shot from the pocket of her blazer. When Mrs. Lyon broke its seal, lilies, baby's breath and narcissi spilled forth—all the usual suspects plucked from *Southern Living* with a pair of manicure scissors.

"Anything else I should pay attention to, Mrs. Andrews?"

My mother smiled, oblivious to the change in Mrs. Lyon's face and tone.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't want you to feel like you have to go to extra trouble on my account."

"It's your painting."

"I trust you."

"I'm glad, but if there's anything else you have in mind, I need to know

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about it now.”

“Well, maybe there are a few things. Small things, really.”

My mother snaked an arm around my shoulders. My back muscles tightened.

“I want my face to be smooth. As smooth as a baby’s bottom. Like Grace here. Doesn’t she have the best skin? Just like all the women in my family.”

Mrs. Lyon’s eyes searched my face.

“Is that all, Mrs. Andrews?”

My mother raised her left hand, and the fading light pierced the ring anchored to her middle finger. It was a fortieth birthday present from my father; at cocktail parties, he referred to it, dryly, as “George Anna’s headlight.” My mother’s friends didn’t know it, but she had threatened to leave him if he didn’t buy it for her.

“My stones. Let’s paint them bigger.” My mother giggled. “Let’s double them in size at least.”

When it was time for Mrs. Lyon to go, I lingered by the screen door on the front porch. A keenness in the air had thinned the day’s burnished warmth, and in the graying sky overhead, the Canadian geese streamed south in a wide, vibrating lavender V. I had worried all afternoon about this moment and now, standing with the cool lacquered boards beneath my bare feet, I could only watch as Mrs. Lyon climbed into her crumpled Mazda. But moments later, the drumbeat of its motor was broken by the whoosh of a window coming down, and when I lifted my head, she was smiling at me in the encroaching darkness, and I saw her brush tracing the lilting architecture of my collarbone, felt her finger racing along the span of my eyebrows. I heard her say I was lovely, unique, and for one impenetrable moment, the silvery current at my center poured forth into every corner of my body.

Then she was gone. Her car disappeared down the driveway, around the corner and onto the highway beyond. I held my position, barely able to breathe, until the night air had extinguished the last red whisper of her car’s taillights. Still, that red gleam was to linger, as red as the fires my father built in our fireplace when I was little, as red as the garnet eyes of the twin black metal hawks that girded its smoke and flame.

I read Mrs. Lyon’s obituary this evening in *The Raleigh Observer*. Breast cancer. She was fifty-nine. According to the paper, she died at home in a canopied bed she designed herself, attended by her husband and four children. There’s no photograph, but when I close my eyes, her face, always absent always from my dreams, is suddenly, inexplicably, burned into the circle at the end of the moving kaleidoscope of my memory. Everything—her auspicious eyes, her forehead’s silvery sunspots, the hammer toe on her right foot—is arrayed before me, untouched by time.

Tonight is Christmas Eve, but my mother’s house is practically deserted. Five years ago, after our father died of a heart attack, my older brother

moved to Birmingham, Alabama. He's there with his wife and their new baby boy. It's always been different for him, and now, though he still tries to pretend otherwise, even he knows that everything here is growing denser, is drawing up, is winnowing down toward some finite, microscopic point. And so, in a few days, he'll come home for a couple of weeks, maybe longer.

"Grace, did you hear me calling you? Where were you? Were you in the bathroom? I was beginning to think you had left."

My mother glares up at me from her bed. It belonged to her grandmother and is so tiny that my mother, a slight woman further narrowed by pain, appears twice her size. She's doused the room with perfume, but beneath the redolent aura of Oscar de la Renta, something dank and faintly metallic, like moldered plaster, lurks.

I sigh. "Did you really think I would leave you alone on Christmas Eve?"

"How am I supposed to know what anyone will do?"

"Austin's wife called this morning. She said he liked the putter you sent."

"That girl. She'll be lucky if he sits down to eat on Christmas. Why she ever agreed to marry him, God only knows."

My mother sips her water. "Probably thinks she'll change him." Her burgundy lipstick leaves a sullen imprint around the straw. "Men do what they want. They don't care. You just wait. She'll see."

"Do you want to have dinner in the dining room?"

"You know I can't get up."

About six months ago, my mother's spine began deteriorating rapidly. Her doctors have yet to figure out why.

"I'll fix you a tray and set up a card table by the bed for myself."

My mother groans and sinks further into the appliquéd pillows framing her face. WELCOME TO BEDLAM, proclaims one. ARE WE THERE YET? demands another. A bag of gourmet cookies drifts along the comforter's swells. She's gnawed the head off a sugared Santa Claus, and I try to block out the image of him inside her, drowning in the acid in her stomach.

I edge my way over to the bed. I dim the Imari lamp on the nightstand. My mother's blue enamel pillbox, stuffed with pebbly painkillers, is next to its base.

