

Glass

Fiction

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I woke to monstrous sounds that shook me from my dreams.

Groggy, I rubbed my eyes and glanced at the clock. I blinked until the green lines came into focus from the bedside table.

2:12 AM.

The hammering continued, and I sighed as I pulled myself to my feet. My head ached. I grabbed my robe from the foot of my bed and put it on as I pulled open the door.

Light blinded my eyes. My mother had turned on all of the lights in the house. She was standing unsteadily on the sofa with a picture frame in each hand. She turned her head and nodded at me, mumbling hello between lips clenching long silver nails. She set down the picture frames and took a nail from her mouth. She squinted her eyes, lining it up, and started hammering. The bangs rang around the room. I cringed with memory.

“Mom,” I choked out. “What are you doing?”

Mom didn’t stop to answer. Instead, she spoke between thin lips. “This wall is a mess. None of these pictures even line up.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Mom, please don’t-”

Her hammering interrupted me, and I held my ears with my hands.

I shook my head, making my way to the kitchen, and grabbed the coffee pot. It was going to be one of those nights. I shook the coffee grounds into the white filter and filled the back of the coffee maker with water. Pressing the red button on the front, the

machine growled groggily. I watched as the dirt-brown water filled the pot. The smells of coffee hugged the room as the brown water steamed.

I straightened the doctor’s business card and felt the ridges of the physician’s name and contact information raise themselves under my index finger. I thought about calling him to see if we could come early, but when I glanced at the time, I knew his office would be closed.

“The whole damn thing is crooked,” Mom barked as she ripped the pictures off the wall to start hammering again.

I watched her as she worked. Her skin was lined with brown wrinkles and sun licked freckles. Her stringy hair was pulled into a twisted bun on the top of her head. She hammered nails into the wall one after another until the wall looked like string art that had long since rotted away. I sipped my coffee carefully and watched.

Mom picked up a wooden frame of my second-grade school picture and lined it up on the wall. She placed another picture on the wall, then another one. She shook her head and stepped to the left. The pictures shifted as she adjusted her weight on the couch. She stepped a little further to the left. Something crunched beneath her feet.

Mom cried out in pain before placing the picture on the wall.

“Mom,” I stepped forward. “Are you okay?”

“Just a second, sweetie. “It’s almost done.”

Mom ran her hands over the pictures on the wall, ensuring that they were all lined up just so.

“Straight as an arrow,” Mom whispered.

She stepped off the sofa and stumbled. Behind her, I could see that one of the pictures had been shattered. The glass broke as Mom was hanging the pictures. Pieces of broken frame and glass stuck in all directions on the couch. Dark red-spotted the ugly brown of the sofa’s fabric. I looked down at Mom’s foot to see a deep red stain spreading across the carpet.

“Mom,” I breathed. I set down my coffee and ran to her foot. Mom looked at me, confused. “Here, let me see it,” I whispered.

Mom carefully lifted her foot. A piece of glass stuck out of the bottom of her foot. Her sticky blood sucked at my fingers as I tried to wipe the area clean.

“Let’s get you in the bathtub,” I reached out and carefully picked up my mom. She weighed almost nothing. I could feel her bones shift as her arms closed around me. Her hair smelled like lavender, and she rested her head on my shoulder.

Carefully, I took her into the bathroom and placed her on the side of the tub, her feet dangling under the faucet. I turned on the water and washed away the blood. The piece of glass was wedged deep in the arch of her foot.

“Mom, I think maybe we need to go see a doctor-”

“No,” she said loudly. “It’s nothing.” Without wincing, my mother reached

down and pulled the piece of glass out of her foot. The glass slid out smoothly, and blood welled from the gash.

“There, easy as pie,” Mom whispered. “Now come and wrap it up.” She said louder, then added, “Like old times.”

“Like old times,” I whispered back.

I shook my head yes, reached over, and pulled the peroxide, Neosporin, and bandages out from under the sink. I didn’t have to ask where they were. This was my territory.

“Sit back,” I said.

I blotted away the blood, and my mind drifted to the many times I’d have to clean up Mom’s messes.

Once, when I was ten, I remember waking up to Mom’s music in the middle of the night. I remember that it was a Friday morning. We were supposed to make dirt cups with pudding, Oreos, and gummy worms. We had been learning about insects and worms all week, and all the kids could talk about was finally getting a dirt cup of their own on Friday. I could almost taste the chocolate goodness that awaited us.

That Friday morning, however, I remember Mom’s music playing way too loudly. Sometimes Mom would be up at night. She would get the urge to clean out the pantry or rearrange the living room furniture, and suddenly, the house would come to life while the whole neighborhood was asleep. With everyone asleep, I would wake to find Mom in the middle of some project that just couldn’t wait. And when I opened the door, I couldn’t believe my ten-year-old eyes.

