

Jen Knox

Salt

Mom insisted I join her to “run errands” this morning, but I’m beginning to worry. After I lose a few more games of *2048*¹ on my phone, my thumb aches and the stop-and-go traffic turns into the uneasy forward momentum of a road trip.

5 “Are we going to Grandma’s?” I ask, checking my phone for back routes to Toledo. Mom smiles, then shuffles her playlist, a mix of classical and metal, and turns up the volume. We pass the grocery and strip malls². We pass a hardware store, which rules out repairs. I focus on a ramshackle garage advertising cheap oil changes a half-mile ahead and wait for Mom to slow down, but the garage blurs by. I watch it shrink in the side mirror. Gray clouds collect behind us as farms and fences drift by. Mom drives beyond soy fields and horses, toward a long stretch of oak trees.

10 “Where are we going?” I yell.

She glances at me, then the phone in my lap. “Did you win?” She knows I never win, so this time I don’t answer her. “We’re going somewhere that’ll change your life, Molly May. Get you out of your head.”

“I need to study before tomorrow,” I say.

15 Mom hits the brakes hard. My seat belt cuts a diagonal line along the front of my body as I’m thrust forward, then back. I grab the handle.

“Almost missed it,” she says with levity I am not used to. After another quick right, we approach a large warehouse at the far end of a gravel lot. The sign that greets us says FREEDOM & SECURITY. A picture of a gun is superimposed atop the American flag, its barrel pointing toward the stars.

20 “I don’t want to do this,” I say. She knows I don’t. She’s tried to convince me to come here before, ever since I told her I was considering becoming a police officer.

“You don’t think cops use guns? We’re not in Ireland³, kiddo.”

25 Ever since I was small, I’d been wanting to join the Police Academy right after high school. I don’t even remember how I came to this conclusion, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized there was nothing else I wanted to do. Meanwhile, to shoot a gun for fun with my mother felt more than wrong. It felt dangerous. The gravel spits up around Mom’s truck as she slows. I imagine it creating a thousand tiny scrapes in the tires, leaving us stranded here. The lot is near empty, save a few large trucks that I guess belong to whomever worked inside.

30 “I’m going to die,” I text my sister, but the text is returned undeliverable. Her phone is still disconnected.

“I’m going to die!!!!” I text my brother, Myron, and Mom’s purse buzzes. Myron is just old enough to get on the family plan⁴, and I forgot that Mom still sometimes repossesses his phone when he’s being

¹ online puzzle game

² *strip malls*: outdoor shopping center

³ police officers in Ireland are usually unarmed

⁴ *family plan*: phone subscription that includes the entire family

an “asshole”.

35 “Don’t be a drama queen. You won’t die.” She smiles broadly, and I watch as the sharp corners of her eyes lift. “Unless you’re not paying attention. Now come on!” She guides me to an expansive counter where a man sits with a series of forms that Mom begins.

“Age?” he asks me from beneath the brim of a camouflage hat.

“Fifteen.”

“Sixteen and up with parent,” he says, reading from a laminated set of rules.

40 “I said I’m fifteen.”

“Sixteen,” he says, and he hands me earbuds, headphones, and goggles, and points me toward a TV at the other end of the room. He does all this without making eye contact.

“Do I put these on now?”

45 “You watch videos now. I’ll take you all back after.” He turns to Mom and says, “How’s my buddy doing, Sis? You tie his nuts together yet?” I assume he’s talking about her new boyfriend, Rattle, who rarely moves from our couch. I like Rattle’s steadiness and predictability, but I’m not yet convinced I like him.

50 “He’s only a month out from being able to come back here,” she says with genuine cheer, referring to Rattle’s house arrest. I wonder if this is legal. Me being here may not be. Or it may not be the owner’s preference, but none of that seems to matter.

I sit on a musty, purple couch and a video begins to play. The man who narrates the video is old and jolly, like Santa, and he seems to care deeply about the safety and wellness of those who come to the gun range. I wonder if Santa is the owner. He tells me to keep my gun off till I’m at my station, to shoot at the target (duh), and to be careful to mind others and keep my gear on. He warns of deafness.

55 I begin a new game of *2048* as he goes on and try to ignore my mother laughing in the background. She’s flirting, and I don’t want to have to think about that. I just got used to Rattle, and if he goes away, she’ll be even more unpredictable. The guy at the counter doesn’t seem capable of a full sentence. I caught Rattle reading *The Great Gatsby*⁵ a few weeks ago. Now that I think about it, maybe I do like Rattle.

60 The video ends with some spa-like music, and I put my phone away, walking back up to the counter to wait. But before I know it, we’re directed to stalls with thick plastic walls between them. There are paper targets of a man with a bullseye on his chest hung up near the front, and when the man in camouflage hits a button, the target is shot back far enough I can barely see the bullseye.

