

THESE ARE OUR RITUALS

From the bay window I watch for the bus that will drop my daughter at the corner. It is 3:15. The afternoon sun glints off the icicles hanging from the edge of our roof. I find them dazzling and beautiful, though I know their formation means there is not enough insulation in the attic, that it costs too much to heat this house, but I don't want to think about that right now. I just want to watch for my daughter, who will be getting home from school any minute.

I don't usually do this, but I called off work today. Said I wasn't feeling well, though in truth I wasn't sick. Just not feeling *well*. I woke up with an odd, unsettled feeling in my stomach- the way it feels when someone comes to visit unexpectedly and you know they are there to tell you some sort of bad news. The other-shoe-is-dropping feeling. I've had this sort of feeling in the past. Once right before Chance's father left. Another time when my mother told me about Dad cheating on her with one of the widows from church. But I don't want to think about Mother right now either, nor our house, going to pot right under our noses, nor Eddie who is Chance's dad. Besides, I like to think of myself as separate from all that. From them. New. Clean. Cleanliness being next to godliness and all. I imagine I am washed in blood, not of the Lamb, but of the familial type, the stuff that's thicker than water. Which has to count for something.

I pull my sweater tighter around my shoulders and take a sip of tea. Darjeeling. I whisper it and like the way the word sounds coming off my tongue. The cup feels good in my hand. It is a creamy-green Fire King cup that I found at a garage sale for a quarter. It's thick and solid, and speaks of a time when manufacturers cared about the durability of the products they created. It's a reassuring cup. Drinking from it makes me feel steady.

Finally, the bus arrives at the corner and I watch Chance exit the brilliant yellow capsule. Her knee socks pulled up her skinny legs over her knee caps. She hates the starched uniforms required by the school: the white blouse, navy cardigan, the ‘revolting’ plaid flannel skirt. Uniforms are easier on our budget, though, and supposedly ameliorate the clothing-as-status-symbol thing, though I know first-hand that kids will be mean no matter what sort of school they go to, no matter what kind of clothing they’re wearing. And so, I am standing in the window, watching.

Chance is squinting up at the sun. Baby hairs have escaped the braid hanging down her back. Glinting strawberry blonde filaments make a shiny aura around her pink face. She begins to trudge down the sidewalk, her book bag bouncing on her bottom. She’s looking at the ground, heading like a guided missile for our front door. Then, from a few yards back, Judy Langola comes up fast behind her. She grabs Chance’s book bag hard enough that my daughter’s feet come up off the ground. She lands on her butt on the cement. I wince at the same time Chance does, imagining the impact on my own tailbone.

Judy Langola and her bitchy little friends burst out laughing and pointing, the white vapor of their combined breath shooting out onto the frigid air. I raise my hand to knock on the glass to let the little brats know an adult has seen what they’ve done. But then I see the look on Chance’s face and stop. She comes up off the sidewalk like a rocket. My hand drifts back down, feeling along the sill for my tea cup. I watch Chance grab Judy Langola by the hair, snapping her neck back like a wise guy in a gangster film. Judy’s eyes widen in surprise. The other girls step away, not helping - a move for which I would bet they will be soundly chastised later. Chance’s face is close to Judy Langola’s, and while I have no idea what she is saying, I can see it is said forcefully enough that her spittle lands profusely on the Langola girl’s face. Judy’s eyes go wide

with a fear her cohorts are unable to see due to their positions behind their friend. Chance pushes her away then, Judy's face so red it is turning purple. Chance calmly picks up her book bag and walks the remaining fifty feet to our door without so much as a backward glance. She flicks her long braid over her shoulder while the Langola gang huddles together on the sidewalk.

I step away from the bay window she comes in through the front door. I realize I have been holding my breath and I let it out in a rush. Chance throws her book bag down on the floor and sluffs her shoes off, pushing her toes against the heels exactly the way I've told her not to at least a thousand times. She looks up at me as if nothing has happened, as if it is a normal day, as if her tailbone is not stinging like I know it has to be. She reminds me of that guy on the television commercial for deodorant that used to be on when I was a kid; *never let 'em see you sweat*.

"Hey, mom," she says. "Can I have a snack?"

"There's yogurt," I tell her, my eyes searching her face, willing her to say something to me about what I'd just witnessed. I am fiercely proud that she stuck up for herself, but I am also aching. I want her to need me.

"Is there strawberry?" is all she says, walking away from me. Behind her, I just nod.

It is 1977. I am eleven years old, and I'm standing in the principal's office for the second time this week calling my mother to see if she can bring some clothes to me at school. She sounds irritated that I am calling again in the middle of her 'afternoon stories'.

