

Bruise and Shine

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ALEX KITT

WHEN MY BROTHER CALLED, *YOU SHOULD GO SEE HER, SHE DOESN'T SEEM WELL*, I imagined boring yellow afternoons, my mother's sweaty old straw hat on its hook at the door, summer flowers on the windowsill heatstroke-dry—and a grey version of my mom stuck inside on the couch. Convalescent. Cable-infomercial eyes. Prying take-out lids open, her fucked-up knuckles becoming more swollen than ever. After a couple nights I told my boyfriend about it. He said he'd come for support. My ex said the same thing last summer.

But when we show up, she's tan, in the backyard, alive and well and getting a start on what I always come to do late summer—pick the apple tree clean.

She has her back turned and I see it, like a hand arched over her body: the tree, obviously dying. We watch her reach, high as she can, plucking and then placing the apples carefully in a small basket at her feet. Sacred enough to cut me right through.

Cole bellows a big hello.

Formalities. Introductions. We set our things on the patio table and move towards the tree. She smiles at me as if our last phone call didn't end in argument and silence, like those long minutes of our static breath didn't end with her placing down the receiver.

Cole tilts his head, "Have you watered it recently?"

"No," she mocks, rolling her eyes.

"Okay well, we could probably prune it. I can call an arborist and see if they could stop by?"

Mom pauses, taking a moment to look him head to toe. Cole decided on the pink sweater that shaped him more like a pear than any of his other clothes—he thought it would endear her.

"I want to let it die," she says, finally.

"Let it...?"

“Yep.”

“What about property value?” he asks. “And the tree next to it, it could...”

She turns to me, “Annette. Tell your boyfriend he’s an ass, talking property value to a woman twice his age.”

I try not to smile. “Cole... You’re an ass.”

He puts his hands up as if he were the culprit.

Cole sort of freaked me out when I first met him. A chef with a missing tooth, harsh eyebrows, back-hair blending easily with his hairline. The part that freaked me out was how naively sweet he was, like he’d swallowed a child. It made you question if he ever experienced a single negative event. My friends say he’s too optimistic, *simple-minded*.

Underneath the tree, Cole, the head of our little conveyor belt of arms passing apples along, was trying his best with mom.

How long have you owned the house? Long. How’s work at the casino? Good.

Offering questions I knew he hoped would boomerang back to answers he could give. Answers she’d find respectable, ones that would paint him in a noble light.

When she rests in the shade of the house, I shush him, and tell him to quit while he’s ahead.

I steal glances at her, my knees pricked numb by the dead grass as I separate yellow-brown apples from those severely brown. As we work, she chain-smokes, like always, like forever ago, smoke pouring from her body. As a child I always imagined her insides black, a coil-dark spell lacing over her bones.

She can’t hide it. I see what I imagined. It’s not that she looks much older—I can blur my eyes and wash wrinkles away. It’s that she looks untethered, a bruised pallor deep beneath the eyes, like absence—not her body, but the spark.

“No flour. Not even sugar.” Cole rifles through the

drawers in her kitchen. He wants to try to bake us an apple pie now that we’ve plucked most of the apples. A nervous way to give himself a task. “How does she not have sugar?”

“She doesn’t cook,” I say.

“How does your mom not cook?”

“It was my dad who did.”

“Ah. Well, what does she eat?” He bends over, pink sweater disappearing into the fridge.

“Food-court, once a day. Besides that, coffee. And trail mix too.”

He stands, pulling something fuzzy out of the fridge, “Well, I’m pretty sure I remember where the grocery store is.”

“I’ll come.”

“We came all this way... Don’t you want to talk to her?”

“Pinky!” my mother yells from outside. “Hey, Pinky!”

Cole’s eyes go wide. “What did she just call me?”

I mimic him: “*Don’t you want to talk to her.* C’mon, go Pinky, go see what she wants.”

