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Incense

Erin Lott

Denison University

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Incense

—Erin Lott '96

I never told you why I lived in a trailer park for three years. But then again, I didn't tell you much when we were dating. Do I get to call it dating, yet? Even though we never went out on a public date. Or is the "break up" still too fresh in our (my) minds that I have to still be realistic? I can't fantasize about what I really wanted it to be, can I? Anyway, I guess that I didn't tell you much when we were sleeping together. God, that sounds so harsh.

I lived in a trailer park back in '88 because I lost my job as the clerk at Citco. I stopped making \$189 a week (after taxes), and I started making \$80 a week in unemployment.

But I don't think that matters, does it? It wouldn't have bothered you. Had you known, I guess you'd have told me that it was my growing experience, my shadow of reality that came into the light.

You've never lost a job.

But why should you? You're college-educated. What is it? A Ph.D. in Lyric Poetry. You work as an associate professor at Colorado University. Tenure track is what you called it. For seven years now. You have a resume. And you made pots. (When I could probably only make lumpy ashtrays if I tried.) You glazed them green and purple. Most people would probably leave them dishwasher gray. You wrote poems. Rich, deep, erotic poems that I read only to feel stupid. Me. The one who lived in the lime green trailer on the East end of Mack's Trailer Lot. Thirty-four Sparrow Road. I never felt like a sparrow there.

Ethan saved me. You wouldn't have.

My name means oak tree in Hebrew. Ayla. Funny, I always liked my name when I was a child. Emily, my best friend in second grade, wanted to change hers. Something elusive, she said. Cassandra. Or cultured. Lydia. But I liked Ayla. Still do. Rooted. Old. Firm. Wise.

I looked up your name, Bethany. It means powerful. In Hebrew, of course. We've always had that connection. We have it even now. Even now that you're gone.

You know, oak trees die. Power lingers. Sad, isn't it?

My mother called me yesterday on the 14th. You know her effect on me. She's 63 years old and she's buying a red Miata. Convertible, she said. As you can imagine, this has disturbed me, so I am dusting, organizing, cleaning, vacuuming.

My empty apartment doesn't have room for her Miata. My empty, empty apartment is too small for me and my mother's Miata.

The bag needs to be changed in the vacuum. The bags are in the hall closet where you left them. You slid them onto the third shelf next to the brand new package of eight rolls of toilet paper. Now one roll is left and a layer of dust has accumulated on top of the vacuum bags.

I brush my hand over the plastic, let the dust leave its film on my hands. You are part of the

dust. Your hand slid the package into its place and left a trace of itself behind. If I believed in karma, yours would be lingering here. Royal purple. Highlighted with forest green. But I don't believe in that. And I move the package onto the second shelf and make a mental note to buy more toilet paper.

After changing the vacuum bag and sweeping the olive carpeting in the living room (which never shows dirt, which is rather practical because I never vacuum unless my mother calls), I make my bed.

Ethan had wanted to buy me a frame. He asked me how I could call a mattress on the floor a bed. But I like it. You never seemed to mind. I had our (your) favorite pillows lining the wall. You remember the ones, I'm sure you do. The green throw pillows stuffed with goose feathers. There were three of them. With fringe at each corner, like the end of a rope. I used to braid the strands over and over. And unbraided them. And back up again while we laid in bed. You never minded lying in bed all day. In the summer, you said it helped you relax. And you didn't have to go to Boulder to teach freshman composition or 20th-century American Poetry or The Poet and Practice. In the summer, you kept your own schedule, entwined, naked, smooth, long with mine.

In the summer Ethan was in Utah, so it was never a problem for me.

By the way, I threw those pillows away.

My mother's name means divine good in Welsh. Glenda. She likes to think that it means divine grace. Or recipient of divine grace. She also reminds me that Glenda was the good witch in the Wizard of Oz. She says the good witch was young and beautiful—just the way my mother intends to stay. She scoots around in her '94 Miata like she were my age. My Taurus barely scoots.

Ethan didn't want his girlfriend living in a trailer. He saved me from Mack, the trailer park owner, a balding man of 46, pot belly, round-wired rim glasses, a left earlobe that was unattached, a right lobe that was attached, who always faintly smelled of sweat and Cuban cigars. After Ethan packed my belongings and whisked me away to my palace—a one bedroom apartment, complete with shag carpet and a bathroom faucet that only pours out cold water, he asked me why I didn't tell my mother where I had lived for three years.

