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She's Come Undone

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IN ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES, MY MOTHER AND I ARE ON the front porch of our rented Carter Avenue house watching two delivery men carry our brand-new television set up the steps. I'm excited because I've heard about but never seen television. The men are wearing work clothes the same color as the box they're hefting between them. Like the crabs at Fisherman's Cove, they ascend the cement stairs sideways. Here's the undependable part: my visual memory stubbornly insists that these men are President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon.

Inside the house, the glass-fronted cube is uncrated and lifted high onto its pedestal. "Careful, now," my mother says, in spite of herself; she is not the type to tell other people their business, men particularly. We stand watching as the two delivery men do things to the set. Then President Eisenhower says to me, "Okay, girlie, twist this button here." My mother nods permission and I approach. "Like this," he says, and I feel, simultaneously, his calloused hand on my hand and, between my fingers, the turning plastic knob, like one of the checkers in my father's checker set. (Sometimes when my father's voice gets too loud at my mother, I go out to the parlor and put a checker in my mouth—suck it, passing my tongue over the grooved eoge.j Now, I hear and feel the machine snap on. There's a hissing sound, voices inside the box. "Dolores, look!" my mother says. A star appears at the center of the green glass face. It grows outward and becomes two women at a kitchen table, the owners of the voices. I begin to cry. Who shrank these women? Are they alive? Real? It's 1956; I'm four years old. This isn't what I've expected. The two men and my mother smile at my fright, delight in it. Or else, they're sympathetic and consoling. My memory of that day is, like television itself, sharp and clear but unreliable.

We hadn't bought the set; it was a gift from Mrs. Masicotte, the rich widow who was my father's boss. My father and Mrs. Masicotte's relationship had started the previous spring, when she'd hired him to spray-paint several of her huge apartment houses and then wooed him into repainting his own pickup truck in her favorite color, peach, and stenciling the words "Masicotte Properties, General Manager" on the doors. The gift of the television celebrated my father's decision.

If I reach far back, I can see my father waving to my mother and me and climbing down from his ladder, spray gun in hand, as we arrive with his lunch in our turquoise-and-white car. Daddy reaches the ground and pulls off his face mask. The noise of his chugging orange air compressor is in my throat and legs, the sudden silence when he unplugs it delicious. There are speckles of paint in his hair and ears and eyebrows, but the mask has protected the rest of his face. I look away when his clean mouth talks.

We lunch in the grass. My father eats sandwiches stuffed with smelly foods Ma and I refuse to eat: liverwurst, vinegar peppers, Limburger cheese. He drinks hot coffee right from the thermos and his Adam's apple moves up and down when he swallows. He talks about "she" in a way that confuses me; "she" is either this half-white house of Mrs. Masicotte's or the old woman herself.

Old. I'm almost forty, probably as close now to Mrs. Masicotte's age as I am to the age of my parents as they sat on that lawn, laughing and blowing dandelion puffs at me, smoking their shared Pall Mall cigarettes and thinking Mrs. Masicotte was the answer to their future—that that black-and-white Emerson television set was a gift free and clear of the strings that would begin our family's unraveling.

Television watching became my habit, my day. "Go out back and play, Dolores. You'll burn that thing up," my mother would warn, passing through the parlor. But my palm against the box felt warm, not hot; soothing, not dangerous like the boy across the street who threw rocks. Sometimes I turned the checker knob as far as it would go and let the volume shake my hand.

Ma always stopped her housework for our favorite program, "Queen for a Day." We sat together on the sofa, my leg hooked around Ma's, and listened to the women whose children were crippled by polio, whose houses had been struck by lightning and death and divorce. The one with the saddest life, the loudest applause, got to trade her troubles for a velvet cape and roses and modern appliances. I clapped along with the studio audience—longest and hardest for the women who broke down and cried in the middle of their stories. I made my hands sting for these women.

