

Coming Down

Lila watched from the kitchen window as her ten-year-old daughter taped a paper shooting target to the siding of the old storage shed in the field behind their rented farmhouse. The target, with its thick black lines in the vague shape of a human head and torso, came with the hot pink air rifle currently draped across Marley's back—a gift from her father.

Lila hated the rifle, although, as she found out during the argument with Jared last night, she couldn't articulate a single reason why. It wasn't that she thought the toy was too dangerous. She was a Virginian hillbilly's daughter and firm believer in teaching children how to handle dangerous things with respect rather than avoid them. She was certain that Marley, who operated the gas stove and sewing machine regularly, could be trusted to practice basic gun safety. From her voyeur's perch, Lila could see Marley was running through some kind of checklist that Jared must have taught her over the weekend, inspecting various parts of the rifle before finally planting her feet and raising it to her shoulder with confidence.

“Is it the money?” Jared had asked when he dropped Marley off. “Because I'll buy all the refill BB's. Just let me know when she's getting low.” It pissed Lila off when Jared bought Marley extravagant presents because, more often than not, they were the strips of duct tape holding together the seams of his shoddy fatherhood. But it was better than when Marley was a baby and Jared was too loaded to even be trusted with a child, and as a result she often found herself compromising with him in all kinds of ways that she never would have if he were actually a competent parent. It gnawed at her conscience to let Jared pump Marley full of junk

food and bribe her with toys, but the thought of him giving up on her altogether or relapsing was worse. As it was, Lila had begun to suspect as much when she noticed his jeans nearly falling off his hips the last few weeks.

“It's not the money,” she had told him. It wasn't anything as tangible as that. Something about the rifle itself, its very nature, disturbed Lila on gut level. She hadn't even let Marley keep the thing in the house; she made her leave it on the back porch. Now, hearing the gun's sharp crack as it bucked against her daughter's shoulder, Lila wished she had insisted that Jared keep the gift at his place altogether. She couldn't see if Marley hit the target or not, but the familiar frown of determination on her face told Lila she wouldn't be coming in for dinner until she did.

The oven timer went off, and Lila used the cuffs of her sweatshirt to pull the tray of chicken breasts off of the rack and onto the stovetop. On her days off from the nursing home, Lila liked to cook elaborate dinners with Marley, utilizing their herb garden to create Thai curries or Italian meatballs from scratch. But coming off of her marathon twelve-hour weekend shifts meant baked chicken, frozen veggies, and a frequent willingness on Lila's part to lift the no-reality-TV ban in order to watch *Survivor Man*, Marley's favorite, with a giant bowl of popcorn between them. Lila fixed both of their plates and set them down on the coffee table before calling Marley inside.

Marley's entrances were always miniature stampedes these days, as she was insistent on wearing her hiking boots at all times. She bounded around the corner waving the paper target above her head. “Look Mom!” she said triumphantly. “Look how good I did!”

Lila took the target in her hands and ran her fingers over the pea-sized holes. Most were scattered around the outer perimeter, but two were dead center where the heart and lungs would

be. Kill shots. “Straight shooting, Annie Oakley,” she said, handing the target back to Marley.

“Now put that in your room and come eat.”

“I’m gonna hang it on the fridge,” Marley informed her.

Lila didn’t like that idea, but she let it go. She reminded herself that phases can change with the wind at this age, and that by this time next week Marley could just as likely want to hang Japanese origami or homemade comic books on the fridge as shooting targets. She took her usual seat on the living room floor by the coffee table and started cutting her chicken. Marley sat across from her on the sofa, sucking on a blue Freez-E-Pop. “Whoa,” Lila said, “what gives? No dessert before dinner. You know that.”

“Dad lets me do it at his house,” she stated, shrugging her shoulders. “It’s not a big deal, Mom.”

Lila reeled for a second at this fresh display of preteen sass as Marley avoided her gaze, waiting to see if she would get away with it. When Marley was younger, after Lila realized that Jared got a special thrill from disregarding her parenting wishes, she’d had numerous discussions with Marley about the different rules at Daddy’s House and Mommy’s House. It hadn’t been an issue for a long time, so what gives? Lila wondered. Immediately the image of the pink air rifle flashed across her brain, and the instinctive distrust and anger that she felt when she first saw it ballooned inside her. “I think,” she replied calmly and—she hoped—ominously, “that you want to re-think that answer.”

