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Tammy Delatorre

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TAMMY DELATORRE

I AM COMING FOR YOU

- Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction -

IAM COMING for you. My mother might have said those words the night she went after him—the bearded man, the one she took to her room all those nights. He would come over after I'd gone to bed. She carried me from her room—the only place I could fall asleep—to the room across the hall. In the sticky Hawaiian heat, I'd wake to their loud moans and groans in the middle of the night and sit straight up in bed. At six years old, the only thing I knew of sex was a glimpse I got on TV: two bodies moving under a white sheet.

The room I was in was not my room. My room was my mother's room. I was afraid of the dark, afraid of being alone, but I also knew I could not go in there with them doing what they were doing. Still, I got out of bed and sat with my back against her bedroom door and fell fast asleep.

I am coming for you. I repeat these words like a mantra, like a prayer, like a blessing. *I am coming for you.* What I am actually doing is driving in the early morning in Los Angeles to the gym. There is little traffic. I am going fast, wanting to be reckless, wanting to wrap my car around some pole rather than to think the thoughts I'm thinking. *I am coming for you.* It crosses my mind that revenge is not a reason to write,

and yet it is the reason I am writing today.

That morning in Hawai'i, when I am six years old, the door I fell asleep against is pulled away from me. I look up, smiling, expecting it will be my mother, but it is the bearded man.

"Listen, you little brat, your mother doesn't need you hanging around." He digs his fingers into the soft, pulpy part of my arm, digs until his fingers hit bone, until I wince with pain, until he's dragged me across the hall to the room that is not mine and throws me against the bed. He pauses for the briefest moment, considering if there's more to be done to me. "Stay there," he says and shuts the door.

I do not come out until I know he is gone, his deep voice absent from down the hall. In the living room, I find my mother lounging on the couch, body relaxed and loose, eyes dreaming, smile crooked, like she's about to lie. "He makes me happy," she says. "Do you like him?"

I shrug, wanting to show her the red welts he's dug into my arm.

"Oh, don't you want Mama to be happy?"

I do, but why does it take him? Why not just me?

After my sister was taken away by Child Protective Services, after my father left, I slept with my mother in her bed, skin to skin. Her sweat. My sweat. I long to know her in this way again, a time when a barrier to her body did not exist. Her hard muscles against my soft belly, her pelvis against my thigh, her clavicle, a resting place for my arm. Mine. All of it. That was my happiness, but I nod anyway for hers.

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I AM COMING for you. I did not see it happen. I did not see him hurt her, and yet she was hurt. I found her unconscious on the living room floor. A red eye swollen shut. A bloodied lip. This was what I knew of love. This was what I learned from her. *I am coming for you, motherfucker.* Because that's exactly what he was. He fucked my mother all those nights, then gave her a black eye. He took everything from her, and he took her from me.

Weeks after I found her unconscious, her bruised eye had begun to heal. I sat in her lap. My fingers drawn to touch the puffy flesh above her cheekbone. She swatted my hand away. "Don't," she said. "It still hurts."

The plum purple had faded, as if it melting into her. I looked at the rest of her body, her breasts, belly and hips. Where had it gone? Deeper. I pressed my hands onto her chest plate and saw another bruise burning a midnight blue through her skin.

"I want one," I said, as if it were a bright-colored tattoo from a Cracker Jack box.

"You shouldn't want to hurt."

But I wanted to be just like her.

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I AM COMING for you. It must have taken a lot for my mother to plan a murder. First, the psychology of it, wanting to slit someone's throat or shoot him or beat him to death, and second, the physicality of it, knowing whether her body was strong enough to take his body and do harm to it.

In my adult life, I've mustered low-grade resentment toward a boss who made me work over the weekend. I've flared with temporary rage at someone who cut me off in traffic. But when I recall the bearded man, the meter moves up the scale, incited by a man who knew how to hurt, years of experience honed behind his methods. He didn't stop and consider; he didn't plot and scheme. It came natural, fingers that grab and dig, fists that hold, then hit.