"Mrs. Lyon died yesterday."

"Who? Who's that?"

"The woman who painted the portrait."

"Oh, right. I remember. Ugly as homemade sin. Thank God you didn't turn out like that."

Inside my chest, something buckles.

"Listen." My mother yanks the comforter over her chin. The rifts around her nostrils are clotted with broken blood vessels.

"Do you hear that, Grace?"

"What?"

"That noise." My mother squeezes her eyes shut.

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“What are you talking about?”

“That noise. What’s that ticking noise?”

I stretch my hands, palms down, over my thighs. “It’s probably that old clock in the hallway. I wound it while you were asleep.”

“Whatever it is, I can’t stand it...”

My mother’s eyes jerk open. Normally a murky periwinkle, the banded muscles around her irises are the lapis lazuli of dreams, vast and absolute. But each pinpoint within is so cold and hollow and strange that the porcelain walls around me don the color of an inky fish’s eye. I blink once, slowly, automatically, before drawing my body away from her bed and toward the doorway, where the hallway’s glow wavers from a great distance, as if conjured from memory. Can all of this be real? And if it is, how did it come down to this? I clamp my fingers around the doorknob and close the door behind me. But on the other side—the hallway’s sequined hush can’t last forever—my body is still. I stand there, heart pounding, as if at any moment the past will assume a physical body and hurtle into me, the resulting collision like two halves of a geode smashed together.

Before the Demerol, before the plastic surgery, before Mrs. Lyon even, there was my mother. On those reddened summer nights, when I was seven and the weeping willows hung low and heavy about our house, she crisscrossed the kitchen tiles, kitten heels clicking in concert with the ceiling fan whirring overhead. She was lithe in a pressed linen sundress with a scarf threaded about her waist like a belt. Her scarves, Christmas presents from her mother, were sapphire with white camellias, gold with amber crescents, pale green reminiscent of the ocean at first light. Depending on her mood or dress or both, sometimes she wound the silken ends into rosy knots, other times she left them loose. It was the mid-1970’s and though those years are remembered for pantsuits and platform sandals, I didn’t know Donna Summer or orange carpet existed.

That June my father, who played golf in the afternoons and evenings at our country club on Raeford Road, began taking my older brother to Highland with him. There, on a mound overlooking acres of gleaming grass, they wielded drivers while I shucked corn on our front porch. Most nights, my mother did the first ear for me, just to get me started, before setting me to work outside with a steel colander.

Every ten minutes or so, my mother stopped cooking to peer out the bay window overlooking our front yard. She was searching for my father’s Cadillac. When it finally pierced the driveway, she scurried out of the kitchen and stood, trembling, on the edge of the porch steps. She smiled the wistful half smile that she reserved for my father and brother; I knew its curves by heart. But, crouched over my bowl, I could only watch as she receded down the lawn, her head moving further and further away until she was lost in the shadows curving across the lawn. *Where are you? I can’t see*

you! There was a pause, a sucking in of breath, then from some corner of the twilight emerged a tinkling laugh and the edge of words that curled and vanished as quickly as they were spoken. I made no attempt to decipher them; I gazed out at the lightening bugs spiraling skywards, their translucent abdomens secreting an emerald flair, and I discovered that if I looked at them long enough and hard enough, I too became a part of the thickening air, like the flame on the tip of a match, snapped out.

One night, at the end of August, my father called to say he and my brother would have dinner at Highland. They did this three or four times a week now. Just the boys, I imagined him informing my mother, his brusque voice halting her vigil. From my spot on the porch, I heard my mother place the phone, a practiced *click*, back in its cradle. A few minutes later, she wandered through the screen door and settled on the wicker love seat a foot from where I sat Indian style. Earlier in the day, she had shaded her eyelids a silvery gray, and in the light from the overhead fixture, they glittered somberly. She drew a strand of platinum hair down the slope of one bronze shoulder. Her face was still, strange.

“Mrs. Stewart called this afternoon while you were asleep.”

I pushed the bowl of corn away. We would have something simple and delicious, like hot dogs and baked beans, for dinner now.

“You can keep a secret, can’t you, Grace?”

“I can keep a secret. I swear.”

“A lady never swears.”

“I promise.”

My mother pointed to a spot on the bench, and I scrambled up next to her. I pressed a scabby knee against her thigh, and breathed the heat in great gulps. Wet and dusky, it wiped out the present and brought forth the past so that our weeping willows seemed to rise, like giant water lilies, from a time ancient and inexorable. I was sure my mother sensed this too, and as twilight became night, it was as if we were the only two people alive in the world.

“Do you remember Mr. Jackson, Grace?”

I shook my head.

“Hold still, or I won’t go on.”

Hold still.

