

the apple

When your mother hates you and the sparrow still sings, the praying mantis still prays, and the tulip still blooms, you think heaven must be crying, but there is no rain.

Something must be fuming. Something must be shattering. Certainly, *something* must be breaking other than me, but the hummingbird does not slow, the monarch flowers from its chrysalis, the lotus wakes each morn, and my mother still hates me.

Is that not some kind of catastrophe?

How about a little thunder? How about a little hail?

There is snow glistening in the streets instead of blazing riots. Winterberry hollies flourish, white frost seeping into their branches like a saintly serum rather than melting through them like serpentine acid. Opalescent icicles dangle from naked apple trees in the timid rays of a calm sun, happy to freeze and content to fall.

It feels wrong to find beauty in ditches meant for ugly deaths, but I let myself find it anyway because those deaths belong to me, and the living was never all that pretty to begin with.

The steep driveway of the house I grew up in welcomes me with greeting snarls and aggravated hisses. It is the first Monday afternoon in February, and I am about to enter the lion's den where my mother prowls, but I am no Daniel.

I am no righteous son.

New Year's has come and gone, and there is no resolution I can keep to make her love me.

"Mom, it's me," I call out after closing the front door. Wipe my boots on the mat but do not take them nor my jacket off. She does not know who I am, but she knows me better than anyone. "Where are you?"

A fruit bowl dazzling with bright ruby and soft golden patches perches atop a polished counter – Honeycrisp. Tea candles flicker and brawl to maintain their flame. Antique frames encase memorized Bible verses printed in neat fonts – John 3:16, Luke 14:26, ample psalms.

"Living room."

I attempt not to loiter. There is a hefty fine, and I can afford it, but it usually drains me dry.

My mother sits perpendicular to a brick fireplace that is no match for the sacrilegious heat polluting the air. Her back faces a wall of chipped mirrors curated to make the house feel bigger and its viewers feel smaller.

I am here to turn her around.

We speak stiffly for five hour-long minutes before I say my piece and she picks it apart.

“You wear that cross around your neck, and you don’t even know what it means.”

I found it in a box of expired nail polish and empty pens when I was eight. It’s dainty, scratched, and a nickel in a roll of quarters. I rarely take it off.

My mother goes on a spiel about how hysterically inapt sacred jewellery suits me compared to the way I act, the way I am. “I’m surprised it hasn’t turned green. It’s not like you would build an altar on a landfill.”

“This is what I’m talking about.” Burnished armour clatters on the floor, the echo is eternal. We fight bare. (Her skin is made of metal. Mine is made of clay.) Shields and helmets do not protect against unrestrained tongues. “You can’t say things like that and expect me to keep coming back here.”

“You sure came back this time.”

Captivity is a chameleon – shelter is its favourite colour. Exile is safety, banishment is one of abundant mercies I am not entitled to.

(I learned how to run, but did not get very far.)

Are not rainbows exalted above a nation’s people?

“I’m here to leave. I’m here to tell you goodbye.”

My mother sighs like I’ve tossed a scarf with tassels of ten-pound weights around her shoulders. “Well, go on then.”

“I’m being serious. You’re never going to see me again. Not if I can help it.”

The laugh that tumbles from my mother’s lips grips the sides of my face and pinches. *Silly, stupid girl.*

“I’ll see you soon then. You haven’t been much help to anyone.”

The cub has matured. Hurls a roar of refusal to step into this house again because it is moulding with sin and *loveless* all thanks to the beast who dwells inside.

“So much for God’s unconditional love.”

“What are you implying? God lives in this house. God is love.”

“But he’s holy first, right? Isn’t that what you always say? Wasn’t that your constant excuse for over-punishing? Listen to me. *You’re not God.*”

“And you’re not making any sense.”

“Then I guess he and I have that in common. You don’t understand me, and we both know you don’t believe in me either. You think I like being this way? The way I *am*? I feel powerless no matter what, and I don’t love people who hate me because it’s fun.”

We walk a tightrope that leads to each other, leads to nowhere. Is it wiser to maintain an uneven balance for the rest of your life, or crash and hope you survive, hope you do not pummel anyone in the landing?

My foot slips while trying to decide. The audience bellows in my mother's honour as I plummet. Everyone hears me scream, but no one listens.

"I don't hate you," my mother says.

Silly, stupid girl.

"Do you love me?"

"Of course, I do. Of course. All creators love their creations, yes? Is that what you want me to say? That Almighty God in heaven loves his children, and I love you?"

Anytime my mother speaks, my hearing declines. My ears have taken too many piercings, and they do not heal.

But it might be true. My mother *could* love me.

Like a wolf loves a lamb, like Jesus loves Satan, and like Satan loves a sinner. Holy or wicked, she never fails to condemn me. Crafts a special murder lined with sinking teeth masked behind a wool coat.

You kissed my cheek and left me to hang.

My mother named me after her mother, and if I were born a son, she would have named me Judas.

What kind of parent has to pray to love their child?

