

## Black Mold

My mother was standing on the couch in a wobbly wide-legged stance. Her finger was hidden like a ghost in a microfiber cloth, and she was rubbing a tiny spot on the glass over our family portrait. I caught the door before it announced my presence and closed it, pushing down the handle so there wasn't even a click. I nibbled on my middle finger nail as I watched my mother try to make the family portrait perfect again.

The mark was on my father's face, and it didn't seem like it was coming off since my mother kept rubbing. She looked frantic, crazy, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. Her hair, dyed auburn every three weeks, was tied up into a bun. A chunk didn't make it into the elastic, so it hung down her neck. Wispies and fly-aways poked every-which-way, giving my mother an even more distressed look, like she had been pulling it out. She swayed on the couch, her ankles swollen from sitting long periods of time at the YMCA, where she worked in the marketing division. She acknowledged she was somewhat overweight for a forty-six year-old woman, which added to the swelling of her ankles. She had an on-again, off-again relationship with diets. As she rubbed the portrait, she shifted her weight between ankles. The couch cushions couldn't have been good support.

I never paid much attention to the family portrait over the couch until my father told me he and Mom were getting a divorce. Then the smiles of the portrait began to shine too bright, our eyes behind the glass squinted with malice. In the portrait, we were in front of a splotchy grey background, like the one used in Sears portraits. The right side of my father's smile was pulled up tighter than the left. His black eyebrows were thick as if drawn in with the chisel Sharpie tip. My mother smiled wide so that crow's feet sprouted from her eyes. She had a hand on my

father's knee. I was about five, sitting on the floor, legs crisscrossed and free of scars. My smile showed missing front teeth. The portrait mocked our broken family.

My mother crouched down, allowing my father's happy eyes to peer straight at me. She started scratching at the mark. She was going faster, harder, as if to dig my father out from the portrait. He wasn't coming back. She looked pathetic, alone on the couch in a wide, wobbly stance.

"Hey, Mom," I said, hoping to take her away from the portrait.

She turned around, her arms going out for balance. Her face was scrunched, thinking and calculating. "Oh, hi sweetie." Then she turned back and starting circling the cloth over the mark.

"What's wrong with the portrait?" I asked, still standing in the hallway.

"There's some weird spot," she said. Her breath was choppy and quick. "It just won't come off."

"Why don't you leave it alone then?" My finger started scratching at my jeans. I didn't wear shorts around Mom anymore, not since Dad told me about the divorce. I didn't want to her to look at the marks and still not notice.

"Well," her hand slowed. "I want to get it off his face."

"It's so small, no one will notice," I said.

"I will," she said, still rubbing. If I could have seen her face, I bet she was cross-eyed.

I hung my purse on the banister, then walked over to her.

"Can I see?" I asked.

Mom lifted her finger. She humphed. I stepped up onto the couch with her. We both put a hand on the wall on either side of the portrait to steady ourselves.

I looked at it, bringing my nose inches away from the glass. The small black mark on my father's cheek was minuscule. I couldn't tell what it was. It seemed like pixilation on an over-zoomed photo. I'd never noticed the mark before. But Mom would go to any length to keep the photographed family perfect. The divorce was finalized three days ago, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 – the day before Thanksgiving.

Dad didn't come to Thanksgiving, even though Mom and I invited him. He spent the day somewhere else with people we didn't know. Mom and I sat at our dining room table that could seat six, both at a head of the table. We didn't talk. I was mad at Dad for not being there on a family day. My eyes stung from being dry, and my throat was blocked by a lump. I bit down my thumbnail, causing purple dots to appear at the quick. As I took my first bite of turkey, I realized Dad wouldn't be there for any future holidays. This is what it would look like. Mom and I at a table meant for six. I put the fork down.

After Dad moved out, Mom was aloof, spending a lot of time in the bathroom. She put the shower on so I couldn't hear her sobs. But I knew she wasn't taking five showers a day. And the pattering didn't always drown out her tantrum-like yells. When I could hear her, she never cursed my dad, but vocally longed for him, questioning why he left and when he would be back.

After Thanksgiving, however, Mom wasn't so subtle about her grief. She used to avoid the upstairs cupboard that held all the family pictures. But yesterday, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, I came home from a hike at Mason Butte, and Mom was encircled by photos of him. Me and Dad. Mom and Dad. Dad. All the faces in the photos smiled.

