

Scratch

by Sara Quenzer

Mom's not supposed to call on Christmas morning. She knows Casey and I have our hands full with trying to pack our Subaru full of sleds, blankets, and kids, and that we'll call her when we get to the cabin. Six years, it's been this way.

Yet there's her number, flashing across my screen for the third time in the last ten minutes.

Casey clicks Elise's seatbelt into place and adjusts her teddy bear so the door won't close on it. "We've gotta get going, Jill," he picks up Daisy and starts to wrestle her into her car seat, "Maybe just answer it?"

I throw my head back and grumble before swiping to answer the call, "What?" Casey smirks at the irritation in my voice.

Mom sounds composed, almost detached. "Aunt Perdie's in the hospital."

This time when I say, "What?" my eyebrows shoot up and my voice shrinks down.

"She fell," Mom sighs, "and things aren't looking good."

I stand still for too long, trying to process the news. Aunt Perdie's been a constant my whole life – always there, at least physically if not mentally. Though I suppose I haven't seen her in...three years? That can't be right.

Casey mouths, *What's wrong?* But before I can answer him, Mom tells me everyone else is visiting Aunt Perdie in the hospital and we're expected to join.

She hangs up before I can reply. Did she think I'd protest? Refuse to see Aunt Perdie even though she's literally on her deathbed? I don't really want to see her, and haven't been diligent in doing so, but I have *some* sense of family obligation. Texts pop up with the name of the hospital, Aunt Perdie's room number, and a reminder to have everyone wear the matching, itchy, wool Christmas sweaters Grandma knit for this year.

Everyone has relatives that bother them. They're passive-aggressive about how little they're visited, they cheap out on birthday money by matching age number in bills, they yell at their spouses in front of the children. But Aunt Perdie?

There was something different about the way she bothered me; so different that ‘bothered’ isn’t quite the right word, it seems too definitive. Perdie has a distance to her. We were never connected enough for her to manage *bothering* me. When she entered Grandma and Grandpa’s house for the holidays, smelling of dust and decades-old Chanel, she was usually more excited to see the pets than the rest of us. My brother, Brody, would help her maneuver her walker over the doorstep and she’d greet the dog with a cracking voice and a shaking hand, “Hello Sweetheart,” she’d reach for the dog’s fur, “don’t you look pretty!” She’d smile and her teeth would remind me of peeling, yellow fence boards between her barn-red lips. I always stood awkwardly to the side, my greeting swept away by the dog’s wagging tail.

At the end of the night, when I’d peck her cheek and tell her I loved her, her response tended to be, “Okay, dear,” or even just, “Bye-bye, now.”

I haven’t seen her for three years, but she hasn’t seen me for far longer.

Hands squeeze my shoulders and I furrow my brows.

Casey’s forehead is wrinkled with concern. “Hon, what’s going on?”

The kids are quiet and staring. I suddenly feel grateful that I’m not crying, and soon after feel guilty both for not crying and for feeling grateful about it.

After filling Casey in, he insists I sit down inside for a minute. I worry it will seem too strange if I don’t.

While Casey moves the kids to our other car and tries to explain the situation in a friendly ages-seven-and-under way, I throw off my coat and pace around our living room. The last thing I want to do is sit. I remember Mom’s text about the sweaters and immediately start to look for them, relieved to have a minor distraction from my thoughts. The few times someone ‘forgot’ to wear their sweater, Grandma spent at least 25 minutes in the bathroom with the fan blaring. Aunt Perdie is already dying – I don’t need to stir the pot.

Casey jogs inside, hair mussed from moving Daisy, Elise, the car seat, the booster seat, and then re-buckling the kids. He unzips his coat when he sees the sweaters spilling over my arms. “You okay?” he lays his coat over the couch.

I shrug and hand him the biggest sweater.

He frowns and pulls it over his head, further mussing his hair, before grabbing the girls’ sweaters from me so I can put mine on. It’s the most uncomfortable sweater Grandma’s ever knitted. Does she *like* to chafe?

I squirm and grimace. Casey nods his head in agreement and sighs at the child-sized sweaters in his hands. The kids will riot.

Casey exchanges the sweaters in his hands for my coat and swings it around my shoulders. I pull my arms through the sleeves and he smooths out the collar, “It’ll be okay.”

My expression must not look convinced because he feels the need to insist, “It will,” and pull me into a hug. I would take more comfort from it if the sweater wasn’t biting into my arms and neck. With a sigh, I brush my fingers through Casey’s hair and steer us out the door, sure to grab the kids’ sweaters on the way.