My face feels as if it is on fire. The bell rings signaling the end of lunch period, and kids are going by in the hall eyeballing me through the plate glass door, my shirt and slacks sopped with milk and food. Some of them point and laugh behind their hands. When Debbie and Linda

go by, Linda gives me a dark look, raising her left eyebrow. It is a warning: *don't tell or you'll be sorry*. I look away. My mother's voice continues to squawk through the receiver.

She shows up at school with a brown paper bag that has my least favorite outfit in it- a blue plaid cotton dress. She has picked out brown knee socks to go with it. I know there are white ones and navy ones in my sock drawer which would both be better matches, and that they, in fact, were closer to the top of the pile than the brown ones which, I am guessing, are an admonishment for disturbing Mother's afternoon. So is the dress. I look in the bottom of the bag and see she forgot to bring me a dry pair of underpants as well.

I am wearing tennis shoes, which will look ridiculous with the dress and knee socks. I sigh. I've already been beaten up once today. It seems to me that Mother is siding with the other team, setting me up for another round of ridicule or worse on the bus ride home this afternoon by making me wear this horrible outfit. I wonder how she can be so mean, then feel immediately ashamed for thinking it. She is my mother. I am supposed to love her. I hang my head and look at the speckled pattern on the rubber floor tiles. I want to melt down onto the floor and blend into the spots and swirls of beige and tan and white.

She grabs my arm hard and leads me out into the hall to the little girl's bathroom, which is closest to the principal's office. She doesn't realize it is embarrassing for me just to *be in* this bathroom, which is only for the kindergartners and first graders use. Maybe she doesn't care, or knowing Mom, it is her attempt at making a cruel point. Mom looks big in here, with the short stalls and tiny toilets. Bigger than she does at home and I don't like that one bit.

"Why do you keep letting them do this to you?" is the first thing she says to me.

"I don't *let* them!" I say, looking at the floor, "They *do* it." I slide out of my shoes and slacks. My panties are soaked with milk and syrup from the peaches that were today's dessert. I

look down in dismay at my sopped underpants and can't imagine going without them. My face reddens at just the thought of it. Mom doesn't even notice they are drenched, she just peels my shirt off, wiping at my face with one of the dry sleeves. She handles the wet clothes as if they have poop and pee on them rather than milk and fruit juice, as if they disgust her. She wrinkles her pert nose.

"You don't let them," she scoffs. "You have to learn to stick up for yourself, Katherine. You'll never get anywhere in life if you just let people walk all over you all the time." She's tapping her foot impatiently on the tile floor. The little *tack-tack-tack* echoes off the pink tile walls. She shoves the hateful dress over my head and makes a twirling motion with her finger for me to turn around to get zipped up.

I start to cry. "I can't," I say. Doesn't she understand what they'll do to me if I fight back? Doesn't she care?

Debbie and Linda take much pleasure in torturing me as often as they're able. I'm not sure why, they seem to have a lot of girlfriends they could be busy with, popular girls too. Especially blonde Debbie who is petite and pretty. Linda is a big girl and has blinding red, frizzy hair. She is a bully, and has been since kindergarten. No one knows why Debbie took her under her wing this year, but they are as inseparable in sixth grade as two peas in a pod.

The latest in their torturous repertoire has been finding me at lunch, sitting on either side of me and pouring my carton of milk all over my food. Especially on the third Friday of the month when we get a coveted carton of chocolate milk. They do this slowly, while threatening what they will do to me if I tell, and describing in great detail just how they will hurt and humiliate me. Sometimes, like today, when I have the nerve to get lippy, they hit me. After they ruin my lunch, they tip the tray, spilling food and milk all over my clothes. Somehow no one else

in class, nor the noon aide, Mrs. Gordon, who we all know is best friends with Debbie LaFromme's mother, ever admits to seeing this happen.

Behind me, my mother sucks in her breath. Her hand is poised on the zipper tab at the small of my back. She pulls the dress open with a jerk and turns me toward the light. "Well, that's it," she says, and grabs me hard. She drags me, protesting and wiggling, out into the hall. My dress is undone and underpants exposed for anyone who might be lingering out there to see. My face is blazing with embarrassment. She pulls me toward the principal's office, my stocking feet allowing me no purchase on the highly waxed and buffed linoleum floor. She demands to see Mr. Kressler, holding me so tightly by the arm that I will have a bruise later where her thumb sinks into my tender skin. I begin to cry harder, understanding that I am now doomed to have my school principal (*spelled with a p-a-l, kids, cuz I'm your pal!*) see my underpants as well.

