

“How to Begin Again”

Bracing March’s biting wind; she wraps a silk scarf around her neck twice. He’s late again. She wonders what the story will be this time. She imagines pebbles rubbing under her shoulder blades, fascia stiff. She’s too young for this, but she feels old. Her head spins with snippets of discussion, Healey’s Family Law class ended a few minutes ago.

She’ll be a lawyer someday. That day can’t come soon enough, but tonight she waits for a chronically late husband, wondering if her son has eaten dinner, wondering how much longer she can go along with this marriage charade. Each choice is more complicated now that she has a child.

She stands erect, stamps her feet to ward off New England’s unforgiving spring. She considers her life like tangled paper clips, unlatch one and several others are released. She shifts a weighty handbag from one shoulder to the other and tucks her scarf even tighter around her throat.

A cacophony of sound echoes around her, like those high pitched whistles only dogs can hear. A car’s muffler roars long before it lurches over a speed bump at Boston College’s south entrance. Every fiber of her body cringes with embarrassment, those imaginary pebbles pierce deeper under each shoulder blade. She chuckles at how her shoulders might be mistaken for earrings.

Cars breeze past as her ride, a ’84 Honda Civic, gorilla taped fenders; spray painted baby blue, limps past the elaborate gothic architecture and the well manicured campus. College students, a demographic she resents, wander across the quad returning from dinner, others weighed down with books trek to the O’Neill library. A few chat oblivious to the bitter wind.

Their only worries are impending papers and upcoming exams. Her husband stops the Honda Civic at her feet.

She wonders how she ever married him. She recalls wanting to be married before the child arrived; to look good on paper. She didn't want her parents to be devastated by her brief lapse of good sense.

He's an embarrassment of a man, but nestled in the back seat is their two-year-old son. He's a testament to all that is good in their union. He's smart and agile, bright as the sun and deep as an abyss. Her son is an ancient soul, from the moment he stirred inside her body until he came forth, all wrinkly and miffed, she knows his existence is no accident.

Professor Healey slows down as he drives past the security check point. She waits until he drives out of sight before getting into their car.

The child wrestles with the car seat straps eager to sit next to his mommy. As soon as she opens the passenger door, vodka fumes emerge. The heat from her husband's breath is palpable as the creaky car door slams shut. She says nothing for fear of exploding. She refuses to discuss his lateness, the stench of vodka and why he still hasn't fixed the muffler. She talks to her son in a sweet voice reserved for children. She can feel her heart beating like a time bomb.

More excuses as usual, "We're making spaghetti and meatballs! And what else . . . tell Mommy." He spins a tale.

All stories aside her son has yet to eat dinner. Animated explanations, which in the beginning she tolerated because he was fun, different, on the edge of a life she didn't even know could exist. She is tired now. She loses track of tonight's story. Dinner is constantly a performance in progress, "but we had to stop and pick up Mommy, right?"

The child is silent as they drive south. She seethes. He drives along the Brighton reservoir; puffs of air escape from joggers mouths like cartoon captions as they dash by. The man looks through the rear view mirror at his son in the back seat. They make eye contact. She struggles to keep silent.

“Look at that guy wearing a magician’s hat!” he says as a team of cyclists dressed in bright yellow spandex whiz by like a swarm of bees. “Look at that! Do you think he is a bee charmer? Or maybe he’s a wizard or maybe . . .”

She turns toward the backseat as the child strains to reach her with his little hands. His elf like face is flushed. He searches her eyes the way he always has since the first time she held him.

She reads her son like a dog eared copy of a cherished book. They face each other, reaching her hand out to touch his tiny fingers. Their fingers clasp tightly. His touch is cold and clammy; she fears he might be getting sick. He’s prone to ear infections.

Their car stops at the cross-streets of Englewood Avenue and Beacon Street for a trolley stalled in front of Preterm, the health center, housed in a five-story eyesore among a row of brownstones. She remembers when that building made the front page of the *Boston Globe*, back when a crazy guy shot and killed a receptionist, a doctor and wounded two nurses because they performed abortions in that building. Cops and ambulances were everywhere the day those lives ended. Now their car idles, waiting for the trolley to pass across the tracks.

Her mind drifts back to the day when she crossed the line where the Pro-Life fanatics strolled up and down Beacon Street carrying rosary beads. They shoved gigantic images of aborted fetuses at her. Inside the health center, she signed her name on a black clipboard and waited to be called. She made a fist, felt the prick of a needle, thought of Pink Floyd’s song, “Comfortably Numb” and looked the other way as blood filled the vial. She was neither,

comfortable or numb. On that summer day, she walked out of Preterm selecting each step carefully as she crossed the train tracks right where their car is stopped now.

“Positive,” that’s how results are given. They never used words like pregnant at Preterm. Having an abortion there would have been easy. She chose motherhood because the test was a mere confirmation of a life growing inside of her. She could feel her breasts bountiful and her belly protrude almost instantly. She had always wanted a child. The father was a mere detail. Besides she knew the guilt would drive her mad. Marriage was required because she didn’t trust his sense of paternal duty.

Tonight all three are wedged in their seats, confined into a puzzle of metal and steel, tape and rubber, gasoline and oil. The trolley rattles half way across the tracks and then it stops. Waiting . . . the traffic light up ahead is still red.

The child whines. Perhaps his diaper is chafing against his bottom. She fumes as the vodka stench rises eroding any veneer of a family. Her heart beats faster with every second, she wonders, can she have a heart attack at twenty-five? She thinks she might suffocate in the car.

Broken promises erupt as a fifth of Smirnoff rolls out from under the driver’s seat. The sight of the half-filled bottle between his feet makes him stop. She’s dizzy imagining him swigging from the bottle. Instead he pretends that he has no idea how that bottle got there. She wonders how many times this has happened.

The traffic light turns green. The trolley lingers for a split second, then, heaves forward, with an abrupt chug backwards. She swallows hard, a hodgepodge of images flash before her. She sits upright in the car.

“Get out of the car,” she says. “I’m driving.”

Like an obedient husband, he complies without hesitation. He walks around the car to the passenger side. He likes to be driven, free to critique and satirize the world as it drifts by.

She slides into the driver's seat. The trolley passes as she buckles her seat belt. He is walking around to the passenger side with that familiar stride she used to love before her sobriety. She shifts the car into drive. He stands baffled at the train tracks.

She puts her foot on the gas pedal and presses down. Driving is second nature, calming and reassuring. The car lunges forward and keeps going. She never looks back at him. She laughs at how simple it was to leave him. She can't go back. She won't go back. She drives up Lanark Road.

"How are you doing back there?" she asks looking at the child through the rear view mirror.