



quip

FEATURING
MARIA ADKINS
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EDITORS' NOTE

Times are strange! We opened submissions for Issue 2 at the end of 2019 with big plans and bigger expectations. And then life got in the way.

First, there were the moves. AB traversed the country and is now happy and settled in Denver, Colorado. Then there were the holidays and the job hunts; then the new jobs and new classes and new pets and new friends and trying to adjust to all the newness. And things just didn't seem to slow down.

Until they completely halted. COVID.

We wish we could offer some sage advice or profound thoughts on the ways we'll come out changed and better for the experience—but that feels a little forced and a lot privileged. There isn't much to say other than this fucking sucks, and it really, really fucking sucks for a lot of people.

So, while we can't offer up the comforts of philosophy and platitudes, we do hope you'll find some kind of solace in these beautiful stories. In "Fat Girlfriend" by Maria Adkins, a young woman grapples with generational trauma and identity. "Favorite" by Patrick Bernhard is a vignette of one boy's longing. Finally, in "The Names You Give" by E. Alexandra, sisters Alyssa and Esther recall the circumstances that led to estrangement from their father. It's an issue of connection as much as it is of disconnection; an issue that feels of this moment.

We'll keep chugging along over here, and we hope you will too.

Yours,

Sarah & Anna Blake

FAT GIRLFRIEND

Maria Adkins



My momma always told me, “I never loved my body, but it’s okay cause it don’t love me neither.” I couldn’t ever figure out what she meant. I thought she was gorgeous. Thick rippling thighs stopped her legs from crossing at the knee. Her belly overflowed the top of her shorts when she sat down. I saw her in a bikini once when I was real little and her whole body looked like it was made of cottage cheese. I liked cottage cheese.

Of course she tried all sorts of diets. Different drinks and videotapes. I’d do aerobics with her in the living room before I would get tired and sit on the floor in front of the couch. As I got older, she made me follow along all the way through. Said nobody would want a fat girlfriend. I got the feeling she was mostly talking to herself but using my name. I didn’t get why anyone would want to look like the people on the tapes. You could see all the strands of thin muscle on the men, and the women didn’t look like any woman I ever saw. I just shrugged and went along with the moves.

I grew up like my momma despite the aerobics tapes and meal replacement shakes: thick hipped and busting through every shirt I owned. In school, some of the kids gave me a hard

time. They always do, especially if your name's different enough. But I always felt sorry for the kids with names so boring no joke could be made. That's the worst thing, isn't it? Being forgettable?

But my name was a joke, sort of. Momma loved to tell me the story about the velvet Elvis painting.

"Your daddy used to sing to me like Elvis when we met. Over and over again, when he'd show up at my doorstep or when we were in the back of his Impala, and I'd push him and tell him to go find himself another girl." She and I had just gone through a drive-thru on our way to church. Momma got a ham biscuit and a Diet Coke, and I had a cheese biscuit and an orange juice. She'd wave her biscuit in between bites as she talked. "And you know even then I was out at the yard sales every Saturday, and that's where I saw that god-awful thing. Two-foot wide velvet Elvis. So, I brought it home and hung it on my wall. And when you were born your daddy wasn't there so I named you Priscilla because he couldn't stop me."

That's how I became Priscilla Songbird. My mother was just spiteful enough to make me the punch line of a joke only she knows.

I met him when I was nineteen, working at the Dairy Queen for the summer. He was a little bit older, but I never asked for any numbers, and he had dark eyes that went on forever into his head. It was a hot night, even for Landis in July, and I was sweating through my uniform in that little building. He ordered a hot fudge sundae and smiled real wide when I bent over to get his change out of the drawer. It was a nice smile, the kind you wanted to keep around.

He was still there an hour later when I got off, leaning against the hood of his Trans Am still smiling big at me as I walked to my car.

He was there again the next night, too. He ordered a banana split and when I got off, there he was again, this time leaning against the hood of my Pinto.

"If you dent the hood you're gonna have to pay me for it."

"I just had to introduce myself to you. Aren't many girls like you around here. You're something special. You can't leave something like that sitting in the window."

"Something, huh? Well, who are you then, seeing something so special about me?"

