

## Matrilineal

If I was blind or maybe mute, I might not be a murderer. Perhaps if I lived my life left-handed or took a right on my running trail instead of going straight. It might be as simple as that old rhyme; step on a crack and break your mothers back. My mother is fine, dead in fact but not by me. She was dead before the social worker got to the apartment, so I'm told.

*Dear Mother...*

That's no good. I crumble the paper and throw it to join two other balls of wasted parchment on the concrete floor.

Concrete would've been a better hiding spot. There was plenty of construction around the streets of Daytona. Florida is a flea ridden dog of hard hats and reflective jackets. I should've thought of that.

*Beloved Mother,*

*It was once thought that two people who never met might be—*

No, no, no, no. I crumble the paper. That is the worst one, didn't sound like me at all. How does one write to the dead? I've had time to come to terms with my situation. I know what I did is wrong. I'm not exactly sorry about it but I'm not so prideful to say I didn't deserve this six by ten box. There is plenty of news that says I do.

# # #

The anchorwoman had long brown hair that curled at the ends like in cartoons. The light did not flatter her overtly contoured cheekbones. She looked like a stork with a long nose that could be seen from all angles. Not just when she turned to the side.

“Thank you, Chris, for that update on the ASPCA adoptions. Remember folks, call the number on this screen for all questions about Hamlet the spotted Great Dane. I might call

myself.” She leaned forward in her chair as she laughed. It wasn’t from the nose, but I could tell she smoked because it sounded more like a croak.

“Just in, a disturbing report has made its way from the sunny shores of the beach,” she said in her newswoman persona, “Earlier this morning police were called to the fair grounds at Daytona Beach by a runner who claimed to have found a dead body.”

My arms went rigid and I stopped mid drink, placing my cocktail of coffee and vodka on my broken table. I meant to fix it, it was only three days ago, but I was so tired I went to bed after going to the beach. Moving a body was not easy. You hear those things on crime documentaries and recreations of famous murders, but there’s really nothing anyone can say to prepare someone for lifting dead weight into the trunk of a car while blood was dripping from the living room to the parking lot. He made a mess. I turned up the volume as the stork woman continued.

“Not much information has been released to the public but what we do know is that a man between the ages of twenty-five and thirty washed up on the shore of Daytona Beach beneath the pier. Now we go to Lourdes Hernandez who is on scene and has more information to share.”

The room of cameras and obtuse light turned into the bright wind-blown face of a woman with dark curly hair and big brown eyes. She was standing on the sidewalk with the ocean at her back. She was much prettier than the anchorwoman. But her teeth were off centered, and I thought her jacket was too big for her tiny frame. It made me wonder, who dressed this woman? Did she live with her mother? Did she live with a man?

“Thank you, Kaley. I—” she smiled wide and I grimaced.

“For God’s sake Lourdes, this is a murder.” I yelled at the TV over her voice.

“—police claim that they have identified the victim as twenty-eight-year-old Harvey Boon—” The camera cut to flashes of crime scene tape and police walking in the sand.

“You bastard,” I laughed as Lourdes continued.

“— tightly wound in plastic wrap with rocks to weigh him down. Police say that during the decomp process, the body was most likely released of the heavier rocks and floated to the surface where seventeen-year-old Trevor Duncan found him this morning.”

“Of course, you floated, you bastard.” I repeated. It always needed repeating.

“There’s no word yet on how the investigation will continue but a press conference at three o’clock will hopefully shed more light on this tragic event. For Channel Nine Eyewitness News, I am Lourdes Hernandez.” The scene cut from the sounds of ocean waves to the claustrophobic newsroom.

Kaley nodded in farce empathy, as if her face wasn’t plastered all over America. I didn’t think that if the camera were on her she’d care one bit for Harvey or any other body that might’ve washed up on the beach.

“Thank you, Lourdes. It is tragic indeed. If you have any information on Harvey Boon—”

A picture of a man with light blonde hair and deep blue eyes filled the right corner of the screen. He was standing on the pier with Joe’s Crab Shack in the background. ‘Cracking them is the best part’, it said. The wind was messing with his hair; hair that I cut just a few days before the picture was taken. I took that picture. We were celebrating an impossible event, the fact that one pink line turned into two. He looked so happy.