“Yes, you do. He lives in the brick house at the end of the street. Remember last Halloween? He and Mrs. Jackson dressed up like Elvis and his mother, Gladys.”

Mrs. Jackson put ruby lollipops shaped like hearts in my trick or treat bag. I remembered that.

“Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Well, last night Mr. Jackson told Mrs. Jackson he was in love with another woman. He told her he wanted a divorce.”

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Divorce?

“After he told her, do you know what happened?”

“What?”

“Mrs. Jackson went down to the cellar and got out Mr. Jackson’s hunting rifle. Her little boy showed her how to load it.”

See how still I am?

“She waited for Mr. Jackson to get in the shower. Then, when she heard the water running, she kicked open the door with her bare feet.”

I have no idea what my mother’s face looked like. I only know that I held myself still. What I saw then was simple and small as childhood things go: a screech owl, brown and round as an egg, that my brother, armed with his first BB gun, blasted from a pine tree earlier that summer. My brother, who peed on trees and wore a studded leather holster, never knew I was behind him; I had followed him into the wooded lot near our house. Crouched behind a sap-encrusted trunk, I watched as he knelt over the owl’s crumpled body and sobbed. Cheeks burning, I covered the lower half of my face with my fingers and leaned forward until my forehead was pressed against the damp earth. And only when I was sure he was gone, only then did I creep out into the clearing and gather up the owl. Cradling her, I spread the tiny wings and drew a finger over the liquid tension of each feather and thought of the night before, of my brother and I asleep in our rooms, the gun tucked away in the utility room, the owl’s body beating against the limbs swaying in the night. I buried her beneath a trio of mulberry trees in our backyard and kept the grave a secret.

“Did she hurt him?”

“She shot him in the back. He died this morning.”

“What about Mrs. Jackson?”

“The police found her stretched across the bathroom floor. Naked as the day God made her. They had to get a woman officer to come and dress her. She wouldn’t get up.”

Oh!

“Mrs. Jackson couldn’t stand it, Grace.”

The weeping willows’ fingers lay on the grass. Nothing stirred in the heat.

“He didn’t love her anymore.”

Then my mother’s arms were around me, warm and lovely and misted with the most gentle of hair. My eyes closed, and I nestled my head in the hollow between her jaw and collarbone and drew greedily on her scent, a potent jumble of Johnson’s baby powder, sweat, crushed mint and, in the pale triangle behind her earring, a last luminous trace of Oscar de la Renta.

“Please, Grace, please. I need you to tell me. Tell me you love me. Promise me we’ll always be together. Promise me we’ll take care of each other. That’s right. That’s my baby doll. Your mother’s baby doll. I knew you wouldn’t let us down.”

I clung to her quivering body, and I prayed for a stillness to descend and

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envelop us. A childish wish I would, eventually, find a way to satisfy myself. Huddled in my girlish bed on Skye Drive, that moment replayed itself within the glowing tunnel of my mind's eye, drawing out like a shadow lengthening under a dwindling sun. I tried over and over again to pinpoint the magical thing I had said or done that brought it about, and it wasn't long before I began waking in the middle of the night, surrounded by my pillows and blankets of red and white checked cotton, heavy with the dream of a windowless, turreted house. I did not know this house or its contents, only that it belonged to my mother and me. Inside it was black as pitch, and I struggled to find a door. I could hear my mother, always in the next room, scratching and flailing against the walls that separated us, as if she too was searching for something she would never find.

Now, with that cindery summer gone, I tell myself that I have found something, though I no longer know what to call it and would have no way, no hope of ever describing it to someone else. I understand too that I am a woman who has sought comfort—some might even say love—in that tenuous pocket of space that coalesces around people and places. Tonight, looking down my mother's dim hallway, past her foyer, into the kitchen beyond, I long to find a crack in the floor, the ceiling, the wall—some physical sign of this truth. Yet everywhere there is only order. Any cracks, if they ever existed, have been painstakingly painted, papered over.

When our dinner is ready, I will carry two trays to my mother's room. We won't discuss her or me or Mrs. Lyon. No, there'll be no more talk of Mrs. Lyon tonight. But when it's time, when I'm finished here, I will pack up everything—my grandmother's furniture, the gold-edged plates, the portrait—and ship it to my brother's wife in Birmingham. For I am not like my mother, and though I have yearned to be, I am not like Mrs. Lyon, either. I could never figure out how to live in the place where I was born and still inhabit a world entirely of my own making.

Yet because of her I will leave Fayetteville. Because some part of me went out to her and came back believing in what lies behind those realities simply accepted as true and unalterable. This was the peculiar quality of her disturbance; it is her blessing to me. And with it, with her flare over the road ahead, I will journey out of this land of shadow and sorrow, remembering that any real leaving, even in the finest of moments, is a precarious undertaking, as fragile and fleeting as hope itself.

Still, it's enough.