I follow him to the door but stop before it. I listen to her begin the infamous boyfriend interrogation. I listen to how different her voice is with Cole. It makes me think of how good she is at pretending to be otherwise, like hiding below a certain depth, a lake you’d never know the bottom of—alien, aloof, all words she once used to describe me. A way to bring something in close to your heart without actually letting it anywhere near.

The conversation Cole and I had on the drive over filtered through questions like: *Wouldn’t she be better if you hired a helper? Couldn’t your brother visit her more often?* I lied about visiting her once a month. I could only do it once or twice a year. I could only be *that* daughter so often.

I turn back, begin to drift around the house I grew up in, following nostalgia and memory, I let the current

take me. And she isn't real, but I can't help imagining her, like a ghost in the hallway ahead of me, leading me. A composite version of myself I create from two old photographs. One of me with blonde hair, wrung out with wind, lake water, and sand, at the beach. The other is me on my eighth birthday in a severely white shirt, with my eyes pinned to my feet.

I follow her down the hall into the living room. I remember the day I played baseball with a head of lettuce in the living room until it shed itself completely, down to none. And how maybe that day, I think, I got the belt, lashes on top of my outstretched hands.

I watch the composite outline blur, then filter with different memories.

I follow her downstairs. Other moments come to mind. Shades of my past self: devoted to family, fantasy, longing, mistake. Selves which detach, release, from the composite mass and then walk by, past me, out of the house. Other shapes, outlines, or different selves come in, in through the vents, in through the pipes. They come inside the house and make her up, blur and blur. I look at this girl and I think of escape. Think of the kid choosing to run away and never lasting past midnight. Think of her as a teen, sneaking her mom's keys, climbing out of the basement window, and taking drives with her friends, drunk, all-over town.

I roll my tongue over my teeth. I feel my body want water. I feel it faintly, that sense of urgency, the signal of the body's need, homeostasis.

What to do with it? Present feelings coming in from the past, reminding me of how I felt when I was trying to forget what came before. And now, how I don't want to be this container, don't want to cycle through memories of moments meant to replace other moments, again. Wanting escape from escape, again. The composite ghost, just me, blur and blur, with whoever it is I am now. In my old room, I curl up on the soft rug like I used to, into myself, like clutching

towards a center that won't hold, myself, arriving from everywhere all at once, going away always.

Mom kicks me hard in the shin.

I pull my face off the carpet. It's still light out.

"The hell you doing? Your boyfriend leaves and you decide to take a nap? Come visit."

I rub the sleep from my eyes and follow her to the backyard. There is only one patio chair, so I sit on the grass.

"It's next week you two are headed to Tofino, right?" she asks.

"What? I never told—"

"Pinky told me. Before he left."

"Stop calling him—" I motion towards her pack, "Can I?"

She tosses me a smoke. "Remember all the hell you gave me? *Cancer. Cancer.*"

I take a drag. Make a show of snapping the smoke in half. Stand. Crush it underfoot, into the grass, and take a few steps toward the tree.

"Tofino should be lovely," she says.

"Mnm."

"How long will this one last? Pinky?"

"Cole."

"How long will Cole last?" she corrects herself.

"He's a good person. Hopeful." I walk to the tree. None of the apples I see look too great. I take three. It makes me think about all those meagre lunches she used to pack me for school. Always apples, no matter the bruises, no matter how close they were to mush. I look at her, looking at me—a look that used to have spite. I take a bite, no crunch, sour running down my throat—a taste of something on its way out.

"He's kinda a simpleton, isn't he? This Cole of yours."

I block it out. "Why don't you wanna help the tree?"

"I figure it's done enough. If it wants to die, let it be."

"It's not sentient, Mom."

"It's not? Oh well, I sure remember you having those long, long talks with it, after your dad passed. *How has your day been? How does that make you feel? Are you okay?* You know that scared the shit out of me, how you did that..." She starts to laugh, "Remember when I went down to the middle school demanding they find you a friend. It was because I saw how you were talking with the tree."