Mom shows Mr. Kressler the bruises on my back. Three neat, round blue spots where Linda got me with her knuckles. He swears he knows nothing about the things Linda and Debbie have been doing to me, they're such good students he says, even though I've told my teacher and the noon aide numerous times about the things they do to me. Even though they've seen my spoiled clothes and teary face, have sent me down to the office a hundred times to call my mother.

When Mom demands something be done, she and Mr. Kressler decide the best solution is to remove me from the lunch room and the radar of Debbie LaFromme and Linda Doyle. I am put on kitchen duty with Mrs. Kraus for the rest of the year. I fall in love with Mrs. Kraus who has a German accent, and is chubby and sweaty and always smiling. I adore being in the school kitchen, with its stainless steel surfaces and vegetable smells, even though I get teased, and have to scrape the trays the other kids leave their messes on. I get to wear a white apron that Mrs.

Kraus doubles up and ties tightly around my waist, and gigantic, orange rubber gloves. I don't have to go outside for recess, and I learn how to use the big, steam-spitting commercial dishwasher. Mrs. Kraus lets me have all the stewed spinach and red beets I want because she gets a kick out of the fact that I am one of the only kids in school who likes them. Sometimes she even gives me an extra piece of her spicy apple cake, and pats me gently on the back with her hammy, red hands.

The other night, when I couldn't sleep, I got up and made ice cubes. Trays and trays of ice cubes. Walking back and forth from faucet to freezer with the mismatched plastic trays, not thinking really, about anything, except the fact that my daughter was driving me crazy, utterly insane. Chance is the moon waxing and waning, the tide ebbing and flowing. And I, well, I am on the quicksand she has concocted for me, and I am floundering. I am trying to keep my head above her unsettling water.

Lately I've found myself waking up nearly every hour on most nights. I've grown to hate the clock with its 1:36... 2:34... 4:12 mocking me, burning my eyes. My first thought on waking is always of Chance. I haven't seen her for months. She's punishing me for marrying Robert. For being happy. I glide between the sink and the freezer wondering how many ice cubes one woman can make.

There are nine trays in all with twelve cubes each. I make them, twist them out into Baggies and store them in the big freezer in the basement. Who knows to what end? Maybe I will use my frosty building blocks to make a castle or a chair or a cell. Fill. Freeze. Twist. Store. It occupies my mind, and I tell myself I'm not thinking about anything. But I really, really am.

I used to love watching my sister, Amy, nurse her baby son. William would wrap himself around her body, meld to her skin and become part of her. She was a font at which he'd worship, suckling her sweet nectar, his eyes rolled back in a breast milk daze, his cheeks sweaty and pink. Will's little rosebud lips grasped sweetly at her nipple, and he'd place his tiny hands reverently on either side of her breast. He was mesmerized. I couldn't wait to have my own baby, to experience such rapturous dependence.

Chance cannot not care less how she gets nourishment, she only wants it in her belly and wants it now. With a minimum of fuss, muss and touching, thank you very much. She fights me, gnashing her pink gums painfully against me, sucking hard and furiously, getting it over with as quickly as she can. She pummels me with her tiny fists, pushing against my stomach with her toes, making little, round bruises on my belly. Every feeding session reminds me of being beat up at school. It is as if she hates my guts because she needs me.

I supplement with bottles of formula right away. When she can hold the bottle on her own, I let her, even though all the baby books say this is absolutely the wrong thing to do. *Cuddle your baby*, the books say, *nurture her*, *speak softly*, *sing*, *hold your baby close so she knows how much you love her*. But Chance won't have a bit of it. It seems she is always furious and has been from the moment of her birth. She *don't need no steeeenking cuddling*.

She's fair though. She doesn't reserve her anger just for mere mortals. She also gets mad at inanimate objects, like the sofa or a blanket or her bottle which she launches away from her when it dares to be empty as she screams ear-drum popping bloody murder. I arrive with the broom and vacuum sweeper to cart away the diamonds of broken Evenflo bottles scattered across the floor. I live in constant fear I'll miss some of the glass, that Chance will cut an artery and bleed to death, that I am a terrible mother.

My mother is 4'11". I am 5'6", but when my mother speaks to me I am 2'5". I am not sure if she grows or I shrink or some random variety of proportions occurs.

"Where's Chance?" Mom demands. Her hands are thin-skinned and crablike on top of the hospital blanket.

I sigh and don't answer.

"What?" Mom says. "You two still aren't talking?"

My head feels heavy as I turn toward her, like a giant ball-bearing pivoting on my neck, smooth and weighty and nondescript. I sigh again. I seem to sigh a lot around my mother, air leaking out of me like I am a faulty balloon. "Mom, you know Chance hasn't talked to me since Christmas Eve."