65 “Show you how it’s done,” Mom says, and she checks my ears and goggles, to ensure I’m suited up. Despite the muffled shots, I am shaken by every blast. She hits real near the bullseye, but this terrifies me more than it impresses me. The focus she has when she aims is fueled with rage, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s thinking about my sister.

⁵ *The Great Gatsby*: a classic American novel from 1925

70 I remember the way they used to fight. Even years ago, at twelve, I knew Allie would leave home eventually. I remember dusting the figurines in Grandma Dee's living room, spending additional time with a small, crystal lion as my sister and mother fought.

The lion distracted me. I liked his big paws and fixed gaze, the way he was cloudy and sparkly, rather than shiny and smooth like the other accoutrements⁶. There were days when his gaze shifted, or his position altered slightly. As my mother and sister screamed, I held him tightly, feeling his gritty warmth on my palms.

75 "Extreme emotions are temporary," Grandma Dee always told me before yelling louder than anyone at them to calm down. Silence arrived. A door slammed, and my mother began to sob like a small child. Mom's sadness was as intense as her rage. There were weeks at a time that would go by like this, with her caught in extreme emotions. I always wanted to help but wasn't sure how. I remember
80 approaching her with the lion in hand that day. Because I'd seen the lion shift and change, I knew he was full of magic, and I offered this magic to her with gentle excitement.

I was slow, steady, as I explained. "He warms like he's alive."

Mom looked at me with fire and knocked the lion from my hands. "Grow up," she told me.

I decide to grow up now. I decide to make my own rules and refuse to shoot, but Mom pulls me
85 hard by the arm. Her nails leave half-moons in my arm. Another woman glances over from down the line. Mom glares. More to diffuse this woman's concern than to submit, I stand up. The headphones are itching my ears, so I move them for a moment and reposition. I stand the way Mom tells me to and keep my aim up the way Santa instructed. I look at the center of the chest, and I begin to shake.

90 When I read articles about police officers who abuse their power, who target minorities or shoot people unjustly, it makes me want to join the force all the more. I imagine my future self will be strong enough to embody justice, not succumb to emotions and biases. I imagine this self with all the restraint I never saw in my mother. I will be everything she is not, and I will do it for her, not despite her.

I stare ahead, go through the motions. My body is thrust back by the shot, and though I do not feel changed, I do feel adrenaline. "There. I'm done now," I tell her, and I say it with enough resolve that she actually listens.

95 I watch Mom shoot for the next twenty minutes, and I can see her entire chemistry shift. She stands taller, brighter, seems less angry and afraid. When she asks me to shoot again, I try to feel this way, too, but instead I feel smaller with each shot, less impressed.

The last time we went to Grandma Dee's as a family, I remember finding the lion on the mantel barely distinguishable. It resembled a miniature, melted version of itself.

100 "Did the lion catch fire or break?" I asked, and Grandma smiled.

She shrugged. "I don't want to throw it away. I got it before I arrived. In Poland, after visiting the salt mines near Kraków when I was your age, maybe younger, one of my last memories. Kept it wrapped for a long time, but one day I just decided to display him. He was so regal. Now he's delicate. See this crack." I traced the line with my finger, imagining the warmth of the lion, its energy, filling my body with

⁶ small decorative objects

105 strength.

When we're driving home, Mom is elated. I realize I won't have time to study, and I don't think I could anyway. There is a slight ringing in my ear, and I ask her if it's normal. It's a question I regret when she insists on cleaning my ear canals with vinegar and warm water later. As she speeds, I watch the grass in field after field, now wet and alive from the rain that must have come while we were shooting, and I
110 breathe in the country air. Our windows are down, and the wet breeze drums lightly against my cheeks, soothing. I smell the wildflowers we pass before we reach town, and the barbeque once we arrive in the city.

Everything appears more alive around me, while I am numb, stuck in a thought loop. When the ringing stops, long before Mom has the chance to attempt to cure me with vinegar, everything stops. It's
115 as though half of my head has no feeling, and I wait for the sensation to return.

"Maybe we could be like Ireland," I say as we drive back, and Mom, who is nodding along to doom metal now, smiles.

"Good luck with that, Molly May. You know what? I think I'm making stuffed peppers tonight – your favorite. Did you like shooting? What a release, right? Better than any antidepressant."

I don't even pretend to get excited, and I don't agree. I'm injured. I'm angry, and after the long
120 drive home, I have no appetite. I try to pay attention to my books as Mom bangs around in the kitchen, but the ringing returns. The sound is incessant. After a few minutes, I rummage around a box from Grandma Dee's I keep under my bed and carefully unwrap the lion for the first time since she gave him to me.

I hold him gently between my palms, rocking him back and forth a bit, feeling the warmth. When
125 Mom yells for me to come down, I keep the misshapen lion in my palm below the dining table. For a moment before Rattle and my brothers arrive, Mom offers that same self-satisfied smile. We share a moment of silence. As my thumbs trace gritty edges, I offer a broad smile as well, imagining a future in which I find freedom and security on my own terms.

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