

William L. Alton

## Get Better or Die

Cops came to the house. Without lights. Slowly. They came with their badges and their guns. We knew trouble when we saw it. We didn't care much for cops. They dug around in things. We liked our things private. Silent. Truman, who sometimes had warrants, ran to his room and hid his stash in the toilet's tank. He locked the door and turned up his TV too loud.

The cops came to tell us that Mom was in the hospital. They came to tell us she was walking to her car when someone jumped her. A man. He beat her and other things. Mom was in the hospital.

Grandpa aimed the car to the highway. The hospital was forty miles away, an hour with traffic. We made it in thirty. "She's okay," Grandpa said. "She'll be fine."

Her face was purple and swollen. She looked like a steak waiting for someone to cook her. Thin, black hair spread over the pillows like a collection of raven feathers. Eyes swollen nearly shut. So frail. So small. I wanted to touch her, but if I did, she might fall apart.

Cops came with questions. Did you see his face? What color was his skin? Did he have any scars? Any tattoos? Did he speak English? “No,” she said. “No. No. No.” Each word chipped something away. Mom faded to gray. She sank slowly into her bed. I sat with her. Held her hand. There was so much I didn’t understand. The who and the how. The why. And the what happens now. Mom, always a mom, said she was good. She was fine. She touched my chin with a shaking hand. “I’ll either get better or die,” she said, as if either one was fine with her. As if neither mattered in the slightest.