

Jamie McFaden

## Home for Thanksgiving

“Dead weight is heavy, but drunk weight is fucking lead,” Tiffany says as she carries my 23-year-old sister, Reese, through my parents’ living room like a bride. When they make it to the yellow-tiled bathroom in the hallway, Reese spews the Blue Motherfuckers and Liquid Marijuanas into the toilet. I think of the word “azure” and fingerpaint, but am rattled back into the moment when I hear the next thing Tiffany says.

“Top or bottom?”

Mumble-moans from drunk baby sister.

“Pants or shirt?” Tiffany asks, as if this makes the best sense in the world.

It must, because Reese pats her jeans. Tiffany yanks them off with the kind of precision that only four years in a sorority house can teach. I place seasoned oyster crackers and a plastic cup of water beside her. She looks like she’s eight years old, lying there, now passed out in just her underwear and a sweater. I’m pissed that we had to leave the bar to take her home early, so I plan on leaving her there like that for our parents to see in a few hours.

She whines like a puppy in her boulder-heavy sleep like she always has. My mind goes back to thirteen and staying up late with Tiffany to watch *Sleepy Hollow*. Scared shitless, we couldn't sleep after the movie ended. So we found the ink daubers my mom and grandma used at Knights of Columbus on Wednesday nights. Reese's little face became our Bingo card, spotted with blues and greens. Even our teeny-bopper bitch squeals did not wake her.

That night, I felt guilty and rubbed off the dots with a soap-and-water washcloth.

This night, I yank her up by her arms and drag her to her childhood room. Don't care if I leave a bruise on her. I place a black bucket on the floor and tilt her head towards it.

I feel bad for thinking Reese's inevitable hangover is well-deserved and tell myself I won't say anything to our parents about how she nodded off on a barstool and had to be carried home.

But I'm not sure I trust me.

## Half-Here

Mom was just some pretty bartender with an ass shaped like a pumpkin. Dad was just a coastguardsman docked in a town that only had draft beer available until 1am on Saturday nights. They went home together after Mom closed the bar. Now I'm here. She says he's a lousy drunk. He says she's been a slut since birth. I don't know who's more right.

I've seen Mom drink her share of Jim Beam. Her eyes fix on the TV while the ice melts in the Beam and Diet Pepsi she clutches in a Tom and Jerry jelly jar. She stirs one finger in it slowly, doesn't hear me when I ask if I can have one of her Diet Pepsi cans. She looks so happy in the glow of the television. Much happier than when she's trying to figure out what breakfast to make the Wednesday morning man in the oil-spotted blue jeans sitting across from me at breakfast. They must all be mechanics, these guys who have cheesy scrambled eggs and buttered toast with us. I don't talk to them much. Instead, I trace the pattern of the wood lanes streaking the breakfast table. I like that they all seem to end at a dark knot that swirls at my side. Mom tells me to quit it and answer the man sitting at our table. I never know their names, but she calls them all "Baby."

And I've seen Dad bring his share of women home. They have high-pitched giggles, some louder than others, but they all seem to have the same pair of high heels. Ones that clack clack along the linoleum all the way back to the bedroom. I call these women one-timers. Dad says I better never bother them. If the house catches fire, I know stop, drop, and roll then 911. They don't stay for breakfast. They don't ask me stupid questions, either, which I like. They grind cigarette butts down into the brown ashtray in the hallway bathroom that we share. I study the lipstick prints on the filtered side. Once, I discovered a purple kiss mark smudged

between the tip of the filter and those double green rings. I must've missed Miss Purple Lips. Sometimes they come in after I've fallen asleep. When I grow up, that's what color I'm going to wear on my lips.

I think since Mom and Dad met fast and did it to each other so fast that I must not've gotten time to grow the way other kids do. I'm only half-here. They talk at me, and their words sorta float through the air. Stinky and fluttering, the way the liquor boxes spit ashes as they burn in the burn barrel out behind Dad's trailer. But being half-here, you can get away with more stuff than if you were all the way here. I try to be good, but sometimes being bad just gets after me, so I'll steal a pack of sunflower seeds from the gas station at the corner of Mom's apartment complex. I swallow the shells so she won't know I took them. You have to grind them down with your back teeth like a stegosaurus would so they don't jab you in the throat when you swallow. I don't know if Mom would really notice anyway because a lot of mornings she has one of her bad headaches or cries mascara spider legs down her face because last night's "Baby" won't let her make him cheesy scrambled eggs.

If I had to pick, I'd say I like it better when Mom and Dad act like what they say the other one is. Mom just stares, and her eyes are like the living room fish tank when she sips her Jim Beam. And dad's one-timers never try to wiggle their fingers down the waistband of my pajama bottoms. Being half-here is alright. I just wish I got to be called "Baby" once in a while.

## The Beneath Blight

In January of her senior year at college, Sophie discovered jagged bits of flesh blossoming from her vagina. She rubbed her hand over the space in the shower, feeling the burls that had sprouted from front to back.

Her worst enemy in high school had contracted genital herpes from fucking the boys who returned home from college during winter break. They came back wearing new clothes and listening to new bands, their stamens full of disease and desire. Sophie found it fitting that a girl with such a mildewed personality now had the twat to match. As if the ugly moved from her heart down.

Sophie didn't fuck those kinds of boys. Sophie had fucked only two boys. The medical student she loved now, and the unfaithful professional mover she had loved for the first three years of college.

The month before she sprouted the lumpy flesh, a story ran on *60 Minutes* about a Mexican man who became a tree. The human papillomavirus wildfired from between his legs to the entirety of his body. The knots covered his skin completely, transforming him into a living willow. His flesh-bark pained him, and he wept sap as he spoke.

She told the boy she loved that she suspected she was now marred, expecting him to evaporate as she spoke. His hand was smooth against her burrs, but he swore he didn't care. He told her that one out of four people had it. That it would not turn her into a tree.

They sat together on a worn quilt, its threadbare surface barely separating them from the cold earth. In the park, with tennis shoe scrapes and moss-covered trees filling the space around them, he asked her to move

in with him. She agreed under the condition that he go with her to the clinic to burn away the ridged buds. By now, he had them, too.

They waited in the dingy room of the free clinic. The chairs were placed in rows so the patients could get a good view of the video that played on loop about a guy who gave his girlfriend herpes. Sophie insisted that condoms always be worn. Flesh against flesh had been enough, though.

The boy she loved held her hand, pressing his palm to hers and squeezing the bones in her fingers against one another. She noticed a man in a sleeveless shirt and his girlfriend sitting a few rows in front of them. The man's skin was yellow and his back muscles tensed through the thin, dirty cotton. When the video got to the part where the guy apologized to the woman for infecting her, the yellow man wrapped his forearm around the girlfriend's neck. He yanked her close and held her there so firmly that from behind it looked as if they were one misshaped form.

After she was scorched with chemicals for one long hour, the boy she loved bought her a green dress and took her dancing. With every twirl on the hardwood floor, she scanned the ground for bits of her bark that may have dropped away.