"Well, all of this is stupid if you ask me," Mom says. Her bottom teeth protrude a little from her lower lip. Combined with the sagging skin of her cheeks, it gives her an unpleasant, bull-doggish look. I notice that like her fingers, her teeth seem to have shrunk, gotten thinner and sharper. They are slightly yellow. I find them a little scary. "I know. I know." she says. "You *didn't* ask me."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't."

"You don't have to be snotty," Mom says.

"I'm not being snotty, Mom, just stating a fact."

My mother turns her television up. I settle back into the uncomfortable plastic hospital chair. I am thinking how I've taken time out of my day to come visit her, and since I've arrived she's asked for Chance and turned up the television as if both are preferable to my company. We sit like this for a while, and I try to become interested in Gunsmoke. I find myself wishing

Chance's father had been a little more like Marshall Matt Dillon, a strapping, rugged man who seems to have all the right answers. A man who sticks around when there's trouble. A man like Robert. On the commercial break I ask Mom if Chance has come to the hospital to see her.

"No," she says, pursing her lips together.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

Mom won't look at me. She stares at a commercial for incontinence medication. "Well, you raised her," she says. It is an accusation.

I am sitting on the sofa laughing at Chance and feeling a peculiar sense of foreboding at the same time. She is three years old and has just slammed her bedroom door for the first time, having stomped away, proclaiming that she hates me. I am laughing because the immenseness of her fury seems comical coming from such a tiny, cute body, with pigtails bouncing, with freckles across the nose. It's like listening to a nun sing a dirty sea shanty.

There are maxi-pad wrappers in the bathroom trashcan, and I know that Chance has started her period. The fact that she hasn't told me eats a hole in my stomach. Part of me is proud of her for handling such a big event on her own, and God knows we've had The Talk enough, it's not like she doesn't know what to do. But to not tell me- I feel hurt and left out.

When I ask her about it she tells me it's no big deal. "When?" I ask.

"Thursday," she says. That was three days ago. I admonish myself for not noticing for three whole days that my daughter started her first period. I look at her pale cheeks and feel incredible guilt. I try to remember if she's been particularly moody. It's hard to tell with Chance. I've spent the last fourteen years walking on her eggshells.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I am almost afraid to ask, afraid of the all too possible malicious answer, but Chance just shrugs.

“It’s no big deal,” she says again. “It happens to all women. Isn’t that what *you* told me?” She makes it sound like an accusation.

“Okay,” I say. She is stock still, but I can tell that inside she is squirming to get away from me. “Do you have any – questions?” I want to know if I can help. I *want* to help. I want her to let me be her mom.

“I have homework,” she says, and is out of the room before I can say anything else. My eyes tear up. I watch her back as she leaves. It feels like she’s going a million miles away.

I think about starting my own period, about telling my mother. I think about the way I was doubled over with cramps so painful that I vomited. I think about the way my mother stood over me, tapping her foot, her voice like a cheese grater rubbing over my whole body. And even though I am nothing like my mother, I understand a little more why Chance kept this to herself.

My daughter is mad about the Christmas tree. She is mad about the holly on the porch, the blinking lights around the windows. She’s mad because she still calls me Scrooge or The Grinch. She tells everyone that her mother hates Christmas, that she always has.

Actually, I love Christmas. I love the idea of family together, of taking out my Grandmother’s antique Italian plaster manger and arranging all the figures and animals, and even love the plastic rhinoceros and purple Barney figurine Chance added to the holy barnyard when she was little. I love baking cookies and making gifts, the television Christmas specials rife with

glowing windows and hearths. I surround myself with the holiday's arms of warmth and good cheer, in its love. It's something I count on.

When Chance was small, there wasn't enough money for a big tree, for blinky lights and tons of toys. I wanted to give her everything, to see her eyes shining when she opened her gifts. I felt ashamed when I saw the disappointment on Chance's face as she opened the Toys For Tots pre-wrapped gifts that were a surprise to both of us. Sometimes when she looked at me, surrounded by a pile of foreign wrapping paper, I felt my mother's eyes staring at me out of her little face. I'd make a big deal out of baking cookies together, though she'd abandon me after decorating two or three for the television, a toy or a coloring book. I stayed up late at night sewing footed pajamas and nightgowns out of reused flannel. I stuffed sock monkeys, and made sure I saved two dollars out of the grocery money for extra candy canes for the tree because Chance loved them so. I did the best I could, though on Christmas morning when she looked at me with those eyes, I somehow felt that I hadn't done anything at all. My efforts meant nothing. I mean, Jesus, even the Grinch caught a break, in the end.