"Ray Clifton, sweetheart. You're gonna remember that name."

"It was nice meeting you, but I think I'll be on my way home now."

I started the car and backed up, just a little, just to knock him off his feet. He stumbled, hands on his knees and laughed at the ground. I turned the car around to leave.

"Wait, you ain't gonna return the favor, darling?" He ran to my window.

"I'm Priscilla Songbird, mister. You're gonna remember my name."

The next week I was naked on his couch, a thin blanket spread half over us. He touched me like other boys had, trying to hold everything in one hand and failing. When he came he tried to call out my name, but the “cilla” just turned into a groan and he collapsed. After a minute, he started laughing so hard he was out of breath.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I was right, is all. You’re not like most girls.”

“How so?”

“Most girls, well you know, bigger girls, they’re mostly the same.”

“You mean the cow girls?”

“I’m not talking about rodeo.”

“I’m not either. Those girls. Big, dumb eyes, move slow, talk slow, always chewing something over. They’ll follow you anywhere.”

“Yeah, I guess you could put it that way.” He laughed.

“They don’t know how to stand up for themselves. They just go around doing what you want them to.” I rolled onto my back. “I promised myself I wouldn’t be one of them.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say you succeeded. You grow up on a farm or something?”

“No. It just seemed right.” I sat up and pulled my dress over my head.

My momma was a different type of big girl. The kind always apologizing for herself. She wouldn’t be seen eating anything fried in public, even though at home it was a different story. She had her damn tapes. The workout clothes. The ThighMasters. When she talked to her friends on the phone, the other receptionists from the doctor’s office, she was always talking about the new thing she was trying or how if my daddy hadn’t left it wouldn’t be so hard, raising a girl by herself.

I still lived with her, in my same bedroom I grew up in. We had an understanding that I would stay out of her way and she would stay out of mine. She worked and I took care of the house. I worked nights for spending money and we didn’t ask each other questions.

It was late when I got back to Momma’s house. All the lights were off but I knew better than to believe she was asleep. Despite our rule, she still liked to ask questions in her own sort of way. I had to walk past her room to get to mine, and sure enough there she was, and she called out to me from her bed.

I leaned in the doorway. The room was dark except for the glow of the TV. That thing was almost never got turned off. She was watching a Lifetime movie, I think. She liked the ones

about bad men so she could keep on blaming my dad. On her rocking chair was a pile of clothes from every morning when she tried on an outfit, didn't like it, tore it off and tried on another. She was lying in bed with the covers pulled up just below her chin and her fingers gripping the edge of the blanket on either side of her face, like a little kid scared of something.

"I'm glad you're having fun, honey. It's so good to be young. You know when I was your age, I wished I could go out with lots of boys, but that was never the plan for me."

"Momma."

"What's his name? Does he treat you right?"

"Momma, please don't start."

"I just want you to be careful, now. I'd hate for something like what happened to me to happen to you. You're so young."

"I'm what happened to you."

"Now you know you're my whole life, baby, don't try to start a fight over this. I'm just trying to help you and you're telling me I don't love my only child, my sweet girl."

I walked over to the bed and laid down beside her. "I'm sorry momma, I know you're just looking out for me." She stroked my hair and leaned her forehead against mine.

"I love you, baby. Don't you ever forget that."

"I know. I love you too."

When her hand stopped moving, I knew she was asleep, and I just lay there watching the movie for a while. It was hard to tell what was going on, the volume was most of the way down and it was half over, but everyone looked very serious and it was always night. There were flashes of gunfire as I fell asleep.

I found Velvet Elvis when I was eight. Momma had gone out for a while and I was playing in her room. I opened her closet and there it was wedged behind some boxes. I already knew the story by heart; I think she'd begun telling me as soon as I was born. I pulled it out and ran my fingers around the edges of the King's head. He was traced in purple that faded to black. He looked ugly and cheap. I wondered if this is what meeting my father would feel like.

That afternoon, Momma came home from work to find me dancing to "Burning Love" on her bed, Velvet Elvis watching from the corner. She turned off the radio and grabbed me by the arm. She dragged me to my room and slammed the door. She never said a word. I spent the rest of the day in my room alone, until I heard her come by and leave dinner on a tray in front of my door. That was her way of saying sorry. Just not sorry enough to talk about it.

