

Drinking with Two Hands

"Go," she says, but you don't move.

"Go, now," she says again, this time incorporating a slender finger pointed towards the door, as if you were unaware of its location directly behind you. You do not have to follow her finger to know the door exists, hard and metal and grey in patches where the white paint has peeled off. You paid very close attention when you knocked on it an hour ago. You marvel at her finger, still uplifted and held perfectly horizontal against the dirty floor. Her arm must be getting tired, but her neatly painted, gold, shimmery nail does not waver. She has her mother's hands—long and slim and graceful, even now in their cruel pointing. They are so unlike yours, which are old and wrinkled, and wrapped with raised, purple veins. Yours are the result of years of manual labor. Your hands give you away, hers disguise her.

She puts the hand down and opens her mouth as if to yell, but closes it again. She knows you get the point. And you can see that she is just now noticing the wet saline droplet glistening near the corner of your eye, held precariously in the small rivulet called the duct, whose floor and ceiling are made of your thin, tired, eyelids. If you blink, you will expose yourself as more than vaguely emotional. If you blink, you will become weak. Perhaps if you leave your eyes open long enough, the dry air inside this old, dusty apartment will make the tear evaporate. Or perhaps the tear will get scared and disappear back into the unexplored cavern behind the whites of your eye. What's back there anyway? There must be room for such a tiny tear, such a small specimen of anguish. It's barely even distinguishable. If you just hold out a second longer, a second beyond the stinging that you are now very aware of, a second beyond your eyelid's overwhelming desire to blink, you can maintain your dignity. If you can hold out just one more second, you will win, you will defeat emotion.

You blink. You could not hold out; the stinging was unbearable. You are embarrassed, and as a result of your weakness, you have become pitiable. For the first time, you have allowed your daughter to see you cry. No one cares that it was only one tear, because it was one more than you told yourself you would allow. There is now a long line of wet running from your right eye, to the crease next to your nose, to the corner of your mouth, and down to your chin. You can see a bit in the cracked mirror behind her, and from your distance, it looks like a small translucent slug crawled down your face, keeping nearest to the features so as to avoid being noticed. You feel dirty.

You have been staring at the floor because you don't want her to see how pathetic you are. You dread the appalled look that you have imagined her making when she sees you cry for the first time. You are from the old school which states that fathers are the patriarchs of the household, that they are strong, and that they never, under any circumstances, cry in front of their children. This is how you were raised, and your actions have just dishonored your father's memory. He is probably turning over in his grave. If there is a heaven, and someday you meet him there, you will

never hear the end of this.

The floor has become nauseating—it's so filthy that you cannot stare at it anymore without feeling sick. You raise your head and meet her eyes with your own watery ones. You look for a reaction, any sort. But instead of her solid brown orbs meeting yours, they are focused on two people walking outside the streaky living room window. You turn to look. One is an elderly man. He is walking slowly and through the open window you can hear him muttering "Buenos dias," over and over. His back is rounded and his head droops so low that the area between his shoulder blades seems to be the highest point on his body. He is walking so slowly. Though the view from the window is narrow, you still have ample time to observe him. With each step, he swings his weight back and forth—the tired dance of one who has carried too much in his life and is unwilling to let it go.

As you look harder, you realize that the man is connected to a rusty silver oxygen tank, being pulled along by the much younger woman next to him. She is immune to his ramblings, and she bears the mark of a caretaker. The loose clothes, lack of makeup, and comfortable way that she walks next to him show you that. Her face shows some resemblance to his. The curve of the cheekbones and shape of the lips convince you that it might be his daughter. She turns her head and looks toward the window where you are standing. You make unexpected eye contact; you stop breathing for a second. You notice that her face is kind, and she does not regret looking at you. You realize that this is a beautiful moment: she is a testament to the devotion of children, who stay around despite the burden their older parents may place on them. You realize that there may be hope for you. There may just be. You feel good for the first time in a very long time.

You turn back to your daughter, and her eyes have settled on you again. You notice that she is not similarly overtaken by the image of the old man. In fact, she looks relatively annoyed, and she sighs heavily towards the window. She taps her foot in an effort to speed this process along. You were so taken over by this moment of beauty and happiness that you almost forgot what's going on. You almost forgot where you were. You almost forgot you were in your twenty-year-old daughter's boyfriend's dirty college apartment. You almost forgot that you found out from her best friend's frantic mother that your daughter has been living with him secretly for an entire year. You almost forgot that her school called you a few days ago to tell you she was failing all of her classes. You almost forgot that she cares more about him than you. She is all you have left. You wish that you could forget entirely.

You have come all the way to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania from Providence, Rhode Island, to collect your daughter and bring her home. This place, this situation, this apartment, is foreign. She does not belong here. She belongs at home, in her pink room, in the big house that she has lived in all of her life. You miss the days of naptime, incessant questions, drinking with two hands. You had something to offer her then. When you hung up the phone yesterday after speaking to Caitlin's mom, you were furious at your daughter for being so irresponsible. And then shortly after, you were furious at yourself—her mother would have seen

this coming. After you were done being furious (your temper never lasted very long), you promised yourself that you would collect her from school and bring her back immediately.