Marley met her eyes, brows furrowed. The stand-off.

“Particularly,” Lila continued, “if you want to keep playing with that new toy of yours.”

That was it, the key of compliance. Marley relented, peeling herself off the sofa in her defeat. “Okay, okay, I’ll put it back.” She disappeared into the kitchen and came back exorcised,

a sweet little Mommy's girl once again. "I'm getting really good at target practice, aren't I?" she asked.

"You certainly are," Lila agreed.

"I bet I could hit a squirrel or a rabbit, don't you think?" Marley pushed her vegetables around on her plate. "Dad said I can hunt with that rifle."

Dad said, Dad said. Was there anything more infuriating than that phrase? "You have to use pellets to hunt," Lila corrected. "The BB's you have would only hurt the animals, and that's not right to do."

"Well, can I get some pellets then?"

Lila thought about her first experience hunting small game with her grandfather as a child. She recalled the shock of an animal's death face, the metallic stench of the guts. Marley had never seen anything that visceral before, and Lila didn't think she was ready. "Maybe in a year or two," she said. "Let's stick with target practice for now."

"A year?" Marley exclaimed. "That's forever! And Dad said he's going to take me camping next month on Uncle Josh's land!"

"Oh really?" That was news to Lila. "You're lucky to even be allowed to play with that gun in the first place. Do you realize that very few kids your age are allowed to shoot real guns, especially unsupervised?"

Lila could tell that Marley knew she had lost whatever footing she imagined she had in the argument, that it was on a downward spiral into Lecture Land. "Yeah," she admitted.

"And do you realize that the amount of adult privileges you're going to get is directly related to the amount of maturity you can show me you have?"

Marley lowered her chin. "Yes."

“Okay then,” Lila concluded, wrestling with that strange parental mix of triumph and guilt that comes with winning the argument but crushing your kid's spirit. She tried to change gears. “So what did you and Dad do this weekend?”

“I don't know,” she answered, defeated. “Played video games, ordered pizza, visited Katie at work.” Katie was Jamie's twenty-three-old girlfriend who worked part-time at a gelato shop to supplement her burlesque dancing income. She had synthetic dreadlocks and called Marley “Mi-Mi.” Lila found her too pathetic to hate. “Oh yeah,” Marley added, “and on Saturday we had a party with some of Dad's friends. They played music in the den and let me play drums, and then we all stayed up late and watched movies.”

Lila's ears perked up at that. “Dad was hanging out with his musician friends?” she verified.

“Yeah,” Marley said, mouth full of baked chicken. “He said they used to be in a band together. I didn't know Dad was in a band. Why didn't he ever tell me?”

Lila could think of about a hundred grotesque and heroin-addled reasons why Jared never told Marley about his punk rock days, but all she said was, “That was a really hard time in Dad's life, kiddo.” With people, Lila thought, he had promised to stay away from. And more importantly, never to bring around Marley.

“Well I think it's cool,” Marley insisted. “I'm gonna have him put some of his songs on my iPod. I'm done, can I go back outside to practice now?”

Lila stared at Marley's clean plate, wishing she had a reason to say no. “Just another half hour,” she said. “It'll be getting dark soon.”

Marley leapt from the sofa and took a fresh paper target out of the box that the rifle came in, which still sat overflowing with cardboard packaging by the back door. After she disappeared

into the field, Lila loaded the dishwasher and started a kettle of tea boiling before walking back over to observe the box. She pulled out the stack of paper targets. There were at least twenty, all the same anonymous human figure with black outlines radiating from the chest like shock waves. Before she could change her mind, Lila crumpled the targets into a big paper wad in her hands and dropped it back into the box. Then she dragged the whole thing out to the recycling bin on the curb. When Marley asked about the targets the next day, Lila told her she hadn't noticed them.

