

Sickly Sweet

Prose — Lara Rudman

She had left in a hurry, barely taking the time to grab the car keys before fleeing out of the door, her husband's yells still audible from the outside. Yelling at her, even after she had left the house, for only her children to have to endure. She hated leaving her children in that house, but she knew they would be fine. With her no longer in the house, his anger would dissipate quickly, and silence would envelop the house once again. She definitely had not thought to grab her coat, so even within the interiority of her car, she shivered with the late fall chill that seeped into the car on that dark night.

She gripped the steering wheel and thought about the scene she had just left. The four of them sitting at the dinner table, including her baby boy in his highchair with his bowl of mashed green beans in front of him.

Her daughter sat at the table, absolutely still, as if a slight movement would remind her father and her mother that this argument was about her. It was often about her.

The argument escalated quickly between the two, eventually becoming about something greater than what it was initially about. So, the woman had fled. Sometimes he left, but this time it was her. Her children were the only ones still seated at the dinner table.

Her baby. He was still in his highchair. Her husband had stormed out of the dining room and into his office, shutting the door behind him. Her daughter would not have known to take him out of the highchair. He was so wiggly now, trying to stand on things he shouldn't. What if he fell out of the highchair? Onto that hardwood floor. Had she remembered to buckle him in? She was starting to panic. Should she turn around? Walk back into that house where her husband was waiting for her return to start berating her some more? No. She couldn't. But her baby. The woman was beginning to think that she hadn't buckled him in the high chair.

She reached blindly into the passenger seat, trying to find her cell phone. She flipped it open and hit #1 on her speed-dial.

Please, pick up the phone, the woman thought. It went to voicemail. In her daughter's sickly sweet voice, she heard the voicemail message. "You have reached--" The woman quickly ended the call. She called again. No response. She called again. The phone audibly clicked, someone had picked up. That sickly sweet voice spoke.

"Mommy?"

"Sweetie, where is the baby?"

"He's in his highchair in the dining room." The woman thought she heard something in the background.

"Is he crying?" she said.

"Yeah. He wants out of his seat." The woman gripped the phone tighter in her hand.

"Go tell Daddy that he needs to take the baby out of the highchair. It's not safe to leave him in there alone." The woman did not get a response. "Sweetie? You still there?"

"Yes."

"Can you go tell Daddy?"

"He's gonna yell at me."

"Well, someone needs to get the baby out, and he's too heavy for you." She was trying to keep the concern out of her voice. She knew the girl would shut down if she pushed her too hard. "Sweetie. Go say something to your father now."

The girl did not say anything but she thought she heard the tell-tale sounds of little bare feet on the hardwood floor. She knew she heard the sound of her husband's office door opening, that distinctive creak. She heard a mumbled voice that belonged to her daughter, but couldn't quite make out what she was saying.

Her husband's response she heard well though. "If she was so concerned, she wouldn't have left. She can come get him herself," he barked.

"Sweetie. Tell him again." The panicked had edged into her voice as her options slipped out from under her. She was going to have to go back to that house. "Please."

The girl must have picked up on her mother's desperation and said to her father, "Mom says--"

"Hang up that damn phone." She heard the sound of his office chair rolling back. She could picture him coming towards his daughter, his tall frame bearing over hers, yanking the phone from her hand. The line clicked. He had hung up.

She called again. No response, just the voicemail. She called again and again.

She could imagine the landline phone ringing, carrying its shrill tone throughout the house. She could imagine her daughter staring at the phone, worried, and contemplating whether to pick up. To pick up would surely incite the rage of her father, an act of open defiance, and her daughter was never one to do that. The girl knew when it was better to play it safe.

She was calling so many times, looking at the cellphone in her

hand, that she had stopped looking at the road. All she could think about was the image of her baby boy standing up in his high chair on unsteady legs, losing his balance, and his head hitting the hardwood floor with a sickening crunch.

The woman called again, waiting for the call to inevitably go to voicemail. Again, her daughter's voice came through the phone to deliver the message. When they moved into the new house a year ago, her husband had suggested that their daughter record the voicemail greeting, and at the time the woman had thought it a wonderful idea, but now the sound of her daughter's voice made her want to vomit.

She just wanted to know that her baby was okay. She took a deep breath and began to leave her message that she knew would be projected from the base of the landline. The woman could imagine the sound of her distressed voice floating through the house. To her husband's office, where it fell on uncaring ears. To her daughter, biding her time silently in some forgotten corner of the house. To her son, struggling in his highchair.