She sat crisscrossed, bent over so her head was by her ankles. I walked up to her and asked if she was okay. She looked up. Her mascara blackened the bags under her eyes. Black-purple trails squiggled down her cheeks. She smiled, red lipstick on her teeth. She said she was perfect. She gripped the pictures in her hands, bending the glossy paper. Her lie frightened me but her stretched smile made the spot above my belly button go cold. It scared me that she could be grieving so much for a dead marriage, yet lie straight to my face with a plastic smile. My chest tightened. I bit my thumbnail as I ran upstairs.

Now, standing next to her on the couch, I wasn't surprised she was obsessing over this tiny black mark on my father's face. She needed him to stay perfect. I needed her to leave the mark alone. Mom started rubbing the mark again.

"Come on," I said. "It's fine."

She didn't answer.

"Should we have dinner soon?"

"There's turkey in the fridge."

I sighed. I felt like a ghost. "Okay," I said, stepping off the couch. "You want anything?"

"Not right now..." Her hand halted, and she studied the mark. "Maybe some Windex will help." She got off the couch and went to the laundry room.

I floated up the stairs to the bathroom.

I started the bath, poured Milk & Honey bubble bath in, and undressed. I avoided looking at my nakedness in the mirror. I didn't want to see the circle nail-dug marks on my thighs. I got

into the bath, making sure the bubbles covered my legs and hips. Those marks started the day my father told me about the divorce.

“I’m going to Ashland” was how my father broke the divorce news to me. He came over on a Monday, since he had them off from his job as the theatre handyman. Mom was still at work.

I looked up from my geometry homework. I sat on the couch, the smiling family portrait above me. His eyebrows were furrowed as if in concentration.

“When do you leave?” I asked.

“This Friday,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“The Oregon Shakespeare Festival offered me a job.”

“When are Mom and I going to join?” I asked.

“Alice,” Dad said, leaning back on his heels. “Your mother and I are getting divorced. You’re going to live with her for the time being.”

My eyebrows mirrored his, furrowed in contemplation. Parents are supposed to get divorced when the kid is young, like elementary-school age. Not when the child is half way through their senior year of high school. Under my geometry book, I started scratching a small spot on my thigh. I wanted the sharp pain to distract me from what my father was saying.

“We thought this was a good time,” he said, “because, you know, you’re going to Oregon State next year. You’ll be right in the middle of us. Me in Ashland, your mother in Tigard.

It was like I was a bead on a string. My mom on one side, my dad on the other, and me, slipping between the two. The string was tense. Neither wanted the bead. I was alone spinning in the middle. My father in Ashland, my mother in Tigard.

Under the bubbles of the bath, I dug into my thigh with my middle fingernail. The wet skin balled under my nail like Playdough. Maybe I was the reason for my parents' divorce. They stayed together for me, but that caused them to suffer. Soon, they hit their limit. They couldn't wait eight more months when I would be leaving for college. My mom was going mad, obsessing over that portrait, and my father was gone. He said for work but it was to get away from Mom and me. From me, the one that forced them to stay together too long.

I scratched and scratched until my nail was full of skin, and a raw dot stung from the bubble bath. I brought my hand out from the water and flick the skin out from under the nail. Wanting to see the wound I dug, I lifted my leg up. A small circle, no bigger than the eraser of a pencil, glimmered right above my knee. It was wet from the water and the bodily liquid that caused scabbing. I could feel it sear and, yet, it was muted pain.

It felt the same when my dad was telling me of the divorce, while I sat on the couch under the portrait of the smiling family.

"I'd rather have my parents together," I told him. Under the math book, my nail dug deeper into the skin of my thigh.

"Unfortunately, that's not how our family ended up."

Skin was rolled under my nail.

"So, you're getting divorced because of the job offer?" I asked.

Liquid wetted my finger. I made sure Dad couldn't see me scratching. I needed the pain to keep me from screaming that he was wrong, that this wasn't how things had to be.

"No," Dad said, tilting onto his toes. "It's, it's a lot of things."

I wanted to ask what things, about what would push two people apart when a child was there spinning in the middle. I dug and dug. The exposed flesh was sticky.

