

Mama Says

I press my face against the window. Wind whistles through the edges of the glass and the cracks of our home. Our home is made of leftover wood, second-hand bits and mix-matched pieces. It sits in between mountains, tucked away in a valley of gravel, surrounded by trees that grow straight up out of the rock. Their leaves are green now but soon they will be red and brown and gold. I want to know *how*, I want to know *why* they switch so quickly from one thing to another, without any warning, without a single sound.

My Mama says it's magic. I say it's tragic, which is a new word I've learned that means bad. I want the leaves to stay green and the trees to grow where they are supposed to - out of the soft dirt, not out of the hard rock.

I asked her once, why it's called a holler and she said it was the hillbilly way of saying hollow which means a valley between mountains. She said holler also means to yell out. When you yell out in the holler your voice bounces back and forth against the mountains. When I'm outside, I can hear babies crying and people screaming and gunshots and singing. Lots of people live further up the mountain. I can hear their echoes, but I've never seen them.

Mama says that if we don't get out of this holler soon, this holler will swallow us whole.

Mama's pacing the floor again. The hem of her tattered terry-cloth robe sweeps across the planks. It's been too long.

Sick and tired. Sick and tired of his shit. That low-down, no-good bastard.

I know these words by heart - like a nursery rhyme, like a Dolly Parton song, like the story about Moses in the basket. I know all the words.

I shiver. An afghan, worn and torn from many years of passing down, finds its way around my shoulders. There is that familiar chill that stays and the pains are back, gnawing on my insides, scraping like the claws of mice. I've learned not to ask, it makes her sad, but my tummy is bad and loud and doesn't do what I tell it. She looks at me and sighs.

Go get your shoes.

We make our way up to Mamaw Maybird and Papaw Lee's house. The late afternoon sun still finds a way to shine through all the trees. I am careful not to step on Mama's shadow.

Mamaw Maybird and Papaw Lee's house is bigger than ours. They've got an upstairs and a fancy clock and a tire swing. Mama says their family has been living in

this holler for generations - which means a long, long time. Mamaw Maybird is out on the porch snapping green beans and spitting a steady stream of snuff into a rusted Folgers can. She takes one look at us and shakes her head.

How long's that bastard been gone this time?

Mama takes a deep breath and gets that squinty look in her eyes that makes my fingers twitch. I've only ever seen her cry a few times. She thought I was asleep. Mama says crying is weak. I get a whooping when I cry for no good reason. I hold my breath. Sometimes things go black and Mama has to splash water on my face but it's better than crying like a baby.

Mamaw Maybird holds out her arms to Mama and it scares me to see how the bones in Mama's back poke out. Mamaw is a big woman, Mama says she's pert near 300 pounds. Papaw Lee is bigger. Men are always bigger. I watch Mamaw Maybird's and Papaw Lee's eyes. He nods his head. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. He is going to let her give us some food. Mama and I can talk with our eyes too.

Mamaw Maybird gets a paper bag and puts some milk, potatoes, and some green beans in there. She even wraps a wet cloth around a chunk of ham and puts it in the bag once Papaw Lee goes back out on the porch. She whispers,

I heard tell he was down at Fat Jack's again with that whore Wymaleene. Ain't no telling what lies that heifer's been a whisperin' in his ears. You best watch yer smart mouth, he pert near broke yer jaw last time. Yer brother Willy's been asking 'bout ya 'round yonder, wanting to know where he's got ya tucked away. Ain't nobody gonna tell him where yer at. Ya know how folks 'round here look after their own. But leaving you and that baby girl hungry ain't right. I can get word to Willy if ya want.

Mama starts to say something but Papaw Lee comes back inside. He's got one of those low-hanging, round bellies like my Daddy. He's always having to hitch his pants up, even though he's got one of those fancy belts with a big shiny buckle. I think it has some type of bird on it, but I've never gotten close enough to look.

I tend to stay an arm's length away from him. I'd seen one of those big hands smack his own grandson clear off his feet once. His grandson's name is Luke and he's around my age. His eyes are shaped kinda funny and he doesn't talk much, but he smiles a lot. I'm not allowed to play with him. But one time, when Mama was taking a long time to heal, Mamaw Maybird let us play. I made him a mud pie and he actually ate it. We rolled around on the grass laughing and Mamaw Maybird was laughing too. That was a good day.

Papaw Lee has a toothpick in his mouth that he runs across his teeth. He doesn't chew on it, he just moves it with his tongue. He spits out the toothpick. It lands by my feet. He doesn't scream, his voice is deep but the words come out quiet.