I started seeing Ray more often, even staying over. I cleaned his house while he was at work. He was doing construction on some new houses outside of town. Some nights he'd bring friends home to drink. They were always dirty, and their shirts were too big and torn. I didn't much care for beer but I'd bring them out of the fridge and Ray'd slap me on the ass when I walked away.

One night after more drinks than usual he called me over. He pulled me closer by my hips to where he sat on the couch. He barely looked away from the two guys sitting across from him.

"Listen," he said, looking serious. "Nobody'll tell you this, but you got to find a girl like this one. Most fun you'll ever have." Those other guys turned to me and nodded their heads, looking me over like they knew something.

I pulled away from him and went outside. I could hear him call after me and then they all laughed. I stayed out on the porch for a few minutes, crying and wishing he was dead. I kept wishing all the way back home to the TV in momma's room lighting up the night. I knew the next night I worked, there'd he'd be, sitting on the hood of my car looking sorry, and I'd follow him home.

But he didn't show up. I was distracted at the front counter, missing orders or getting them wrong, trying to keep track of the cars in the parking lot. After we shut down I walked out, sure I'd see him, but there was only my car and the dumpster. I unlocked the door and sat down with my hands on the wheel. For a while I just stayed like that, half hoping he'd show, half not knowing what else to do. I went home straight to my room and laid flat on bed with my arms crossed until I fell asleep.

Next night he wasn't there either. I drove to his house after closing. His car was there, along with a couple more. I rolled down my window and I could hear a little laughter leaking out the thin walls. I thought about walking to the door, about seeing some other girl in there maybe, or just him and his drunk friends. Or that maybe me wishing him dead all those times worked. I couldn't tell what I wanted to find. It didn't matter. It all meant the same thing.

Back home, I walked as quiet as I could toward the TV light of Momma's room. Standing at the edge of the doorframe, I could see her there in bed, asleep on her stomach, her hands bunching up the pillow under her head. There was a movie playing, the same kind there always was, half over and the volume down. I sat in bed beside her for a minute staring at the screen before I picked up the remote and turned the TV off. In the dark for the first time in years, the moon glow crept in from the window.



FAVORITE

Patrick Bernhard

Instead of wincing at the loudness of the pop song his mother played on their ride to the community pool that day, Grant listened. He found it helped him picture Kailey the lifeguard more clearly.

Without love...give me some value, some worth.

Without love...no life left on Earth.

The beat made sense, even if the lyrics were sometimes difficult to understand. The song faded and a man shouted that Brock of Brock's Hardware had too many paints and wood conditioners in stock. Grant's head bounced as asphalt changed to the gravel of the pool's parking lot.

The other children, towels wrapped around themselves like wings, ran up the walkway to the locker rooms, their parents begging them to slow down. Grant's mother looked at him in the rearview mirror. He waved, but she'd already looked away. He grabbed his towel and scurried from the parked car as his mother rolled down the window.

While everyone made their way down the ladder one at a time, Grant jumped in, popping up quickly to see if Kailey had seen him, but she was helping a few of the more scared kids climb in, their hands leaving white marks on her thin arms where they held onto her. She kept her head tipped to the side, grinning, as she settled them each into the water, reaching to adjust the strap of her bright red lifeguard suit every so often.

He cupped water in his palms and tried to catch his reflection in his hands until everyone was in the pool. Kailey called out, and they swirled themselves into the daily circle for the first activity: getting used to the water by going under and holding their breath for just a few seconds. Grant blinked at the others, who were splashing and slapping the surface. Nobody was crying yet; some of the kids screamed if their parents weren't near the pool's edge. He thought about his mother smoking in the parking lot and staring at the road atlas, reading the names of roads that ran through places she used to visit and shading her eyes with the sun visor. Kailey smiled and laughed at the two kids closest to her. Then she whistled and pointed downward with both hands.

