

Baysie and me, we were both in love with life.

The man beside me said, "Hell, I'll take another." He gestured at his beer bottle, his own prescription medicine, calling the bartender. I raised my glass, welcoming him to unemployment. He raised his too, knowingly or not, but, cheering the beauty of his upcoming loss.

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## MODELS I KNOW

My primary concern, when I dragged a bag of clothes, a toothbrush and one lip-liner into the shelter, was to get myself together. It was summer. I had this plan to sit in the sun until I could blend the line between my sunburned shins and where my socks had been.

It's good to have goals.

I can still trace the lines of the word Fry-O-Lator written backward on my arm, like reading my old high school diary. I've tried to minimize scarring since, inside and out. When I wasn't any good at minimizing it, I got tattoos over the burns, trying to make it my own.

Mary's House doesn't call itself a shelter. It's a home for "Women in Transition." I hoped it could be a refuge, like the land I'd grown up on, that place my crazy mom thought could somehow save us.

If I'd known mom, before her breakdown? If I'd been older in those days I've seen in photos, before she grew so puffy with medication, I thought maybe I'd be living differently. I'd be a different person.

At Mary's, they won't take you if they think you'll need to be there more than once. I could feel the finite edges of their offer as a resource, and already I wanted more in the way of help. I

wanted to be held, to move in and stay forever. They want to be the stair-step, the ladder for women climbing their way to a better life. I promised I was making changes. I told them ten days. In ten days? I'd be fine!

During the day I sit on the cement steps in the backyard and put baby oil on my feet and ankles. I bring a stack of magazines with me and put my feet in the sun. The magazines are mostly outdated, but the date doesn't matter at all.

The thing about the magazines is that I can never tell where or when those people in the magazines are supposed to be living. Even the people you don't see, the ones who write letters in, I can't picture them any place I know.

One magazine tells you how to put together seven outfits for under one hundred dollars each. The women are only wearing T-shirts and jeans, wide black belts and shoes that slip on. On the weekends they wear the same jeans with brown belts. Then they wear brown shoes like boots, but with lightweight soles, not boots for hiking or work boots.

I don't understand dating. The dresses the girls wear for dating, I don't know where they're going. These girls are younger than me and older at the same time. They're going somewhere nice enough to wear strapless dresses, but safe and clean, without pregnancy and diseases you can catch. Where these women live they have telephones beside the bed and closets as big as public bathrooms.

I don't understand how to build a life. If dad was still alive, I'd ask him about evidence. I'd ask where I wandered down the wrong trail of inquiry.

My arms are covered in tattoos. For a while, yes, maybe I thought that if I had tattoos I'd grow into the kid of person who had tattoos, in a round-about way. I hoped each one would tell the story of my life back to me. I'd hoped that being strong would make me better at being alone.

At Mary's House, my room is in the basement with two other women. We have three narrow beds in a row. Every wall has a poster with an inspirational saying.

"My life begins with me."

"Only I can affect change."

"I am not responsible for the acts of others. I am only responsible for my own reaction."

My father would have said, "Evidence is not intimidated," reminding me to trust myself and trust in the material world.

According to Carolyn, we are here, in this house, to rethink our stories. She says, "Who do you let deliver your narrative? It's up to you to tell the story of your life."

Nobody is allowed to drink, not even beer. Carolyn burns incense at night and plays meditation tapes. Evenings, we're invited to join her in the living room, closing our eyes and thinking positive thoughts. If we don't want to join her we can sit in the kitchen and talk. Then mostly we talk about how bad things were, or how bad things are, for the ones who think it's bad now being in a shelter.

The third day at Mary's was the only day I thought was bad, besides the first day when I walked all day and got the burn on my legs. The third day I found bones on my car, between the windshield and the windshield wiper. I didn't even see the bones until I was in the car, behind the wheel, behind the glass with the bones in front of me.

It was a whole chicken that had been boiled and only had a little skin still on the bones, a few pin feathers on the skin on the wing. The legs and the wings were held together by cartilage and tendons.

Carolyn was on the porch, waving goodbye. I was going into town to file for a restraining order, and she knew I didn't want to go. She saw the bones when I saw them, and she stepped over to my car and lifted the windshield wiper with one hand and the bones with the other and she threw the bones into the trash can by the side of the house.