I should be smelling my dinner on the table right about now.

He turns around and goes back out on the porch. Mama starts to say something again, but Mamaw Maybird shakes her head and puts her finger to her lips. I have never seen Papaw Lee beat her. Mama says he used to but doesn't anymore because he's older and Mamaw Maybird's gotten smarter. Mama says that Mamaw has learned to keep her mouth shut. I wish Mama didn't talk back.

We go outside. He strokes his bushy white beard real slow and stares at Mama like Daddy does on bad days. He's got another toothpick. Mamaw Maybird says quietly,

Lee your dinner's pert near ready, just waiting on the beans. Cornbreads in the oven if ya wanna have a piece to tide you over.

There's been a few times when I've I had to spend the night with them 'cause Daddy had to take Mama to the doctor's. Papaw Lee, if he's not on a moonshine run, sleeps on the couch with his shotgun beside him. Mamaw Maybird lets me sleep in her bed and she scratches my back till I go to sleep.

Everything about her reminds me of food, even when I'm not hungry. Her skin is puffed up like buttermilk biscuits. I have watched her pull up parts of her tummy, she calls it *her rolls*, and sprinkle baby powder in the creases there. And even though her skin looks red and angry, it still reminds me of sprinkling flour on dough.

They ain't my real grandparents. My Mama's Daddy, my real Papaw, is locked up and her Mama (who I'm supposed to call Granny) lives in Jersey. Granny and Papaw ain't together anymore. Mama said that after eight kids and constantly trying to kill one another, they finally called it quits.

We're gonna go stay with your Granny in Jersey. He don't know where she lives now. He'll never find us there.

Mama always says this when Daddy's been gone too long or if he's hurt her real bad. But Daddy *could* come home with a big bag of groceries. He *could* have Slim Jim's and M&M's in his front shirt pocket - just for me.

I always get kisses first. One time, before I waited to see what mood he was in, I said, *Give Mama a kiss first*. He didn't give her a kiss.

He might come in whistling and say, *Look here what I got fer my purr-ty girls* and Mama will pretend to be mad, but then it will be her turn to get cuddles. He will run his hands, hands that stay stained even after he washes up, through her long brown hair that she is not allowed to cut. Not ever, ever. Daddy says she looks like Crystal Gayle, but prettier. *Yes sir*, he will say, *my gurl is the purr-tiest*. He will say, *You are mine and no one else's. Mine forever.*

If it's a good day, he will just smell like cars and grease and gasoline. And tomorrow, tomorrow we could go out in the yard and I'll look for worms and he'll squirt me with the hose as he washes the dirt and the dust and the mud off the Mustang. Daddy loves his cherry-red Mustang. He says he loves it *almost* as much as he loves me, *almost* as much as he loves her.

We make our way back. Mama has my hand and it's hard to keep up. Mama walks really fast. But sometimes, Mama's not fast enough.

The moon has gotten big like a bouncy ball. Mama smacks my head, *Get away from the window*. She hands me a bowl of green beans and a big chunk of ham. She always gives me and Daddy the bigger pieces. She says she ain't hungry, but her tummy doesn't listen to her either. I leave a little bit of ham in my bowl even though I want to eat it all.

After yer done eating, you go on and practice yer writing. Write yer name ten times and make sure you make them letters smaller. Ain't no teacher gonna want to see that sloppy scrawling of yer's taking up the whole damn page.

Mama says I'm gonna go to school. *You ain't gonna be no heathen like them young'uns up yonder*. I'm a big girl now. I just turned 5. I can count to thirty. I know my alphabet and I can spell my name. I'm still trying to learn how to write in between the lines and Mama don't wanna hear it, that the pencil is too big for my fingers. *Practice makes perfect*. Plus, I'm getting better at not reaching for stuff with my left

hand. I have the devil in me, but Mama's been smacking him out. She said she should have done it when I was a baby, but she didn't know how bad it was until Daddy's Mama told her that the devil is left-handed.

We hear it at the same time. The crunch of the wheels on gravel, bits of rock flying. I freeze but Mama snatches me quick. She drags me to the corner. I still have the fat pencil in my hand. She struggles to pull the hope chest away from the wall. I want to help but I don't want to get in the way. I know Mama can do it. Daddy complains that Mama is stubborn. Mama says stubborn means never giving up.

The hope chest is heavy with things Granny collected for Mama since Mama was a little girl. It's packed with the good china and shiny silverware and quilts, stuff that Mama says are heirlooms, which is another word for fancy things we ain't allowed to use. But Mama always says, one day, one day soon.

