

I remember when I was a child. My French mother would tuck me into bed, humming softly, her wide nose as comforting as the warm sunset on the horizon, her dark curls brushing against my forehead as light as feathers. She would murmur to me in her foreign language, and although I never knew what she said, I could feel the meaning of the words, feel them in my bones. They were soft and true and real. That was before everything happened, before my father developed a taste for liquor and my sister a taste for self-mutilation. I hold onto the memory like a treasure, because that's the last good memory I have of her. I felt completely safe.

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I remember the first time I found my sister cutting herself. I went into my sister's room without knocking and found her curled up in the bathroom, tears running down her face like water from a faucet, a razor in her hand and blood flowing from her calves and wrists. I was so shocked and sickened, and I didn't know what to do. I crumpled down on the floor next to her and grabbed the razor out of her hand.

“What are you doing?!?”

She didn't respond. She just cried harder and tried to take the razor from me. I moved my arm out of her reach.

“Go away! Leave me alone!” Her words were so slurred. I was afraid that she had taken something, like pills.

“Why are you hurting yourself? What's wrong?” I felt so nauseous, a purple kind of feeling.

“I want to die, Marie. I hate myself. I WANT TO DIE.”

~

I remember when I first met Gregory. It was at the local Catholic school which I attended, Our Lady of Fatima. I could tell right away that he was native, his skin dark and shiny and clear, like copper. He was in my third hour, Government. I tried not to stare but I went ahead and snuck a couple of peeks every few minutes anyway. I couldn't help myself. I heard later from my friend Elizabeth that he was new; he'd just moved here from up north.

Later that day I walked into English. When he walked in I couldn't help but be pleased, and I could feel my face warming up. He looked around and then chose the desk in front of me. The whole hour I just stared at his hair, completely fascinated with it. It was long and black and shiny. It reminded me of a river for some reason. After the lecture he turned around to face me.

"You're in my third hour, right? My name is Gregory." He held out his hand, the sound of his voice like thunder and earth and life.

I took his hand, my heart jumping and thumping like a drum.

"My name is Marie. And yes." His hand was soft and comforting. He seemed to be all warmth and silk, like *ganache* frosting.

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I remember the first time my father hit me. I was in fifth grade. My sister and I had been playing outside in the snow near the lake, and she had accidentally fallen in the icy water. We came home and my father began to yell.

"What happened?!?" He ran over to Colette, my sister, who was crying.

"She fell in the lake." I explained.

"Marie pushed me in!"

"No I didn't!! Don't lie!!" I could see my father's fury, and it scared me. It was black and dark. It was death.

"Yes you did!"

"She slipped!" I couldn't understand why Colette would lie to him. I realize now that she was just a child, and one who was cold and wet at that.

"YOU PUSHED HER IN?!?" My father inched toward me slowly, and my heart gave out. He smelled like whiskey and hate. I started to cry; I was so scared at the look in his eyes. He stalked closer. He would kill me; I could feel the anger—the large, looming evil.

"No! Of course not! It was an accident!" I cried, praying silently to mother for help.

He didn't listen to me though. He slapped me in the face, and I fell down. I could feel the ache in my jaw. He then grabbed me by the back of my coat and walked with me flailing to the lake that was a couple of yards away from our house. He threw me in.

The freezing water sloshed around me as I went in. By this time I was crying hysterically. I couldn't feel anything but pain and hurt and cold. I got out of the lake and walked to my father. He threw me back in. The icy water got in my nose and caused me to choke. He then left me there and went back inside.

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I remember my first date. Gregory took me to the ice rink and we glided around. Well, I glided at least. He sort of flailed around for a few minutes and then fell. The cycle would then be repeated. I had never felt so happy. I soaked in the feeling, lost myself in it. He kept me smiling the whole afternoon, his jokes very lame but especially charming. I liked the way that he was so humble and nice. He was honest and good, and he didn't show off. He was just—himself. I didn't have to pretend with him. When he took me home I made sure that he dropped me off far away from my house a ways down the driveway. I didn't want my dad to get mad. Gregory opened my door for me and helped me out. He then closed the door and just looked at me for a few seconds, his eyes unfaltering. I blushed and looked away into the distance, really looking at nothing, just feeling his appreciative glance on me.

“Marie.”

I looked at him. He leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. He then wrapped his arms around me. I closed my eyes and just let myself feel. I was warm and safe. I could feel his slow, steady breath against my cheek. He smelled like the spices my mother would put in her pumpkin pie: nutmeg and cinnamon. My mother always made pumpkin pie every All Saint's Day.

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I remember when my mother died. I was 7 years old. My father had just gotten back from the war in Iraq, and he had taken to spending all of his time at the local Irish pub. I knew this because I could hear them fighting downstairs about it. My mother would cry a lot and my father would laugh at her and then slap her for raising her voice at him. I came home one day from

school to find her body hanging from the ceiling, a rope around her throat, just circling slowly around in the air, her white dress swaying in the breeze from the window.

I was the first one home.

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I'm remembering all of this while I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Gregory's car. We're parked near the dock a couple of miles from my house. He's gently touching my face, eyeing the bruises that are starting to bloom across my cheeks, eyes, and nose. I can't look him in the eyes though. This beating was worse than the last. Usually Dad just slaps me and then hits me on my stomach and arms, where the bruises aren't visible.

"You have to go to the police, Marie. You can't let him get away with this." He says it gently and softly, like a lullaby. I can hear the underlying anger though. It doesn't scare me, because I know whom it's directed at.

Normally I would have never snuck out and called someone to come and get me. I would have limped up the stairs and gotten into bed. Tonight was more brutal than usual though. I had taken some of the roses from Mom's dainty little rosebush and put them in a vase. The strong heat of summer was coming, so the flowers would die soon enough. Dad was furious though. He saw the pruned rosebush near the front door and turned on me immediately. I think he was actually mad at Mom though rather than at me. Mad at her for leaving him by taking her life. He was angrier at her cowardice than anything. After he was done he went outside to the front of the house and proceeded to cut down the stalks of the rose bush with scissors, trying to eradicate the plant. I realized then that I couldn't protect Colette indefinitely. Dad never did anything to Colette. I made sure that he never laid a hand on her. I always accepted the blame for everything, because I couldn't let Colette get hurt. I had never contacted the authorities before because I was afraid that they would separate Colette and I, but mostly because the next day my dad would always come up to me and cry, telling me how sorry he was, and how he would never do it again. I always believed him. Not anymore. I had to do something, to ensure Colette's safety. It would only get worse, I could feel it in my soul. I looked over at Gregory, at his warm eyes, and I nodded my head.

“Okay.”

The rosebush that Dad had cut down would come back again in the spring. If you want to destroy something, you have to pull it out by the roots. Otherwise, it blossoms again.