

## Side Effects

A pall settles over our Impala as we pull up to the house on Tangle Street. It's a little gray house surrounded by a white fence. My father's parlor is gray too. As the engine rattles, Mom just gives him the look. Here we go again, she doesn't say, but I know she's thinking that. I don't like coming here either but mum's my word. My little sister Jo Ann doesn't have a lot to say about this either. We both know how this visit will go and we'll take it like the troopers mom told us we were. We'll speak when we're spoken to, and we'll know what to say because we have it recited by now. Dad calls us his sidekicks. Mom calls us his side effects.

"What we do at home is our business," dad has said, "and we tell people about it on a need to know basis. And nobody needs to know anything." His eyebrows always go up when he repeats himself. "Am I clear?"

Oh yes you are, I think and nod.

Inside the little gray house, there are a too many Bibles and other boring books. There are walls of crosses, a family coat of arms that's so meaningful says papa, we're just too young to understand. Pinned to the wall are two faded Shriner hats that he won't let us put on. It smells like old cheese. There is one pretty couch and a pair of matching chairs but they're covered in this horrible yellow plastic covering. The floors are covered with plastic too, guides, I guess, for staying on the right path because my grandparents can't see anything any more.

We haven't been to see my Dad's mother in a couple of weeks so there'll be all sorts of hell to pay. Whoops, dad's driving over the curb now. Maybe he can't see either.

"She's not sick," mom says again. It's already getting hot in the car and dad just turned the engine off.

"She's just pretending."

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“I don’t want to hear it any more,” dad says. “Hush.”

She squints, looking ahead. She has checked herself in her compact mirror five times, adjusting lipstick, wiping eyeliner. I don’t know why she bothers. Grandma never looks at her anyway. Dad’s working up his good son image, he slides his pack of cigarettes beneath the front seat, sucks on another mint. Jo Anne stumbles out of the car, drops her doll in the dirt and proceeds to scream. “She’s ruined! Her dress is ripped! I hate this place!”

She gets shushed, then a crack across her fanny, which only makes her scream more. Within minutes she’ll develop hives like she always does here, Mom will give her a swig of cough syrup, and she’ll pass out on the overstuffed chair in grandma’s darkened bedroom. The curtains by the front door move. Papa, the Baptist preacher. He waits behind the front door for us, never out on the porch like our other grandparents. Just waiting. Weirdo.

Mom with her packages, another new housecoat that Grandma probably won’t like anyway. She’s got her mad on for Dad, it’s always this way, whether he does something wrong or not. I only hope that if and when I have kids, they don’t feel this way about coming to see me.

I go in first. Mom’s trying to scratch the rest of the dirt off Jo Ann’s doll’s head and Dad’s bringing up the rear, crunching another mint. Papa hugs me like I’ve got leprosy. He has, in my mom’s words, the personality of a piece of cardboard paper. If we’re good, which means quiet, we’ll get to have pieces of Dentyne gum and tiny glasses of ginger ale from papa like we’ve earned it as a reward.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Dad’s already leaning over my grandmother to feel her forehead. Apparently, according to Papa, she has been sick for so long now that there’s no way she’ll get well.

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“My heart,” she’s grabbing at her boob and for a minute I’m thinking, uh-oh, she’s going to pull it over the top of her nightie. Didn’t he realize she’d nearly died? She was always nearly dying. We were used to it.

Mom is sitting on the arm of chair. She has learned how to stay in the background. She knows the routine. She will look all over the room but never at my grandmother. I watch her look at an old photo of three-year-old me in the mud brown shore along Galveston. “My, how things have changed,” she whispers.

This is what my dad and his mother have to go through when they haven’t seen each other in a little while. Papa has wandered into my grandmother’s room from his bedroom after peeping at the golfers on his small television set. He mutters something about a five iron, but he doesn’t want to seem uncaring though we both know he stopped with the caring years ago, what good does it do? Grandmother says that papa is better than a dumbwaiter because he’s always available. Aspirin? Coming dear. More tissues, a glass of water? Coming dear.

