

Maddi Rasor

Smoke and Mirrors



Finalist

The instant I got home from school that day, I knew trouble was brewing and about to boil over.

I got out of the carpool and immediately noticed my big brother's beat-up Chevy in the driveway. As I hauled my overstuffed backpack up the driveway hill, I wondered, *What's he doing here? Not that it's a problem, just... weird.* He was in college and should've been an hour and a half south at the Harvard on the Hocking. There wasn't a break anywhere in the near future; it was third quarter for me, second semester for him. Sure it was Thursday, but he didn't come home for weekends, and he hadn't since he'd been a freshman.

But sure enough, there he was, sitting with his Sperrys on the kitchen table and smoking a cigarette, the way Mom always yelled at him not to. He was dressed in sweatpants and one of his fraternity t-shirts from Homecoming or their charity run or something. His 'do I look like I'm trying to impress you?' clothing.

"I never got home after four o'clock," Fletcher said in lieu of greeting, "when I was in high school."

I shrugged. "You drove like a maniac."

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

There was an awkward silence as Fletcher snuffed out his cigarette in the ashtray that normally sat outside on the porch. He got to his feet, awkwardly shoving his hands in his pockets. "Want to go to Dairy Queen?"

"Sure." Blizzards were sort of like currency between us kids. I wondered what he'd done now that he needed me in his corner. "Only... aren't you gonna change?"

Fletcher glanced down at himself, then cracked a sheepish smile. "Right. Good call, Tessa. It's cold outside." He disappeared back into the laundry room.

When he returned, the only difference was the ratty sweatshirt he was now wearing over his former ensemble. This from my brother, the Frat-star, who never went out less than dressed to kill. I hoped he hadn't come down with something. "Let's go," he said, jingling the keys in my face. A leftover taunt from the time before I could drive. "I'll try not to drive like a maniac."

Out on the road, Fletcher was just as quiet. His car—formerly our older sister Mae's—still creaked and groaned like a crotchety old man, but ran just fine, like an aged former marine. Country music pulsed from the stereo, a blast of summer in the dead of winter. It painted a picture of ocean breezes and cold Corona—which, according to Fletcher and Mae, was a shitty beer, and there were plenty of better ones made in Mexico.

"Fletch," I said carefully, "is there a reason you came home for the weekend?"

The real, unspoken question hung between us.

He sighed and went searching for his cigarettes. "Yeah. Mom and Dad asked me to be home this weekend. Supposedly Mae and RJ are too, but that one's still up in the air, 'cause you know she's pregnant." He lit one of the tiny rolls of paper and stuck it between his teeth. "And apparently due soon."

I rolled down my window as I thought on this. "Why do they want all three of us home, do you know?"

Fletcher took a long drag on his cigarette, saying nothing. "I think so," he finally got out around the smoke.

I actually recoiled in surprise. "You do?"

He nodded once, still staring straight ahead at the road. "Yeah. I

overheard them talking this morning when I got home.” He flicked a supposedly nonchalant glance at me, and I could tell he was genuinely concerned—worried, even. “But Blizzards first.”

Bad news, Dad always said, should come with something sweet to chase away the bitter aftertaste.

“Did Dad lose his job or something?” I asked, now into full-on worry-mode. I got it from Mom.

“No, but...”

“Is something wrong with Grandma? Or Uncle Jameson?”

“No, but...”

“Or...”

“Tessa!” Fletcher half-exclaimed, half-laughed. “Jesus H. Christ, calm down!” He flicked his cigarette butt out the window, even though it was only half-smoked. “I told you, Blizzards first.”

I folded my arms across my sternum. “You’re no fun, Fletch.”

He didn’t really reply, only went *Hmm* and kept driving.

We pulled into the Dairy Queen parking lot, only to discover that half the town had the same idea and was in the drive-thru lane. “To hell with that,” Fletcher said, and he jerkily maneuvered the car into a spot.

Inside, the place was almost empty, like a ghost town where all the spirits were in the boneyard instead of the streets. We strode right up to the counter, and Fletcher had ordered and paid for both of us before I could even pull my wallet out. “Hey,” I said mock-sternly, “it was supposed to be my turn.”

“You don’t have a job,” he countered, holding one of the paper cups out to me. Cookie dough, as always. “So don’t worry about it, yeah?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

We found a table in the corner that overlooked the scenic, slush-filled parking lot. “Is that all you say now?” my big brother teased. “*Yeah?*”

I glanced up from my Blizzard and forced myself to keep a straight face. “Yeah.”

His laugh was raspier than usual, and I had a feeling it had nothing to do with the cigarettes. He gets hoarse when he’s been drinking too much (siblings weekend taught me that one), when he’s getting sick (living with my older brother for the first fifteen years of my life taught me *that* one), and when he’s been shouting (ditto for that last one). I wondered which it had been, or if it was somehow a combination of all three—*plus* the cigarettes.

