

Funeral Reds

*The Jennie Hackman Memorial Award for
Short Fiction 3rd Prize*

Four days isn't long enough for the hair on your knuckles to grow back in, creating the illusion they were never shaved at all. The quills are short and erect, as if a coarse electric volt were making them stand at attention. I've pulled off the acrylic nails, folding them in a wad of toilet paper and tucking it in my bureau drawer; I like the white ivy pattern the manicurist did this week and I want to save samples so she can recreate it when I get back.

I bought two pairs of pants for the occasion, both black with a knife crease going straight from the belt to where it laps onto my toes. I borrowed a Dartmouth sweatshirt from my neighbor down the hall, the man with three locks on his door and a potted cluster of ferns in the entryway. I bought a wrinkle-free button-down; it's hanging in the rental car downstairs, smothered in the static cling of a reused dry cleaners' bag, a crinkled paper banner fitted to the coat hanger reading "we (heart) customers." Doesn't every business "heart" customers? Or at least the ones who buy something...then again, I don't think you go to the dry cleaners to browse. Between the new clothes and the rental car, I can't afford shoes. None lining the top shelf of my closet will do, but rummaging in the broom closet I find a pair of brown flip-flops—they'll have to work.

Before I leave I make sure the oven is off and the toaster is unplugged, and then I look in the vestibule mirror. Without makeup I look sad; the crow's feet have expanded to fully spread Japanese fans, tight around the eyes but then drooping midway down my cheeks. My lips look disgustingly pale and rough; I remember my mother sitting at her dresser dabbing and rubbing on lipstick, saying: "these are kissable lips." She'd lean so I could kiss them, all chalky and red and cakey tasting. I had fastened my hair in a low ponytail and tucked it under the lip of my shirt; later, with a collar it will seem like I have short hair. I grab the keys, slipping my fingers into the linker like a familiar silver ring.

The drive from Miami to Nebraska is sweltering; the stretches of highway waver like silver mercury in the horizon. I hadn't been home in twelve years, and although I spoke with my mother on the phone every other week I felt separate, divided by states and

time and misery. When the phone trilled in its cradle five days ago, I hadn't expected it to be her, and I didn't recognize her voice through the muffled sobs. After several attempts at asking her what was wrong, and being answered with quivering starts and gasps, I could hear the receiver being pried from her hand and then my aunt's cigarette-rasped voice informing me my brother had died of a heart attack.

My brother, Eddie, who was four years younger than me, had apparently collapsed in the aisle of a K-mart while shopping for wrenches. No one came down the aisle until he had gone, but there was security footage of him sprawled on the ground, grappling at his chest, his face turning darker on the black and white video until it went white, the blood, after all congealing around the heart, seemingly just evaporated in a few seconds.

I look in the rearview mirror to switch lanes and I catch my own eye. Pale blue and veined with amber, a nice eye, but without a glistening bush of lashes it lost its appeal, like an elegantly shaped but hairless cat.

The windows are open and wind roars around my head; usually I would mind my hair, but it didn't matter, the stuff lies on my head flat and clean, the part set slightly off to the side. There is a piece of Saran Wrap floating around in the cave of the backseat and trunk, tugged by the wind but never being sucked out onto the tar river, to meander aimlessly over Tallahassee. I rented a dark green Jeep, something that wouldn't alert suspicion. The triangular edges of my eulogy flap under an overdue library book. I had written the eulogy carefully—nice, secure words like: good, brother, fishing, mechanics—things that described him but also things that hid me. I felt slightly selfish worrying about myself for the last three days. After the initial period of fraternal loss, I hated myself for only thinking of me while making strategies of how to get through no more than forty-eight hours in Boeville.

The church stood squat and tan on the half-grass, half-dirt lawn; it resembled a thick shortbread cookie with a chimney of a steeple on the top. I swung around to the back parking lot, so freshly paved the tires practically stuck to the asphalt with the heat. The underbellies of cars were sweating rainbow tributaries of oil and air conditioner fluid. I parked in a slot next to my aunt's car; she leaned against the blue Pontiac and peered through the glare of the windshield as I jerked the gears into park.

"Hi." I smiled as I shut the car door, quarter-folding my eulogy and tucking it into my pocket.

She squinted at me, drew a cigarette from a crumbled carton, clicked on her lighter, and sucked the flame into the white and

yellow shaft. A cloud of smoke obscured her face. I hated cigarette smoke, not for the smell or the cancerous toxins, but because it came out as a near-monotonous puff, not like the salacious belly dancers of blown out candles or proper plumes from a cigar but rather like a stale, hazy wall that always seemed to shield the smoker's eyes. "Hi." She looks at my feet, I look too and want to kill myself; I forgot my toenails had been French-tipped last week.

"How's my Mom?" I try to change the subject, as if I could divert her from my pearly pink and white tootsies. Tootsies, that's what Jacob calls them as he tickles the soles, kissing up the smooth trunk of my calf. The word always makes me feel so little, so adorable and pretty.

"As well as can be expected. She's really torn up. You know they were really close." She speaks in jerks.

"Is she in there now?" I make toward the open door.

"Charles is going on a business trip after this. His suitcase is in the trunk. Would you like a pair of black socks?" The last part is a statement, not a question.