My mom’s hair had been chopped off and swung crookedly around her shoulders. She had been growing her hair out for years. Her beautiful, curly hair lay in clumps all around the living room.

“Mom?” I asked as I rubbed my eyes.

“Baby,” she whispered. “Don’t you just love it?” Mom shook her head, and I couldn’t help but notice even more clumps falling from her uneven hair. “It’s so freeing, don’t you think?”

Speechless, I remembered just standing there in the doorway.

“I know what you need,” Mom said as she touched my shoulders. “You need to be free, too.”

Mom’s eyes stared into my own, and I could almost feel her reading my thoughts. I could feel her seeing the time that Amber and the other girls told me they wanted to play hide and seek at recess only to have me hide behind the slide the whole time while they played without me. I could feel Mom hearing the mean things that boys would say about the way I dressed or the way I smelled. We weren’t rich, but Mom always did the best she could to keep me clean and fed. I could feel Mom watching me as I became more aware of myself in the mirror, of my crooked smile and my skinny legs, while Amber and the others always looked so perfect. I could feel Mom seeing all of the hate in my eyes that I had for myself.

Mom nodded. “You need to be free of it all.”

Mom led me to the kitchen and lifted me to the counter. She picked up a large knife from the chopping block next to a handful of her beautiful hair.

“Hold still,” Mom commanded.

Without moving, I held still. I could feel my heartbeat in my throat as Mom sawed off clumps of hair handful by the handful. My hair joined hers on the floor like water swirling down a drain. We were joined together in ruin.

Mom continued to cut until all of my hair had been sliced off. “Just one last one,” Mom said as she gripped a small piece of hair near my neck. She took the knife and sawed close to my head before her hand slipped.

“Oh,” Mom muttered. “Look at that.”

I looked and saw Mom’s finger bright red with blood.

“Mom, are you okay-”

“It’s fine, baby.”

“Mom, come on. Let’s get you to the bathroom.”

That’s the first time I remember bandaging her up in the early hours of the morning before the sun had even approached the horizon. After wiping away the blood, I disinfected the area. Mom had cut off the very tip of her left index finger. She muttered that she had never needed it anyway as if to make us both feel better.

“Mom, I don’t know if you should do this anymore,” I remember saying.

“Do what, baby?” Mom asked as she folded her arms across her chest, hiding her ruined finger from sight.

“This, Mom. Waking up and doin all these crazy-”

“Shhhh,” Mom breathed. “Come here.”

Mom pulled me into her, and we both fell into the tub. Mom laughed as she hugged me. Her warm arms reassured me. We sat there until the sun came up over the horizon. School would be starting soon.

I remembered being horrified at my uneven hair and hiding it quickly in a baseball cap. I thought that no one would notice until school started, and my teacher instructed me that hats of any kind were prohibited from school. I felt my cheeks grow red as I blushed beneath my cap. My teacher didn’t notice and reminded me that, again, caps

were not permitted in class. I felt tears well in my eyes as I slid the hat off my head and heard the snickers of my classmates. I remember crying softly as Amber leaned over to the person next to her and whispered loud enough for even the teacher to hear.

“I guess she took the dirt cup thing too seriously because now she looks like dirt.”

The whole class erupted into laughter. I couldn’t control my breathing. My hands shook. I ran from the classroom and locked myself into the bathroom, refusing to come out until I heard Mom’s voice on the other side of the bathroom stall.

I unlocked the door and fell into her arms. She carried me to the car, and as we passed my class, I could hear Amber’s voice trailing behind us.

“No wonder. Her mom is even more of a freak than she is.”

I hid my face in Mom’s shoulder, and I felt Mom’s arms hold me even tighter.

“You’re all set,” I said as I finished Mom’s foot.

I looked around and realized that I hadn’t been in Mom’s bathroom in at least twenty years. Everything looked the same. The bathroom counter was still the same coral pink, and the wide mirror was still cracked from the time that Mom thought her reflection was someone else. She had added things, however. Boxes were piled head-high and magazines lined the counter. A long-dead palm tree sat in the corner and stared longingly at the window. The smell of rotting paper and mildew hit my nose.

I turned my attention to Mom. She looked old. She looked tired. Her thin gown hung loosely around her skinny frame. I wondered when was the last time that she had had a real meal. It hurt to look at her. I looked

down, instead, and my fingers traced the edge of the emerald green tub. The cool porcelain beneath my fingers froze my fingertips.

I shuddered.

I felt Mom’s fingers on my shoulder.

“Baby,” she managed before I collapsed into sobs. “Come here.”