When the bearded man closed me into the room that was not mine, I might have thought, *I hate you.* I might have thought, *I wish you would die.* A little girl clenching her fists. *Die!* I might have thought that. But imagine my mother. She made a list of things to do. It began with a gun. I was there when she went to ask her uncle for it, said she'd feel safer with it now that my father was gone. And the words did not come to me then, though I wanted to say them: "Please don't give it to her." She checked the first item off her list. The next: leave my daughter in the middle of the night. And the next: recruit two strong, able-bodied men to help me do what I cannot do alone.

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I AM TRAVELING to the gym on Wilshire Boulevard to know my mother's

body. Her strong arms, her svelte figure, her muscular back. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.* I still reach for her in the middle of the night. Just a cold sheet. I strive for a body like hers but fail. There are times when I'm on the treadmill, when I'm running full out, like I'm running for my life, like I'm running to get back to her, even though that's impossible.

It was cold the morning my mother left me. That's why our windows were rolled up when we pulled into the small parking lot of the Presbyterian Church on Ali'i Drive. I could foresee the long, dim room where we kids jammed our jackets into cubbies, crayon-colored on desks and took naps curled in sleeping bags. I didn't want to go in there that morning because I knew my mother had a gun.

She leaned over to kiss my cheek. Her black hair smelled of gardenia and honeysuckle. She was so beautiful with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. I wanted to perch on the steering wheel and lean into her breasts.

"Come on, sweetie. Mama's going to be late for work."

She was always referring to herself in the third person, as if she wasn't her own self, wasn't an "I" making decisions, just someone she knew, taking actions beyond her control.

She waited for me to open the door and get out of the car, to join the throng of children on the playground, so messy and playful and light. They ran and sweat and laughed.

I sat in the passenger seat; hot tears rolled down my cheeks. "Please. Can't I come with you just for today?" Of course, it wasn't just to-

day. It had been many days, a long train of days helping her clean rooms. So many days, I knew her routine by heart: the bathroom, the bed, the trash, then vacuum. Other maids might have done it differently, but if my mother knew anything it was how to clean up other people's messes.

"No, you can't come with me every day. You're going to get me in trouble."

"But I can hide. And I promise to be the best helper."

Usually, she relented after a few pleas. She liked the company and she liked the help, so I worried she had other plans, plans with the gun.

She got out and came around the car to my side. I turned and quickly pushed down the lock. She knocked on the window once with her knuckle. "Open. You have to go to school."

I anticipated her next move and shuffled quickly over the middle console where the hand brake was pulled up and pushed the driver's lock down as well. I climbed back into my seat and faced forward until I heard her say, "All right, you can come. But just this once. I mean it."



AT THE GYM, I do resistance training first. My muscles work mostly against the weight of memory. I do successive reps until the point of fatigue, until the point of failure. Tiny fibers in my sinew fire and burn until they twitch and shake. On the other side of this effort is me trying to become my mother's body. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.*

I do plyometrics next with explosive jumps, use the elastic properties of my muscles to propel myself through air. I try to land soft and with good form to protect my knees. Old injuries, they still haunt me. I need to be strong like my mother. You never know when you're going to need it.

Because, of course, a man like the bearded man would end up in my bed. He had the same fingers. He put them in me, among other things. When I first met him, he said, "I want to wreck you." I cuddled against his hot skin, thinking, how sweet, that he thinks he could, how sexy that he wanted to try. That story ended badly, as we both knew it would. He wrecked me. And I let him.

In one form or another, every man in my life has been a version of the bearded man. They hurt me because they could, because they knew how. They didn't hit me, like my father or the bearded man hit my mother, but they still hurt me. Like that boyfriend who broke my bedframe, too many nights going hard against me. When he got up for a drink of water, I slid the mattress off the box spring, and the box spring off the frame, and found the butterfly bolt had snapped in two. Like a vertebra, broken, the whole thing caved in.

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AT THE ISLANDER Inn, I helped my mother push the maid service cart down the balcony passage between rooms. The walkway overlooked the gardens and an asphalt road. I pulled the towels while she started to clean the tub. I pulled the sheets and linen from the bed while she brought a

new set in from her cart. She always tried to make the bed in less than five minutes. When I helped, she made the time easily, according to the clock on the nightstand.