I balance against the flank of my car and pull the socks onto my sweaty feet. Then I camel-toe them into my flip-flops. Despite the layer of fabric between skin and rubber, my flip-flops quack down the slate aisle. People raise their trembling faces from their Kleenex, probably wondering what a duck was doing at a funeral.

My mother sits in the front row. I recognize her flared, bucket-style hat; she wore it to every funeral since 1987, its glorious year of purchase. I watch her for a moment; her loose jowls quiver slightly with her sobs. "Mom?" She looks up at me with a pair of puffy pink eyes. She frowns and her pupils form the dots of twin question marks.

"Oh... Mar-Marvin. Sit down." She swallows a lump of what I assume to be salty mucus trapped in her throat.

I sit down and turn to face her. She reaches up a papery hand and touches my surgically shaved cheekbones, then her fingers swoop down to my narrowed jaw, coming to rest on where my Adam's apple used to be. She swallows again and covers her mouth with her handkerchief.

Through the first quarter of the service I can think of nothing but the dead air between my mother and me. After she recoiled her hand from my flesh, it remained in her lap, as if it regretted having touched at all. Now there was an awkwardness, thick and sliceable, like a mortar wall made of nothing but heavy, coagulated fat. A fat silence, a fat disassociation, a fat and guilty hatred. She probably hated me and hated herself for despising her only left over child.

"And now Edward's eulogy will be read by his brother, Marvin Gains."

It startled me a little to hear my name said in such a formal way, I don't think I have heard it said so stoically and monotone since my high school graduation. The only person who still called me Marvin was my mother; even Eddie had shortened it to the mutually comfortable Mar.

Quack, quack up to the pulpit. I felt a massive, hard wad in my throat, like a tumor or worse, that all the familiar faces somehow, by uniformed prayer, were wishing my Adam's apple back into existence. "My brother..." My voice accidentally went up, slight falsetto; I tried to push it back down into my abdomen with the steady hand of my diaphragm. "Eddie was my best friend. He was always a man who knew what he wanted..." I could hear whispers and saw separate heads folding into gossip. "One time we went fishing down by Cresant's Pond and he told me..." Several people got up and walked out. I wanted to shout at them: "This isn't an off-Broadway review, it's a God damn funeral!" But I restrained myself and finished the eulogy, folding it as I quacked back down to my pew.

I stood by the un-served dessert table with a Styrofoam cup of decaf warming my already hot fingers. I was trying to stand as far apart as I could while still being there; I didn't want to walk out of my brother's reception without at least toasting him a cup of bitter joe goodbye. Two men in navy blue suits were eyeing me over the mouths of their amber brewskis; I recognized them as Eddie's high school friends.

Okay, Eddie, I love you and I've done what I could, but I have to go now. I gulped down the dregs of my coffee and began to leave. My mother had been ignoring me, blockaded by her black-clad reading club, so I didn't feel bad slipping away without a hug goodbye; there hadn't even been a hug hello.

I was seven steps from my car and thinking I was safe when I heard the crunch of gravel behind me. I managed one more step before I heard a male voice.

"That was a pretty shitty thing you did, coming here."

I pivot to see four of Eddie's buddies standing at the edge of the lot where the grey chunks of old gravel met the modernly paved asphalt. I stop. My brain told me to get to the car, lock it and drive, not caring who I plow over on my way; but there was something in the man's voice that made me want to curl into a ball and rock until he went away.

"You should not have been the one to send him off."

"He deserved better than you."

"You should'a stayed wherever you came from."

They began to smash their fists into their cupped palms. I thought that was something people only did in 1950's juke and

drives movies. The smack of muscle-taut fist against fat, defenseless palm made me want to retch.

My jaw was smashed with a dull pain by his boney knuckles. I quickly detached myself from my body, the way I practice in the mall when teenagers mock me or when salesladies refuse to help me. I floated over the parking lot, the roofs of the cars glistening in the Nebraska sun. I saw them kicking me, yanking me up by the hair to get a good jab at my face. I saw my mother standing in the church window, unmoving, looking down at me through the smudged glass.

When I get in my car, my hands are trembling so much I drop the keys several times. I pop the locks down on the doors so they can't get in. I hear one of them shout for a brick or hammer, something to bash the windows in with. Finally the serrated key is in the ignition, making the engine rev and roar. I yank the vinyl wheel and pray I won't hit anyone because I don't want to be dragged back to this town on manslaughter charges.

At a truck stop thirty miles away, I trip into the cement women's bathroom with a make-up case. I wash my face of the dried blood with the sulphurous water and dry it with a fistful of brown, chaffing paper towels. I smear on the rubious lipstick and the silvery-beige eye shadow, and frost my forehead and cheeks with a layer of thick-smelling concealer. My shaking hands ruin it all; the lipstick cuts a "C" down my cheek and the eyeliner astrixes my eyes, as if they were saying something loud and angry. I watch myself turn back into me; with each stroke of mascara and finger-tease of my torn hair I feel safe, at home in my flesh. I drop the make-up into the mildewed basin of the sink and hug myself, still staring in the mirror and cooing, "It's okay, Marla. We're back. Everything is fine." And I rock slightly until I can gather my things and return to the waiting car.