My parents bickered when I was around. About the coffee, the trash, Dad's late nights – the mundane things of married life. I thought it was normal, that all parents bickered like them. Sometimes at night when I crept out to the bathroom to pee, I heard them arguing, their voices muffled by the wooden French doors of their bedroom. Or, if I didn't hear voices, I tip-toed to the banister and saw my mom asleep on the couch. Even in sleep, her face was scrunched, thinking and calculating. I convinced myself it was all normal.

"A lot of things," I repeated to my dad. My finger stopped scratching.

Dad hooked his thumbs in his pockets and rocked heel, toe, heel. I got up, careful to hide the raw mark with my geometry book, and stomped upstairs. On my "Year of Puppies" calendar, I marked a big red "X" on that day, October 22<sup>nd</sup> – the day my father told me he was leaving. Mom found me in my room that evening. I had changed into full-length yoga pants to hide the three other marks I made after Dad left.

I stood up in the bathtub. The new nail-dug mark stung as bubbles slid over it. I turned on the shower to rinse off. The water ran over the crown of my head, down my forehead, through my eyelashes, rolling down my cheeks. Salty tears mixed with the purified water.

When I got to the base of the stairs, I looked back at the family portrait. Mom wasn't fussing over the spot anymore. In fact, she wasn't in the living room at all. My chest lighted a bit. After my shower, I originally put on full-length pajama pants. But then I wondered if Mom would be worried about the marks on my legs the same way she did about the mark on the portrait. So, I put on lime green pajama shorts instead.

I walked up to the couch. The black smudge had grown to cover my father's face. Like someone had pressed a cigarette to the picture and burned just his head. Except the blackness grew around his smile. The contrast with the black made the white of his smile glare bright.

The black had lost the pixilation quality and now looked fuzzy like mold. It sprawled out, veiny and fading at the edges.

About ten years ago, when Dad and Mom were still married, we got an infestation of black mold in the crawlspace under the house. Oregon had had an especially rainy winter and hot summer; the congregated water caused awful humidity under there. That's how Dad explained it to me. He and I used to watch *This Old House* reruns on Monday evenings before dinner, so I nodded along, as if I understood.

Much to my mother's dismay, Dad let me go under the house with him to see the mold. We wore heavy duty face masks, and he even made me wear my science goggles. Contact with black mold could be deadly, he said.

Looking up at the portrait, I stared at the black mold-like substance. I could see the it growing, stretching out towards my mother's smiling face.

"Mom!" I yelled. When she didn't respond, I repeated, "Mom."



“What?” she hollered back from upstairs.

“Can you come here?”

She shuffled to the banister. I didn’t even have to say anything. Her eyes went straight to the molding portrait. Mom gasped and ran down the stairs.

“What happened?” she asked.

“How would I know?”

She grabbed the portrait off the wall and carried it to the dining room table. From the back pocket of her jeans, she pulled the microfiber cloth and started rubbing again. It was obvious, though, that the mark was not on the glass.

“It’s not coming off,” I said.

“I can see that,” Mom said, her eyes wide and wet.

The black mold veins throbbed, expanding down to Mom’s face. She quickly but carefully flipped the picture frame over and undid the back. She pried the portrait out, flipped it, and began to softly rub. The black mold didn’t come off. She rubbed harder. The blackness didn’t even transfer to the cloth. She pushed harder so the portrait bent under her finger.

“You’re going to ruin it,” I said.

A beat of silence, save for the grainy sound of the cloth rubbing against the portrait.

“It’s not coming off,” I said.

“Do you think it’s black mold?” she asked, her vocal cords strained.

“It’s not coming off,” I repeated, wanting her to leave it alone.

“What is it?” she asked, higher pitched.

“I don’t know.”

She slammed her hands on the table, her chest heaving above the portrait. I stepped back in shock at the sudden bang. I nibbled on my index finger nail. I bit at the quick, cutting through the nail with a satisfying spongy feel. I pulled the nail off. The black mold crept around my mother’s smile. Purple dots appeared under the nail tip. The black mold veins started expanding downwards towards me, innocently smiling.

My parents’ faces were blacked out, but their smiles stayed uncovered. The smiles mocked me, teased me, reminded me of a time when they were in love and I was innocently smiling.