Biting his bottom lip, Grant sat cross-legged at the bottom, watching the small bubbles float out of his nostrils. The other children went up and he was left alone. The moving surface of the water hid their heads and their chests, so he could see only their bony legs kicking and hands poking into the water like birds' beaks. He tried to ignore the pain in his chest by studying the colors of the swimsuits, one by one. Purple with a black swoosh. Lime green. Dark blue. After he had inspected every color, Grant began to count knee scabs.

There was suddenly a much longer set of legs striding through the water behind everyone else's, shining lines of bubbles trailing them. Grant let go of the rest of the air in his lungs,

and the silver explosion of his breath wrapped over the arms reaching into the water after him.

Grant let his hand slide across the soft skin on the inside of Kailey's thigh as she rushed him back to the air. He gasped and spat like always, hoping some of his mouth water landed on her shoulder and chest. He tried to remember the song in the car before the ad for the hardware store sale. He squinted at her while he caught his breath to see if the song made her even more real, like it had in the car, but it was difficult to see her face with the sun in the middle of the sky.

"Remember what we talked about, Grant? Just for a few seconds, okay?" she said, with that mix of friendliness and worry that brought the happy hurt to his chest. That happy hurt grew as Kailey carried him to her spot in the circle. After she gently set him down and rubbed his back, she returned to teaching the class, and Grant felt the hurt begin to leave him. For a moment, the song caused it to bob up and down and back again, like he hoped it would, but then it was gone. He thought about his mother and how she might have pulled him out of the water. Probably by his right arm, with her long nails digging uncomfortably into his skin.

"Let's try floating on our backs," Kailey said. She grinned as she came to him first, and he flipped onto his back, trying not to let the water run into his eyes. The tip of her long hair was like a blonde, wet paintbrush, and he tried to stay still as she placed her palms under his back, keeping him from sinking.

THE NAMES YOU GIVE

E. Alexandra

It's sunny without a cloud in the sky as I walk to my car, but when I slam the door, shadows haunt me from the inside. It's five days before Christmas and I've just had another piece of my skin removed, finding out, again, that a piece of me I thought was a birthmark was actually cancer.

I call my sister.

"This is not a big deal," she says firmly.

I want to remind her about last Christmas—the mole she'd found on her elbow, how she'd called her doctor every hour on the hour, and when he didn't respond, she'd emailed him photos of the mole, a yellow tape measure straightened underneath.

"Okay, but I kind of think if this was you, it would be a big deal," I say.

"Well, maybe. But it's not. It's not a big deal, okay? So be thankful for that. From an outside

perspective, not a big deal.”

I pull the edge of my sock down and prod the bandage on my foot. The mole had been on the left side of my heel for as long as I could remember.

“How can it be cancer?” I’d asked the surgeon. “The mole’s always been there.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he’d said. “They’re normally from childhood. The damage has long been done.” He laughed and waved his hand dismissively, and I looked down suspiciously at my body and wondered why I couldn’t let go of the world beneath my skin.

I miss the mole. I peel the bandage back, and stare at the pinkish-purple skin. It seems bashful and I wish I’d left it alone, thinking maybe some things are not meant to be examined too close.

“I just yelled at an old lady at work,” my sister says, her voice louder now. “She called me the wrong name. I gave her some papers and she said, oh thanks, Alyssa! I said, ‘it’s Esther!’”

“That’s kind of weird she called you Alyssa,” I say. She makes no sound of recognition and I add, “since it’s my name,” feeling as though I had to remind her.

She’s silent for a while and then she says, “I guess it triggered me a little,” and I look up from my heel, bite my lip, and pivot away from myself.

“Well, it’s almost your birthday.”

Her birthday is Christmas Day. This year, she told us Christmas will be scheduled from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. —enough time to open presents, have breakfast, sing a couple songs, and then it’s on to her birthday. She says it like a joke, but I know we’ll follow her schedule. I figure she’s allowed it now, after all the years we spent Christmas with my father’s new family. A day full of his kids ripping bows from miniature Mercedes SL-6s and golden rings while my sister and I lingered on the edges with two pairs of woolen socks like distant cousins.

“It’s SmartWool. Quality stuff,” he told us.

