2000 First Place Personal Narrative

Cutting Strings

I’m in bed, scanning the ceiling for a light that isn’t there. There wasn’t one last night, or the night before, so I shouldn’t have expected anything different than the textured surface that my retinas now scratch across in a long diagonal. The same grey, dried-paint-sharp ceiling that they don’t show in the brochures. Always without a light. Sure, one of those fake-Southwestern lamps with a plastic lamp shade sits beside me on the coffee table, but it’ll just fall with everything else once this island of a motel room shrinks down to a pinpoint and these two beds, those dresser drawers, that mirror, Jessie, Bekah, and my own elusive existence tumble into the empty gap.

“Are they still out there?”

I don’t see her, but I imagine my 16-year-old sister Jessie gaping at the blank TV screen, hoping somebody will answer her question.

“Yep,” Bekah rattles off too quickly.

That’s right, I realize. Still outside. Probably in the car, pinned under the hard rain. It was raining when we got here. Some firefly of a town at the crossing of two faded freeways in northern Pennsylvania where it snows a lot in the wintertime for the skiers, my dad told me in a watery voice while our minivan hummed down the off-ramp. Watercolor black, I thought while I looked out the window, except for the yellow, splotchy Super-8 sign and the white motel lobby. My two sisters and I brought the luggage down and we’re still waiting for mom and dad like dead puppets, and I’m still wishing for a light fixture.

Like the bubble-shaped one that hung in my bedroom about two thousand miles away, before I turned 18 on this family road trip. Before this second act, when my parents stopped flinching their puppet master wrists from above the stage, and so I finally cut my own strings, just to fall flat on my plastic face and deflate like a balloon.

The door clicks open. What can I hang on to? The ceiling is blank.

“Mom?”

I hear my sister’s drawl and think desperately about a light fixture, this one big, with crystal chains and gold bars. I can feel the mattress slipping below my back.

Take your things.

Swinging from chandeliers? No, too much. I’d just hold on.

“Take your things and get out,” Mom says. “You’re sleeping with your dad tonight.”

My two sisters and my older brother and I never heard much, but my mother would sometimes tell us about how her parents beat her and did other things too. “Other things.” The phrase always hung like molasses from
my mouth when I said it as a kid; my mother made it sound like codeine cough syrup tastes–fruity and nauseating, richly lethal. Last summer, I saw that damaging pain leak from her eyes. She was in another argument with dad, maybe about bills or about his downward-spiral job, when I stumbled into their room to ask if I could maybe borrow some money, and that drawn face, that trembling, soft-black hair caught me. She gasped like a broken radio, angry tears slicking her cheeks, and she just looked at me, and I looked back and glimpsed for the first time those lingering stains of child abuse.

Oh, she loved me. There was no question about that. She’d bring my school assignments I always left at home; she payed for my piano lessons and voice lessons and Nate’s gymnastics; she even yelled at the mean bus driver once, just so I could have a “nice ride to school without taking his crap,” she said. But sometimes, during her unpredictable eruptions, I wonder if it’s a mobster kind of love, like Don Corleone’s in The Godfather. She begins to shake, and I always hear a whirring sound, like a machine just turned on. The manufacturing begins–innocent and unrelated phrases uttered weeks before by my unsuspecting mouth churn in her vacuum chamber, then spit back out at me like knives only aimed to surround me and prevent me from moving. The next day she’s dormant again, nicely “apologizing,” or placing the blame of the argument back on my shoulders with graceful aplomb, her delicate self-balance restored.

Dad seems too short to meet her pressure, and I always wonder if he’ll fold like an accordion. Maybe it’s his miniature, quick stride that keeps him up, or his circuit-board brain. He used to be an engineer, after all, so he automatically finds right angles and parallel lines in everything, ready to accept Mom’s backward orientation even if it means his own world is turned upside-down. Sometimes, though, during an argument, the only way he can cope is to shut down completely, giving up his ability to measure or evaluate or critically understand or whatever people call it, sort of locking up and hiding the key. I think his fragile schematics get too soaked with emotion; they don’t run.

All of this burned into my skin before turning 18 right outside of Philadelphia, headed north on I-476, so I imagined I was ready. Ready to measure them against everyone else, their systems of thought and action against the ones I had seen in other parents or read about in books. Those judgements I had gathered would cut my strings with one final swoop, a painless schnik that was already headed my direction; I could feel it just a little further down the freeway.

My scissors finally opened when Dad drove too quickly and missed an intersection nine miles north of Philadelphia. He drove to the next exit sign, landing us between smokestacks and two green ridges. We hadn’t eaten lunch and this suburb was an industrial scab with no fast food place in sight.

He drove up a small hill. My mother said turn left, with an electric crackle.

We turned right, then left, up a steep hill with factories on both sides.

“Mike. This isn’t the on ramp. You needed to turn left at the last intersection like I said before.”

“Julie, I know where I’m going.” He sulked. “This is the way we came in.”

“It doesn’t matter which way we came in; the freeway is that way.” She pointed out the driver’s side window.

I heard a whir coming from either my mother or the air conditioner; I couldn’t tell.

“You know, parking in Philadelphia is one thing, but. . . .” She paused, smiling bitterly out the windshield. “I tell you to turn left–you turn right. You are determined to get us lost. Typically male,” she growled.