My father's duties as Mrs. Masicotte's manager, in addition to painting the outsides and insides of her properties, included answering tenants' complaints and collecting their monthly rents. The latter he did on the first Saturday of every month, driving from house to house in Mrs. Masicotte's peach-colored Cadillac. By the time I was a first grader, I was declared old enough to accompany him. My job was to ring tenants' bells. None seemed happy to see my father and most failed to notice me at all as I peeked past them into their shadowy rooms, inhaling their cooking smells, eavesdropping on their talking TVs.

Mrs. Masicotte was a beer drinker who loved to laugh and dance; the package store was one of our regular Saturday afternoon errands. "Case o' Rheingold, bottles," my father would tell the clerk, an old man whose name, Cookie, struck me funny. Cookie always offered me a cellophane-wrapped butterscotch candy and, by virtue of Mrs. Masicotte's order,a chance to vote for Miss Rheingold at the cardboard ballot box next to his cash register. (Time after time I voted for the same Rheingold girl, whose dark brown hair and red-lipped smile reminded me both of Gisele MacKenzie from "Your Hit Parade" and my own mother, the best looking of the three.)

My father was proud and protective of his own dark good looks. I remember having sometimes to hop around and hold my pee until he was finished with his long grooming behind the pink bathroom door on Carter Avenue. When he emerged, I'd stand on the stool amidst the steam and the aroma of uncapped Old Spice, watching my face wobble and drip in the medicine cabinet mirror. Daddy lifted barbells in the cellar—barefoot, wearing his undershirt and yellow bathing suit. Sometimes he'd strut around the kitchen afterward, popping his muscle at Ma or picking up the toaster to give his reflection a kiss. "You're not conceited, you're convinced!" Ma would joke. "Convinced you, all right, didn't I?" he'd answer, then chase her around the kitchen, snapping the dish towel at her fanny and mine. Ma and I whooped and protested, delighted with his play.

After the television came, Daddy brought his barbells upstairs and exercised in front of his favorite programs. Quiz shows were what he liked: "The $64,000 Question."

"Tic Tac Dough."

"Winner Take All." Sometimes in the middle of his grunting and thrusting he'd call out the answers to losing players or, if they blew their chances, swear at them. "Well," he'd tell my mother, "another poor bastard bites the dust, another poor slob gets to stay a working stiff like the rest of us." He hated returning champions and rooted for their defeat. His contempt for them seemed somehow connected to his ability to lift the weights.

According to my father, we should have been rich. Money was, in his mind, somehow due us and would have been ours had his simple parents not sold their thirty acres on Fisherman's Cove for $3,000 to a Mr. Weiss the month before drowning in the Great Hurricane of 1938. During the

Depression, when my father was coming of age, Fisherman's Cove had been just marsh grass, wild blueberry bushes, and cabins with outhouses; by the time he went to work for Mrs. Masicotte, it was the cozy residence of millionaires. These included Mr. Weiss's son, who lived two driveways down from Mrs. Masicotte and golfed for a living.

My father forgave Mrs. Masicotte her wealth because she was generous with it—"spread it around," as he put it. In those early years, the television was only the first in a stream of presents that included a swing set for me, kitcheny things for my mother (a set of maroon-colored juice glasses, a black ice bucket with brass claw feet), and, for my father, gifts he wore home from the big house on the cove: a houndstooth sports jacket, leather gloves lined in genuine rabbit's fur, and my favorite—a wristwatch with a Twist-O-Flex band you could bend but not break.

"That's it, Jewboy, add another couple thousand to your stash," my father shouted at the TV one night, in the middle of his exercise routine. "The $64,000 Question" was on; a champion with round eyeglasses and shiny cheeks had just emerged victorious from the Revlon isolation booth.

"Don't say that, Tony," my mother protested.

His eyes jumped from the screen to her. The weights wavered above his head. "Don't say what?"

Ma pointed her chin toward me. "I don't want her hearing things like that," she said.

"Don't say what?" he repeated.

"All right, nothing. Just forget it." Ma left the room. The barbell clanged to the floor, so loudly and surprisingly that my heart heaved in my chest. He followed her into the bedroom.

