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Char

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CHAR

MICHELLE TIESMA

After the fire, they send us flowers, but the bundles only serve to remind me I have nowhere to put them. That swan-etched vase, my great aunt's . . . I had found the glitter shards, broken after the licking flames cut out the bottom of the china cupboard, crashing the dishes to floor.

The flowers wilt in the corner of the Ogallala Displaced Persons Shelter, propped against a wall, expensive moribund blossoms browning at the edges and crumbling into dirty ash on the concrete in dry silence.

Leo's delicately fat fingers haven't unraveled themselves from the yarn of my sweater in what seems like days, his grip inescapable, strengthened by that two-year-old's certainty that, if he only holds onto his mother tightly enough, everything will be okay and normal. In the three days trapped in the shelter he finds every opportunity to start mumbling his baby sister's name in the way that was so sweet, even just a week ago: "Mo mo mo Mo mo mo." Jamie, his father, silences him every time he starts this chant.

"Leo, shush. Mona isn't here."

My breasts are angry without her. Sore and full and aching. I don't know what to do, I don't know who to ask. On the second day, I hide in the corner stall of the bathroom, tiny paper cup in hand. I fill it, again and again, fingers shaking against my nipples, the cardboard lip of the cup waxy. I pour each small cupful into the toilet. I can feel her warmth against me, in the quiet of the nursery rocking chair. My

chest is so cold as it empties, my bare back against the metal stall. The toilet swirls in slow, murky white.

We bought new clothes for the funeral, but our skin still stinks of smoke. There are so many familiar and unfamiliar faces milling around, coworkers' arms pulling me into hugs, shoulder pats from well-meaning neighbors, vague acquaintances with stiff handshakes and frowns. I take every conciliation with a small upturn of the lips, Jamie's hand burning on the small of my back as he speaks in hushed tones to his sister who flew in last minute. She totters around in her spiky heels that sink into the greenish parlor carpeting while her two tween daughters steal buttermints from tiny dishes on end tables and hug me with sticky fingers.

Leo is excited to have so many potential friends around; he's bouncing from place to place, tugging on pant legs and tapping on knees. He laps up the attention, unaware that it's all built upon pity. His giggles occasionally cut through the murmur of the room, but every time I try to convince myself to go and quiet him, I don't move. I just watch him bumble along to the next distraction.

I remember his giggling whenever he played with Mona. His gentle hands stroking her, so pleased with her, instinctively proud of her, giggling at every coo and cry she made. Now he giggles the same for the flower petals he pulls off the arrangements, and for the buttermint wrappers his cousins litter across the room, so they crinkle in his palms and pockets.

Clusters of my acquaintances speak about nothing, noting the spring weather, the Husker's draft, the flowers. They mill in front of the tiny, tiny sealed box at the end of the room while I stay as far away as I can. My elderly neighbor stares at it, dabbing at her eyes as if it weren't just an empty, ornate box with a single tulip laid across it. She's following the script: What to Do at a Memorial. I have an odd prickling of jealousy at her furrowed brow and misting, cloudy eyes. My eyes are so dry they sting, the soft yellow light against so many pink flowers blistering into my sight. I excuse myself from Jamie's touch and strangers' company to stagger out into the lobby, out into the parking lot. I'm breathing heavily, and the rows of solemn, empty cars glare at me. I hear the jingle of my father's key ring leaving the building, and he and my mother flank me. They pull me into a soft hug, smelling of the distant Pennsylvania mountain air that I used to take for granted. My eyes ache in their dryness.

"You're coming home, aren't you? You can't stay here." Their eyes have been burning at Jamie all day. "You can't be near him. Do you think you could press charges?"

I'm not answering. They stop asking and just hold me.

After everyone has dispersed with tears and hugs and handshakes, leaving us alone with the box, I make

it to the parking lot as fast as I possibly can. Jamie watches from the lobby door as my parents lead Leo away, his chubby hands clasped inside my parents' wrinkled ones. He still tries to wave at me, bouncing and giggling, his little black suit pants sagging.

Jamie rests a hand on my shoulder; I instinctively jolt away. He raises the hand, surrendering, and watches them go. "Taking him to lunch?"

"Yeah, they'll be back in an hour or so."

He hugs me. My skin crawls. We climb into my hatchback, the first moment of privacy in days—since it happened. The words froth inside of me; I can't meet his eyes, but I can feel his words building, too.

I boil over first. We're screaming. We contort in anger. We're crying. I'm hitting him, hitting him, throwing off my ring and hitting him.

I scream at him for not getting Mona. In the middle of the night, as soon as the alarm shrilled, I ran out, Leo cradled against me. Jamie went to get her, yet came outside without her.

I beat him with the back of my hands as he shouts back.

He blames me for my little colorful jar candles, what the fire department said was the cause of it all. He doesn't hit, yet cuts with every accusation of *your fault, your fault. Didn't blow them out. Your fault.*

And all I can think to do is hit and hit and *you gave up, how could you just leave her to*

—

We break ourselves against each other and only stop when there's no more air in the car. Our lungs are both so smoke-poisoned that they give out quickly. My hands sting, and he wheezes.