“Julie, I . . .”
“Juuullllie, Iiiiii,” she imitated, “‘Juuullllie, Iiii. . .’ You know, I’m sick of your crap. No, you don’t know where you’re going. We go around and around, waiting for you to clue in! You just keep driving and doing your own thing. You never. . . listen!” she exploded, while we slowly ascended the on ramp of interchange 18.

“See, Julie, we’re here!” he yelled back, “I was right and you . . .” he faded out.

“That’s great Mike. We’re finally here with twenty minutes. . . gone! There wasn’t any food, Mike! Just like yesterday! And the day before! The kids are starving, and I tell you to get off six miles ago. But noooo. . . you could never listen to me. . . your own wife!”

My face began to tingle.

“I can’t talk or express. . . anything to you without getting it rammed down my throat by your stupid male. . .”

“I’m done. I’m finished. Just take me home and let me leave, because I’m sick,” I suck in the air like I’m drowning. “Of your stupidity! Of your stupid logic! You’ll blame your entire life on somebody else if you get the chance and end up looking just fine for yourself! Well, you’re not just fine, you never have been. Everything about you is wrong! And I. . . hate. . . you!”

The carpet’s slipping away too. By the time I make it next door, I’ve lost a few inches and I start to feel dizzy. I’m kneeling against the stiff bed and asking God if maybe I hadn’t been so right as I thought. And then I ask if He could help me figure this out somehow, get it all straightened out. This isn’t what it’s like to be an adult, I tell Him, this isn’t what it’s like. . .

And then I finish, drained, and imagine a heave in the carpet, like our tablecloth suddenly yanked out from under Sunday dinner. I start to accelerate downward. I’m bumping into my luggage and the bed, taking a few hard hits, the last one knocking me out and sending me to sleep. Then I wake up, that cotton-ball taste in my mouth, like I’d just taken a three hour nap. I’m still kneeling, but kneeling on nothing, really. No walls, no room. I can’t feel myself falling any more; instead I’m just floating around in a vacuum. Or maybe I really am falling. I can’t tell; there’s no reference point. Einstein said that moving and holding still are the same thing, I repeat to myself, so I didn’t need that light fixture in the first place. I’m just floating around. We’re all just floating around. . .

Three shrill bursts hit the door and my eyes open, their lids blinking away a drop of sweat. She almost flows past me. Her voice wavers in low falsetto, amplified and pure, but completely broken.

“My advice to you: get your father and tell him I don’t want to see either of your faces tonight.”

“Dad, come in to bed.”

I slap the windshield again.

“Come on, dad. I’m tired. Mom wanted me to get you.”

His silhouette sinks downward. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. He’s turned himself off, for system maintenance, for down-time. There must be a stupid short-circuit, I think to myself. He’s just a broken record–a sad, old broken record, I whisper, the heat rising to my ears.

“You’re amazing Dad!” I scream, pausing. “A perfect five-year-old child. You won’t apologize for anything or take responsibility. . . for anything! You’ve lost all my respect. I don’t think I ever had any respect for you!” I stumble back over the wet asphalt and return to my room.
This time other people are floating around in the vacuum too. I see my grandparents, my dad’s face, a little younger than now. My sisters are below me, or above me. I can’t really tell, because it’s all relative, and Einstein says... I bump into someone’s long, thick legs and I just float next to them for a minute. I arch my head up and see my mom in one of her brown dresses and I’m smiling suddenly. And I grab hold of both her hands, pretty tight, and I just start to laugh, and I keep laughing for a long time.

It must be the fake lamplight that opens my eyes to a hazy room with a figure in the corner chair. There he is, reading Harry Potter. Bekah’s book. Harry Potter, I think, how funny, in this room. I squint in surprise, and then disgust, this time directed toward myself. What did I think would happen? Did I think he’d suddenly turn into dust? Or disappear with a poof when I wave my hands and scream? But Harry Potter! He isn’t in the car anymore, but sitting in the same room as me, but without my mother, reading Harry Potter, while others in the motel and in Pennsylvania sleep soundly.

No more toll roads, I think, while we four-leaf-clover onto I-80 westbound. Drizzle dusts the roof of the car—early-morning rain with an acrid scent. My window is down; I can smell it, along with a stretch of purple wild flowers dangling off the freeway shoulder. This flexible ribbon of asphalt connects our minivan with Emigration Canyon and State Street.

My mother speaks.

“Matt,” she asks cryptically, “what have you learned?”

“That I need to be nice to my mother.”

There it is; I knew it was coming. She’d turned the blame back to me again. I cleared my throat, then let it pass. She didn’t have to be anyone else besides the person she’d been since I popped out of her womb with a thugg! My father didn’t either. I’d re-attached myself to them, replacing subservient strings with loving hands.

What did I learn anyway? That my dad reads Harry Potter. That my mother can sometimes sound like a broken vase. That they both have first names and I can’t resolve much more than that, no matter how hard I try. That the Mikes and Julies aren’t perfect, but that the Matts aren’t perfect either, and that all of them need to fasten themselves to each other or they’ll get lost in the vacuum. That we can only stay alive by snipping our strings, grabbing each other tight with our blood-filled arms, and never letting go.