“—please call the police hotline at the bottom of the screen. We will keep you updated as information arises. Thank you and we will return after a few messages.” She smiled again before a sasquatch entered the screen saving money on car insurance.

# # #

I stare at the wall of black concrete. There are no windows so I've no idea what time it is. My skirt is riding up my leg as I curl my feet underneath me. This jacket is too tight, so I take it off and immediately feel less constricted although not by much. The pencil and paper are beside me and I'm surrounded by crushed up balls of useless words to a person who can't hear me. I pick up the pen.

*Mother,*

*It's been a while. I guess you could say it's been a lifetime. I haven't thought of you much. There isn't a lot to remember about you. I remember the cramp in my legs when you locked me in the closet. I remember you going out a lot. That's why you kept me in there. I was six, I think. It's still kind of foggy. You came home one day and forgot to unlock the closet. I don't know why I didn't scream.*

*My therapist says I suffered a traumatic event so therefore I was in a trace like state. I really don't know, he's kind of an idiot. Always asking me questions but never answering anything. You ruined my life, you know. It was the smell, they said, that made the neighbors call the police. Four days I was stuck there, with your gross body.*

A fly lands on my hand and I stop writing. I watch the fly as it tickles its way down my finger. I remember the flies and the sound of their wings. It's strange that I couldn't remember it before or maybe its wishful thinking. The fly takes off and I lose sight of it as I return to the letter.

*I imagine there might've been maggots and flies. They would've burrowed into your needle scars. I think I asked the social worker about that, but she didn't tell me. I don't remember them coming and getting me. I do remember the foster homes and the traveling. I was*

*a bouncer, in between homes. I still can never stay in a place for very long and with my current situation I guess I'll have to come to terms with that too. I wonder if that's from you. Or maybe Daddy but we didn't talk about him. I still don't know why.*

I pause as I try to recall Daddy, but I can't. I guess that's for the best. The air is stale, hand-me-down, like someone breathed it all before me. I wonder if anyone died in here, probably not. I'm only waiting to go to the courtroom. Do people die waiting to go to court? I suppose they do. I guess it depends on what they did. I killed my husband. I guess someone could kill me for that.

My mother in law certainly would if she were given time with me alone. Mary Boon isn't a bull in a china shop and who invented that phrase anyways? It's ridiculous to blame the bull. It didn't belong in the china shop. It wouldn't go inside given the chance. If anything, Mary was the person who put the bull in the shop. She loves to create chaos, she is chaos.

God, she's a pill.

Several in fact, with her Vicodin and Xanax she probably would've drugged the bull for maximum destruction. I could use a Xanax right about now. Not because I'm nervous but because she'll be in the courtroom. I'd just like to get a head start on my headache for when she takes the stand. She is the last witness before closing arguments and once finished everyone will take a collective sigh of relief when she finally gets off. She called me that night. Not that she has anything to do with her own son's murder, but I like to think she blames herself. I need to keep writing.

*Do you think if you didn't die, I might have died instead? I'm sure I would've, and you wouldn't have cared. I can't seem to think of any part of my life that benefited another. I haven't*

*made the slightest difference. So many of my foster parents told me “Oh you’re a lucky girl. God saved you for a reason.” or “Great things are in store for you.”*

*I work in a two by four cubicle making collection calls. This prison cell is an upgrade. No one was ever happy to talk to me. To the point that I’d started to hang up the phone first just so I wouldn’t hear the click of their hang up.*

# # #

I was in the middle of washing a plate when the phone rang. I wiped my hands on the rag hanging on the wall before picking up the phone.

“Hello.”

“Oh, is Harvey there dear?” Mary’s feeble tone was only amplified by her delight in hearing my voice. I hated her calling me dear.

“He just got out of the shower Mary. Is there anything you want me to tell him?” whatever it was I decided I wouldn’t.

“No. I just wanted to check in. How are you, dear? How’s the morning sickness?”

“Manageable.” I said as I traced the tiles on the countertop.

“Hopefully it will pass, although everybody is different so if you should need anything, please, call me.” I could hear her dentures clacking together in her mouth.

“I will, Mary.” I smiled because it was the only way to make my lie believable.

