

Hugging the Rock

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The First Day

No Room

When my mom decides to run away from home
she packs up her car
with all the things that matter most
to her.

Her guitar
and some books
all her CDs
her clothes
her shoes
Grandma's music box from the fireplace mantle
and the quilt from the bed she shares with Dad.

She jams plastic grocery bags filled with soap
and shampoo
into the small spaces left in between things
and ties a couple of suitcases to the roof.
At the last minute
she throws in a few dishes
towels

and a potted red geranium that guards the
front porch.

Dad tells her not to pack stuff too high
so she can still see out the back window
but she ignores him
and shoves her pillow
between her guitar case and the portable TV.

By the time she's done
there's no room left for anything else.
No room left for Dad.

And no room left for me.

The Wrong Answers

When I ask her why she's leaving
she finds lots of ways
to not answer me.

She takes photos from the albums,
leaving big holes behind.
She dumps out her purse on the kitchen table
then puts everything back in it again.
She unloads the dishwasher
just like any other day.

“Why do you have to go?”

Because I can't stay.

“Why?”

Because I don't belong here anymore.

“If you're not supposed to be here
where are you supposed to be?”

*I don't know, Rachel.
Maybe that's part of the problem.
I just don't know.*

“Why can't I go with you?”

*You can visit after I get settled.
For now you need to stay here
with your dad.
You'll be fine.
Better than fine, I bet.*

I don't mean to,
but I snort
and she slams her hand down on the kitchen
table.

I jump.

*Don't make this any harder on me, Rachel.
I can't do this anymore.*

I wonder
if she took her pills this morning
then I glance at the bottle
near the coffee pot
and she catches me looking.

*Yes, she says.
But sometimes they don't work.*

And then she starts to cry.

The Garage

I sit on a milk crate
and watch Dad
make sure Mom's car
is safe to drive.

First he adds some air to the front tires.
Then he pulls out the dipstick
wipes it clean with a rag
and shoves it back in again to check the oil.
He scrapes crud off the battery
then closes the hood.

I still can't believe this is really happening.

I peek in the windows of the car
too close
and leave an imprint of my face on the glass.

Stop that, hollers Dad.
Look at the mess you've made.

My faceprint
is stuck to the glass.
I should do it to every window
so she'll see me following her even when she's
gone.

Get some paper towels.

I squirt the cleaner and wipe it off
but I must not be fast enough
or good enough
because he takes the paper towel from my hand.

Never mind, he says. I'll do it myself.

Mom comes out
drops empty boxes on the floor
and glares at Dad.

*I washed the car yesterday, she says.
Windows too.
Not clean enough for you?*

She wants to fight;
I can tell.
Dad won't answer her
won't even look at her.
He just scrubs the window
harder and harder
until Mom gives up
and goes back in the house.

Run Away

I run away
fast.

Away
from Dad
hiding in his garage.

Away
from Mom
and her packed car.

Faster.

Past the mailbox.

Faster.

To the corner and back
again
again

again
like a relay race at school.

Mom's dog, Madison,
barks
and chases me
like it's a game
but it's not.

I run as fast as I can
but I can't run fast enough
to run away
from the idea of her leaving.

I collapse on the grass.
Madison sits down next to me
panting
and big drops of saliva hit my arm.
I let the drool slide down my elbow
before I wipe it off with the edge of my shirt
wishing I could wipe off today
as easy as that.

The Bargain

It's not fair
that a mom can just decide to leave
and a kid can't decide
to not let her go.
I'm sorry, Mom. I'm sorry.
Please don't go.
Please. I love you. Dad loves you. Doesn't that
count?
Whatever I did wrong, I'm sorry.
I won't do it anymore.

You said I could pierce my ears
and get a raise in my allowance.
You promised I could finally
have a kitten of my very own to sleep in my
room.
Did you tell Dad about that?
I haven't started to shave my legs yet
and what if I get my period?

And does Dad even know where to find the
hot water bottle
when I get sick?

I don't know how to talk to Dad.
He's too quiet
and I never know what he's thinking
and he's always gone at work.

What if he gets mad and leaves me too?

We can get you help.
More help. More something.
I know a girl whose mom felt sad all the time
and the mom went away to this hospital for
awhile
and when she came home
she was better, mostly.

You could go there.

I thought you loved us. Loved me.
I'll be good. I promise.

Clean my room without being told
do all my homework
leave you alone whenever you want quiet time.

Just please
please

don't go.

Questions

When I come home
I don't see Mom
but Dad darts around the kitchen
an orange sponge in his hand.
He scrubs the sink
wipes down the chrome faucet
then pushes all the chairs up to the table.

I want to ask him things
like
does he feel the same way I do right now
all mixed-up
and hurting
and mad
at the same time?
And does he have any idea
where she'll go
when we'll see her again
and what my life will be like
after she's gone?

He clutches the broom
sweeping long half-circles
that slowly bring him closer to me

“Dad?”

He stops
looks up
but I don't think he really sees me
standing right in front of him.

