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A Piece of God for Safekeeping

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Margaret sat at the kitchen table with a drink in one hand and a magazine in the other. She downed the rest of her drink, then poured herself another. Was this the second or the third? The fourth? She took a swig and the bitter whisky burned the back of her throat on the way down. Strangely, she liked the tingling sensation it left behind after it was gone. She wiped a bit of sweat from her forehead and leaned back in her chair holding her drink up to the pitiful kitchen lamp, watching two water droplets race from the brim of her glass toward the bottom. Margaret tipped her head back and finished it off.

She heard the keys in the door down the hall and her mother’s heavy footsteps. She watched her mother’s eyes slide from the half-empty bottle to the completely empty glass in front of her. Margaret waited.

Loraine didn’t speak. Instead, flinging her purse onto the back of the chair opposite Margaret, she took a seat, then lit a cigarette and took a small drag, something she hadn’t done since Margaret

3rd Place in Our Writing Contest

Notes from our judge: The relationship between a mother and daughter is one that is constantly shifting between bumps and smooth patches. In A Piece of God for Safekeeping the author demonstrates both how young children observe more than their parents would wish and how more often than not a parent must face their mistakes and humanity in the eyes of their adult child. It is a relationship that demonstrates the raw, imperfect, great and terrible beauty that is humanity. Throughout the piece the author shows how even the smallest details can reveal all the truths humans attempt to hide about themselves. By using lines such as "They drank in a silence so complete noise could only tiptoe around them," the reader gets a glimpse into how tense Margaret and Loraine’s relationship has always been. The author’s use of shifting between references to the past and the effect they have on the present demonstrates the power of every moment, every decision.

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Jalyn Gilmore

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Loraine didn’t speak. Instead, flinging her purse onto the back of the chair opposite Margaret, she took a seat, then lit a cigarette and took a small drag, something she hadn’t done since Margaret
was a sophomore in high school. Finally Loraine said, “What are you reading?”

“I dunno.”
“How many drinks have you had?”
“I dunno.”
“You know you’re not old enough to drink, yeah?”
“I know.”
Loraine smirked. “Mind if I join you?”
Margaret made a theatric sweep over the table.
Loraine’s smirk persisted as she poured herself a drink. They drank in silence for a long while. Neither made any attempt at eye contact. Maybe they didn’t know how anymore. With enough time people lose words they thought they once owned. They drank in a silence so complete noise could only tiptoe between them here and there, as glassware against a wooden table, and the tick-tock-tick-tock on the wall, and turning magazine pages.

Loraine suddenly slapped her glass down with a gruff, “This isn’t how I thought things should be.”
Margaret peered at her mother. “What?”
“It’s not like I planned for things to turn out this way. It just happened.”
Margaret must have had more to drink than she thought. Her words stumbled over her tongue and spilled onto the table. “I never even…just…what?”
Loraine took another drag, much longer this time. “It’s just sometimes you get dealt a hand and you play it.”
“What in the hell are you talking about?”
Loraine felt her bottom lip quiver and the familiar sharp sting in the corners of her eyes. “Your dad was a good man, he just wasn’t…” she scrubbed her fingers through her hair, “this wasn’t what I wanted.”
Margaret stared at her mother, as if all it took to understand a person was a long, patient examination, like people kept their answers inked out on their skin. Finally she said, “Then what did you want?”
“I don’t know I—”
“What did you want?”
Lorraine said nothing.
“Go on, say it. What did you want?”
Lorraine lifted an eyebrow with that familiar set of her jaw.
“Alright. Fine. I didn’t want this. I didn’t want to be stuck in this ass end of town widowed with three kids.” She waved her hand around the kitchen. “I wanted more than this.”
“That’s why you stayed out longer on Thursdays when you didn’t think Dad noticed?” Margaret’s voice was heavier and thicker than the night air. She kept her eyes on her mother, but Loraine stared into her glass. Margaret sighed and sat back. “Alright, let me ask you this: did you ever really love Dad?”
For the first time all evening, or for the first time since Henry died, Loraine met her daughter’s eyes, met them with such sincerity she couldn’t have manufactured it even under the most sober conditions. “Of course I loved—”
“Did you love him?”
Margaret’s words hung in the dinky kitchen in the sweltering July heat. They slithered up Loraine’s hands, over her wedding ring, and into her mouth. She nearly choked on her tongue. “I don’t know.”
Suddenly Margaret felt the heat nestled around them. She felt her thighs sticking together and the single bead of sweat running down her back. Her eyes never left her mother, but she couldn’t see her, only a woman she had known for the last twenty years.
Again Loraine scrubbed her fingers through her hair. Again the words evaporated from her lips into the summer air. She shifted under her daughter’s relentless eyes, finally realizing that they were in fact her own. Margaret always looked like her father, but Loraine knew those eyes; she knew that crinkle in the brow. She knew that face because she’d seen it in the mirror enough times. “Well, what do you want me to say, huh, Margaret?” She spat the name out like spoiled vinegar. “What do you want me to say?”
“I don’t want you to say anything. Nothing at all.”
Lorraine chuckled. “Oh really? Nothing at all, huh? And what do you know? What the hell do you know about me?”
Margaret leaned forward slowly with her elbows on the table. She seemed like she might vomit, or maybe that was just how she looked these days, like she was always on the verge of spilling everything all over the place. “I know you, mother.” She stood up carefully and staggered to her mother, bracing herself with one hand on the table. “I know you. I know how Dad worked every day for you—for us—and that just wasn’t enough for you.” Her shoulder began to shake but she leaned over Loraine.

“So you got it all figured out, huh?” Loraine, who always seemed to be twice her size on any other day, shrank down to about half her normal size.

“I know you, mother,” Margaret continued undaunted. “I know that Dad trusted you. Because you were his wife.” Her voice was ragged and raspy. Tears stung her eyes but they didn’t dare fall. “Was he worth it? Oh, I hope he was. I hope every night you didn’t come home to us was a night well spent. I hope he gave you everything Dad couldn’t… I hope you found what you were looking for.”

Loraine met Margaret’s eyes. They were hard and dense like old lead bullets. Loraine knew Margaret was fighting back tears with every inch of her body. It was like that time she was in second grade and a boy in class lopped off a chunk of her hair. Her teacher was impressed Margaret didn’t cry and Margaret had said, Mommy says don’t cry in front of people you hate.

No, Loraine had said, don’t cry in front of people you don’t like. Same thing, she wailed.

And as Margaret stormed out of the room and out of the house wiping her cheek, Loraine wondered where she was going and who would see those fresh tears.

If anyone at all.