There were times when Lila wanted to use again, too. She had been floating around in a functional cloud of recreational drug use for years when she met Jared at a music festival in Austin. She was living out of her van at the time, traveling from labor gig to labor gig and making really bad mixed media art that she tried to sell at craft fairs. Lila always hooked up with guys whose habits were worse than hers, but Jamie outshone them all with his three-day benders and violent, terrifying come-downs if the supply ever ran dry. Watching him claw his own face in a convulsive fit was the first time Lila ever seriously thought about kicking smack entirely. When she saw those two pink lines in a public restroom stall, the final mechanism clicked into place, and she flushed her stash down the very same toilet. Still, there were moments when she closed her eyes and remembered warmth that flooded her until it seemed to seep from her fingertips, demanding nothing except that she surrender to it.

As Lila busied herself folding clothes and avoiding the clock, she felt the strongest urge she'd had in months. It was Sunday night, and Jared was twenty minutes late dropping Marley

off. Neither one of them answered their cell phones, and Lila was trying not to freak out for no reason. She still had no evidence that Jamie had relapsed other than his weight loss and her own nagging suspicion, and she had to acknowledge the possibility that she was projecting onto him her uneasiness about the air rifle, which was now housed in the umbrella basket by the back door after Marley convinced Lila to let her keep it inside. She glanced over at it and felt the same inexplicable sense of dread creeping up her spine. She would give them five more minutes.

Just as Lila finished folding the last of her work scrubs, she heard Marley's key turn the deadbolt. "Jesus," she breathed out loud, both a prayer and a curse. She tried to play it cool, though, and waited until she heard footsteps crossing the foyer before looking up from her work. There was Marley, safe and sound and looking like a deflated balloon with not Jared but Katie trailing behind her. "Hey, Annie Oakley," Lila said, which had quickly become Marley's favorite nickname.

Marley muttered "Hey" then plopped onto the sofa.

Katie handed Marley's overnight bag to Lila. "I washed all her clothes before she packed them," she announced cheerfully, as if her bringing Marley home was a normal occurrence. Before that night, Lila had only ever met her twice, when she came with Jared to Marley's birthday party and at a soccer tournament.

"Thanks," Lila said, taking the bag. "But why didn't Jared bring her?"

"Well, I think Mi-Mi wore him right out," she said a little too quickly. "He was just so tired after dinner, and his back's been hurting him a little recently, so he asked if I wouldn't mind running Marley home. And of course, I didn't mind."

She may as well have said that Jared was busy double-checking Marley's homework and writing extra child support checks for as much as Lila believed her. She used to make the same

excuses for him herself. The silence was too much for Katie, whose rehearsed lines were obviously used up, so she just started rambling. “We just had so much fun, didn't we Mi-Mi? And Jared's so excited about their little camping trip. He's just been burning a hole in his wallet buying all kinds of gadgets and supplies for it. Did you know they even have this special camping toilet paper that dissolves or something when you're done with it? Mi-Mi says that's cheating, though.”

Marley stood up on the sofa and leaned over the back, revived by the talk of camping. “The Survivor Man doesn't need that,” she said. “I don't even want to use the flashlight.”

“We're going to have to wait and see about that camping trip,” Lila said, but she had already made up her mind.

Marley knew it too, and she snapped back into the tween defiance that Lila feared had become a permanent color in her mood ring. “If Dad says we're going, I can go,” she asserted. “It's his weekend with me and we can do whatever we want.”

“Marlena!” Lila barked. “If you have any brains left in your head you will not say one more word.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Katie cooed, “Just let Mom and Dad have a talk about it—“

“No!” Marley interrupted. “She's just trying to keep him away from me, and it's not fair!” Before Lila could even speak to order her daughter to her room, Marley jumped off the sofa and ran to it, slamming the door behind her.

Lila took a deep breath while Katie stood petrified in front of her. “I'm so sorry,” she stammered. “I didn't mean to cause a fight.”

“Don't worry,” Lila assured her. “I'm not putting you in the middle of this.”

Katie let out a sigh. “Oh good,” she said, “because I’ve tried so hard to make a good impression with Marley, and I just think you are, like, the coolest mom ever, and I just want everyone to be able to get along and for us to, you know, be a family together.” She followed Lila’s lead to the front door and took her keys from her pocket.

“You’re a sweet girl,” Lila said as she opened the door. “And I don’t mind you being in my daughter’s life. But, Katie,” she waited until the girl made eye contact to continue, “if you try to cover for him again, we’re going to have a problem.”

Lila saw the guilt flash across her face. “What are you talking about?”