The gravel is bouncing off the tires of his Mustang as it zig-zags up the holler. It clangs and growls and it sounds like thunder and he's getting closer. The headlights swerve left and right and it looks like flashes of lightning. He's slamming on the brakes. I suck in my tummy and slide down the wall, behind the hope chest. I rest my forehead on the top of my knees that are pulled up tight against me. I've got just enough room to rock. Mama always makes sure I got just enough room. We have gotten fast. I used to slow her down. He hasn't found this spot yet. She always gives me the best hiding place.

The car door slams. It echoes. Mama says everything is louder in the holler.

Hush little baby don't say a word. Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird.

There goes the front door. I'm sure he's kicked it, but he didn't have to. She's finally stopped trying to lock it. He likes to say, *Don't make me have to tell ya again.* He always finds another reason to say it. *Ain't no winning,* Mama says.

I don't want to count. I will just sing in my head. I sing in my head a lot. Sometimes Mama will tickle me and say Yoo-Hoo, like the commercial for the yummy chocolate milk I like. It makes me giggle extra hard. Other times she'll smack my head and say, *Ya hear me?* And she'll have to repeat herself, she hates to repeat herself.

And if that mockingbird don't sing, Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

You fucking whore. I know what ya been up to.

I put my fingers in my ears. I can only get my fingers in so far. I rock back and forth while I sing my favorite nursery rhyme.

And if that diamond ring turns brass, Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass.

Mama always says, *Don't peek. Practice your counting.* Words are easier to remember, especially when I can sing them. When Mama's in a good mood, she will sing with me. We used to love to play the radio, but Daddy broke it. He couldn't fix it. I used to think he could fix anything.

And if that looking glass gets broke, Mama's gonna buy you a billy goat.

I can't hear Mama, but I can hear the chains on his boots as they clank together. He walks sideways when he's like this. He talks sideways too. It's like he twists the words with his tongue before he spits them out. I made him stick his tongue out once, but it just looked like a regular tongue. On good days, his words sound like a George Jones song - slow and smooth and calm and warm.

And if that billy goat won't pull, Mama's gonna buy you a cart and bull.

I take my fingers out of my ears. Sometimes it's better to hear what's going on. And there goes the chains again - jingle jangle, ding dong - like that fancy clock at Mamaw Maybird's. If you count just right it will make a noise - sort of like a bell - exactly when you tell it to. I hear it all the time when I'm playing outside. Mama says everything echoes in the holler.

And if that cart and bull turn over, Mama's gonna buy you a dog named Rover.

Mama screams. She keeps screaming. It doesn't echo. It just stays in the room.

I really want to peek, but I know better. I'm biting my knuckles. I have never sucked my thumb like a baby, but Mama still doesn't like it how my knuckles get raw.

Why's Willie lookin' fer ya? Hmm? Ya think ya can just leave? I'll fucking kill you first. Ya hear me? Ya hear me?

And if that dog named Rover won't bark, Mama's gonna buy you a horse and cart

And if that horse and cart fall down, you'll still be the sweetest little baby in town.

There goes that thud, moan, thud, moan. I don't know when Mama stopped screaming. It makes me feel better when I can hear her, but I know he won't stop till she stops making noises. I know what it looks like without looking. I've peeked before. It's like when he kept kicking that stray dog that knocked me off the porch. I tried to tell him we was only playing. I tried to tell him he was my friend and he never bit me, just gave me lots of licks. Mama told me not to fool with it. I shouldn't have been following it around, then Daddy wouldn't have had to take it out back and shoot it.

Wait for the snores. Mama always says to wait for the snores.

Tell yourself the story about Moses.

Then Pharaoh gave an order to all of his people. He said, "You must throw every baby boy into the Nile River. But let every baby girl live." A man and a woman from the tribe of Levi got married. She became pregnant and had a son by him. They named him Moses. She saw that her baby was a fine child. So she hid him for three months.

Sometimes I change the story around, so that Moses is a baby girl.

I hear the change drop out of his pockets - plop plop - as he tosses what Mama calls his fancy, going out jeans on their bedroom floor. He's always dropping things and breaking things and falling down when he's like this.

Mama and I usually pick up the coins and check his wallet afterwards. Most times there is no money left, but sometimes we get lucky. *We're saving up*, Mama says.

I can't hear Mama, usually I hear her moaning softly. I can't come out till I hear Daddy snoring. I try to count to thirty, but I keep losing track and I can't hear Mama. Finally I hear Daddy snore. I don't want to wait any longer. I push my back against the wall, squeeze my tummy in and slide out.

