

## I AM NO LONGER

I put it back on the shelf. Pictures can be so mean. I'm not like that any more. I'm no longer swings in the park, duck duck goose with friends or meaningless kick ball games in the sun. The good old days when mother could fix anything with a hug and a kiss. I'm scarred, black inside The doctor with the thick glasses tells me the scars will get smaller and smaller until they are gone. I don't believe it.

Mom fusses over me like I'm a child. Why can't she leave me alone. She picks out my clothes. All new. She helps me dress. I can do it myself. She says. "Now don't you look nice." I use to think I looked nice, what good did it do me?

I miss my first thing in the morning starter kit, two cigarettes and a cup of coffee. Mom thinks I'm too young. What does she know?

I can feel a pounding in my chest. I wish it would stop. I don't mean stop pounding, Sometimes I want it to stop working all together. They say there are other things in there, lungs. stomach. liver. gizzard. I don't know. I feels all black and hollow to me.

Mom is driving, just a chattering along just like she always does. She doesn't know I'm not listening. She has this thing about being the center of attention. She thinks if she should ever stop talking, she might disappear. Mom, you won't.

I sit silently. I do that a lot lately. I nod or say "yea" occasionally. I know she's glad I'm back but I'm not, not really. I'll never be back.

This isn't our car. Ours is a turquoise green this one is some kid of red. The other had turn crank windows this one goes down with a button, but of course she thinks I'm the same. I want to scream but I won't.

I guess I scream at night. I wake up and my throat is sore. Mom is there before I can even open my eyes. She hugs kisses, strokes my head and you guessed it, starts talking. I swallow. We are getting closer to school.

School is so juvenile, The doctor with the thick glasses, thinks it good for me, therapeutic. I don't know why anybody cares about this stuff. I don't know what difference it makes or what good it will do me.

The kids all think they know what I've done and what I've been through. I know they all talk, mostly behind my back. No one asks me anything directly. My guess is that they've been coached, warned or what ever, not to talk to me about it. I don't want to talk about it to them either. Maybe I should say thanks, but to who?

I look out the windows. I know we are getting close to school. Mother's mouth is still going. I wonder if she thinks I might find her voice comforting. I shake my head. I don't say it but I don't. She stops the car.

"Have a nice day." I hear her say. Maybe I was paying attention. I know what she is going to do now. She'll give me a big bear hug and kiss my cheek. She'll wipe an eye with her finger, under her glasses and say "I love you." I haven't said it back yet but I suppose I will, one of these days. It seems the right thing to do. I take a deep breath and slip out of the car.

I walk slowly up the walk. Emily. Teresa and Melody are standing in a circle. They look at me then quickly look away. I know how they are. I used to be one of them. That's what we did to those that didn't fit our standard. They had no chance of ever getting into our group. "Humph" I say. But I don't say it very loudly. I really don't want them to hear. They'll just use it against me and laugh.

I pull my books close to my chest. I watch my steps. I hear a horn blow. I turn

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before I have a chance to think. It's mom. I can see her in the car. The red car. She is waving like crazy. She wants to say good bye one more time. I move my hand from my books just a little. I wave back. It's the first time I've done that. I'll have to remember to stop myself next time

I hear a gasp or simple movement of some kind. I know someone is looking at me. I keep walking.

Mr. McCloud opens the school door. He is about ninety years old. The school police presence. I heard he never gave up on me.

"Good morning Miss Downs." I sigh. I should feel something for him. He continues. "It is good to see you again." He got to me. I smiled a quick smile than let it fall. I haven't looked at him yet. "Have a nice day." he says as he holds the door open for me.

I don't look. I don't turn. I hold my books tight and kept walking. I know he sighed. I just know he did. I hear the door close He is on the outside now. I'm on thee inside.

I watch the tile on the floor. No reason to look up. Taylor Gill comes running down the hall. He nearly hits me. He goes into a spin and almost stumbles.

"Sorry Kit." I look up. Not with my face only my eyes. Just a quick blink. He has that laughing joker face on. I wonder what he wants, from me. He makes me sick. I keep walking.

Mr Pettybone steps from his office. I know it is him. I don't need to look up. His stride is quick and calculated. Dress shoes and perfectly pleated pants. He wears too much aftershave.

"Good morning, Miss Downs." Please don't treat me like a celebrity. I know he pushed the school board to move me up a couple grades so that I'd be with my old class mates. Thanks I guess." "How are you this morning?" I debate with myself whether or not to answer. I stop.

"Fine," I say. I try not to be sharp. I hope it didn't come out that way. Maybe it did.

"How are we coming with our classes?" How am I doing in my classes? I think but do not say.

"Fine," I answer.

"Good. That's a good girl." I'm not sure he is talking to me, or just preparing for another spot on prime time TV slot with me by his side telling the world. bla bla bla

"I've gotta get to class," I stand there stiffly. He says something. I've block him out. He turns to go back to his office.

Tootie Melloy stands beside her open locker. She is flirting with Clay Johnson. I use to like Clay but that was before. As for Tootie, she thought we could be friends. I mean we are sisters now, sorta. I think it would be ok if she could drop dead. I mean it. It is not because of Clay. Clay I don't care. Tooties Mom took my dad. Tootie's voice is sickie sweet just like her mothers. I could gag.