Now, Robert and I go all out and decorate the house, inside and out. We buy extravagant gifts just because we can, and because it makes us happy to give them. Chance is sullen and pissy. She sits frowning at our big dining room table, piled with turkey and all the trimmings, a little, wrapped gift on each plate. She speaks jokingly to Robert, but won't so much as look at me. She wants to keep her old idea of who she's decided I am, a Scrooge, a Grinch, even though it's obviously untrue. It makes her defiantly foolish, but she holds her ground. When Chance makes up her mind about something her opinion is cement. I've always admired and disliked that about her.

People get broken. They hide their cracks and chips under their clothing and behind their superbly whitened teeth. They mask it with their ferociousness and carefully meted out fury. My sister is here, standing tight beside me. She hasn't been able to cry, but then Mom hurt her far worse than she ever hurt me. Chance is here too, standing on my left. Together, the three of us are a stoic wall of stone. Robert stands behind me, his hand on my shoulder, supporting the wall, but not breaching it. His innate respect for the beautiful, terrible mysteries of us is but one of the reasons I love him so.

As they begin lowering Mother's casket, Chance breaks down. Her sob breaks my heart, and I put my hand out to grasp hers, but she's already turned to Robert and buried her face in his coat. I'm hurt, but at the same time grateful that she's taken to him like a father, that he loves her in return. Next to me, Amy squeezes my hand. Behind me, Robert is speaking softly to Chance but I can't hear what he is saying. When she turns around, she is clutching his white handkerchief the way she used to clutch the raggedy sock doll I made for her when she was two. She loops her arm through mine and squeezes it, and I turn and kiss her temple, grateful for whatever magical words Robert whispered to her.

The reverend says the benediction, and when it's over I step forward and bend down for a handful of dirt. It hits the top of the coffin, sounding as hollow as my heart once felt. I hear the sound over and over as Chance, Robert and Amy follow. The other mourners begin to step forward, and Robert hugs me under the big oak tree near the car. "It's over, Katie-Kat," he says, and I lay my cheek on his scratchy one.

Chance and Amy walk toward us, arm in arm, their heads together, whispering. It's funny how close they are. Amy moved away when Chance was a baby, and only visited sporadically but my sister has always drawn Chance like a magnet. She seems to ground my daughter,

whereas I always seem to wind her up like a top. Amy and I are Chance's Yin and Yang. Amy always jokes that we should have mothered her together. I tell her seriously that we have. Without my sister's visits over the years, without our gigantic telephone bills, I think motherhood would have drowned me.

When they reach us, Chance comes right to me and hugs me tight. "Can we go, Mumma?" she says, calling me by her little-girl name. It takes me off-guard, and my heart soars in my chest. I feel like warm rain is falling over me. Immediately I am teary again. I squeeze her back, and put my face in her hair, fragrant from her green apple shampoo. She smells like spring and all things new.

"You bet, punkin," I say, even though she's twenty-six and much too old for the endearment. We walk arm in arm to the car, away from the crowd, from Amy and Robert. Away from my mother.

Mother is afraid to die, and since she's been told she's in the ICU for good, since reality's set in, she tells me she loves me every day. She clutches and strokes me with hands that are nothing but bones and cold skin. I want to revel in the sweetness of her repeated declaration, but part of me knows she's just saying it because she's frightened. The bitch about dying is that it's so solitary. She's trying to conjure Death away with lovely, desperate words.

The first time she says it though, I start to bawl, my instantaneous tears spilling over my cheeks like a dam that's burst somewhere inside my head. "What's wrong?" Mom says, her voice ragged, no more than a whisper really, but shocking to me because it sounds as if she's genuinely concerned. Her demonstrations of love feel new and tempting. I think of the witch in

the story of Snow White, luring the princess with a poisoned apple. I wonder why I don't feel guilty for thinking of it.

I looked at her, my eyes and nose streaming. "You never tell me that," I say.

Mom tries to grasp me tighter but she doesn't have any strength left. Her hands feel like a bird's wings brushing my fingers. "Well," she rasps, a bit of her old feistiness creeping in. "You know it. Why do I have to say it?"

I have to tell her this. I have to tell her, and the little girl I used to be has to tell her. The daughter I am now has to, as well as the mother I am. I have to tell her, but it is hard for me to get my breath. I stoke her paper-thin skin. "You have to say it, because it needs to be heard," I say, my voice scratchy and broken. I am looking into her eyes, and for the first time in years I see hers tear up.

For a moment the room is hollow with silence. "I know it," she says then, under her breath and turns her head away.