"And they sent me home with that boy who stole our Wii."

We break into laughter, but her smoker-cough stops her short. I revel at our natural step into the act of mother and daughter. But I worry about her, with our following silence, it seems like some strange costume, so I ask, honestly: "Can you stop calling him Pinky when he gets back?"

"I'll be nice."

After taking a few big bites from each apple I make the habitual swing of my arm, tossing them into the dirt where the garden used to be. When I look at the open earth, I'm reminded of how mom and dad would step between romaine and green leaf, checking the peas, big clumsy steps, like giants. Dad would try to get her to dance a bit, feet planted between the rows. She'd move awkwardly. Even the way she tried to smile through it, past her discomfort, looked awkward. But she tried to lose herself in it, even as a kid I could tell, mis-stepping onto chives or red chard to keep balance, blushing.

"If the tree dies, will you even come up at all?"

"Mom," I say, in a way that means she's wrong. I don't even believe it.

We sit silent for a while. Her breath reminds me of our last phone call.

"Any other news?"

"Life with me is always the same," she says. "Wake, casino, eat, home, sleep, wake. At least your brother still comes by." She takes out another smoke, with a

hunger that isn't hunger. "Same old same old," she carries on, "Tell your mother something... Are you still seeing that guy with the heart condition? Atrial-septic-defect-guy. Or is it that skinny guy? The cheat with all the drugs?"

I don't say anything. The same bitterness but leaning toward something drained.

"Christ, Annette. You don't have to pretend. You see things the way I do. Everything goes in the end."

"How little does it matter to you?" I ask. "The tree." She shrugs. Ambivalent.

"Should I just go?" I ask.

"Yes. May as well. May as well leave Cole too, huh?"

We stay. Neither of us move a muscle, and more light leaves the sky.

"They didn't have sugar! How does a grocery store not have sugar? And nutmeg! Do you know a substitute for nutmeg?"

"No."

Cole rolls up his sleeves. Moves the flour and cinnamon towards the big bowl, pulls the eggs and butter from the shopping bag, runs his hands through his hair. His arms stay up, fingers laced around the back of his neck.

I stand behind him.

He lets out a sigh. His shoulders drop.

"Don't try too hard," I say. "You know, she's got very little hope in things."

"Don't worry. I'll make it work. I can do it."

"He doesn't have to."

"Mum, he wants to."

"Does he know I don't like pie?"

"Shh. No."

"Well."

"I know, I know. Could you just pretend to like it? For me?"

I'm on my knees, beside the front window in the living room. Staring out at the quiet neighborhood listening to the sound of the whisk; the sound of some metal bowl clanging off something else; the sound of Cole's exasperation inside the kitchen.

Mom has some fake flowers in a vase by the window. A fan of magazines lay atop a new side table she must have bought for herself.

I imagine her browsing the store. Seeing the table. Paying and scheduling delivery. Happening to be by the window as the delivery truck rolls into view. And then, this—a fan of magazines no one would ever touch, and a vase with flowers that would never bend. She would bend. Fake flowers and fans of magazines and their tables and entire rooms would not bend. I would bend. It makes me remember how much dad hated fake flowers. It makes me remember wishing he would walk in the door. It makes me remember the way mom tried to maintain their garden, but how everything eventually just died anyways.

I look at the flowers on the windowsill, dried dead petunias my brother must have planted in the spring, yellow nothings folding back into soil. I did the same when I still lived in town, I remember driving up to water them, to keep the plants and flowers alive. But they were always dry, and my patience, too, like their stems, grew thin. Her own lack of effort was wearing me thin.

I poke my head into the kitchen and see Cole sitting on the floor watching the pie in the oven.

"Doing okay?" I ask.

He doesn't turn to look at me but shrugs his shoulders, "Could be better."

"Will it turn out?"

