

Riders on the Storm

“Honesty is always the best policy,” my mother says.

These are fighting words.

A thunder cloud cracks like an egg beneath our feet. It splits down the middle, not like a fractured egg tentatively tapped, but like one whapped against the corner of a counter. Invisible torrents of rain plummet from underneath me, splatting against cold basement tile and saturating the tired couch with frigid droplets. Downstairs, my dad is playing “Riders on the Storm” by The Doors on his guitar. He is accompanied by the disarmingly realistic rain sounds that underlay the melody, and thunder that booms through the amplifier. Jim Morrison’s voice smoothly ascends the stairs, fragrant with incense.

I’m not sitting on a barstool next to a granite countertop; I’m perched on top of a cloud, riding it like a magic carpet. I can feel damp humidity under my bare toes and the electricity that charges air before lightning strikes. In my mind, this condensed mass of water has two surfaces. The bottom of the cloud is pregnant with moisture, aching with the dark weight; the top is white and wispy and bathed in sunlight that can’t reach the earth. Trickle of piano music tentatively join the rain sounds, and a bass guitar thrums heavily from downstairs. Light streams through the second-story window I’m sitting next to. It haloes my head, making me feel as though I am sitting atop the sunny surface of a crumbling cloud. Perched on the barrier between two worlds. Inside and outside. Above and below. Within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the little ecosystem I used to fit into so neatly.

“Is honesty *always* the best policy?” demands my brother’s accusing voice from the recliner. It is deeper than I remember. Its owner totters momentarily as he rises to his feet; James is still getting used to the eight inches he gained this year. With those inches came wisps of facial hair. Bullies he calls friends. Hostility. Insecurity. Most notably, they came with a voracious appetite for the victory of being right. He tears through life with the ferocity and self-righteousness of a riptide in otherwise calm currents. His newly adult voice elicits a pang of nostalgia for the little boy who used to help me build couch forts.

Dad is strumming away rhythmically below. I don’t need to see him to know that he is wearing his customary rock ‘n’ roll uniform: a tight, low ponytail and a loosely belted bathrobe. Upstairs, Mom is squinting at a package she’s writing on. It contains a sweater identical to the one she’s wearing. This unlucky and unwanted twin is being sent back to a retailer who accidentally doubled her order free of charge. A crease appears between her brows, and she searches for glasses momentarily before finding them atop her red hair. My mom’s hair is red, not orange in the way people usually mean when they describe red hair. In fact, the dye she stains it with more closely resembles purple than orange. Her hair is red like the wine we keep hidden under the sink and at the back of the bookcase; it glows in the light, as though lit from within.

The ceiling is too low. Low like monkey bars that you can suddenly grasp with feet flat on the gravel below. Flat on laminate painted to look like hardwood. Flat on the sunny surface of the storm hiding below. “Yes. Always.” My red-headed mother senses the riptide and swims towards it. There is no ambiguity in “always.” “Always” fills the kitchen without leaving room for compromise. Electricity accumulates in the air filled with always. The rain is still pounding away.

When my dad was young, his hair only reached his shoulders. He looked enough like Jim Morrison that he was frequently asked for his autograph. He looked enough like him that people could overcome the improbability of finding Jim Morrison buying beer on Sunday morning in an Ogden gas station. Like Jim, he loved to start the day with a drink.

Mom sips a pale, sepia-colored beverage she generously calls coffee. She looks my brother in the eye as she does. Dad drinks his coffee thick with sugar. The stiffest drink he's had for a long time is Coke; a love of sugary beverages is common among people fighting cravings for more threatening liquids. He spent years in the basement, bonding with bottles behind a deadbolted door. Now, he spends that time knocking back cold Cokes while he plays his guitar.

Despite his abstinence, I think he still isn't sure if he's allowed to climb the twelve steps separating the basement from the rest of the house. I don't think any of us know if he's allowed yet, though we also don't know whose permission it is we're waiting for. History has fermented in the pores of this house. The air is sometimes sweet and intoxicating, sometimes sour and toxic, but always perfumed by the past. It's easy to forget the scent of fumes when you breathe them every day.

"If I was throwing you a surprise birthday party, it would be okay to lie about it to keep it a secret." James spits these words out accusatorily. I can't remember the last time he bought anyone a birthday present; the idea of him throwing a party is laughable. Thunder sprints across the sky downstairs, seeming to move from one side of the house to the other.

There's an enormous red clock on the wall. The most noticeable thing about it isn't that it is red, it's that it is an oval not a circle. The shape makes it look as though it is melting, perhaps in the heat of one of Dali's deserts. It is giving in to gravity, and as it does it stretches time with

it, molding it into a new shape. I have always been skeptical about the idea that every day contains twenty-four hours, every hour sixty minutes, and every minute sixty seconds. Time is far too malleable for such rigid constraints; it lengthens and compresses, accelerates and slows. When I come home for the holidays, the years that have passed seem to bend back on themselves, reminding me both of what has changed and what has stayed the same since I left.

