

Glimmer

Tonya Mitchell

One night you will be sitting on the couch waiting for your mother to get home when your world will fall apart. The cocoon that is your life will split open and you will think, *This can't be happening. This can't be real.* You don't know it yet, but years from now you will press your forehead to a windowpane, brush your cheek against a gossamer memory, and think back to this night. For now, plant your feet on the floor. Sit up straight in your pink elephant pajamas and look from your mother to Walter. Wait for the words, all of them, because they are the only things keeping you in the room.

Your mother is breathless, flushed. Hands flutter to pearls—your father's pearls—at her throat. Her painted eyelids flicker like twin butterflies the color of indigo. She is wearing a new dress in her favorite color: aquamarine. A shimmering chiffon you helped her pick out the last time you went shopping together—an event you now see—just this very minute—as duplicitous. Perhaps there is a change in you for Walter, who stands beside your mother, steps back a pace. As if it suddenly occurs to him that this should be a private conversation. Among family. Mother to daughter. But don't look at him, look at your mother. Sit up straight in your pink elephant pajamas. Resist the urge to crumble in on yourself because now you know. You *know*. Wish that she would speak to you in her native German so that you could reply back honestly, cruelly, *Ist dieses ein Witz? Is this a joke?*

But it is English words that cascade from your mother's mouth soft and intimate as rose petals. Crimson blooms of joy straight from her heart. They float to you on a hidden current propelled by her enthusiasm but when they reach you, they transform into needles. A thousand little needles—biting, sharp and purposeful. They stab at you, pierce your flesh like an army of fire ants. Breathe them in, each and every prickly word, feel their burning descent until they come to rest in the pit of your stomach. Commit them to memory. File them under T, Things to Mull Over Later, when you are alone and can breathe:

In love

Surprise
Proposed
Getting married
Happy happy happy

Break your rule and look at Walter whose eyes are an apology. *It's okay*, they say. *I know this is a shock*. Don't stare at his thinning hair, his creepy, towering frame. Instead murmur nice things. Hug your mother. Try not to flinch as you shake Walter's hand. Ask to be excused.

Sit on the edge of your bed. Try to imagine your room the way it was before the news. When the chair was just a chair, the pile of shoes in the closet just a pile of shoes. Now every object in your room seems tainted, complicit in the conspiracy that has become your life. Walk in circles. Bite your thumbnail down to the quick and ignore the dull throb. It is nothing compared to the pain of your mother's betrayal. Pretend none of this matters, that you are the same person you were yesterday, five minutes ago, before your mother came home and the bottom dropped out of your life, but you know it isn't true. Scream silently to the world how unfair this is and tick off the reasons why: (1) You're a good daughter and you don't deserve this. (2) You and your mother are doing just fine alone thank you very much. (3) Daddy, God rest his soul, wouldn't like this.

Imagine yourself packing a suitcase and shimmying down a drainpipe. Try on future daring roles for yourself. Teenage runaway. Hitchhiker. Thief. Juvenile delinquent. Turn off the light, crawl beneath covers and have a one-sided conversation with your father. *Daddy, I don't like him. Daddy, he's not you. Daddy, what do I do?* There is no reply. Later, when you hear your mother's step on the stair and your door opens, pretend you are asleep.

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David Underdown

3 a.m.

Those nights when sleep leaves you stranded,
a sand-bound hulk on the bed
of a long gone sea.

Heavy-lidded, flannel-headed,
straining for familiar sounds,
a scutter of rain, the ruffle of wind.

Outside, over Cumbrae
distant house lights blink and tremble,
dance through drifting veils.
Inside a silent presence of machines,
garnet in the dark,
an amber eye on the skirting.

Unkempt thoughts,
their tangled skeins,
searching loose ends
among the wind-snagged rigging.

To sink and watch
the hulls of passing ships,
keeled and barnacled.

And later, a wandering absence of light
against the star-pinned dark.

7.10 a.m. Friday 16 October 2009

Outside the morning is arrayed like an experiment
as if someone has split it into parts
to find out what it's for:
earth and sky are taut as rubber bands
stretched to just before they snap,
dark matter prism-ed from fire to infra-red.

Rolling back behind my head
a caul of cloud;
in front the still impenetrable shore;
and in between a slit of light
as if the furnace lid has been prised up
to yield a glimpse into the heart of things.

Trapped in the gash of sky, an early gull.
The wind-farm waves its arms in miniature
and sixty miles away that smudge must be the Pentlands.

I could fall
into the promise of this morning,
ride its rush across continents.

Fathers and Sons

The tall man whose back I watch stands strong
on his centre ground, on his own now
though the curl at the nape of his neck
still touches me; and somewhere in the distance
is the careless rapture of tossing him skywards,
the space between my waiting hands as he falls back
squealing delight in the danger,
when he was smaller and I was stronger.

Behind, an old man is lost for words
about the present choosing instead
to mind when we built dams of sand,
creating reservoirs where water rose and held
while we fought hard to mend each breach
before it broke and flooded down the beach.