“So what’s the bad news?” I asked, and instantly, the atmosphere

sobered.

Fletcher sighed, and set down his plastic spoon. His jaw opened and shut a few times like he couldn't really figure out what it was, exactly, he was trying to say. Then he blurted out:

"Mom and Dad are getting a divorce."

I nearly choked on the bite of ice cream I'd just taken. "They're *what?*"

He was no longer looking at me, but searching his own Blizzard for the meaning of life. "Getting. A. Divorce."

"What?" I sat back in my chair in shock, ignoring the metal and plastic frame digging into my back. "How? *Why?* Are... are you *sure?*"

"Tessa." Fletcher made a 'calm down' motion with his hands, and I immediately shut up. "They're getting a divorce through a divorce attorney, I'd think, 'cause Dad's been having an affair, and yes." His glance flicked up, and he drew in a deep breath. "I'm *damn* sure." When I didn't say anything, he added, "They wanted to wait until you were out of high school, but Mom can't take it anymore."

Something snapped to attention in my head. "Did you say Dad's *been having* an affair?"

Fletcher nodded stiffly, stirring his ice cream despondently with that weird-ass, blocky plastic spoon Dairy Queen has. "Yeah. He has a *girlfriend*." He stabbed his Blizzard at that. "You remember the one secretary in his office who's like, four years older than Mae?"

My jaw actually dropped, like this was a movie and not real life. "*Her?*"

Fletcher nodded. "Yup." Another stabbing of the Blizzard. His was rapidly turning into sludge. "A woman who obviously knows about Mom, and you, me, and Mae, and didn't *care*." He was shaking his head, his teeth gritted.

I wasn't sure which exactly I was feeling in that moment—deep, white-hot anger, painfully intense sorrow, intangible and unknowable fear, or one of those other things swimming around in my gut that I couldn't name and didn't want to. Fletcher was always easy to read; his face was an open book. He got that from Mom. But Mae and I, we were harder to read, harder to understand, like Dad.

Like our *goddamn* dad.

Tears were rolling down my cheeks but I wasn't crying, I was *pissed*. My hands were shaking, so I clasped them around the plastic Blizzard cup. It was still mostly full of ice cream and memories. But even when I did that, my shoulders, my arms, my whole *body* was shaking with fury and fear and something damn close to hate.

“They wanted to tell you tonight,” Fletcher continued, almost apologetically, “but I... I don’t know, I thought you’d want to hear it from Mae or me before...”

“Before Dad tried to explain,” I interrupted.

Fletcher winced. “I’m sorry, Tessa, I...”

“It’s not your damn fault.”

“I made you cry, though.”

“That’s not...” I began again.

But his phone went off on the table, too many vibrations to be a text. He snatched it up before the final ring. “Hello?” A pause. “Hey Mae. Yeah, I just... okay. Okay, we’ll be back soon. Bye.” He let out an exhausted breath, and slammed his phone back down on the table. “Mom and Dad want us home.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I bet they do.”

We both stood, quiet as ghosts and just as faded, threw out our not even half-eaten Blizzards because neither of us had the stomach for the rest just then, and piled back into the car. Fletcher turned off the country music, and in the mounting silence, I could practically feel us both seething. Who the hell decided to cheat on his wife of twenty-some years, and who the hell wanted a sugar daddy with a mortgage and three kids? What kind of man was that? What kind of woman?

And more importantly, who the hell decided to put up with that shit?

Fletcher pulled into the driveway behind Dad’s Mazda and Mae’s Ford. We sat there a moment, listening to that not-quite-perfect silence an idling car gives. Neither of us needed to ask what the other was thinking; we knew. Somehow, siblings always know. Fletcher pulled out a cigarette but didn’t light it. He chewed on the end instead, like he was some gangster with a cigar in a ‘30s movie. It was only then after his phone went off again that he killed the engine, and we both got out.

“Hey,” Fletch called to me.

I turned back to face him. “Yeah?”

He pulled me into a hug, which was something Fletcher never, *ever* did. “Don’t let them lie to you, okay?”

I nodded into his shoulder. “Okay.”

“And Tessa?”

“Yeah?”

“Mae and I got your back no matter what shit Dad pulls.” He stepped back to look me dead in the eye. The seriousness of the moment was kind of undermined by the unlit cigarette dangling precariously from between his teeth. “So don’t let him. You got me?”

I couldn't help but smile just a little as I said, "Yeah."

Fletcher half-smiled himself, lit the cigarette, and then we both started making the trek up the driveway and through the front door.