“No,” she retorts calmly, taking another sip. “I don’t like surprise parties. Honesty is always the best policy.” Since when does she egg him on like this? She has always been the mediator, the neutral core around whom we orbited. It seems that our family’s gravitational center has grown tired of being diplomatic since I moved out. In the years before I left, I worried a lot about her. She carried an emotional burden substantial enough to be almost physical in its weight: the responsibility of keeping the family together. The weight of this duty gradually replaced the weight on my mom’s bones until she was skeletally thin. Now, I am equally excited and unsettled to see her taking a small step outside her role as mediator.

I didn’t pack enough clothes. I’m staying with my parents during Christmas break; it has only been a few days, and already I’ve worn everything I brought with me. Today, I’m wearing a t-shirt with my high school’s logo on it, and a training bra underneath. Both are a little too tight. I found them crumpled in the dresser of my childhood bedroom, abandoned when I left for college. I haven’t grown much since then; still, I feel suffocated, shrunken down to the size of the person I was at eighteen.

Thunder ripples rhythmically through the sky below. A crease works its way between my brother’s brows, eerily echoing the one permanently etched between my mother’s. “What if…” There is a tense silence while he searches for another example. I can almost see him frantically searching his mind, looking for a situation in which a lie is the only acceptable solution. Looking

for a way to be right. The crease disappears. He's found it. "What if you were hiding a Jewish person during the Holocaust and a Nazi asked you if you were hiding a Jew?" He's triumphant. "You'd *have* to lie." This sudden leap into the extreme is expected coming from him. I'm tugging absently at my shirt, trying to create space between my skin and the complicated memories of home that are woven into the fabric. The electric keyboard hidden somewhere below is gaining strength.

I bought a lot of bras during my first semester of college, right after I moved out. I bought at least one for every day of the week. I didn't think much about it at the time. Now, sitting at the counter in an old t-shirt and Old Navy training bra, I am understanding for the first time why all those bras seemed like a necessity. It wasn't because I grew out of the old ones- a child's size bra has always been plenty functional for my small chest. It was because of the indescribably primal itch that a snake must feel right before it sheds its skin. The prickly feeling of the past against skin still pink with newness.

"I still wouldn't lie. I'd kick him in the balls instead." She punctuates this by slapping a stamp on the boxed-up sweater. I almost choke on my own coffee at this. When did I start drinking it black? A single lick is delivered to my bare toes. Simultaneously moist and economical. It's Scamp, I think to myself, and then briefly consider the absurdity of the fact that I can tell my Shih Tzus apart by the way they lick. Based on the solemnity on his face, Scamp seems to feel that Nazis are not something to joke about. His concern is unnecessary; she wasn't joking at all.

I think I started drinking my coffee black around the same time I started wearing black bras. Several of them were red, too. There was also a white one, and a blue lacy one that I still quite like. They hugged my skin secretly under sweatshirts. The black ones in particular armored

me against the new world of adulthood, and the old world of granite countertops and basement guitar solos and endless “discussions” about nothing.

James wasn't expecting such a colorful retort. The frustration of being denied a clear victory shadows his face. Are his clothes starting to itch the way mine did at seventeen? Will he find this tie-dyed Nirvana t-shirt balled up under his bed when he returns from college? Will he put it on to find it soaked in puberty? Steeped in the sounds of The Doors, the storm underlaying the music, the occasional swear word bellowed when Dad misses a note? Will he remember demanding to know why my mother would dare to send back a free sweater for the sake of honesty?

I don't think he will remember. He picks too many petty little fights to possibly remember this one in particular. I do, however, think he will remember how this “discussion” was wrapped up. He will remember not because it was memorable or unique, but because little spats and full-fledged brawls almost always end the same way in this stormy home full of fighting words. “I love you,” my mom says. James doesn't melt at this. He isn't happy about it; it's the ultimate trump card after all. But he knows it is the truth. He knows because coming from my mom, who is honest to a fault, for whom honesty is *always* the best policy, it couldn't be a lie.

Defeated, James tromps up the stairs without a reply. He doesn't echo her sentiment. The hypnotic cacophony of music and rain sounds halts abruptly following a dissonant string of wrong notes. After making that many mistakes in a row, Dad apparently doesn't see the point of finishing the song. Scamp scratches at the door to the backyard; Mom opens it and follows him outside. Sitting alone at the counter with my too-tight top and too-cold coffee, I wonder how things will continue to change as time passes. Will we all still congregate on holidays and the

occasional weekend? Or will we scatter, repelling each other with clashing personalities, unrelated interests, and collected resentments?

I fear both possibilities. I love the people in my family, and I know that I want them to be permanent parts of my life. I also know that I want to grow. I want to change. And I have done more growing and changing since I moved out than I ever did while I was riding the storm that constantly brews between these walls. I want the three of them to experience the taste of fresh air, the clean scent of an atmosphere purified by rain that has since departed. I don't know if it is possible for us to exist together without the cloud cover I got so used to existing beneath as I grew up.

Thunder cracks beneath my feet. The song starts over.

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