At lunch, she let me eat her baloney sandwich. When her boss came by, I hid in the closet. When he came by again, I hid in her cart. He came by a lot.

In one of the rooms, I found an unopened bottle of Wheat Nuts. Mama usually threw out any food, but that day she made an exception.

Those nuts were crisp and salty. I remembered them tasting like the goodness of working with my mother, where work was solid and reliable in its routine, and the gun didn't exist. We finished two floors of rooms. We made everything clean again.

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“READ ME A story, Mama.”

“You're already falling asleep.”

“But my arms...” They ached from the long day of cleaning. They felt hollow, like they were being erased.

Her fingers gently kneaded my shoulders.

“Aren't you coming to bed?”

“Not yet, baby. Not yet.”

She left a little sweetness then; her lips pressed against my crown.



I WOKE WITH a start and reached over to her side of the bed, but it was empty. I ran across the hall to check the room where I kept a large cardboard box I used as a playhouse. I heard crying. I neared the cutout door. Maybe Mama was inside. All I could see was my Raggedy Ann on the floor, one of her legs folded severely under her body. I inched closer and reached to straighten the limb, thinking the crying might stop, but it didn't. I touched my own face; it was wet with tears.

I ran down the hall and checked the rest of the house. My mother was gone.

I waited for her at the kitchen table. I fell asleep on the couch. I got ready for school in the morning. But no one came for me. Not the next day or the next. Not for seven days by my count, and I learned how to count early. My father denied it, said he came the night she called, but who's to say she called the night she left.

Seven days I used a dining room chair to stand on tippy toes to reach the white ceramic bowls she kept in the cupboard. Seven days of Lucky Charms and Fruit Loops. Baloney sandwiches, too. It was on the first night that I counted the thin slabs of pink meat and slices of bread to figure out how long they would last. Seven days I looked at the list of names and numbers tacked next to our phone on the wall. I couldn't reach the phone or the list, but I could use the chair if I needed to. Seven days, five of which I got ready for school in case she came home. Of

course, she'd already begun to leave me. This time, I knew it was for good.

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CONSIDER THE BEDROOM. How many I've been in, through my twenties and thirties, rooms that were not mine. A man I met at a coffee shop. I ended up in his room. This is the part of the story where I take off my clothes. I thought I needed to, to get back to her. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.* I still reach for her. Just a cold sheet.

This is the part where I let the straps of my camisole fall from my shoulders, my breasts bare and heavy. Although this man has a beard, the rest of his body is smooth. This is the part where the top button of my jeans is undone so other parts, soft and puffy, come out. He glares at my belly button, how dark and recessive, how it beckons his tongue. My nipples grow plump; he rolls one between his thumb and index finger, then pinches. This is the part where my jeans are on the floor, and I wonder how to go on trying to be my mother's body. His tongue darts between my legs, between the folds of flesh, in and out.

This body, left by my mother, has not always felt like my own, not something to be taken care of, not something to hold as precious. This is why I hurt it, not on purpose, not at first. He turned me over, entered me from behind. He thrust and pushed my face down into the white sheet of his bed. He ground hard into the curve of my ass; the crook of his arm bent up around my neck, putting me in a choke hold. He might have snapped me in two. Imagine my body found the next morning, bro-

ken and left.

I don't know when it started. That's a lie. I know the exact moment: she snuck out in the middle of the night and left me, hollowed out, just a shell I let men crawl into.

At the gym, today, like so many days, I cannot see my face in the mirror on the wall. I see only pieces of my body: stiff hips, tight neck, bouncing shoulders. I like the momentum of my parts, moving beyond memory. Fragments somehow made whole. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.* Moving over this terrain holds me. I am becoming my mother and not my mother, and stronger through the process.

Consider the many nights without sleep. Even now, I don't sleep well, not since I was a little girl. I refuse to suffer a state of unrest in bed, so I walk the short hall back and forth in darkness, hoping to find tired, that sense of heaviness that makes me fall back through time, to get back to her. And when tired still does not come although the morning light has come, I pull out my laptop and work on this essay and think of all the things that I'll have to leave out.