Again, he shrugs. I feel the immediate urge to find mom's hair trimmer and shave all the hair off his neck. I'd continue up his hairline, do his arms, make him bare like a child so his optimism would suit him.

Mom comes in behind me and takes a seat at the table, "Smells good. Almost done?"

"Not quite. Thank God your neighbor had sugar."

"Who? Which?" I ask, already feeling the pang in my chest.

My mom asks, "Which house?"

Cole stares dumbly.

"Which house?"

"The one, the next one, next door, the brown one."

Mom starts: "Oh no! You didn't," laughing hard.

I look at Cole: "Did you taste it?"

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"They hate us. Completely. Did you tell them? When you went over; did you tell them who you were? Why you... Why wouldn't you," I say.

"Why do they?"

"It doesn't matter, take it out."

Mom doesn't stop laughing. "C'mon, have a taste."

He stands, puts his finger in the mixing bowl. When he tastes, his screwed up face confirms it's salt. "Why would they..." he begins.

"Told you, Annette," thwacking her pack of smokes against the tabletop and standing, and repeats it, heading out to the yard.

Cole doesn't move. I go past him, take out the pie, shut off the oven.

We can hear mom start up laughing again outside.

"I don't like your mother," he whispers. "Fuck her."

"Hmn."

He strokes my arm. "Maybe we should buy her a big stupid dog and never come back."

For a split second, I imagine all of my boyfriends over the years, and all my corresponding selves, all of us, here, crowded in the kitchen.

"Hey," one says, pushing his body closer to mine. "Hey. It's okay." They put their hand in my hair, "We can bring a pie next time." They all press towards me. From the slats of all their ribs, every guy, it spills, from

their mouths and their eyes: dumb love reaching out.

And I think of all of me. Each self descending down the ladder of years, all with that same pit in their gut, the far away feeling.

Cole goes to kiss me, and I try to say stop. Our teeth clash.

I push off of him as he tries to hold me, and from his arms, I go out quickly to the patio where mom sits—the yard so empty.

She sees in my face what I tried to ignore, tried to keep from Cole. I can tell she'd like to say it again, *no victories Annette*, but she just puts on a soft smile.

I want to sit with her. Be comforted. But there is only the one chair.

"There are some camping chairs around the side," she says.

I go alongside the house, stepping over a rake and an old hockey stick. I walk all the way down, but don't see them.

I turn. I notice they're under the broken patio umbrella all the way back past the rake.

And then I see 'Tree Doctor Fertilizer' by my feet with a recent receipt stapled to the bag.

I pull back the tarp which covers some of the bag and find the stepladder Mom said she threw out. There are the shears. There is the spade. And little bags of seeds, used and torn open and wasted with effort.

I don't grab a chair. I don't say anything when I get back around from the side of the house and see her

sitting there, slumped back in her chair, eyes shut. I don't say anything to Cole, who's leaned up against the doorway letting all the bugs in.

I see the apples. Under night, a few good ones way atop the tree that we couldn't reach, looking like clusters of moons. And I want him there. My dad. I want him to pick me up like he used to. To lift me. Make me float a little, like when I was a kid. Stupid pretend floating that felt real with him.

Cole has two plates in his hands. Each with a clump of mush salt-pie on them.

But he sees where I'm looking and leaves the plates on the patio table. He walks with me to the tree and gets low and I saddle onto his shoulders.

I place my hands in his hair.

"Higher," I say.

"Okay," he says, with more breath than word, more struggle, lifting me.

I straighten my body, extend.

We come off balance; I clench my thighs tight. I reach for a branch, shaking the tree, patches of black sky through it too, shaking loose. I shift my hand on his head, but it slips, I poke his eye, he swears. I reach again. Strain, every bit of myself, towards, my fingers brushing the apple. Brushing against, brushing almost. Steadying for balance. I glance back, over the yard, towards mom. She's leaning forward watching us, nearly out of her seat, her eyes caught with a light like hope.