Some years there was no mention of Esther’s birthday at all. Other years it was after dinner, just before bed, when he’d linger over the table in the quiet of the day, look over at her kind of amused, laugh, run his palms on the top of his head. “Oh geez! Geez! It’s your birthday! Happy Birthday! Geez! I almost forgot! Would you believe it?”

And of course, we would believe it.

I drive to Old Town to one of the kitschy southwestern stores with walls lined with fur shawls, bejeweled cowboy boots, and rows upon rows of silver and turquoise earrings. These stores are made for Texas women in their sixties. They are not made for my sister, but I am desperate and late and cannot show up one-handed with only a Christmas present on her birthday.

“What do you want for your birthday?” I ask her.

“Oh, you don’t have to get me anything.” She says she’s coloring with my niece and nephew. Her mood seems to have lifted and her voice is light and happy and full of the delight that comes with concern for trivial things.

“Well I’m in a store, okay? Do you want jewelry?”

“Yeah, I like jewelry.”

I move toward the glass case. “Any particular gem?”

“I don’t know gems.”

“Color?”

“I like purple.”

“Amethyst?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

I ask the lady behind the counter to see the purple stones.

“We also have a lovely collection of opal and laborite,” she says. The lady has dark eyes, bleached blonde hair, and a different Christmas themed glittered nail on each finger.

“Do you like laborite?” I ask Esther. The woman reaches for a pair of stones with her left hand. Her ring finger is a snowman, adorned in gold.

“Look, I don’t care. I like purple, okay?”

My niece and nephew fight in the background. Esther threatens to take a Barbie, now two Barbies, and then there are cries and two separate doors slamming.

“You know,” Esther says. I imagine her standing from the carpet of her living room, walking to her kitchen, and gazing out her window. I picture Sunglow azaleas born from seeds from my mother’s garden blooming in her yard and cardinals bathing themselves in a stone bird bath my sister keeps heated through winter. It is December but the birds are still there, and the azaleas are bright pink beneath snow. My sister does not like to see things go.

“I was walking with my neighbor. She bought something from that cooking store, sur de something,” she says. I hear her turn on the sink.

“Yeah, so she tells me I was at sur la table, and she says table all French and snotty like *tahblay*, and I immediately don’t like her anymore. I ask her, ‘what did you say?’ Then she says it again, ‘*tahblay*’, with that same accent and everything, and I said, ‘look, don’t call me anymore.’ She said, ‘what? What do you call it?’ I said, ‘table. It’s called table.’ Then she says

it again, that word. ‘*Tahblay*.’”

She draws the word out, long and slow, and as she says it, I can hear her eyes roll and her fist clench as she twirls her pinky mockingly in the air. “I told her, ‘look, I don’t care. It’s table and I’ll never say it that way and you know what? Do you know how douche-y you sound saying it?’”

My sister has a keen nose for airs that are not one’s own. Once, when I came back home, I told her “bueno-bye.” It was a thing I’d heard New Mexicans say, and I said it with a forced ease, pretending it was my own.

My sister narrowed her eyes, snorted out her nose. “What did you just say?”

Esther comes by this naturally. It is a response to our father, who is a special kind of pretentious. The kind that claims to be a “citizen of the world” while paying thousands of dollars on articulation coaches to hide his Southern twang. The kind that had his Dumbo ears surgically pinned back and told us both we should really consider doing the same.

When Esther and I were ten and seven, we spent the summer with him on a lake somewhere in Austria. I can’t tell you much about the town. I can’t even tell you the name. Most days my sister and I stayed locked in our hotel room. We tied paperclips to floss, dropped them over the balcony, and pretended we were fishing, reeling in summer hats from the heads of people passing by on the street below.

My dad came home around six each day, and we ate dinner at the same restaurant every

night. It had the cleanest wooden floors I’d ever seen. Blue and white checkered tables and a bearded waiter in knee-high socks named Klaus. My dad spoke German to Klaus. They smiled and laughed together and when Klaus walked away, my father leaned into us.

“Geez, how do you guys not know German, huh? Just English, huh?” He shook his head and stabbed his schnitzel with a golden fork. “I mean I just can’t believe you’ve never been here! How have you never been to Austria before?” He stuffed the schnitzel into his mouth, grumbling as he chewed.