“Oh, there is something you could tell Harvey. Could you let him know that I need to be taken to the pharmacy? Since I can’t really drive anymore. Whenever he is able to, of course. I don’t want to impose.” Her frail voice was a fabrication of who she really was. A grain of sand in the wheels of a clock.

She always imposed. The order of the day was always bent askew with her constant lack of independence. Did she think she was a good mother? I wouldn't know.

“Of course, Mary. Anything else?”

“Yes, dear—” I rolled my eyes and breathed a heavy sigh as I imagined her puckered lips pursed in a slug like sneer. I hung up.

# # #

A loud high-pitched squeal fills the room as the little mail like slot opens with a tray of food. A turkey sandwich, an orange and a Motts juice cup, same as yesterday. I remain on the bed and stare at the opening. The feign light of my cell meets with the sun that peeks through the slot. The difference is startling and tangible, as if I could point out the very spot it meets.

“Last day huh?” says Correctional Officer Cortez. He's a stout fellow with his belt around his waist being on its last button before it will surely snap open in front of everyone in the courtroom. The imaginary scene makes me smile. He's not a terrible person but he does like to talk.

“Last day,” I echo.

“For the record I don't think you did it.” He says.

Oh, but I did.

“Thank you.” I say in a voice that I hoped was sincere. I really need to finish writing that letter.

“I mean, you're tiny. How could you have carried him to your car?”

The pen drops from my hand and the tip releases just the smallest amount of ink. It bleeds onto the paper with vein like tendrils before I pick it back up.

“And how deep his neck was cut. There’s no way you could reach. You’re barely five feet and he was over six feet tall. I think your lawyers got the right idea. He fell on the coffee table. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

God, he doesn’t shut up. My fingers grasp the pen tighter.

*I lost the baby, you know. Oh, you know. There I was peeing when plop, there it goes; floating like a rogue piece of shit that didn’t flush properly. Guess what I did? I flushed it. Does that make me a terrible person? I think it does. I’ve tried to connect. I was successful for a bit with Harvey. You would’ve liked him or maybe you wouldn’t have. I never knew you.*

*In any case you probably would’ve been against me killing him. You would’ve asked if he beat me? No. Raped me? No. Was I acting in self-defense? No. Or was I temporarily insane? No.*

*My lawyer seems to really like that theory. But he decided to retell the tale in the form of an accident. He tripped, mother. That was all. He tripped and ripped his throat open enough to see the white bone of his neck. It was an odd thing to see bone out of the body. It was shinier than I expected.*

Officer Cortez clears his throat as he holds the food on the slot. I stand and take the tray from his hand.

“Officer Cortez, I’m sorry, but do you happen to have a Xanax?” I say as I lift my voice in a way that I think is charming. There is a short pause as I am sure he is not expecting that sort of question.

“I can’t give you that. Do you need a doctor?” He sounds nervous. It is a mistake to ask for such a powerful drug but when faced with a devil such as Mary, Xanax is looking like the holy water I need.



“Oh no. I’m just a bit nervous, I guess. I wouldn’t tell anyone you know. You’ve just been so kind I thought you might help me out.” Good God, this is exhausting. Even though he can’t see me my cheeks hurt from the fake smile I force.

“Yeah, sorry, I can’t. It is almost time Miss, one forty-five. So, you’ve got about fifteen minutes. I’ll leave you to it.” His voice lilts in a cheerful tone and he slams the slot closed.

Does he like being a correctional officer? It is not a glamorous job, but I suppose he’s dealt with worse people than me. I’ve only ever killed one person. One pill is not so much to ask for. It’s not like I’m Ed Kemper, fascinating as he is. Is he even alive? I don’t know.

I set the food on the thin mattress beside me and run my hands over my skirt before I sit. I grab the paper and pen, holding it in my lap.