Earlier that week he'd brought home from Mrs. Masi-cotte's a thick art tablet and a tiered box of Crayola crayons. Now I opened the clean pad to a middle page and drew the face of a beautiful woman. I gave her long curling eyelashes, red lipstick, "burnt sienna"-colored hair, a crown. "Hello," the woman said to me. "My name is Peggy. My favorite color is magenta."

"Don't you ever—ever!—tell me what I can and cannot say in the privacy of my own home," my father shouted from behind their door.

Ma kept crying and apologizing.

Later, after he'd stomped past me and driven away, Ma soaked herself in the tub—long past my bedtime, long enough for me to fill up half the pad with Peggy's life.

She usually shooed me out when I caught her naked, but Daddy's anger had left her far away and careless. The ashtray sat on the edge of the tub, filled with stubbed-out Pall Malls; the bathroom was thick with smoke that moved when I moved.

"See my lady?" I said. I meant the drawings as a sort of comfort, but she told me they were nice without really looking.

"Is Daddy mean?" I asked.

She took so long to answer that I thought she might not have heard. "Sometimes," she said, finally.

Her breasts appeared and disappeared at the surface of the soapy water. I'd never had the chance to study them before. Her nipples looked like Tootsie Rolls.

"He gets mean when he feels unhappy."

"Why does he feel unhappy?"

"Oh…" she said. "You're too little to understand."

She turned abruptly toward me and caught me watching her shiny, wet breasts. Sloshing, she strapped her arms around herself and became, again, my proper mother. "Go on, skedaddle," she said. "Daddy's not mean. What are you talking about?"

Mrs. Masicotte's tenants paid their rents in cash, counting series of twenty-dollar bills into my father's outstretched hand. On the best Saturdays, after Mrs. Masicotte's leather zip bag was filled with money, Daddy would turn his attention to me. He liked the way television watching had made me a mimic.

I'm Chiquita Banana and I've come to say Bananas have to ripen in a certain way

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Over and over, I sang the jingles he liked best. Sometimes we played "wild ride" on the twisting roads that led out to Fisherman's Cove. I sat in the backseat of the car, a sort of junior Mrs. Masicotte, and commanded my father to speed. "Okay, ma'am, you ready, ma'am? Here we go!" I'd grab the peach velvet cord strapped across the rear of the front seat rests as Daddy gunned the car around corners and lurched over rises in the road. "Feel those blue-blooded shock absorbers, Dolores? We could be sitting in our living room." Or this, which he told me once: "This car is ours! I bought

this showboat from the old lady." I could smell Mrs. Masicotte's perfumy smell embedded in the soft upholstery and knew it wasn't true, even back then when I would fall for almost anything—when I thought that, like Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, my parents' fights just meant they loved each other in a noisy way.

The Saturday errands ended each week at the top of the long driveway on Jefferson Drive, where Mrs. Masicotte's white wedding cake of a house looked down on Long Island Sound. We entered through the dark, cool cement garage, the Cadillac doors slamming louder than any before or since. We walked up the stairs and opened the door without knocking. On the other side was Mrs. Masicotte's peach-colored kitchen, which made me squint. "Mind your manners, now," Daddy never failed to warn me. "Say thank you."

It was in that kitchen where I waited for Daddy and Mrs. Masicotte to be finished with the weekly business, two rooms away. Though Mrs. Masicotte seemed as indifferent to me as her renters were, she provided richly for me while I waited. On hand were plates of bakery cookies, thick picture books with shiny pages, punch-out paper dolls. My companion during these vigils was Zahra, Mrs. Masicotte's fat tan cocker spaniel, who sat at my feet and watched, unblinking, as cookies traveled mercilessly from the plate to my mouth.

Mrs. Masicotte and my father laughed and talked loud during their meetings and sometimes played the radio. (Our radio at home was a plastic box; Mrs. Masicotte's was a piece of furniture.) "Are we going soon?" I'd ask Daddy whenever he came out to the kitchen to check on me or get them another pair of Rheingolds. "A few minutes," was what he always said, no matter how much longer they were going to be.

I wanted my father to be at home laughing with Ma on Saturday afternoons, instead of with Mrs. Masicotte, who had yellowy white hair and a fat little body like Zahra's. My father called Mrs. Masicotte by her first name, LuAnn; Ma called her, simply, "her."