"Please, just take him out of his highchair." Tears were streaming down her face as she drove down the dark street. "Just tell me he's okay." She paused, still waiting for someone to pick up. Anger seeped into her body and her foot pressed harder on the gas pedal, and the car lurched forward. "If something happens to him, I swear to God I will--" She didn't know what she'd do, but by God, she was going to do something. Maybe she would leave, for good. She opened her mouth to continue her tirade with her new threat on her lips but was cut off by the sound of her car making an impact with something else. A dull thump from the passenger side of the car.

The woman slammed on the brakes, her car skidding to a halt and her head pitching forward. She pulled the car to the side of the barren road, swiftly put the car in park, and turned on her hazards. She reached into her center console and pulled out a flashlight. She opened her car door and swung her legs around to step out onto the road. She paused when she noticed her bare feet. She had forgotten to grab shoes. Nevertheless, the woman pressed her bare feet to the chill asphalt and walked around her car with her flashlight. There was a medium-sized dent in her front bumper. The woman looked around for whatever she had hit. The light of her flashlight traveled along the perimeter of the trees that lined the road. On the ditch on the side of the road was a form that distorted the beam of light.

The woman walked forward to see a fawn, its leg bent in an unnatural direction. She drew a long breath and continued her approach slowly. She knelt in the grass next to its body, which heaved with each

labored breath. The deer eyed her with pure terror. She placed a hand on its tan pelt, and the fawn began to kick its feet erratically, trying to stand. She quickly took her hand off, and the animal stilled. She looked around. No one was on the road, and she didn't know what to do. She couldn't just let it die. The guilt washed over her. She stood up and backed away from the fawn, as that seemed to make it more comfortable. She walked back to the car and grabbed her phone, which was sitting in the cupholder in her center console. She flipped open the phone and the screen lit up in her face. She had two missed calls.

Before she could see more, she heard a shrill sound. The woman whipped around to find the fawn in the jaws of a mountain lion. "No," the woman gasped. The fawn's legs twitched, even the broken one. The mountain lion seemed to stare her down, as if daring her to come forward.

The woman took a step forward towards the two animals that in the dark seemed to form one monstrous organism. She directed her flashlight at them and the mountain lion began to pull the deer into the safety of the shadows of the forest.

The woman could do nothing but sob as the big cat tugged the baby deer into the abyss.

The woman grabbed her phone again and made a call, not expecting an answer in the slightest. The ringing comforted her, in a way. It had become familiar.

The cellphone rang a couple times, and the woman was shocked to hear a whisper come over the line. The woman pressed the phone closer to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hi Mommy," the little girl whispered. "I sneaked upstairs, and I called you on the phone by your bed. Daddy doesn't know I'm talking to you." The girl said something else, but her mother wasn't paying attention. The woman had taken to staring into the exact sliver of shadow that the two animals had disappeared through. The woman heard more chatter from the phone.

"What did you say?" the woman asked.

"Daddy pulled the baby out the highchair soon after you called." The woman couldn't quite comprehend what her daughter was saying to her. "He's okay, Mommy. Don't cry. He's okay."

She hadn't even realized she was crying until her daughter had said something, and now the tears came quicker and hotter, splattering on her cheeks.

"It's okay. It's okay. It's okay," the daughter repeated until her mother's tears subsided.

The woman gasped, drawing breath to speak. "Can you ask

Daddy to come pick me up?"

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She sat on the cold asphalt, her bare toes were numb. The headlights cast shadows past her seated form. The door of the car swung open, illuminating the inside of the car, which held her two children in the backseat. Her husband stalked towards her. When he reached the woman, she looked up at him as he stood overtop her. She had no more tears to cry, but she knew he could see it on her face. She was sorry. And she thought that he might be, too.

He wordlessly pulled her up from the ground, pulling her close to his chest. After a moment, they separated and the man took the woman's hand. The husband led his wife back to the car, that held the girl and the baby boy.

He helped her into the passenger seat and then walked back to her car to survey the damage. The woman blindly reached into the backseat to touch her baby boy. She felt his little foot in her hand and gently squeezed. The boy giggled, and she wondered if that was the most magnificent sound a mother could hear. She wanted his laughter to block out that ringing in her ears.

The girl unbuckled her seatbelt so that she could get close enough to her mother to put her hand on her mother's shoulder. "Are you okay?" the girl said, sweetly. The woman reached up to pat the girl's hand, even as the sound of her daughter's voice grated on her ears. She didn't know what bothered her more, the ringing of an unanswered call or the voice that had taunted her with each call that went to voicemail.