She said, "Wait, Lucille," and she used my full name, like a mother or an interviewer at a job I wouldn't get. She said, "I'll clean your windshield." She brought glass cleaner out of the house and cleaned the glass and acted like it was that easy and not a bad sign at all.

I said, "Travis knows where I am. He knows. He's seen my car." I loved him, but his problems were bigger than anything I could fix. He lived through his own endless, internal war.

Instead of the Justice Center, I went to a park on the river with a boat dock. I rolled up the bottoms of my pants and put my feet in the water off the side of the dock, then put my feet in the sun. I read a magazine I'd brought. Restraining orders don't work anyway.

The backyard at Mary's has a fence that is wooden and over seven feet high. Nobody can see over the fence. There's a picnic table and a sandbox for the children of the women who have children and stay at Mary's. I paint my fingernails at the picnic table.

By the fourth day I have a burn on my feet, but not one to match the burn on my legs. The burn on my feet is spotted, red on the top and white on the ankles. I put sunblock on the red spots and baby oil on the white places and keep my feet in the sun. There is only one other white girl in the shelter and she doesn't even look white. Not white like I'm white. They laugh at the way I burn.

A model in the magazines is the same age as me. When we turned twelve, when I started reading magazines, she was in a movie. When this model went to college the magazine had a full article about the clothes she packed. The article listed what the model used to wash her face, and how she packed shampoo in plastic containers so it wouldn't spill and toothpaste in a plastic container so it wouldn't break open in the luggage on the airplane.

This model, before she went to college, taught me how to cut my own hair. In the magazine there was a photo of each step as

she combed her hair forward over her head, collected her hair together in front, and cut her hair into a long, angled bob. Now her hair is short, up over her ears, and sleek on the back of her neck. In an interview, she says she's not as ambitious now that she is older. She enjoys doing the laundry. Her favorite part, she says, is cleaning the lint filter.

At night, awake in my bed in the basement, I hear the noises of the gangs in the empty lot next door. In the day they use hand signals. At night they whistle. I listen carefully, trying to identify the whistles.

One night I heard the whistles, and I heard voices. A car passed the house driving slow, then faster. When I heard footsteps upstairs, I went up. Carolyn was in the living room, wearing only a buttoned-up shirt, pulling back the curtains to look at the street.

"They went through the yard," she said. "But they're gone now."

They weren't gone far. Two cars in the street were stopped, driver's side window to driver's side window, facing opposite directions, with only their yellow lights on.

I said, "We should call the police."

Carolyn opened a drawer on a desk near the front door and took out a box of incense. She put two sticks of incense in a brass incense burner and lit them with a wooden match.

She sat on the couch and said, "Sit with me. Participate. Let's build a circle of safety." She crossed her bare legs underneath herself, closed her eyes, and tipped her head back. She said, "We will bless this house and keep ourselves free of harm."

It's Carolyn's neighborhood, not mine. I like to think she knows what she's doing. When I talk with Carolyn, I try to believe as much as I can. In the shelter, every day I ask her the same questions. I tell her about Travis, who I'd been living with—the good and the bad, and how there was plenty of both. I like to hear her answers, and she always answers the same.

"Remember," she tells me, "it's not your job to be a teacher. It's your responsibility to decide what you are willing to accept. It's your life that's important." Carolyn says, "Protect yourself. Follow your own path."

Men come to the shelter. They stand on the porch and ring the doorbell or open the screen door and knock. They yell when they don't think we'll answer.

"I know she's in there," they yell.

"Louise, I love you," a man yells at the door or at the fence in the backyard. "I need you. It's not going to happen again. It'll get better, it really will."

We sit in the house or in the backyard and listen. Some women go home. It's their choice.

My feet are still white with red patches and my legs are burned. My fingernails are starting to grow long and I shape them with an emery board. I'm in the kitchen shaping my fingernails at the table the day I hear Travis's voice.

"I just want to talk to her," he's saying. "I know she's here. I know she's here, I want to talk."

Without seeing him I can imagine the look on his face. He's pleading, not yelling. He's learning from mistakes. I almost walk out to meet him, to go home. It would be easy. It's been easy before.

I wonder how my sister would manage this. I wonder where she is. Our parents are gone. The place we grew up? It was a Bi-Mart now.

"I'm sorry," I hear Carolyn say, "this is my house. You have to leave."

My nails are smooth. Carolyn closes the door. She comes in the kitchen and tells me he isn't going away. He's standing on the porch knocking on the door. He's walking in the front yard trying to see through the windows. He's sitting on the hood of my car.