I was still young and wished I knew more, but my sister knew enough and sulked behind the same walls that would take a lifetime for me to build. We lived with our mother in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. Our father was from there too. He’d left long ago and spent his whole life running away.

He was flying back there only to take us home. The night before we were supposed to leave, we ate at the restaurant with the clean, wooden floors. “Ein Abschiedsessen,” Klaus said to my father. “Farewell dinner,” he said to us slowly as though he could not imagine we knew any language at all. Klaus brought out three eggs in ornate, bite-sized glasses. He tapped the side of the fist egg with a spoon and my father reached for it, tilted the glass up, and drank the yolk in one gulp.

I watched in amazement. My sister pushed her glass across the table and folded her arms.

“I’m not eating that,” she said. She widened her eyes toward me, “and you shouldn’t either. You’ll get sick.” Klaus bowed nervously, then walked away.

“What?” My dad scowled across the table. His nose wrinkled between his eyes just like hers. “Don’t be ridiculous. People have been eating raw eggs for hundreds, thousands of years, and you think they get sick?” He pushed his lips out slightly, lifted his eyebrows, and reached for her egg. “Geez, bet you’re ready to get back to Boone!”

My sister stuck her lips out just like him. Her nostrils flared as she watched him grab her egg and slide it to me.

“Here,” he said. “You can have two.”

I stared at the two eggs in front of me. They were brown and spotted and smelled like sulfur. Esther side-eyed me. With one hand, my dad pinched salami and cheese off his plate.

“So, look, something’s come up,” he said, his eyes glued to his fingertips. “Work’s asked me to go to England for some meetings. I need to spend about two weeks there, and, you know.”

He pressed the tip of his tongue against his upper lip as he folded the salami carefully over the cheese. “You know how your mom is.”

Esther glared at him as he took a bite.

“What?” he said, his mouth full of chewed salami and cheese. “It’s not like she’ll let you stay!” A cube of cheese dropped from the bottom of his salami onto his lap. He picked it up,

examined it from all sides, then dropped it on the ground beneath his chair. “So, plans are changing a little. The stewardess will take you through security and everything. Help with the connection in Brussels. And then a different one will meet you in Atlanta.”

I slid from my chair, crawled beneath my seat. I did not like to see things unclean.

“What are you doing? Don’t touch that. Someone else will clean it up.”

I froze with the cheese in my hand. When he looked away, I swallowed the cheese; I did not want to go against him, but I have never been as sure as he is—that messes would always be cleaned.

When I sat back down, Esther had turned her back to our dad. Her arms were folded across her body and she shook her head slowly in disbelief.

“What?” he said. “Kids fly alone all the time.”

She slammed her napkin on the table and stormed toward the room. The ornate glasses shook against each other. A long, dark crack ran down the smaller of the two eggs, and a trickle of bright, yellow yolk oozed from beneath its shell.

“Ah, shit! Look what she’s done, huh?! She’s just so sensitive,” he muttered. He shook his head and pressed the broken one aside carelessly.

“Come on. This one’s still fine! It’s good! Try it, you’ll see!” He pressed the bigger one to me, but I kept looking at the broken one, the line of yellow yolk leaking out the side.

I worried Esther was right. What if I did get sick? And then was sick on the plane and some stranger or stewardess would have to take care of me? But of course, it wouldn’t have been a stranger or the stewardess; it would have been her, ten years old, flying across the ocean with a vomiting little sister.

When I got back to the room, Esther’s bags were already packed. The blanket was pulled over her head, and I folded my clothes in silence as she lay underneath the covers. When our dad knocked on the door, she threw back the blankets and scrunched her face toward me in a firm warning.

“Hey. Hey, Alyssa,” he said softly. “Don’t you want to go on the hike? See the lake and the mountains?”

A part of me wanted to go, but I studied my sister’s face and knew it was her—not him—who’d be getting me home. He gave up eventually and we stayed quiet, listening for his footsteps on the other side of the door. Maybe we were trying to decipher them, searching for some pattern that would lead us to answers to questions we didn’t yet know how to ask. Our room was silent with anger and worry, and there was a heaviness about it that felt like the roof was caving in, that it might bury us, like we might be trapped forever underneath all that silent anger and worry.