"I hate you."

My mother scoffs. "I thought you loved me?"

"Is there a difference? I think, to you, they mean the same thing."

Maybe my mother loves me like Lucifer loved to worship. Or maybe she loves me like God loved Jesus.

I do not know if that is any better.

The crowd could chant to crucify me, and her silence would yell louder than anyone.

I do, however, know the gospel story. I know God is love, but he's holy first, and if he chooses to send his son to die for people who hate him, then his son will die and love them afterward. I know Jesus is perfect, and I, unlike him, do not have any divine purpose, but I am hanging on a cross for someone who hates me, and when I die, I am petrified I will love them afterward.

Does God have peace in heaven knowing sinners curse him in hell? Do sinners burn with the damning knowledge that God is love, *but he's holy first?*

"You taught me that God is a father. A parent. What are you?"

"I'm your mother."

Hell is not fitting under a roof that was meant for me. It is the kitchen where the tools we use most often are blue flames and sharpened blades, and we ice our burns with scalding water and clean our wounds with lemon juice. It is sitting at the dining table being forced to finish the *love* on my plate because that is all I am going to get for a while. It is the refurbished guest room down the hall I slept in for years, a busy wallpaper installed to cover the cries of a child who was not allowed to be sad, who mistook bombs for music and injured their legs dancing.

It is the basement I wished would turn me into a phantom, the bathtub I was left to drown in, the ceilings decked with my mother's demons, the thick rugs thrown down to hide crimson stains from kneeling with fervent prayers to be loved by something other than a knife, and I've died way too many fucking times in this godforsaken living room.

"You're a liar."

If I had a world of sinners to save, maybe I could bear the suffering. All I have is a sinner's blood, and there is not much left. My mother has a wall of weapons, and all I have are my hands.

I grab the pendant around my neck and yank it. The necklace rives with a clipped snap, my heart along with it.

Abandoned is the cross I could never level, severed is the chain that helped me try.

"Here." I flaunt it like an escaping thief with his cuffs. Slam it on the coffee table between us. The nail comes undone when I retract my arm. "I only wore it because it used to be yours."

The weather outside is brisk, strewed with visible breaths, chattering teeth, and walkable water, but there is nothing as cold as my mother's eyes.

I am bleeding, and the closest person who can save me sits idle and watches.

She is so skilled at it that I almost respect her, almost bow down and repent, but then I realize how easy it is for her to look at me like this, and I remember that false idols do not deserve my praise.

"Am I a liar or do you not believe me? I can admit that I'm not perfect, but what mother is?"

"You were supposed to be!" The shouting shocks us both, but I will raise a voice instead of a child and see how my mother likes it. "You were supposed to give me everything you didn't have. You were supposed to be my mom. *You owed me that.* I don't care how selfish it

sounds. I'm sorry that your own mother ruined you, but if you wanted a daughter, you should've treated her like one."

"I never wanted a daughter."

I see the arrow soar from miles away. It shoots me dead centre and knocks the wind from my lungs regardless. Drags piping hot streams to my tear ducts and thirsts for them to flow.

"I still don't."

The fight is over, and I am tired. Words spoken to my mother are a waste when they leave my mouth, and they exist to feed me deserts and wrath.

"How can you say that?" My tone is strained, destined for whispered questions with fatal answers. "Do you hate me? Do you really hate me?"

My mother does not know who I am, but she knows me better than anyone.

You hate your own flesh and blood, so you give birth to a daughter and treat her like a mirror.

She suspends our gaze and huffs. "Biblically, yes. Biblically, I am supposed to hate you. So, biblically, I do."

I shake my head and berate the burst dam blurring my vision.

Luke 14 Verse 26.

"It doesn't mean what you think," my Sunday school teacher says. "In this context, to hate means to love less. We are to love Jesus so much that everybody dear to us seems like our enemy. They're not, but can you imagine with me for a second? Imagine loving someone like that."

I did not have to imagine, caught on the ledge my mother was gracious enough to let me tread and loyal to let me trip.

Is that love? Did it used to be? Was it ever?

My mother tells jokes that make me cry, and she holds everything but her children and her tongue.

"If I ever have kids, they won't know you."

Peace is impossible, its shape is vain. No intellect I have ever met pronounced her without a drop of malice because her robe of purity consists of conflicting stitches and a scarlet lining.

Justice has snuck out the back door and left her shadow on the rack. I drape it around myself like a heavy cloak. Invisibility was once a coveted superpower of mine.

"If anyone ever calls me 'mom', they won't have to beg for an answer."

I do not look back, and the hem of my garment remains untorn. A glacial breeze crashes into my body like a late train and flies forward on the tracks without me. Retreating footprints decorate the ground, and I leave a part of myself behind that was never really mine. Snowflakes kiss my cheeks in a blizzard of sorrow, warmer than my mother's touch. Sunlight brushes my face and fears to set me on fire.

I am whole and incomplete, reborn and birthed into a new grave.