*But I’ve never cut a body open before, so I guess everything was not as I expected. You would know I’m lying. Mothers can tell so I’m told. You would’ve been able to see right through it. Why did I kill him? For the same reason I killed you. Oh, I didn’t really kill you, I know. You overdosed, at least that’s what they told me. No, I was a liability. As I said before I’ve done nothing to contribute to society. I tried the domestic life. Have a baby and settle down, but I was suffocating. You know what I felt when I saw that fleshy blob at the bottom of the toilet. Relief, sweet and all-consuming relief.*

*Harvey would never let me run though. He loves me, loved I mean. I called him a bastard after he died. That’s not very respectful, because he really wasn’t. I still do it anyways. It’s not his fault he was born with a soul. I just happened to lose mine along the way. I’m not sure if I was ever born with it. I guess that’s what happened when I was brought to life, stuffed into a closet, then left for dead as you decomposed six feet away.*

# # #

I was putting away the dishes when Harvey came into the kitchen. I hadn't told him I lost the baby yet.

"Who was on the phone?" He said running his hands through his wet hair.

"Telemarketer." I said out of spite.

"How's the little one?" He placed a hand on my belly and kissed my neck.

"Fine, very quiet." Silent in fact, but I couldn't tell him. Not yet.

"I love you." He said. I smiled at him. I never said it back. Not that I can remember, but he never seemed to mind.

"I love you?" He said again.

I paused with a dish in my hand. I felt the grooves of the knife marks in the plate. I was very aware of the little pieces of glass that chipped away from years of abuse. He's never repeated those words. Especially in the form of a question.

Is he asking me?

I laughed and kissed his cheek as I bent over the washing machine to pick out the utensils. Does he really believe I'll say it back?

"Hey, I love you." He grabbed my shoulder to make me face him. His blue eyes were searching mine in a way that was endearing. I felt sick. He wasn't angry and he wasn't testing me, but he was waiting for a response.

"I know." I pulled a strand of my brown hair behind my ear. He smiled and kissed my forehead before walking to the living room.

He wasn't going to make me say it?

I put away the forks and spoons until I only had a knife in my hand. I almost wish he'd made me say it. A false confession of sorts before I left him for good.

He was standing in front of the TV running through he channels. A cold sweat came over me as I realized it would never end. There was nothing I could do to make him love me any less, and there was even less inside me that cared. He would always be there.

It was time; a time for farewells. I thought I might miss him. I guess I'd find out. I walked into the living room standing just behind him. He was so tall.

“What do you want to watch?” He said without turning around.

I didn't answer. In one stride I stood on the table and wrapped my arm around his shoulders. I saw the smile before I cut his throat. The bastard thought I was hugging him. The glass coffee table cracked, and my legs fell through as his body collapsed on top of me.

The knife hit something hard and smooth then fell from my hand. I felt him heave and as I pushed him off me, he gurgled, and I stared down at him. What a funny sound. Something white peaked beneath the bloody flesh across this throat; bone, I assumed.

God, there was blood everywhere. All I could think while he gasped below me was how on Earth was I going to clean all that up.

# # #

The door to the cell bursts opens and Officer Cortez stands there in all his round belly jolliness. His mustache curls with his lip as he holds out cuffs.

“This is it. Ready?”

I nod and fold the letter into my jacket pocket. I turn around as Cortez fastens the cuff on my wrists. He never puts them on too tight. As much as I appreciate it, he really didn't need to.

During the car ride to the courthouse I watch the buildings go by and the people walking. Who among them has killed? Who among them is walking with a secret? It's amusing to think of the possibilities. I pull out my pen again and unfold the paper.

*I think having partial memory makes that worse. It's all secondhand information from reliable sources but not from my own mind. I have nothing to compare to, nothing to equal out and measure. That's probably why I was kicked out of so many homes. There was no measure of control and nothing to stop me from doing what I wanted. I guess that's why I killed Harvey.*

*I guess that's what you did. I assume I was like any normal child. Loving and wanting. That was Harvey. A good and honest man who doted on me. But that's not what you wanted, and I guess like you I didn't want that either. He was a son of a bitch for floating like he did. Like our child he just drifted to the surface. I guess it was bound to happen. I wasn't very good at murder. I'd never done it before. It takes practice I suppose.*

*There isn't much you can do for me now. In fact, there was never anything you could've done for me except live. Then maybe I might've died. I think I would've been happiest then.*

I think the way it ends now, sounds like the best way. Mother didn't exist anymore but if she did, I imagine she might tear the paper in two.