I told him that she knew I lived at 34 Sparrow Lane. She didn't know that it was a trailer park.

I told him it was a complicated story.

He wanted to know why I never asked her for money. Pride, I said.

You would never have asked me that question.

But then again, you wouldn't have let Ethan save you.

Ethan called me again last night. This also has disturbed me. I feel the need to clean everything in the house. Every 14th he calls me to see if I have enough rent money for next month. I should be used to it now. It's been happening for four months now. Calling me adds a rhythm, a pulse, a beat to his already ordered life. I try not to disturb him too much anymore. He'll pay my rent, if I ask, I know it. But to ask for money would be too much for me to do to our "relationship"

as friends now. He might take it as a sign that I wanted to sleep with him again. He confuses love with sex, and sex with love.

You taught me the platonic power of an orgasm. You taught me that an orgasm achieved solely for your own gratification can be liberating.

Ethan's name is ironic. It means "firm." In Hebrew. Even he connects with us in origins. Yet Ethan is only firm on his commitment to protecting the frail. The sparrows. The trees. Me. If only Ethan would be as firm when protecting himself.

Did you know that Ethan is a second grade teacher at Lyons Elementary school? You're both teachers. And I'm just a learner.

Funny, I had so much to learn from the two of you. And you both had such different lessons to teach.

I have finally finished with the living room and the bedroom. I insert a stick of sandalwood incense into the clay holder (gray) that I made (lumpy) that sits on the top of my dresser. The smell starts slow; the smoke filtering the room. It makes me think of you.

You know this story. But I like to tell it anyway. That month I was selling t-shirts (tie dyed: indigo, chestnut, maize colored cotton in schizophrenic swirls, nothing grounded) in Louis's T-Shirt Shop complete with concrete blocks stacked to make walls. "T-SHIRTS \$10" was painted across the front of the store in red balloon letters, calling you inside to an incense fogged haven.

You already had been in the store twice that week. No one needs t-shirts three times a week. I thought that you were attracted to Louis. Almost everyone was, but me. I have to work with him everyday.

You unfolded t-shirts and folded them back up. You rolled each bead of the necklaces between your thumb and index finger, searching for the connection back to the earth because each bead was natural. Louis accepted no imitations. You held an ivory and blue baja up to your small frame and looked in the mirror. You meandered with three neo-hippie teenagers though the shop.

I perched on the bar stool at the front counter flipping the Lyons Lions Club pen over and through my fingers. The heady smell of sandalwood incense filtered into my nose and mouth. I tasted its smoke on the tips of my teeth. I watched you and aimlessly looked out the window that had SALE ON JEWELRY painted on it.

You slipped a tie-dyed t-shirt and a strand green and yellow beads onto the counter. You asked for three sticks of sandalwood incense and a bottle of vanilla body lotion. And you smiled at me.

I had never meant to start sleeping with you. But it was summer. Ethan was in Salt Lake City, and he had just called to say he would be moving out to Montana that week. He was going to be a wrangler at Mountain Sky Dude Ranch. Give tours of the area on horseback, he said. He liked the pound of the horse beneath him. He liked to know that he was in control of the animal. His auburn curly hair would be pushed back into his cowboy hat, gathering sweat around the edges. His leather boots

would be firm but covered in dirt and shit and stink. And he would smell faintly of horse hair and sweat. All day and night. The soft smell of manure would linger on him even after he showered. And the smell of the mountains and the valleys and the plains wouldn't leave him. Take care, he said. He'd be home in two months. In August. It's December. I still haven't let him back in.

Bethany, you ate dinner at my house when you were hungry. You called me when you wanted to hear my voice from Boulder. You stopped by the t-shirt store when you wanted to see me or buy more incense. None of these things you did very often. You didn't need to. I learned not to expect your arrival. And every time I stopped looking for you, you came, or you called.

But I was attracted to you. At first, it scared me. I thought about how *abnormal* it was for me to be attracted to another woman. Everything inside of me said that it wasn't natural.

But isn't it natural for an oak tree to want power? Don't they go hand in hand? Haven't you ever heard of "the powerful old, oak tree?"