We'll be okay, Rachel.
Everything will be okay.

He's wrong.
I know he's wrong.
Nothing will ever be okay again.

My Crowning Glory

I've always had long hair
just like my mom.

She calls it my crowning glory.

I braid it every night
or it's a mess of knots in the morning.

When I was little
I used to lie down on the kitchen counter
so she could wash my hair in the sink.
She'd roll up a towel for under my neck
make lots of suds
then rinse it again and again
with vinegar
until it was squeaky clean.

The entire time
she sang me bits of songs she wrote
about falling in love

taking chances
and getting your heart broken.

I'd sit on a stool in front of her
while she combed out the tangles
and told me my hair shimmered
like black pearls in the sun
and to never cut it
because it made me look just like a princess.

I'd tell her I wanted to live in a castle
with a moat
and a dungeon
and marry a prince
with a white horse
just like in the fairy tales.

Sometimes she'd play along
and pretend to be a queen
with a very tall crown
and sometimes
she'd tell me that

not every princess
needs a prince
and that life in a castle
didn't sound like much fun to her.

Final Instructions

*Mind your father, she says.
Take care of Madison for me.
Eat your vegetables.*

“I can do the first two,” I say.
“I’m not so sure about the last one.”

I want to make her laugh
but she hasn’t laughed in a long time.

I have instructions of my own
but I don’t say them out loud.

Take your pills every day.
Do whatever you need to do
and then come home soon.

Don’t forget about me.

For Real

Dad and I follow her outside
to say goodbye.

I don't want to watch her go
but just like seeing a crash on the freeway
I have to look.

A sour taste hits my mouth
and I want to puke
right there in the middle of our driveway.

She hugs Dad quick;
then, before I'm ready,
she stands in front of me.

Inside
I feel myself break
into a million pieces.

"Mom!" I cry
and rush into her arms.

She holds me,
but she holds me different
and now I know
that this is for real.

The Rock

Madison waits for an invitation
to jump into her usual spot
on the front seat of Mom's car.
Mom pushes her away
but Madison doesn't understand and starts to
bark.

Mom tells me again
my place is with Dad.
She tells me
someday I'll understand.

I look at Dad
who is trying hard not to look at Mom
as she gets ready to drive away.
He hugs his arms close to his chest
sucks his bottom lip in over his teeth.
He wears what Mom calls his disappearing face
because when he wears it
all his feelings just disappear
and no one can tell what he's thinking.

I go stand next to him.
I want to hold his hand and have him hold mine
but that's not the way things work
with me and Dad.

I lean on him
just a little
too much
and he steps away.
I wobble
back and forth
before I catch my balance.

Mom says he's a rock,
the good kind you can always count on
to do the right thing.

It's hard for me to think of a rock as something
good.
Some rocks are heavy and make you sink.
Some rocks are too big to move.
And some rocks are sharp
and cut you
if you try to hold them in your hand.

Goodbye

When she finally gets in her car
and drives away
I realize that Mom is a rock too,
the kind that crumbles
if you hold on too tight.

Blame

I didn't think she'd really go
but she did
and I clench my fists
until my nails dig into my skin
and the mad I've been holding back
breaks free.

I turn on Dad.

“It's your fault.
I know it is. It's all your fault.”

*It's no one's fault.
I'm sorry, Rachel. Things happen.
Even when we don't want them to.*

It has to be his fault.
It has to.

My face feels hot
and red

and I know I'm going to cry again
even though I shouldn't have any tears left in
me at all.

I can't stop shouting at him.

“You did something to make her leave.
I know you did!”

He doesn't say anything else.
He just waits,
wearing his disappearing face
while Mom disappears down the road.

Why didn't he try to make her stay?
Why didn't he do something?

Maybe he wanted her to go.
Maybe he made her go.

I push the thought down as soon as it comes
but the doubt is there
and that makes me even madder.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

He just stands there
with his hands jammed in his pockets
and lets me yell at him
until I’m all yelled out.

The Challenge

He sits on the couch
staring at me
sitting on the floor
staring anywhere but
back at him.

Homework?

“No.”

Hungry?

“No.”

Do you want to watch TV?

“No!”

I stand up
to escape to my room.

He catches my hand
as I rush by.

Don't be mad at your mother, Rachel.

I pull my hand away from his,
fast.

“I’m not,” I say.

“I’m mad at you.”

I Don't Remember

I don't remember much
from when I was really little
but I'm pretty sure
I was happy.

Me.

Mom.

Dad.

My family.

I don't remember when
my mom started to be depressed all the time
my dad started to work late
and I started to spend more time at Sara's house
than I did at home.

I don't remember when
making sure Mom took her pills
became the first thing I did every morning.

I don't remember when I figured out

it was easier to keep my thoughts on the inside
instead of sharing them.

Easier to want
whatever mom wanted.

Easier to pretend
like Dad
that everything was all right
instead of talking about everything that was all
wrong.

I don't remember when
our family started to
fall apart.

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