You remember her freshman year. You called her the night after you dropped her off at college. You told yourself you would wait a week, give her time to settle in and make some friends. But it was strange being in the house alone. It had always been quiet when she was around, but it was a quiet filled with human presence. Soft breathing, the batting of eyelashes, the way she swung her leg back and forth restlessly at the kitchen table. These small barely audible noises that filled the air were missing. And it was hard to figure out what came next.

So you picked up the phone and dialed the numbers. When she answered there was loud music and too many voices in the background and she said "Hold on a second," before she even said "Hello."

You waited a while and then she was back. She said "Hi, Dad."

You asked how her first day had been and she said "Awesome, it's so much fun here," but she didn't elaborate. It was fourth grade at dinner time all over again.

Words weren't necessary though, she sounded happy and that was good enough for you. You told her how your day had been. You had gone to work, come home, walked the dog, made dinner. You were sitting down watching Law and Order and just thought you'd check in. You would let her go now, since she sounded busy. When you were getting ready to hang up, you were nervous about how to end the conversation. But your little girl was so sweet that before you got a chance to toss in a loaded and choked up goodbye, she said "I love you," quietly, like she really meant it. And when you hung up you were smiling and no longer alone. You wonder what has changed.

In the car on the drive down, you thought of every possible obstacle you would run into. You acted out fight scenes with her imaginary seven-foot-tall wrestler boyfriend. You told yourself that if you had to kick him in the crotch to take her away, you would do it. Fuck the man code. Things change when your children are in trouble. And you were going to do anything to get her back. Fortunately, her boyfriend was not home when you arrived.

But you feel worse for coming. You have made it all this way and now your innocent little girl is standing in front of you telling you to leave. She is telling you that she is happy. And she is telling you with a finality in her voice that you have never sensed before. You have tried everything today. You have yelled at her; you have threatened. You have told her how she will become a pregnant loser drug addict with nothing to live for. She laughed when you said this. You are beginning to realize that she won't come back with you. You try one last thing, just to be sure.

"Beth, please," you say. You think she might give in. But instead she says, "Dad, go," softly. "I won't change my mind."

You want to turn and run because you feel more tears coming, but instead you stand still and stare. You make her see you cry.

You say, "Will you at least walk your old man out?"

She nods politely and you exit the old building, descending its three cracked steps. When you reach the bottom you feel a sharp tug on your jacket. Immediately after you hear a soft cry and you turn around to see Beth slipping on the icy second step and falling forward, just missing your outstretched arms.

"Be careful!" You say stupidly, after the fact.

Her knee is bleeding though her ripped jeans and you bend down to examine it.

"I'm fine," she says.

"You're not; you're bleeding."

"It's really ok."

"Do you have a first aid kit inside?"

"No." Her lack of preparation angers you. You remember the time you caught her and the neighbor's boy playing doctor in the shed. You peeked in through the window unnoticed to see boy and girl parts being shown off. You were so horrified you couldn't even stop them. Her mother Meg would have known what to do. But you never could bring yourself to tell her. Maybe that's when it all started. Maybe you've been failing since then.

You turn your head and notice a drug store across the street. You firmly instruct her to "Stay right there," and walk away before she can object. Inside, you buy cotton balls, antiseptic, band aids, and on a whim, the candy bar she used to love. You hurry back and present her with the candy first. She lifts her head and smiles as she accepts it. She chooses at that moment not to tell you that she's given up eating chocolate these days.

You turn your attention to her bloody knee. She has her mother's legs. You remember the day Meg came to your office, a couple months after you were married. She sat across from you at your imitation cherry wood desk and she told you she was pregnant. She was smiling so brightly that you didn't even think to ask if she had meant to be. She was always so quiet about personal things and the raising a family talk had not yet come up in your young relationship. You were clouded, too, by your own feelings of joy. You had always wanted to raise a child.

You cried and embraced her when she told you and she left your office and went home and cried too, but differently, silently. And you never knew how she struggled. You never suspected anything. You only found out later when she was gone. She hid it all so well.

You try to lift your daughter's jeans up to clean the wound, but they won't go above her calf muscle and for a minute you are baffled. "Dad, really, I'm fine. I can take care of myself," she says to you. But you are determined. Ignoring her protests, you firmly wrap your left hand around her ankle. With your right hand you clasp the loose fabric below the wound and pull downwards until it rips and the knee is completely exposed. The sound startles both of you. Working quickly, you dab antiseptic on the tender skin and cover it with a bandage. She remains quiet the entire time. When you finish, you stand up and nod, and she rises to her feet.

"I guess this is goodbye," you say.

Before you go, you want to leave her with something. A parting gift from her father. You move toward her and rest your hands on the outside of her shoulders and you say something you don't believe. You say, "You are a strong woman." Her lips part as if to speak, but she gives you a smile instead, then she turns around and walks inside. When the door slams, it is the loudest sound you've ever heard.

You turn around and walk away, placing slow distance between you and your only child. You glance across the street and see that the old man and his daughter are there, walking back in the other direction. You stay there and watch them walk away, and it seems like they never leave your sight, they just keep getting smaller and smaller.