Mom wrapped her arms around me, her foot still propped up on the edge of the tub. She pulled me into her, and I got up from where I knelt on the tile floor and squeezed in beside her at the edge of the tub.

My mind swirled like our discarded hair in the kitchen close to thirty years before. I remembered hating school. I remembered hating Amber and her teasing and her perfect hair and teeth. I remembered hating my second-hand clothes that Mom always got donated to us from the local church. I remembered hating the time that the school got together to give us a Thanksgiving meal, pointing out to everyone in the community just how not okay we really were. I remembered hating my mother for being different, for waking up in the middle of the night with crazy adventures that only led to more disasters and for the long periods of time where she just sat in her room like nothing else mattered. I remembered hating myself for being just like her.

At fourteen, I had had enough. I knew we needed help. I knew that I needed help, and Mom was in no shape for assistance. I had come home from an especially bad week at school. Mom had spent all of her disability check on Christmas decorations, and we had no food in the house for the weekend. She sat up that night decorating, and I sat up that night hating everything and everyone.

I took Mom’s knife from the kitchen, the

same one she used to cut our hair years before and brought it into the bathroom. My mom didn’t even notice when I left the room. I remembered thinking that I was such a freak. I could hear Mom in the living room humming Christmas songs to herself. My hands were shaking.

I placed the knife on the edge of the tub and lowered myself inside. The cool porcelain of the emerald tub soothed me. I was there, alive and breathing, in the tub. I was real.

I heard Mom drop something in the other room and laugh at her clumsiness. I wish I could fix her, I remembered thinking. Maybe if I were strong enough, I could fix her. Maybe if I were good enough, I could even fix myself.

I broke down and tried to hold myself together in the tub. Without thinking, I grabbed the knife and started to cut. Pain shot down my left arm, but I could finally breathe. It was like the pain cleared my head, and I could think again. I laid back in the tub and focused on my breath. Stars exploded in the darkness, and I watched the fireworks.

It was well after sunrise before my mom found me. The doctors said that if I had laid there any longer, then I would have bled to death. A lady in a polyester suit came into the hospital room and asked my mom questions, then she asked if she could speak with me privately. She kept asking me about Mom and my feelings. I didn’t know that it wasn’t normal for moms to spend their entire checks on Christmas lights or throw dance parties at 2 AM on a Tuesday. I didn’t know that it wasn’t normal for her to follow that up with a two-week depression where she could barely get out of bed. I thought that

when Mom was up and happy, that things were going well, she wasn't sad anymore. This was one of the good times, and perhaps, I had made her better. The lady pursed her lips and jotted down everything that I said.

Later, a tall man in a white coat entered the room. He cleared his throat and asked me even more questions. I didn't want to answer them because of the lady's reaction to my earlier answers, but this man had kind eyes. He explained to me that I wasn't crazy, and neither was my mom, but that we did need some help. That was the first time that I had ever heard the term Bipolar Disorder.

Needless to say, social services took me away. I lived with my aunt and uncle for the next four years before moving out on my own. I took my medicine and attended counseling sessions regularly, but things were never the same with Mom. We barely spoke.

Now, as I gripped the green tub, I relaxed into my mother. She held me so tight that everything else melted away. We fell into the tub, like old times, wrapped around each other, keeping each other safe.

"Are you scared?" I asked Mom.

"Never," she whispered back, but I felt her hesitate. "It's just that sometimes I get confused."

I nodded against her shoulder. "The doctor said that would be normal."

Mom sighed. "And sometimes I feel so tired."

"The doctor said that's normal, too."

"Why does it have to be that way?" She asked into the dim bathroom.

"I don't know," I whispered in return.

"At least we have each other." She said.

"Yep, we'll always have each other." I echoed.

"I missed you," Mom offered, and I squeezed her in return.

My belly button itched where it touched her skin. The phantom umbilical cord pulled taught between us. I had never felt so close and so far away from my mother at the same time.

We sat there until the window outside colored pale blue, then pink, then white with morning light. We didn't have much time left. The doctor wanted to talk about Mom's condition, her odd behavior separate from Bipolar Disorder. Dementia clouded Mom's brain, and they had found something growing in one of her kidneys. The doctors wanted her in as soon as possible and had called me to come and make the transition as smooth as possible. I doubted that there was anything that I could do.

"Our appointment is soon," I interrupted the silence of the bathroom.

"I know," Mom said. "Just a few more minutes."

Mom's arms squeezed around me again. "I'm so sorry, baby." She said through tears. I could feel her thinking of all the times she had let me down.

"Me, too, Mom." I returned as I thought of the twenty years that had passed between us without me visiting one time.

We sat there, breathing together, drowning in all the regret, all the lost time, hoping, with the rising of the sun, that it wasn't too late.