"It's her," she'd tell Daddy whenever the telephone interrupted our dinner.

Sometimes, when the meetings dragged on unreasonably or when they laughed too loud in there, I sat and dared myself to do naughty things, then did them. One time I scribbled on all the faces in the expensive storybooks. Another Saturday I waterlogged a sponge and threw it at Zahra's face. Regularly, I tantalized the dog with the cookies I made sure stayed just out of her reach. My actions—each of which invited my father's anger—shocked and pleased me.

I had long hair the year I was in second grade. Mornings before school, my mother combed the snarls out of my ponytail and dosed me with a half teaspoon of Maalox to calm my nervous stomach. My teacher, Mrs. Nelkin, was a screamer. I spent most of the school year trying to be obedient—filling in every blank on every worksheet correctly, silently sliding oaktag word builders across my desktop, talking to no one.

"Oh, don't worry about that old biddy," my mother advised. "Just think about the baby coming instead."

My baby brother or sister was due to arrive in February of 1958. When I asked my parents how the baby got inside Ma, they both laughed, and then Daddy told me they had made it with their bodies. I pictured them fully clothed, rubbing furiously against each other, like two sticks making fire.

All fall and winter long, I coaxed bottles toward the mouth of my Baby Dawn doll and scrubbed her rubber skin in lukewarm water in the bathroom sink. I wanted a girl and Daddy wanted a boy. Ma didn't care one way or the other, so long as it was healthy. "How will it get out?" I asked her one day near the end of the wait. "Oh, never mind," was all she said. I imagined her lying on a hospital bed, calm and smiling, her huge stomach splitting down the middle like pants.

At breakfast time on the morning of the school Valentine's Day party, Ma decided to rearrange the silverware drawer—a task that upset her enough to make her cry.

The valentine party turned out to be a fifteen-minute disappointment at the end of the long school day. As it drew to a close and we pulled on our boots and coats and stocking hats, Mrs. Nelkin approached me. She told me to

remain at my desk when the dismissal bell rang; my father had telephoned the school to say he'd pick me up. I sat in the silence of the empty classroom with my hat and coat on and a stack of valentines in my lap. With the other kids gone, you could hear the scraping sound of the clock hands. Mr. Horvak, the janitor, muttered and swept up the crumbs our party had made and Mrs. Nelkin corrected papers without looking up.

It was Grandma Holland from Rhode Island—my mother's mother—who appeared for me finally at the classroom door. She and Mrs. Nelkin whispered together at the front of the room in a way that made me wonder if they knew each other. Then, in a sweeter voice than I was used to, Mrs. Nelkin told me I could go home.

We didn't go home, though. Grandma led me down the two flights of school stairs and out into a taxicab, which took us to St. Paul's Cathedral. On the way there she told me my mother had had to go to a big hospital in Hartford because of "female trouble" and that my father had gone with her. Ma would be gone for at least two weeks and she, Grandma, would take care of me. There just wasn't any baby anymore and that was that We were having creamed dried beef for supper.

The church's stained-glass saints had the same tortured look as the women on "Queen for a Day." Grandma took out her kidney-bean rosary and muttered the stations of the cross while I followed her, spilling valentines and accidentally kicking the wooden pews, raising up echoes. The candles we lit sat in maroon cups that reminded me of our juice glasses from Mrs. Masicotte. I wasn't allowed to handle the flame. My job was to drop the coins into the metal box, two dimes for two candles, clink clink.

When Daddy came home that night, he lay in my bed with me and read my valentines. He looked up at the ceiling when he talked about Ma. Somehow, he said, she had grown a cord in her stomach along with the baby. (I pictured the backseat cord in Mrs. Masicotte's Cadillac.) Just as the baby was coming out, it wrapped the cord around its neck and strangled itself. Himself. A boy—Anthony Jr. As my father talked, tears dripped down the side of his face like candle wax. The sight shocked me; until that moment, I had assumed men were as incapable of crying as they were of having babies.