The moon is filling up the room with light and this makes me happy - happy like when I get a treat like a Yoo-Hoo or M&Ms or Mountain Dew. Sometimes it gets too dark to see. I'm not scared of the dark, I'm a big girl. But still, I'm so happy that the moon hasn't gone to bed yet. The moonlight shines on the trail of broken things that I know will lead me straight to Mama.

I lost my first wiggly tooth a few days ago so it must be Miss Tooth Fairy helping me. Mama said sometimes Miss Tooth Fairy gives wishes instead of money for extra special little girls. I wished for M&Ms, but I should've wished for more good days. On the nights it is too dark to see, I have to crawl and be careful not to crash into things that Daddy has thrown. I have woken him up before. Miss Tooth Fairy has let the moon stay up way past its bedtime to help me see better. *Thank you, Miss Tooth Fairy.*

I can't forget to thank her. Mama says that my "*Yes Sir, No Sir, Excuse me Ma'am, Pardon me Miss, Thank-you, May I, Pleases*" are very important. I must always mind my manners. *Be polite. Don't interrupt. Don't ask for things. A child is to be seen not heard.*

Daddy's snores are getting louder, we're safe for now. His smell is everywhere - it reminds me of the burning medicine that Mama dabs on my cuts to stop me from getting 'affected.

Mama isn't moving. I hate it when she goes real still, but I know what to do. I tip-toe to the kitchen and get a rag. I still have to get the stool. I can't wait till I'm big enough to reach over the sink. In my head, I ask Miss Tooth Fairy to help me again. I know I might be pushing my luck, but I can't help it, I'm always asking for things in my head, but as long as I don't actually ask out loud - I don't get in trouble. Mama says it's selfish to ask for things, but this isn't just for me, so I think it might be alright. *Pretty please, make the tap be quiet.* It's loud when you turn it on too fast. I have woken him up before.

I do it real slow and the water trickles out - no noise. I want to clap my hands, I want to yell YAY, but I'm no baby, and I know better. I tip-toe back to Mama and gently move her hair away from her face. It is covered in blood.

The light's changing. I don't know if the moon is climbing up the steps in the sky or if it's tumbling down. I do know I need to move quicker, but sometimes I'm clumsy and hurt her. It won't matter if it's on accident or on purpose, Mama says there ain't much difference.

I gently, gently - *one two three* - wipe the blood off her face, but she ain't moved at all. Most times she'll come to and take the rag and do it herself. She says things like, *Your Mama is tough. No need to worry. Let's get you to bed.*

I pick up her head, it ain't heavy, *not for me*, and I put it in my lap. I want to give her little kisses but I know her face will be sore. She doesn't like to be touched

when she's like this. *Open your eyes Mama, open your eyes.* I fight the urge to hold my breath. I blink, *one two three, one two three.* I will not cry. I think Miss Tooth Fairy is done for the night. I can't ask Mr. Jesus. He's busy helping the little children and I'm a big girl now and I've asked for way too much.

The rag is thick with my Mama's blood. There is blood coming out of her nose, it isn't squirting out fast like water from a hose, but it's dripping like the tap when I don't turn it off all the way. There is blood coming out of her ears. I start to wipe some of it away with my left hand, remember, and then quickly switch to using my right. I need to rinse out the rag and then get it to the sink without making a mess. I quickly roll up the rag in my nightgown that I've drawn up to my knees.

I tip-toe back to the sink. It's getting harder to see but good thing I remember where everything is now. We don't have much furniture, but what we do have is always getting broken and then fixed again, broken and then fixed again.

I asked for too many wishes, and it's only the one tooth that I've lost, but there is another wiggly tooth that I've been pushing back and forth with my tongue. I concentrate on pushing on it harder with my finger instead of just my tongue. If I can get one more tooth out maybe I can have more wishes.

I don't turn the tap slowly enough, and it makes that loud noise like Papaw Lee's truck when it stops before it gets to the big drop toward the end of the holler.

Daddy says it's the sound of switching gears. I like to know the right name for things. Mama knows lots of words but Daddy doesn't.

I quickly turn the tap off. It sounds like banging pots and pans. I am so mad at myself. *Big Dummy. Always in a hurry. Can't do nothing right.* Daddy isn't snoring anymore. *Please let Daddy keep on sleeping.* My nightgown is wet. I'm always making a mess. Daddy isn't snoring. I don't know what to do. I don't want to use the other rag because we only have two. Should I hide again, in case he's awake? I bite my knuckle hard enough to draw blood and it calms me down.