“No more visits until he’s sober,” Lila said. “Tell him that.”

Katie started to protest but changed her mind and gave a small nod instead. Lila closed the door.

Lila decided to give Marley some time to cool off before trying to talk to her. Two glasses of red wine’s worth of time, to be exact, during which Lila speculated about the best possible way to explain to her daughter that her father is a drug addict. Up until then, when Marley questioned her about Jared’s absence from her early childhood, Lila had only said that Dad had been sick for a long time, the truest lie she could think of. But that answer wouldn’t fly anymore, and Lila wondered how much Marley had already pieced together on her own. A white-hot anger burned in her when she thought about what she may have witnessed that weekend.

Lila grabbed one of the oatmeal bars she had baked for Marley’s lunches that week before knocking on her door. “I come bearing gifts,” she said. “Can we talk?” There was no answer, so

she opened the door and stepped inside. Marley sat on her bed absorbed in a tangle of bright orange nylon cord. Lila set the oatmeal bar on the nightstand and sat cross-legged on the carpet in front of her. “Whatcha doing?” she tried.

“Making paracord bracelets,” she answered flatly. “Dad and I can wear them on the camping trip and we can untie them if we need to rig an emergency shelter.”

What it was about that particular moment, Lila wasn't sure, but as she watched Marley loop the thick cord around and through her small fingers with the utmost ten-year-old concentration, she gave up hope of being able to forgive Jared for what he had done, of them ever being any kind of functional family. She was through compromising, and having Marley hate her for it would be the last collateral damage she would allow him to cause. “Baby,” she said, “you can't go camping with Dad next weekend. I'm really sorry.”

“It's our time together and we're going,” she insisted, not looking up from her work. “He said he's picking me up after I get home from school and we're driving out to Uncle Josh's land. He's going to teach me to fish and hunt squirrels with my rifle.”

“I know he said those things, but some things are different now and we aren't going to be seeing Dad for a while.” Lila put her hands over Marley's so she would look up at her. “Do you understand?”

Marley jerked her hands away, still tangled in the cord's complex knot. “You think he's on drugs, but he's not,” she said. “You don't even know what you're talking about! You just hate him and you don't want me to see him, but it won't work because he's picking me up Friday and you can't stop us.”

Lila was out of ideas. If she couldn't convince Marley that Jared wasn't taking her camping, that come Friday he might be too loaded to even get out of bed, then she would have to

wait and let her see for herself. “Tell you what,” she said, “let's just wait and see if Dad comes and then we'll talk about it. But try not to build your hopes up, okay?”

Marley didn't answer, only turned a few more degrees away from Lila and continued weaving the paracord.

Marley didn't build her hopes up; she jet-propelled them into the stratosphere. Every day after school she would drop her backpack on the floor and grab the air rifle to practice shooting empty Coke cans that she wedged between the fence posts at the far end of the field. She wore her paracord bracelet night and day and slept in her sleeping bag that she rolled out on her bedroom floor. Lila watched, powerless.

When Friday finally came, she felt like she was serving breakfast to a death row inmate, heaping her plate with four strips of bacon and extra frosting on her cinnamon roll. “So I was thinking,” she said as Marley sipped her orange juice, “that maybe we could go see a movie later tonight if the camping trip doesn't work out.” She tried to sound as casual as possible.

“He's coming,” was all Marley said.

When they got home after school, instead of her usual beeline to the backyard, Marley gathered her camping gear into a neat pile near the front door and waited on the sofa, reading a plant identification book that she checked out from the school library. Minutes went by. Hours. Lila started cooking dinner—lasagna, Marley's favorite. At five, Marley finally tried calling Jared on her cell phone. Lila craned her neck around the kitchen counter to try to hear the conversation, but he must not have picked up because after a few minutes Marley took the phone

away from her ear and threw it against the back of the sofa. Lila thought that might be her cue. She picked up the sleeping bag from the foyer and brought it to Marley. “Sweetie, I don't think Dad's coming today,” she said. “Why don't we save this gear for spring break and we'll go camping in the national forest, just you and me.”