"Should we call the police?" I ask, wanting more than anything, Carolyn's advice.

She says, "You are responsible for your own decisions. You initiate change."

I don't leave the house the rest of the day. The next day he's gone, and it's the first time I've made it this far. I go into the backyard, behind the seven-foot fence, and rub baby oil into my ankles.

The model in the magazine would never burn the way I've burned. I hold the magazine close to my face and look at her skin and it's flawless.

A woman across the street from Mary's takes care of her grandkids, and any other kids that come by. I wave at her from the porch. The two oldest kids ride Big Wheels up the sidewalk. I talk to her about her grandkids and her own kids, who are always gone.

"You ever heard of someone having chicken bones left on their windshield?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "No. Can't say I have. You heard of that? That happen over there?" She points at the house she knows is a shelter, Mary's House, my house for now.

"Happened to me," I say. "On my car."

"To you? Well, can't be too good. That's what I say, can't be too good." She's bouncing a baby against her shoulder and watching the girl on the Big Wheel. She says, "Chicken bones?"

I tell her, "A whole carcass. Boiled."

"Never heard of such a thing. Not in this neighborhood."

That night in the basement I heard the cars again, driving slow and fast, circling the block, one with its engine too loud and the muffler dragging. I heard voices. When I went upstairs, Carolyn was already up and in the living room. She was wearing a T-shirt that didn't reach past her hips. Carolyn says nudity is nothing to

be ashamed of, and that it's not my job to take on shame anyway. Still, I didn't know where to look.

She put a meditation tape on the stereo and said, "Join me in a guided visualization." She sat on the couch and made a circle with her fingers, touching the first and second fingers on each hand to the tips of her thumbs.

I sat on a chair, but didn't close my eyes and didn't make the circles. There was a noise upstairs in the attic, like something falling to the floor, and two footsteps. I stood up fast.

We heard it again, then Carolyn, without saying anything, turned off her meditation and called the police.

When they got there she still wasn't dressed. Carolyn opened the door and let two officers in and she stood there with her arms folded in front of her to keep off the cold that snuck in the open door. When she moved, you could see her dark brown patch of hair just below the faded-out T-shirt. One officer had his notebook out and asked exactly what the problem was while the second one looked around the house at the posters with all the inspirational phrases on the walls. The second one was smiling, but didn't want to be caught smiling.

Carolyn showed the officers where there was a closet you could open that had stairs leading to the attic. They got out their flashlights and their guns and they went up, one behind the other.

While they were up there, I asked, "You don't want to put something on?"

What the police found was a cat. They brought it down, a skinny thing that was always prowling the neighborhood.

"You know there's no glass on that window up there?" the first officer asked. "The board's been taken off. You'll lose all your heat that way," he said, and he laughed. He handed the cat to Carolyn. She held it, rubbing its ears.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "Thank you. Bless you both."

I don't know when I quit trusting police. When they walked to the car anybody could tell they were ready to talk and to laugh about the woman with the cat in the attic who didn't even bother to put on enough clothes when she called the police to her house. They'd tell the story, talk about the woman, talk about Carolyn like she was crazy.

Maybe she was crazy. I couldn't believe we had a window that wasn't even closed with a board or glass. Anybody could climb through that window. It's only a one-story house with an attic. The truth is, I didn't understand what Carolyn meant by some of the things she said. *Circle of safety?* A week in her house and Carolyn was as good as one of the women in the magazines, living in a way I couldn't make sense of.

I wanted to pull her up close, look at the details, study her pores, like a picture in a magazine. The house I grew up in? It was the loneliest place on earth.

I took the cat and went out the sliding glass door into the backyard. The streets were silent, with no cars and no gang whistles, just a full moon and a neighbor's backyard floodlight. The Rottweiler on the other side of the fence started barking. The Doberman in the next yard over joined. That made all the dogs bark, close to the house and farther off. Once they start they keep each other going. My magazines were on the table and I opened one, looking for the model I'd known since I was twelve. Other models, in their clothes, with the ages I couldn't place, were running up steps and turning their heads in cities I'd never seen.

From the parking lot on the other side of the fence I heard one whistle. I listened for a response, but only heard the same call again. I moved my own tongue and mouth but didn't dare make the sound. Like bird calls, one set of notes whistled says, "I'm on your side." Another tells, "I'm your enemy." The places I've lived, nothing has been that clear.