I stared into the blackness. The veins encircled my head like a halo. My stomach sunk and my thumb throbbed. My parents fell out of love a long time ago. My dad stayed at work too long. My mom felt abandoned. They disagreed on everything from coffee, to trash, to the way they raised their daughter.

I was the bead in the middle, the reason the string was tense. Mom and Dad pulled the string tight to keep me up, spinning in the middle. But now my dad was gone and my mom stood next to me, crying over a ruined portrait. But she hadn’t asked me how I was doing. My mom never talked to me about the divorce. She just locked herself in the bathroom to weep, or surrounded herself with dead captured memories as if she could ask the Devil to bring those moments back. My mother is here but never talks to me.

The last time I saw my dad was the day he left. I drew an “X” with the chisel side of a red Sharpie on that day, too – October 27<sup>th</sup>.

I was sitting on the couch, under the then-unmarked portrait, working on physics homework. I heard the door unlock. I didn't look up, thinking Mom had gotten home from work early.

"Alice," he said.

Surprised by the deep voice, I looked up. "Oh, hi, Dad."

He rubbed his eyebrow. "Mind if I sit with you?"

I shrugged. My breathing quickened, and my heart beat deep in my chest. A bitter taste coated my mouth.

He stood by the armrest. "I'm heading down to Ashland today."

"Okay," I said. I looked back at my homework, like I didn't care. But scabs, yellow like mango jam, polka-dotted my thighs and hips.

"I wanted to say bye," Dad said.

I looked at him, not tilting my head up, so my eyes glared from under my eyebrows. Under my Physics book, I dragged my nail over a spot of skin on my thigh. "When will I see you next?"

"I'm not sure," he mumbled. He rocked back on his heels.

"Will you at least come up for Thanksgiving?"

His eyebrows sunk. He rocked forward to his toes. "Maybe."

My throat constricted. I kept digging with my nail. I contemplated asking why but then concluded it wouldn't remedy anything. I went back to my physics homework.

“Sucks,” I said stiffly.

“Alice, you can be mad”

“I know.”

“But know this is for the best.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I still love you,” he said.

“Sucks you didn’t come to my Physics Extravaganza,” I said.

The Physics Extravaganza was on November 16<sup>th</sup>. It was the first science event my father missed. He came to every elementary science fair, even though everyone got a blue ribbon and a yo-yo. He went on field trips to OMSI, during which we lingered in the Physics Lab while the other kids wandered into a giant nose. He even came the day my class made egg cradles and parachutes from paper, when we dropped them over the second-story banister at school to see whose egg wouldn’t break.

But my father was absent from my senior year Physics Extravaganza. My lab partner and I won second place for our Bicycle Wheel Gyroscope. I had explained the project to him late But he wasn’t there to see it.

“I’m sorry I missed it,” Dad said.

I could have screamed or told him to go. To not leave Tigard but to leave me alone. To hold me close like a father should. I scratched faster, deeper.

“Can I get a hug?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said.

I bit hard on my thumb nail while I was smooshed between his chest and arms. It hurt. My insides hurt when he hugged me. I wanted to kick and scream and tell him to make it better because that’s what a dad should do. He squeezed me, making my shoulders pop. My thumb seared but I kept nibbling. He let me go. My ribcage expanded with the new space.

“Bye,” I said.

“I’ll see you...” His eyebrows twitched. “Bye, Alice.”

I changed into long pants before Mom got home.

Now, Mom was hunched over the mold-infest portrait, sobbing. I watched her, a pathetic sight.

My throat ached as if I swallowed an egg whole, shell and all. My head felt like someone had scooped all my mushy brain out. My nose was dry. I could feel the air as it passed through my sinuses, as if it was running its nails along the fleshy walls. My stomach twisted, pulsated. My finger throbbed. My toes tingled. My ears burned.

I looked at the portrait. The black mold veins crisscrossed over my face. It spread out, filling my face with blackness. Only my smile with the missing front teeth was left.

“No, no, no,” my mom cried, now scratching the portrait with her fingernail, rotating between each face. The black mold didn’t come off.

“Stop it,” I said, keeping my voice a tense whisper. She didn’t. “Stop, Mom.” I grabbed her hand.