The interior of the hospital is pathetically festive. Faux garland lines a few countertops and railings, faux trees stand in a couple of dank corners, and someone plunks out *Silent Night* on the grand piano in the lobby.

Elise, my seven-year-old, is complaining about her sweater while Daisy, my three-year-old, hasn’t stopped wailing since the minute her sweater was tugged over her pigtailed head in the parking lot.

Casey and I decide then and there that we’re going to call every babysitter saved in our contacts – it’s a longshot that anyone will be available, but hell, we’re shooting. I’ll go nuts if I have to deal with the rest of the family *and* Daisy’s tantrum. Besides, the girls are too young to spend Christmas in a hospital.

After checking in at the front desk, we’re led down a hallway toward Aunt Perdie’s room. Casey holds Daisy to calm her down, and I hold Elise’s hand while she drags her feet and her teddy bear. “Grandma worked hard on these sweaters guys,” I squeeze Elise’s hand, “so say ‘thank you’ when you see her.”

Elise pouts, “I wanna go to the cabin.”

I mutter, “You and me both, kid,” leaving the real parenting to Casey.

He promises we’ll go to the cabin eventually, explains that Christmas is first and foremost about the *whole* family, and asks her to be on her best behavior.

Nodding, I turn around so Daisy can see my face, “Yup, Santa wouldn’t be too happy with all this crying and complaining.”

Practically snapping to attention, Elise holds up her teddy bear with new determination, and Daisy replaces her wailing with a mere trembling lip. She tries to wriggle out of her sweater, but Casey tells her doing so would

hurt Grandma's feelings and requests she keep it on. I know it's too much to ask of her. She's too little. Being three and uncomfortable gives her about as much regard for other people's feelings as a catty late-night talk show host with substance abuse problems. This isn't lost on Casey either – he immediately whips out his phone and finishes the massive group text to all our sitters with one hand. The whoosh of the sent text is hopeful, albeit naïve.

The nurse stops us in front of Aunt Perdie's room. He puts one hand on my shoulder and sympathetically tilts his head, "You probably want your whole family in there," I do my best not to roll my eyes at this clearly childless man as he continues, "but there's only room for one more person."

I give Casey a reassuring look so that he feels comfortable leaving me alone and taking the girls to the waiting room. He pecks me on the cheek. Elise hugs my leg, no doubt trying to win some points back with Santa.

After a deep breath and a roll of my shoulders, I open the door to face my family. Mom and Dad stand together in the corner, my brother, Brody, leans against the wall a few feet from them, Grandma sits in a chair right at Perdie's bedside, and Grandpa slouches in a chair by the window. Brody's wife, Shana, is MIA.

I slip off my coat and fold it over my arms. The room has two miniature plastic Christmas trees with basic ball ornaments and stiff ribbons tied in bows on the tops. There's a lingering smell of gravy, mashed potatoes, and pre-packaged ham. A woman in the bed next to Perdie's eats figgy pudding with a tremor.

Brody sees me first, smiles, and gets an all-too-familiar look in his eye. "Wow, Jill showed up," he looks to Dad, "you owe me five bucks."

I glare, "Ha." The greetings begin and the room is consumed with hugs and 'Merry Christmas's. We keep the contact brief as hugging each other with Grandma's sweaters on is like hugging large porcupines.

Aunt Perdie is asleep. Her head is bandaged thickly with a small patch of white hair at the top, peeking out like stuffing in a ripped couch cushion. For the first time in my life, I see her lips without the barn-red lipstick. They're pale and they're dry. I scratch under my sweater sleeve.

Mom offers me a plate of dessert bars and I look at Brody for confirmation that they're safe. He shakes his head.

Aunt Perdie was the one to make the desserts, always bars of some kind, and it was a task she refused to delegate. In the earlier years they were good. Goey and rich with crisp crusts, never over or under-baked. Time took its toll though, and daring to take a bite of one of her sweets could mean a mouthful of burnt hair or even

a false nail. That paired with Grandma and Grandpa's tendency to undercook meat and overcook everything else meant McDonald's on the ride home.

With a quick 'thank you' and a close-lipped smile, I wave Mom's offer away.

She sets the plate back down and huffs, "The paramedics think she fell trying to pick one off the ground."

Dad tuts, "We shouldn't have let her bake."

Brody and I share a knowing look. We'd been saying that for years – even before I got my degree, met Casey, and had two kids. But Aunt Perdie is one independent elder. Aside from telling the same stories during every family gathering and her reliance on a walker, she lives life like she just retired. She drives. She gambles. She bakes – though that one obviously lost its touch a while ago.

