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Stacia Hill

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AT THE SHARE HOUSE

STACIA HILL

I watched slim fingers slip a thin paper into a cigarette roller. It was made of plastic, blue and yellow – I remember this distinctly, as well as the smell of tobacco added pinch by pinch. She used a thick blue card to pack the loose tobacco, she twisted a dial on the side, slid the top of the roller to pop out the finished cigarette, and then started all over again. I watched her fingers move and the cigarettes piled up. They had no filters, and she sealed each paper with her tongue. I can't quite remember her name, but it may have been Margaret.

My mom sat one chair over and followed suit with a cigarette roller of her own. Her hair was fine and dirty blonde, cut haphazardly with kitchen scissors. Her nails grew long naturally but were stained yellow and unpolished. The two women created piles of cigarettes in silence, and I listened to the methodical sounds of paper slipping, plastic clipping, and the tapping of the finished cigarette against the table wood. I was eleven but had already been taught cigarettes were a lot cheaper when you rolled them yourself. They had no filters so you had to be careful not to burn down to your fingertips. If you were poor you finished your cigarette and then unrolled the butt to add the partially scorched tobacco back into another little bag for later use. The scent of tobacco at the table was familiar and held a notion of comfort.

I sat in a too-big chair and drew a deciduous tree that had lost all of its leaves. The trick to drawing good-looking trees is to accommodate the branches, the forking of boughs, the splitting of twigs, into smaller and smaller segments. The longer you sit and add branches, the better the tree will look in the end. I drew a hole in the trunk where an owl lived, and winding roots weaving in and out of the soil. I made a path just to the right of the tree that started wide and narrowed as it

moved diagonal across the paper. In my mind I recited the lines of “The Road not Taken,” recently memorized for 5th grade English. Margaret looked over and said, “What an artist,” in a tired voice. I’m sure my mom spoke then, but I can’t imagine what she might have said.

When the women were finished rolling cigarettes we moved outside. I stood against the building’s wall and stared at a grey plastic arm for crushing cans that was mounted to the outside of the building. Beneath the arm were two large garbage cans, lined with thick black plastic, and filled with flattened pop cans. The people in this house drank a lot of soda and smoked a lot of cigarettes. They saved all the aluminum cans and cashed them in for money at the recycling plant. I counted the flattened cans resting on the surface of the pile and tried to mathematically work out how many total cans the bins could hold, but I couldn’t remember the formula for volume. It felt like I was trying to guess the correct number of jellybeans in a glass jar at a carnival. I looked out at my mom and Margaret smoking on one of two picnic tables in the yard. Above their head was some type of birch tree; the leafless November limbs resembled my drawing from inside. Every spring the tree comes back to life and thousands of little ladybugs blanket its surface, presumably to reproduce with each other all over the leaves.

Living in the house were two orange cats with extra toes on their feet. They often hid in the juniper bushes just beyond the front porch. I knelt down and glanced into the bushes, searching for the cats, but I didn’t find them there. They were probably inside, hiding beneath one of the residents’ beds. On a sunnier day not long before I used my first digital camera to take a photo of a cat sitting in dappled sunlight. Their eyes glowed yellow in the shadows, and I loved them.

On visiting days my mom would smoke at the picnic tables while my brother and I played outside. One day it rained for a few hours, and dozens of tiny snails crept out onto the sidewalks. I collected a few snails in an empty fruit snack packet and brought them inside. My mom helped me line Tupperware with damp paper towels. We punched holes in the lid, I placed the snails inside and we fed them carrots until their droppings turned orange.

In the evenings residents of the house took turns preparing dinner. There was a large white marker board with names of people and tasks delineated: grocery shoppers, dinner cook, dish washer. There was a common room TV and a smaller one in the women’s lounge. There was probably another in the men’s area but I was never allowed up the stairs. Two payphones in the dining area rang frequently. Occasionally someone was waiting nearby to receive a call but not always. A staff member usually sat at a cluttered desk looking over one of the two long dining room tables.

This is where my mom lived once, in a house with strangers and schedules and visiting

hours. I came for visits every week, and once every other weekend. Ten years ago I was a kid with a kid brother and a sick mom who was getting better every day. I built memories here, and then I slowly lost them over the years. I forgot about the typewriter on the dresser in the women's lounge. I had never used a typewriter before but my mom could teach me because she had used one just like it in college. I once typed a journal entry about my kissing gourami named Valentine. I wrote a love letter to my mom, and she bought me a machine to make my own stickers.

There was a morning when my dad took me to Perkins for breakfast because I was sick with the flu. I couldn't go to school so he drove me to the house where my mom was, and I threw up bacon in the parking lot. That day my mom and I sat and watched the movie Titanic until I fell asleep. Then she smoked on the loveseat outside and I laid my head in her lap. I cannot accurately describe to you the beauty of this moment – it has never once left me. The sun warmed my skin and the weather worn fabric of the small couch. The light illuminated my closed eyelids until they fluoresced hot orange, and my mom ran gentle fingers through my hair for what felt like blissful eternity. Her cigarette smoke smelled deep and pleasing on this day. We were silent but a breeze drifted through the leaves of the ladybug birch tree, and birds called in the distance.

I still don't know exactly how long my mom lived in this place. I never kept track, and I could probably look back and calculate an approximate timeline but I won't. She was gone from my life for so long and then suddenly she was there in this house, and I was there with her if only for a few hours each week. When I was a kid my mom lived in a group home for the mentally ill, the recovering addicts, the homeless. In this home we were together, and we were happy, and we were safe.

At the tail end of her stay she met a man and fell in love and I cried because she could not be his when before she was only mine. She left the house and the man came along. A month or two later I found his deodorant in my mom's bedroom and this filled me with rage. I knocked it behind the dresser so he wouldn't be able to find it again. My mom lived in the basement of a friend's house that wasn't big enough for more than one person. Still, over time the man came over more and more often. Soon they moved out together and found an apartment of their own. The man's prolonged presence resulted in my increased tolerance of his existence. Eventually he grew to love us all and I think I might have loved him once.

Everything shattered a few years ago. The man ultimately disappeared. I poured cups of mixed alcohol down the drain. I silently replaced birthday money taken from my brother's elementary school backpack. I woke up in the night unable to find my mom anywhere in the house. Then,

a few months ago, I nearly lost my mom completely. I walked down snowy streets in fear that I would hear her name call out to me from the dark blankets and cardboard scraps on the sidewalk surface. I called her and a slurring man I didn't know answered the phone in North Dakota. She was lost for six months.

I found my mom in the halfway house from 10 years ago. I brought her flowers, pink azaleas in a pot, the day before Valentines Day. We sat together at the table where, years ago, I watched her roll hundreds of cigarettes. And I listened to her talk about what was the same and what had changed. She laughed wildly in a way that was new and unsettling to watch. She rocked towards me and reeled back slightly, grinning and holding my hand in hers. I brought her expensive chocolates and she ate them at the table, passing me bits to share. I listened to stories about weeks she spent on the streets, about her broken ankle and the surgery. How she met a new man – he had cancer. It was terminal.

I sat at the table and felt stunned. I looked at the bowl on the floor that held water for the old orange cat. His name is Hobbes, I couldn't find him that day, but I think he may have been hiding in the juniper bushes. My mom smoked at the picnic tables outside. Her teeth looked different. I glanced at the birch tree – no ladybugs quite yet. We hugged. My mom cried, but for some reason I couldn't.