We all watch as dad listens to her heart. Over next to her bed she lifts and shakes her various bottles of pills, she’s running low. Dad looks at mom, who looks at dad, then away. Then dad digs around in his bag for the special prescription pad. He writes out four or five prescriptions, which she hands to papa. He’s off to find his hat for the drive to the pharmacy while we’re stuck waiting.

We’re listening for the loud sound of papa pulled into the driveway. Grandmother is giddy. Mom’s doing her thing now, yanking out the housecoat for grandmother’s inspection, she loves the scooped neck, the snap buttons, but the material, the material feels real scratchy according to my grandmother, do they have anything a little softer? They most certainly don’t, mom begins but dad gives her the look, she sighs, says, I’ll check. I hear her mumble about

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the fact that Neiman's isn't going to accept any more of her returns. They look at me funny at the store, she said to dad as she looked at the robe on the way over here. They think I can't make up my mind. He didn't say anything, but she looked at him and I heard her whisper the word *bastard* under her breath.

At last here comes papa, acting like he's been to the Sahara and back, puffing, pulling his goofy golf hat off, handing over the package. We have to wait until she accounts for every one of the pills. While she counts, Dad goes over the side effects with Papa. What to watch for. Like we haven't heard this a thousand times. Dizziness, nausea, blah, blah, blah. What he doesn't say. The fact that she'll probably take too many, then wander around, probably fall into something and knock her head on a piece of furniture. Last time it happened, she ended up at the emergency room. Dad, embarrassed by his mom laying there on the gurney, grabbing at imaginary bugs in the air. What meds was she on the nurse wanted to know. The list went on and on. A doctor came in and said that she had overdosed. Still, Dad pretends like he didn't hear that so he has started worrying about her. There are real side effects, dad repeats, and Papa pretends like he's going to be on the lookout for them.

In the meantime, mom makes ready to go. She has, I can tell, had it. I've been waiting to go since we got here. I am ordered to go out to the car with her purse and dad's crocodile doctor bag. Back I come in for the box with the housecoat in it and Jo Ann's ugly doll that now has a dirt gash across its face. Jo Ann is flung across the back of my grandmother's chair. Too many tablespoons out of Mom's cough syrup. Dad's eyeing her now. She's not getting any lighter.

There now. All pills counted. Grandma closes her eyes, smiles so I see where her teeth are missing and she's so still that she almost looks gray and dead. Papa wonders what she'll be wanting for supper. I kiss them both goodbye. It's hard for me to believe we're related to these people. They're just

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two old people we kind of know. Bye bye, see you next week.

Before he closes the front door, papa wants to make sure he'll see us in church tomorrow. Of course, of course, dad says. Well, we didn't last weekend, papa says in his we're-all-going-to-hell voice.

"Terrible stomach bug," Dad says.

"You're a doctor," Papa says. "You ought to know how to heal yourself." He smiles at my dad but it's not a real smile, it's more like he's checking his teeth in a mirror.

We don't mention the icepack mom and dad kept passing back and forth earlier in the morning on our way over here. We don't mention that dad lost his temper last night and stuck his hand through one of our kitchen cabinets, and we sure don't mention that my mom yelled, just before she threw up last night, that she would never go to his parents' house and be treated like that again. But today is a new day so Mom and me put on our fib faces and nod our heads vigorously. Awful stuff, mom says, glad you didn't get it. Papa rubs his poochy stomach, says that he could well have a stomach bug too, now that we came over. Dad apologizes but papa walks toward his front porch whistling like he's calling a dog.

In the car, mom says "Thank God." My dad's jaw moves back and forth but he keeps his thoughts to himself. "That woman," she says. Now she's in her purse, digging around, I hear the castanet sound of more pills. It's a big pill but she swallows it dry. She'll be better soon, she says.

A turn here, a turn there, a few bumps and stop signs and we're home. Dad lugs Jo Ann inside and deposits her on the couch. She'll come to in a few hours, just in time for dinner.