When I was a teenager, we asked her about moving in with my parents or into a senior community. She pursed her red lips and set down her silverware. We had taken her out to Red Robin, the nicest place in our price range, and before we asked she was telling us about how she and Uncle Wallace, may he rest in peace, had met in a restaurant just like it.

For the third time that evening.

After a pause in conversation aided only by the sounds of clanking dishes, baseball games, and other families bickering, Aunt Perdie told us we were sweet but she would have to decline. Seeing as she wasn't wrecking her car or falling down during every outing, there wasn't an obligation to push her.

Looking at her now, I feel we must've been wrong. Then again, I haven't seen Aunt Perdie in person for three years. Maybe there have been more signs than I know about, signs that it was finally time to push.

Aunt Perdie's eyes half-open and flutter as she takes a ragged breath. Rasping, she tries to say something. Her mouth forms the beginning of a word but only a cough sputters out. Another breath through parted, pale lips, "Deb?"

She's staring at me.

We all glance around the room, looking for another person, someone just behind me, but there's no one. I then vaguely remember an old Perdie story featuring a Deb. When I shuffle a step over, her eyes follow me. "Deb, it's good to see you."

Great. One of the few times she acknowledges me, and in her mind I'm not even really me. Grandma starts to cry so Grandpa helps her out of the room, patting my shoulder on the way.

I kneel by Aunt Perdie's side and grab her pruned hand, "Aunt Perdie, it's Jill," I try to look her in the eye, "I'm Jill." My parents and brother watch closely, and I re-introduce them as well.

Perdie closes her eyes. At first I think she might be drifting, but she begins to reminisce. She asks me if I remember going to the fair with her, Wallace, and my husband Herbert. The story sounds more and more familiar as she drones on about the best rides, the cotton candy, the hilarious clowns. Bits and pieces of it had come up repeatedly over the years. Half my life, Perdie's stories have been reruns. "Remember it, Deb?" her grip tightens around my hand. "The lights, the music?"

The wool of my family sweater feels animated in the way it crawls over my skin. It feels tighter. A Sweater Constrictor. And my throat, my throat feels tighter. Swallowing with effort, I place my other hand over Perdie's. "Yeah, I remember."

Brody and I sit on a bench a block from the hospital. We don't talk, not for a while. Not until he breaks out a little flask and a grandiose cigar. I give him a crooked smile to say, *Old habits die hard.*

Back in the day, when every holiday was spent at Grandma and Grandpa's house, we found time to escape in the backyard. It was just Grandma and Grandpa out there. No fence or any other visible marker for a property line. We usually walked along the stream, even if the wind was violent and the water was frozen over. When we were small we would play tag or hide-and-seek, when we got older we talked about TV or books, and when we were older than that we'd sneak one of Grandpa's cigars and one of Grandma's whiskey bottles to share. Cheap stuff, nothing life-changing. They grew to be quiet; only the sounds of crunching leaves or snow, wailing mountain wind, and rustling coats.

Of course, when I had my own family, I lost this. I started spending most holidays with Casey's family, and then, after having kids, we kept Christmas for ourselves. For my parents and grandparents, I try to organize at least one trip a year. Brody and I still see each other regularly. But it's different. We're veterans of the same childhood, but I'm the only one who refuses to go back.

Flame licks the end of the cigar until Brody can take a puff and pass it. "Today doesn't make up for it, you know." He doesn't look at me.

Electing to tackle the flask first, I take a sip, thankful that the whiskey burns. “For what?” I’m sure to stare at him as I take a drag of the cigar.

A quick, dirty look, and he snatches the flask.

When I blow out the smoke, it’s with exasperation. “I had a family, Brody.”

“I had a family too.”

“A wife,”

“Yeah.”

“No kids.” I take one more drag and we switch poisons again.

The rest of the excursion is silent. A knot forms in my stomach as I begin to wonder whether or not I just touched a nerve. Had he and Shana been trying? Where is she? I can’t build up the courage to ask before we start walking back to the hospital.

We return to a scene of utter chaos – Daisy is sweater-less, sobbing, running around the waiting room, and knocking magazines off the coffee table as she goes. Elise is chasing her, picking up the magazines, trying to put Daisy’s sweater back on, and crying because Santa is going to fill their stockings with coal.

Casey is nowhere in sight. He must’ve put my grandparents in charge, which was a desperate move. Grandma is crying harder now than when Aunt Perdie mistook me for Deb, and Grandpa is massaging his temples, resigned to the fact that he is, indeed, too old for this shit.