My dad searched for me everyday. Tootie's mom searcher too. My dad said one day one thing lead to another. What ever that means. My stomach feels empty. Now he lives with that woman. I'll never forgive him.

I feel a tear forming in my right eye. That is the one that always starts. I'm not going to cry. Not here. Not today. I turn into the class room and take a seat. I over hear a conversation.

"I heard he raped her over and over every day." "The voice stopped when the speaker

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realized I had entered the room. She doesn't know anything. It wasn't like that. He said it made him feel guilty the way things started out. I assured him I was OK with it. When he said he was sorry, I said don't ever be sorry. It just is. I dab the corner of my right eye a couple times.

The teacher drones on. I know already. I can read. I read the assignment last night in that room, the one I sleep in. I don't have a phone. I don't have a computer. I can't be trusted. I don't have my own TV. If I set in the living room my mom has to be right there. She kisses the top of my head too often.

One of the girls behind me is talking to another, the same one that was telling her friend all about sex and about drivers training classes this summer. Mom says, if I'm good, I'll be able to take drivers training too. I'll be old enough. I haven't told them I can drive already. He taught me. He let me drive the truck all the time.

Finally, the bell rings. It is time to go home. Some of the kids push and shove to be the first ones out. In the hall, everyone is talking, saying their good byes. No sense in hurrying. If my mom isn't out there, Mr. McCloud isn't going to let me pass anyway. I get as far as the double doors. I can see out. I don't see mom, but I do see dad. He sits with that woman waiting for Tootie. Tootie doesn't care. I find the bench. I sit and wait for mother.

The hallway thins before mom shows.

"Miss Downs, your mother is here." I was emersed in a book. I had stopped watching for her. This whole thing seems ridiculous. I use to walk home. I started walking home in the third grade. No big deal, but now mom insists .I wait for her to pick me up.

"Good night Miss Downs." Mr McCloud says as I pass. I turn slightly. I wave with three of my fingers as my arms hold my books to my chest. I still haven't said anything to him.

I get to the car. I open the door and slide in and guess what she starts talking. "How was school today?" She asks as she leans over. She puts her arm around me. "I missed you today." I know what the right thing to say is. I say it. "I missed you too." I say flatly, without any expression.

I look out the window as mom drives. She is talking again. She asks what I'd like for supper. I'll have to say more than "Yea" or "Ah Hua"

"Could we stop for some take out Chinese?" I shrug my shoulders. She reaches over and touches my head. I guess I never make any requests much.

"What ever you want, Sweet heart."

Now the food isn't great or anything, but it reminds me of Tony. We ate take out Chinese all the time. The smell of the food in the car is what do you call it? Nostalgic, Reminiscing.

We drive over an old suspension bridge that rattles as we pass. I use to stop here on my way home from school. I'd jump over the rail and slide down underneath. It was cooler underneath. I liked to play in the water.

One day there was a man fishing in the shade under the bridge. I liked him right away. He showed me how to bait a hook, how to cast and the important method of reeling the really big one in. He insisted that our friendship be a secret. Never tell anyone anything. Some people might not understand and might not let me see him again. I promised I

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wouldn't, not ever.

I thought it was some kind of game when he hushed me and threw me over his shoulder. He put me in his truck. I rode home with him. I wasn't afraid.

He tied me with a chain. When night came I realized it wasn't a game. He wasn't going to let me go.

I want to jump over that rail. I can't tell mom. I can't tell anybody. I want to slide down the embankment to get in the shade. I want to see him smile the way he smiles when he'd see me. To watch him pull in his catch and explain to me how to prepare it for supper.

"What are you thinking about?" Mom's voice interrupted

"Ha What?" The smell of our diner drifted through out the car.

"What were you thinking about?" She asked again.

"Nothing Mom Why?"

They wanted me to tell them everything. Tats, habits, what he eats, what he drinks , his favorite beer, size shoe, you name it. Then came the questions about our sex life. How many times. How did he do it? They claimed they already knew, but wanted to hear it from me. I tried to deny it. They didn't believe me. I mumbled up. They sent in Dr. Thick Glasses. She reminded me of Lucy in the Charlie Brown cartoon. I wasn't fooled.

Once we got to the house. I went inside past the mantel. There was the picture of a little girl. I don't know her, and she doesn't know me. I went up the stairs to the room.

I stop at the foot of the bed. I put an anklet around my ankle. There is a chain tied to the anklet at one end and fastened to the floor at the other.

My mom found an old handy man to put it in. Some one that didn't have his name or business name on the side of his truck. This is something mom doesn't want the neighbors , the police or anyone else to know about. She cried with her hand over her mouth and stared the whole time the old man was working at putting it in. She cried harder when I put it around my ankle. Mom put up quite a fight over the chain. I insisted until I got it.

I flop down on the bed. I put my hands under my head and look at the ceiling. In three and a half years, I'll be eighteen. an adult. I'll leave this crummy little town. I'll find Tony. We will live as husband and wife again.