“I need to get it off,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because –” Mom’s eyelids drooped. Her lip began to quiver. Her hand slid from my grasp.

We looked at the portrait. The black mold veins stretched out, crisscrossing across the rest of the portrait. Only the smiles were untouched, highlighted by the surrounding darkness.

“The people in the portrait,” I said, “they’re not here.”

Mom sniffled.

“I’m here, Mom. Can’t you see?” I smacked my hand. “Can’t you feel me?” I kept slapping my hand. “I’m here, I’m here,” I repeated through bared teeth, each “here” punctuated with a slap.

“Stop,” Mom said, grabbing my hand mid-slap. “Alice, I see you. I know you’re here.”

“Then why don’t you talk to me? You’re the mom. I’m the kid. I’m the one who lost my dad.”

“I know, sweetie.” Her eyes became glassy. “But I’m hurting, too. I lost my husband.”

“Obviously, I get that,” I said. “But you didn’t even tell me about the divorce.”

“I didn’t know how,” she said.

I grabbed the portrait. “This family is gone, Mom.”

“I can still fix-“

“No, you can’t.” I threw the portrait on the floor.

“Alice, stop, I can-“

“Those smiles, they’re gone.”

“But the smiles are still there.” Mom pointed at the portrait.

We both stared at it on the ground. The black mold covered the portrait. Only the smiles showed. Smiles that taunted us.

I grabbed the portrait and bent it in half. Mom winced but didn’t stop me. With a hard squeezing, I folded the ruined family portrait again.

“It’s only us, now,” I said, walking towards the garage door. “Like at Thanksgiving. Only us.”

Mom shuffled behind me. “I can fix it.”

We walked out the side door to the trash can.

“You can’t. Dad’s gone. You’re here. I’m here.” I threw the smiling portrait away and turned to her. “Be here with me.”

Her eyes flicked from the trash to me. I thought her obsession with the perfect family portrait would overtake her, and she would push me aside and clamber into the trash can to get it. But she didn’t.

“I just – I want the perfect family,” Mom said.

“It doesn’t exist anymore,” I said. I wanted to say it never did, but I swallowed the bitter words.

Mom and I stared at each other. At first, her eyes squinted, charged with anger at me. She breathed in, so deep her shoulders raised and her back arched. Then she blew the air out through her nose, a sound of hollowness escaping.

My index finger moved to my thigh and tried to scrap. But there was no nail left, so it was just flesh rubbing on flesh. My thigh was coated in a layer of lotion I put on after the shower.

Mom's eyes widened when she saw my thighs. It was the first time she noticed the marks. I wanted to crouch down and hide the scars. But I let her take in the sight of her daughter's marked skin.

I brought my finger to my mouth and tried to nibble more. The lotion residue was bitter, and there was no nail to bite. Trying to hook my tooth under the quick caused too much pain, so I returned my hand to my side.

Mom scrunched her face, thinking and calculating. Her eyes met mine. They were full of worry, moving ever so slightly back and forth between my staring eyes. She motioned me to come to her with a few hand flicks. She brought me into a hug that was tender and smelled of her vanilla hand lotion. I put my arms around her.

Her voice wavered as she said, "I'm so sorry."

A sob welled up in my throat, and I swallowed multiple times to push it back down. Part of me wanted to accept her apology; I felt like I needed to. But another part of me said she should feel sorry. I was the ghost finally seen.



After a few vanilla-scented beats, we walked back into the house. We sat down on the couch, the family portrait no longer above us.

“How are you doing, sweetie?”

My heart pounded, throbs echoing through my veins. A spinning bead, I slipped to Mom’s side. Dad was far away. Mom held me, slowing the spinning. I started biting my ring fingernail.

Then I started to cry, my head on my mother’s chest. Mom rested her cheek on my head, wetting my hair with tears. After a good while, Mom kissed the top of my head, then said, “I think we have some scar cream.” She got up, and I collapsed onto the couch, no longer crying. She walked upstairs to the medicine cabinet. I stopped nibbling my nail.

Mom came back with a tube of off-brand scar lightening cream. No longer was she rubbing, rubbing, rubbing the mark on the portrait. Instead, we sat together and rubbed the cream onto my circular nail-dug marks.