I sweep Daisy up into my arms in no time, hugging her to me and keeping my voice calm but stern. “Everybody just take a deep breath,”

Daisy screams and clutches at my hair. Elise tries to force the sweater into my hands, blubbering about Santa. I free one of my hands and usher Elise ahead of me, quickly apologizing to everyone else in the waiting room as I try to get us outside.

Brody holds in a laugh. I can tell he’s suddenly glad to be the one without offspring. Despite his inclination to gloat, he grabs Elise’s hand and he helps us get to the elevator. As I mash the summoning button, Daisy is still screaming. “Sweetie, you don’t have to wear the sweater anymore,” I tell her, unable to keep frustration out of my

tone. “And I promise Santa will forgive you.”

This quiets Elise, but Daisy is looong gone. The elevator doors open and Casey almost runs into us. “Hey,”

I nod to Brody who nudges Elise to her father before sending us off, and then I turn to Casey. “Where’d you go?” Hostility tip-toes around my words as the doors close. Casey can sense it.

He rubs his forehead, “Looking for you.”

Daisy twists around in my arms and reaches her hands out to Casey with grasping fingers. Her breath is catching now, screams turning back into sobs. I step closer to Casey to hand her over, and he sniffs.

A look flashes across his face as he picks up the scent of smoke and whiskey. “Nice, Jill,” he clenches his jaw.

I keep my lip from curling. I will not fight in front of the kids, and I flick my gaze to each of them in turn so that Casey understands, “Easy.”

My husband shakes his head and focuses on keeping Daisy in the cool-down process. Elise tugs at the sleeve of my sweater and I wince as the fabric grates my skin. “Are we gonna go to the cabin now?” Her face is especially sweet when she looks up at me.

I kneel down, hug her, and say, “I’m not sure I can go yet,” I turn to look at Casey, “but maybe you guys can head there tomorrow.”

Elise pulls away to look at me with wide, tear-filling eyes so I quickly add, “And I’ll meet you there,” she starts to relax so I keep going, “I just can’t leave Uncle Brody alone so fast, you know what a baby he is.” Elise grins and I smooth down her hair before noticing that her neck has started to get red and rash-y from the sweater. I help her take it off just as the elevator reaches ground level.

To keep the mood light, I give Elise a piggy-back ride while Casey and I discuss what to do next. None of the sitters have contacted us, and we both agree that the kids need to go home. What we don’t agree on is that Casey’s got to take them.

Though part of him is still peeved, his face is shadowed with worry. “I don’t wanna leave you here,” he puts his hands on his hips.

I cock an eyebrow and smile, “Oh-ho, yes you do.”

This prompts a micro-smile from him, but he’s not one of the kids. I can’t tease his mood away. We start to

buckle the girls into their seats and I kiss their foreheads before closing the car doors quietly. “I’ll keep looking for a sitter,” Casey picks a stray hair off my shoulder, “and come back as soon as I can.”

I sigh and brush his cheek with my hand, “Don’t worry too much.” We hug quickly and he asks me to keep him updated.

When I walk back toward the hospital, I look over my shoulder twice to watch our car drive away, my chosen family inside.

We sit in the waiting room chairs, eating pudding cups and avoiding eye contact. The doctor said we should do it soon if we’re going to do it. “She’s in a lot of pain,” he’d tapped his clipboard and a corner of his mouth scrunched up in a textbook expression of sympathy.

Mom clears her throat, far from the emotionless woman I spoke with this morning, her eyes swollen from crying. “She had a good life.”

Everyone nods, me a little late. I think back over what I know she had: Uncle Wallace, Deb, the fair, the dogs, the dessert bars, the casino, her lipstick...Uncle Wallace...the dessert bars...the lipstick.

The pudding starts to taste filmy as I realize that’s all I know about her. Closing my eyes, I try to fill in the gaps. She lived through the Depression, WWII, the Cold War...I try to imagine her standing with her mother in a breadline or hugging her father when he came home in uniform. But I can’t.

It’s my turn to say goodbye. I’m alone with her now, night has officially fallen, and Casey’s going to pick me up in twenty minutes. I tug at the collar of my sweater and then scratch up both of my arms. *Cry*, I order myself. *Say something, do something.*

Perdie’s heart monitor beeps stubbornly.

I run my hands through my hair before standing up, turning away, and taking off my sweater. A stranger in her room.

In the corner there’s a pile of Aunt Perdie’s possessions. Something glints at the top. I walk to the pile slowly, drained of energy and dragging my feet, feeling alien. A tiny, golden canister is the source of the glint.

Lipstick.

After pulling my sweater back over my head, I return to Perdie's bedside. "Merry Christmas," my voice is hardly a whisper as I make her lips barn-red one last time.