

STAY WHERE YOU ARE

by Jon Boilard

Snow falling was flakes of old paint and our room at the Hot L Warren was cold. My mother said, This is no way to live. Then she gave me foodstamps to use for her medicine at the Frontier Pharmacy on Main Street and Sugarloaf. Then Bobby Popovic behind the counter with the spots on his face and the wet hair said, No way. Tell her forget it. Not this time. Not anymore. She waited outside in the tan 1962 Chevy Bel Air that had a busted driver side headlight and rust patches that were eating away at the car like an apricotty cancer. The night was dark and cold and the moon was a perfect Carl Yaz pop fly from summer. She watched through the glass door that had a cow bell on the handle that would ring when it opened. Bobby Popovic handed it back to me all rolled up like I'd had it in my pocket and he said, Go on and beat it kid. But she was waiting outside, I was going to be in trouble, she really needed her medicine this time. I didn't have to look because I knew she was watching from the car, leaning over the steering wheel, drumming the dashboard with her press-on fingernails, breathing short puffs you could see like her spirit slow-leaking.

I didn't move from the black-speckled Formica countertop that came up to my chin, terribly aware that the only thing between me and her rage was the stretch of cigarette-scarred carpet that flanked the stools that lined the soda fountain. And the slightest indication of failure on my part would bring her in there for one of her scenes. So I didn't move a muscle and the world around me stayed oblivious to my predicament. The smell of black coffee was so strong it triggered my other senses, too. Kielbasa from Pekarski's off 116 in Conway sizzled on the grill. Dutch Syska smoked a Swisher Sweet and ate a cheeseburger with pickled onions. The radio near the frappe machine played a polka from the station in Northampton. Fat Mike squirted ketchup onto steak-cut French fries one at a time. Moe Sadoski spit Beechnut chewing tobacco juice into a Styrofoam cup and played cards by himself in the booth that was supposed to be for two or more. The toaster popped a couple slices of rye for Bubba Hubboch's BLT. Pat Bismo under her chemical-blue beehive shook a can of Redi Whip with one hand and with the other poured a hot chocolate for Joey Hostrop who drove the snow plow during storms. Then the red and white can hissed its final sweet kiss and Pat tossed it into the trash can near the cash register.

Then Billy who was the owner came from around back where I could hear "It's a Wonderful Life" on the television and he had on a big white shirt with short sleeves and big white buttons. He folded his furry arms across his belly, the back of them spotted with chalky barnacles that he picked at. He was wearing glasses that could dangle from his neck on a chain and had dandruff on the lenses. He held Bobby Popovic by the elbow and looked over at me and smiled but not nice. They spoke so that I could not hear them and he smiled at me again. What you got there Buster? Let me have a look, he said, and I handed it to him all rolled up like I had it. He looked at it and squinted and said, Hmmm. That should be all right. This time. Bobby Popovic with the spots said, Crazy bastard, and walked away mad. Billy said he'd be right back and he went behind the shelves. He was humming "Little Drummer Boy" and I could only see part of his big white shirt so I took a Hershey's bar that would give me a cavity from a box on the counter and put it in the front of my pants. He came back around and handed me a paper bag and he fixed his glasses so that he was looking over the top of them at me. He smiled like before. His stare was milky, a pair of cat's-eye marbles. Tell her be careful and not too many at once. He put a finger to his lips. Now shhhh. You best not tell anybody, he said. He called me Buster again and said, This is the last time.

In the car I told her what he'd said and she ate some right away. Then at our room in the Hot L she told me I was her little man and she ate more medicine. She put all of them into her hand and she put all of them into her mouth. That's better. You're my little helper. She washed them down with Cutty Sark from the green bottle with the yellow label and the pirate ship. She kept it in the bathtub. She put her head back. She drank some more and there was some on her chin in a white spot when she finished so I cleaned her up with a towel we'd stolen when we tried to live at the Howard Johnson's off the 91 rotary in Greenfield. She said, That's better and rested her hand in my hair. She told me to put Fleetwood Mac on the record player. Then she was sleeping and I sat on the floor in the hall where the heat used to come through a vent. I ate the Hershey's bar. The act of chewing was hard and nutty and unfamiliar and the heat wasn't coming through the vent because it never did anymore. She called out my name and then said something else. She did not open her eyes and she whispered, You were such my little helper. Little man. Medicine man. She made an arcing motion with her arm like she was wiping away all the stars and then from the dirty window overlooking the dead-end alley between the Hot L and the tannery the sky was a flat and empty black canvas but for a thumb print smudge that had replaced the moon.

In the morning the record player was still going even though the music was finished. The needle ticked loudly like the second hand on a grandfather clock, only sporadic and full of static. Outside a northeast wind was a howling cold ghost that surrounded me. I closed my eyes against it and the sun and the glare from the snow banks Joey Hostrop had sculpted from behind the wheel of his silver Ford F250 all night long. And I told them from the payphone in front of Leo's TV on South Main that she was still sleeping and they said, What kind of medicine? I read it to them from the label on the little brown container and it took me three times to say it before I said it just right and they knew what it was. They asked me my name and said, Stay where you are.

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