I want Mama to wake up. I grab the clean rag and make another wish.

Star light, star bright,

First star I see tonight,

I wish I may, I wish I might,

Have this wish I wish tonight.

Let my Mama be alright.

I get on my hands and knees. It's dark and he won't see me. Maybe he won't see me. I have woken him up before. Mama always says, *Your Daddy loves you best and he would never hurt you.* But last time, last time she didn't wake up for a long time.

Just as I get close to Mama, Daddy starts snoring again. Mama is whispering, *Come on out* - soft enough so Daddy can't hear, but loud enough for my big ears. *Thank you, Miss Tooth Fairy and Mr. Jesus.* She moans as she takes the rag out of my hands that won't stop shaking and she spits out a tooth. Does Miss Tooth Fairy want Mama's teeth too?

Mama says, *How many times have I told ya to turn that tap on slow?* I put my head down and mumble, *I'm sorry Mama.*

Now, I need you to be brave. Can you be a big, brave girl for Mama? I nod my head and take my left hand and hold it in my right one.

The flashlight's in the hope chest. It's wrapped up in the quilt Granny made ya. Go get it, but girl you better be quiet.

I tip-toe to the hope chest. The lid is heavy, but I'm a big girl. I lift it up. I feel around with my hands until I feel my baby quilt. Mama used to let me carry it around, keep it in hiding places with me, but I'm too big for that now. I grab the flashlight and creep back to Mama.

I need you to get over to Mamaw Maybirds and tell her to call your Uncle Willy. Tell her I'm hurt real bad. Tell Mamaw Maybird, but don't tell her around Papaw Lee. He's probably out doing moonshine runs, but you still gotta be real quiet - just like you are here- just in case he's there. Then I want you to stay there if you can, unless

Papaw Lee wakes up - and if he does, you come back here but don't come in if you hear yelling. You go out by the shed and stay put till me or your Uncle Willy come to get ya.

I don't want to go up the holler by myself and I don't like Papaw Lee. Last time I had to go there he said mean things about Mama trying to get Mamaw Maybird's nose in between her and Daddy's domestics. I asked Mama what domestics meant but she never said.

Mama spit out another tooth in the rag. She says,

Scooch, go ahead girl, get the afghan and wrap it around you and just follow the gravel up - follow the gravel. Shine the light on the gravel. You know the way. And remember say nothing about calling Uncle Willy around Papaw Lee or your Daddy. Can you do that for Mama?

I don't want to go out in the dark. I don't want to go alone, usually we go together.

Ok, Mama, I whisper. I'm on my hands and knees feeling around for the afghan that I think was left on the rocking chair that's now on its side, near the front door, which is broken again.

It's cold and dark and it's hard to hold the afghan around me and hold the flashlight too. The wind's whipping around me making the branches on the trees creak and moan. I can hear animals scurrying around. I sing "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" and Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams". I know lots of songs. I can sing out loud here but very softly.

I try to walk faster but I trip and scrape my hands and knees. I'm a big girl. I'm not going to cry. I take a deep breath in and then I force myself to let it out. My nightgown is wet with Mama's blood and I forgot my shoes.

I finally see the house but I know to turn the flashlight off because if Papaw Lee is there, he might shoot me. I wait until my eyes can see in the dark. I know where all the creaks are on their porch. I have gotten so good at being quiet. I tip-toe all the time. I open the door and hold my breath and hope that Miss Tooth Fairy gives me Mama's wishes - she should have two.

Papaw Lee isn't there. *Thank you Miss Tooth Fairy.* I make my way to Mamaw Maybird's bedroom and softly nudge her awake. She turns on the light and looks at my nightgown and shakes her head. She picks me up and I put my head in her neck and I cry. She rubs my back and makes soft noises. I cry harder. She gently takes my nightgown off and gives me some of Luke's clothes to wear.

Mamaw Maybird is stroking my hair as she asks, *How bad is it?*

I mumble, *Real bad Mamaw, real bad. You have to call Uncle Willy.*

She says to me, *I already did child, I already did.*

We both jumped when we heard the *BA BOOM.*

Everything echoes in the holler.

That night, before the sun had a chance to wake up, Uncle Willy took us to the Greyhound Bus that would take us to Jersey.

Mama lets me have the window seat. I keep my eyes on the leaves. I wanted to see if I could catch them changing colors. I am not sure if Miss Tooth Fairy already gave me the second wish, but just in case she didn't, I will ask her to give it back to Mama.