# # #

I was so cold. Mommy didn't leave a blanket for me this time, but I did manage to store a bag of chips in the corner. Last time I was in the closet I didn't eat for two days. I wrapped my arms around myself as I stared through the cracks of the door. There was the outline of the bed and lots of clothes all over the floor. Mommy always told me to make sure I cleaned up after myself, even though none of the clothes were mine.

I hardly had any that fit me anymore. She kept saying that she would buy me a nice dress for Easter, but she said the same thing last year. There was the faint smell of vomit in the room. It was something I was used to. Mommy always vomited after having a friend over. It was always someone different, but she said they were all her friends. They gave her medicine. She

left the needles laying around all the time, but I never touched them. I didn't like that I could see blood on the tips. There was a creak as the door to the apartment opened.

“Oh, yes. Right there.” Mommy said in a heavy voice. I could hear her panting as another deeper voice grunted.

“I'll get my monies worth from you.”

“Give me some of what you got first.” She sounded like she was tired.

I put my hands over my ears, but I still heard everything. I always heard everything.

“Only one fix. You'll get the rest when you've finished the job.” The man's heavy shoes banged on the floor like a giant's footsteps. They came into the room and sat on the bed.

Mommy was barely dressed in her shirt that was hanging over her shoulder and exposing her chest. The man shirt was off, and his ribs looked as if they were one papercut away from being seen. I brought my hands over my eyes and peeked through my fingers as he took out a needle for mommy's medicine. She sighed as he put it in her arm. This was the only time I ever saw mommy smile.

“That's good.” She said as she laid on her back.

The man stood and unbuckled his belt as he filled the room with his grunts and moans. Mommy was as limp as the macaroni she cooked for me. The bed creaked and my only thought was that I wouldn't sleep tonight with the noise. I was so hungry. I grabbed the chips and opened the bag. They didn't hear me, they never did. I shivered and chewed as the night went on without a single moment of silence.

# # #

We get to the courthouse and through the beeping of metal detectors, shakedown, and swearing upon bibles I finally rest in a mahogany chair behind an equally expensive table. This would be nice wood for a coffin or a cradle.

God, there she is.

Mary sat in the row opposite of me. Her face is veiled in black and she turns to look at me. Her cheeks are wet with tears and like a toad her blue eyes are swollen. Her cane shakes with her hand and I imagine her falling as she walks to the stand.

I must've smiled because she let out a silent sob and turned away. I can feel her breath in the air like its carbon monoxide. I turn around and I look at my lawyer and his oversized ears makes his glasses even smaller for his sallow face. He drinks, I can tell.

"Give this to the judge." I reach into my pocket and give him the letter. He starts to open it, but I shake my head.

"Miss I strongly advise against this. Let me read its contents and then we can go from there." He says in a voice too high pitched for him. He starts to open it again.

"No." I say standing up. The courtroom has gone silent. I must've said that louder than I intended but that didn't matter.

"Control your client Mr. Tennet." The judge says as she sits on her podium.

"Madam Judge if we could have a ten-minute recess—" The judge holds up a hand stopping him from continuing.

"We haven't begun Mr. Tennet. Is there something your client wants to say?" She says with her robes swaying in the conditioned breeze. Before my lawyer says anything, I turn to face her.

Her sandy blonde hair has been treated to an obscene amount of bleach that leaves a chemical look about her. The lines in her face speak to a lifetime of failed beauty treatments and taxpayers Botox. I wonder if her husband still finds her attractive. Without a wedding ring she's probably divorced. The likelihood that her children still talk to her is slim. There is nothing in her severe frown that generates any remnant of an understanding heart.

"I have a letter, your honor. I'd like you to read it, then I'd like to change my plea." I say as Mr. Tennet sighs and travels across the room to the judge. He hands her the letter and waits by the podium for her response.

I watch her face as it journeys through the words I wrote. There is disgust, pity, and then anger. Her lawful eyes meet mine and I think she uses too much eyeliner. Her horrified expression is reigned in as she looks back at the letter. I close my eyes and smile as I imagine my allocation, with Mary listening to me recall how I killed her son. That above all makes me feel something akin to peace. Not that I ever knew the feeling. In fact, I don't feel much at all.