I won't want to say how a man from Pomona took me to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* because I love that rock opera, how we arrived early so we walked the grounds surrounding the theater, how he pulled me behind some bushes and propped my body against a large green unit. I imagine that metal box had something to do with electricity. Against its dangerous hum, I let him push into me.

I won't tell the part either, where this whole story is about ne-

glect, about leaving my body to the point I no longer exist.

I dated the man from Pomona for nine months. He accused me of sleeping with random men behind his back, accused me of sleeping with his best friend, accused me of giving head to a man at a nightclub when I went to the bathroom, accused me of being a slut. I wouldn't do that kind of thing to him, yet I had done that kind of thing before him: gone home with random men, one I met at a Coffee Bean, another from a noodle house, one from Borders Books. *My mother's body, a map in my mind*. It hurt so much to acknowledge the truth of it. I had been that girl. Wouldn't I always be that girl? His accusations rang in my ears. It became necessary to bring the pain I felt to the surface, to take a phone receiver or the heel of my shoe or even my own fists to my thighs, pain erupting in pleasure, the bruises, a beautiful sign, my body was healing.



I LEAVE THE gym, and a dull ache flares in my shoulder. Some pain you carry for years; this one crinkles my brow, dries my throat, makes me want to weep. On the way home, I stop at an ATM to get cash. I push my card into the slot and remember how my mother relied on the wrinkled dollar bills left by tourists on hotel nightstands.

Today, there's money enough. I have a solid job and a loving boyfriend, but the thought creeps into my mind: wreck it. Tear it down. I go into a nearby Starbucks and order a hot chocolate. The barista hands me my cup, "I put a little extra in it." He does a whirling-whip-cream ges-

ture with his fingers and wears a naughty grin. He's handsome enough. We could be at his place in fifteen minutes. We could do it against the door of the bathroom; old habits are hard to break.

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AFTER MY MOTHER left me, no one would tell me what had happened. My father's girlfriend got closest, saying things she shouldn't to a six-year-old, "You should have seen what that guy did to her: busted her up real good." And another time, "After your father did what he did, she wasn't going to take that shit from another man."

As I grew up, no one would tell it to me straight. I asked my father once. He said, "You think too much about the past."

Finally, at thirty-nine, I hired a private investigator who obtained the police reports for me. My mother got two men to help her kidnap the bearded man at gun point, to bring him back to my childhood house and beat him within an inch of his life. One account said she shot at him seven times but didn't hit her mark. Another said they broke into his apartment, bound his hands behind his back and put him in a car. Another said she held a knife to his throat and threatened to slit it. She hit him in the face with the gun. She hit him in the face with her fists.

I imagine she might have said, "See! How do you like it?"

She came for you, motherfucker.

It's easy to judge my mother. I've heard others do it, say things like, *she lost it. A screw came loose. She was a hot mess. She was a night-*

mare on wheels.

Violence is never justified. Yet sometimes I think my mother was justified.

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THIS STORY ENDS in a dream. My mother and I are in a department store. We have picked out clothes and gone into separate dressing rooms. Between the slats of my door, I see her admiring herself in a three-paneled mirror, wearing the same tight violet dress I have slipped on. Her waist is slender, her back and arms muscular and tight. The store clerks gather with praise.

In the dream, I feel small, like a child again. My body, blockish and chunky. Her body, the map. I follow its tortuous route.

“Do you have something on? Let me see,” she calls.

I am coming. It’s easy to forget why I created the map in the first place. I push through the door, urgent to say, *Read me a bedtime story, Mama, one with a different end.* But when I emerge, I am alone. I stand before the mirrors, where she once stood, now a grown woman in a different dress, this one a shade of autumn red. It shows off my legs. Revenge is not a reason to write, but it wasn’t revenge I was after, just a desire to find a new map. A map is but a mirror. In the reflection, I appreciate my shapely legs and sturdy core, a shell refilled now with my own beating heart and a rib cage to protect it.