No one would know, I told myself. Not even Ethan.

Yesterday, when my mother told me she's buying a new Miata, she also told me that she's coming to see me. My mother, old enough to have grand-children if I ever let her, wants to come visit her only child. She wants us to be friends.

I spray Endust on my old underwear that I use as a dust cloth and wipe fingerprints from the bathroom door. She doesn't know that Ethan and I aren't seeing each other anymore. She wants to have dinner with us. She wants us to be married. Her 31 year-old daughter is an old maid in her eyes. She reminds me that my biological clock is ticking. But the metronome of my fertility calms me while it agitates my mother. She thinks that Ethan would make a good husband — educated, intelligent, sensitive, supportive and, most importantly, financially stable. All the adjectives I once used to sell him to my mother. Now she uses them to sell him back to me.

She wouldn't approve of my having seen you. I guess it's best that you took that position at Dartmouth College as visiting instructor. How long is it? Yes, two years. You said two years was too long to be faithful. New Hampshire was too far away from Colorado. You sat, smooth, shaven legs crossed, in the rocking chair in the living room. Your eyes looked right at me as I stirred the marinara sauce on the stove with a wooden spoon. I added more mushrooms and searched for the oregano on the shelf.

This was to be our last dinner together. Ethan was due home at 10:35 the next morning. I would have to pick him up from the airport. Him and his backpack and the smell of horses.

I didn't say anything to you, so you uncrossed your legs and stood. You strolled into the kitchen and pulled down the dishes from the cupboards and set the table. You lit a stick of jasmine incense, and it layered the apartment and mingled with the garlic, oregano and basil.

I scrub the dishes that have dried egg-yolk on them. I have left them in the sink too long. There is no one here to remind me that I need to wash them. The SOS pad foams pink all over my

hands, and the smell of steel wool burns my nose. I raise a dripping hand to the window sill and turn on the transistor radio that sits there. I have deliberately stopped listening to classical music and country because of you. You had said classical music had a feeling like poetry. An unsayable emotion that could only be described through experience. Country, you said, was your vice. I only listen to classic rock now.

You leaving was convenient. You were due to fly out of Denver on Friday. You had three more days. I wouldn't ever have to tell Ethan. He would never know what I had done, and we could resume right where we had left off and nothing would change. But I never even intended to tell Ethan had you stayed.

That last night, for one moment, I stopped having sex with you. And for one moment I started to make love to you. It confused me. and it scared me. and I didn't know anymore. I still don't. And in the morning, you brushed your hand across my black hair while I pretended to be asleep. I still remember the tips of your fingers on my ear. You still smooth my hair in my sleep.

You woke me up. Told me good-bye. Without remorse. Without sadness. Very brief. But with a smile. You weren't callous. But it was to the point. And when you said "see ya later," you lied. You left your key on the kitchen table.

Three hours later, I shuffled to my closet and lifted a pair of crumpled jeans from the floor. I slipped a t-shirt over my head without a bra and found my car keys. Me and the Taurus, just the two of us, drove to the airport to pick up Ethan. Firm, firm Ethan. Here to protect the frail.

My mother has scheduled a cruise. She called me an hour ago. Instead of spending Christmas here, she will be in the Greek Isles. She said that she only had a few more years to be young. She invited me to go, but I said that I couldn't find the time. Dust is accumulating again. It settles softly back onto the furniture. But I can hear it shifting its weight around my apartment.

When Ethan entered the apartment, four months ago, he asked me why I never cleaned it. I looked at him and didn't say a word. The car ride home had already been bad enough. The tension in the front seats was terrible. Ethan had immediately repositioned himself in the driver's seat and started the car. I said hello. He said hello. And then we stopped talking. For the entire hour and a half ride throughout the still mountains from Denver to Lyon, everything I thought related back to you. When we finally got home and he asked me why I didn't clean the apartment, I said that I had been really busy.

He laughed, his head thrown back. Ayla, he said, I know your hours at the t-shirt shop. And then the laugh stopped. Suddenly. And he asked if I had found someone else.

My shoulders dropped, but I looked him in the face. Yes, I said, but it's over.

I tried, Bethany, I really did. Even though I found his body attractive, it didn't fit mine like it used to. His smell was too animalistic. His smile were too forced. His words were too smooth. He was stale.

Firm, but stale.