But then the sky turned to night, and red sparks burst in the window from fireworks in the valley below. It was the Fourth of July. The other Americans, though likely not our father who was above such things, were setting off fireworks by the lake, and my sister said something, finally. I wish I could remember what. I can’t. All I can remember is that, whatever she said, it made me laugh so hard my side cramped and I doubled over in a mix of pain and laughter. I laughed and laughed, begged her to stop, tried to catch my breath, wiped away my tears and told her, “Stop! Stop! Please! It hurts!”

We kept on laughing. Laughed until we fell asleep and forgot all about the pattern of our father’s footsteps.

I wonder if he heard us laughing—if he tried to decipher it in the same way we did his footsteps, some pathway that would lead him back to us. Or maybe he heard us and felt relief, absolved of guilt, thinking he’d done more than enough giving us each other. He was only 36 then, a year older than my sister is now, and it didn’t yet seem clear which way it was all going to go. Like maybe he’d make it up to us somehow. Maybe this would be the only abandonment, not one of many, and someday we’d all sit around laughing, reminiscing about the time my sister was afraid of something so silly. An egg.

Back on the phone in the store in Old Town, I hear my sister shut off the sink.

“Guess who sent a present?” she asks.

I hold the amethyst earrings between my fingers. “Who?” The earrings are wrong—too

dangly and ornate for her. I point to a pair of simple studs.

“Dana. He sent a present to the kids.” We don’t call him dad to each other anymore. It’s like somewhere along the way the name slipped from his skin. “A train set. It’s for like two-year-olds! J. opened it and said, well that’s something, but it’s kind of baby-ish.”

Her son, J., just turned seven.

“I guess he’s trying, though.”

I saw him once, three years ago. He came to visit me with his family. I couldn’t tell you why. The first night he got drunk. Told me, “you know, you and Esther were never priorities to me.”

“Yeah, we know,” I’d said. At the time I didn’t feel like crying, but I never told Esther because I never could figure out how to make it funny.

I tell the lady with the glitter nails I’ll take the studs. She holds up a finger, pulls out a matching bracelet.

“I asked J. if he knew who it was from.” Esther’s voice is low and I picture the top of her nose crinkling, holding back laughter like a sneeze. “I told him it’s from Dana. Then I say, ‘do you know who that is?’ And you know what he said?”

The laughter is banging beneath her words. I feel tingling in my belly and my side cramps in anticipation.

“He said,” she pauses, and my stomach spasms. “He said,” and she can barely get it out. “He said, ‘your aunt?’”

I double over with laughter, and she’s laughing so hard she can’t breathe. “Stop,” I say. “Stop! It hurts!” I fan my hand in front of my face. Tears line my eyes.

“I know, little guy. It’s too confusing,” Esther says, and her voice is soft and floaty now in the way it gets about her kids. I picture her holding her side, catching her breath, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“You know you really don’t have to get me anything,” she says. “I mean you’re going to be pretty disappointed in your gift.”

“I know I don’t, but…” and my voice trails off because we are always filling in roles for each other that we cannot name.

“Hey, take a picture of your heel, okay? You need to take a picture of it so you can monitor it, make sure there are no little tendrils they’ve forgotten.”

“What? They *just* removed it.”

“You never know. Those things grow from somewhere deep. They can come back. All it takes is one little bit, stewing in there, growing little legs.”

“Okay, I’ll look at it.”

“I’m serious! Before you leave the store, you need to look at your heel and send me a picture.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say and hang up the phone.

The woman smiles, the pair of studs glisten in her open palm. “Look,” the woman says, turning the bracelet slightly in the other palm. The light from the sun hits the bracelet, bounces back to the earrings, and illuminates a web of dark crystals woven inside.

“See?” she says. “With all three, they really shine.”

I look from the bracelet to the earrings and from the earrings back to the bracelet again. “Just the earrings,” I say. They shine just fine, all on their own.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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Offbeat and off-kilter, quip publishes stories that move to their own rhythm. We like fresh voices, weird worlds, and themes that stretch the fabric of traditional literary fiction.

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