“I don't want to go anywhere with you!” Marley shouted. “Just leave me alone!” She shoved the sleeping bag back at Lila and took the rifle from the umbrella stand before disappearing out the back door. Just let her go, Lila told herself. Let her get it all out and then maybe they could make an attempt to salvage the weekend. She put the lasagna in the oven and started on the last of her household chores for the day, hearing every so often the distant pop of a Coke can being shot.

Lila was outside watering the herb garden when she heard Marley's ragged breathing and jerked her head up just in time to see her daughter bounding up the porch steps, her face distorted in pain and fear. “I shot him!” she cried, “I shot him but he's not dead!”

No drug had ever taken effect as quickly as the adrenaline that pumped through Lila's body as she tried to make sense of Marley's words. “Who?” she demanded, grabbing the frantic girl by her shoulders. “Who did you shoot?”

“The squirrel!” she sobbed. “Mom, you have to help him!” Marley clutched at Lila's sleeve and took off towards the pecan tree at the far end of the field, dragging Lila behind her until Lila's dazed stumbling turned into a run. Then, for a few seconds, they were simply running together in a kind of dream, and Lila was aware of the bristle of the tall grass against their legs and the freckles on Marley's forearms that weren't there last summer and the truth, the terrible truth about why she hated the air rifle. She ran with her daughter towards the end of her innocence, towards the first irrevocable decision she had ever made.

The squirrel was a few feet from the tree, screeching its primal shrieks as its useless body flopped from side to side. She must have hit it in the spine, Lila thought, or maybe the stomach.

“Mom, please,” Marley pleaded as she dropped to her knees in front of the creature. “We have to do something. We have to help him.”

Lila squatted beside Marley and put her hands on her shoulders. “Baby, there's nothing we can do now.”

Marley collapsed into her arms and shook her head, sobbing. “I didn't know,” she kept repeating. “I didn't know it would be like that...”

The squirrel continued to screech, and Lila knew she had to end it. Gently, she helped Marley to her feet and walked her about twenty paces back in the direction of the house. Marley's chest heaved with her sobs, and she struggled to catch her breath. Lila leaned down and tilted her chin up so that their eyes met. “I need you to listen,” she said, “and do exactly as I say. Stand here and don't move. Close your eyes and cover your ears, and do not uncover them until I tap you, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

Lila waited until she obeyed before walking back. The squirrel had stopped flopping around but was still twitching and wide-eyed with pain. She began looking around for a large enough rock, but then she noticed the air rifle in the grass a few feet away where Marley must have dropped it. She picked up the gun and ran her fingers over the hot pink finish for a moment before raising it to her shoulder and centering the squirrel's head in the cross-hairs. She fired, and the screeching ceased.

Lila returned to where Marley still stood with her fingers shoved in her ears and tapped her on the shoulder. “You can look now.”

Marley opened her eyes hesitantly. "Did you kill him?" she asked.

"Yes," Lila answered. "I stopped him from suffering, because that's what you try to do if you're going to hunt."

Marley's eyes were bleary and red. "I didn't mean to."

Lila wanted more than anything to scoop Marley up right then and carry her back to the house to gorge her on Freez-E-Pops and television until every memory of that day was blotted out. Instead, though, she smoothed a strand of hair behind Marley's ear and told her, "Go and pick it up."

The look of horror returned to Marley's face. "Mom, no! I can't look at him again. Please don't make me do it!"

"You killed that animal, Marley, and now you need to pick it up so I can show you how to skin it and we can eat it for dinner."

"I can't," she insisted, tearing up all over again. "I can't, I can't look at him."

"Yes you can," Lila said. "Pick it up by the tail and don't forget your rifle."

Marley looked over at the spot where the squirrel lay. "I can't," she said, even as she started walking. "I can't, I can't."

Lila watched Marley pick up the rifle first, handling it with a new kind of understanding as she slung it across her back. She hesitated for a few seconds, then reached down and picked up the squirrel's mangled carcass by pinching the tail between her thumb and forefinger, as if it might resurrect at any second and bite her. She walked past Lila and on towards the house without stopping.

Although Lila followed just a few steps behind, she felt the distance between them like a chasm widening, and she knew in that moment that Marley was no longer hers. Starting today,

she would begin building a room inside herself where Lila could never go, made from the bricks of every impossible decision, every problem in life for which no easy solution exists. From now on, Lila realized as Marley adjusted the rifle across her back, she would deal in consequence.