

Auntie

You call after dinner. I'm piling dishes in the sink, the setting sun glinting off the faucets. You live in Washington now, or Oregon – somewhere on the West Coast – but you still time your calls perfectly, nestling them into the lazy crook of early evening.

You skip the greeting, say you have a proposal. A new business, you say. A combination spa and café. It will be great, just the right environment, the ambience. All you need are a few investors, you say. Then you can really get this off the ground. So what do you say? you ask.

I watch a car drive past, spraying up dry leaves.

Listening, right? you say.

Listening, I say.

(It was one of those August days, summer sliding down the windowpanes softer than honey. You were babysitting, made me your special chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast, said we're going shoes shopping. Your rickety old green car, the one you said would belong to me someday, all the cracking spaces of it – leather and wooden dashboard and seat belts that snapped too tight – it still belonged to you then, and you strapped me on, in the front seat because you said I was tall enough to pass for twelve even though I was only seven. The road looked too narrow for the car, the yellow lines, the trees crowding in, but you turned the key and let me flip through radio stations until I forgot about worrying.)

You moved when I was ten. You lived in an old yellow house twenty minutes away with floors shiny smooth for sliding and pillows all over your couches and a long skinny driveway up

to a garage with a broken door and when you said you were moving I ran upstairs to hide in your bedroom closet, socks slipping, determined to stay forever if that would keep you here.

You were going to California. The Sunshine State, you said. You can visit me. I'll call. There's so much more I can do there.

I covered my ears and wouldn't listen.

(The store was empty, the clerk, a teenaged girl, yawning. I followed you to the back, you brushing your fingers over the boxes, asking didn't I love the smell of shoes? the acrid tang of leather and rubber? I didn't know what *acrid* meant and climbed onto a chair to watch you, calloused hands pulling out heels and flats and sandals, trying them on, sauntering for me, discarding pairs for being tight or loose or bright or dark. I only nodded. Your voice bounced around the aisles, the shelves stretching towards the ceiling. So many shoes I would never be able to count them all.)

You were the best cook, better than my mother. The chocolate chips in your pancakes melted on my tongue, and you always made me a big one to eat and a tiny one to savor. When I slept over I came down, morning eyed and pillow haired, to find you standing at the stove in your slippers, a spatula in one hand. Your kitchen was cold in the morning, the linoleum sticking to my bare feet when I crossed to settle into one of your big wooden chairs.

You would eat opposite me, mouth full of chocolate and pancake batter and proper etiquette: how to hold a fork, how to cut up food. You always promised me that we'd go to the old used bookstore on the corner of your town. You'd love it, you said. Really you would. I'd nod, curling my toes in anticipation, but too soon my mother would come to take me home.

My father complained about sleepovers, said you were a bad influence. Once when they thought I was asleep on the car I heard them arguing over you. She never follows through, my father said. Broke again, back begging for money and you just throw it at her.

She's my sister, my mother said.

My father frowned.

When they glanced in the rearview mirror I screwed my eyes shut, heart pounding.

(The pair you chose was black leather, cool under my fingers. You placed the box in my arms, cardboard corners digging into the soft insides of my elbows, and said like a secret hey take this out for me okay? I thought you needed to pay but you said no no no this store's giving it away for free go on take it out go on. I looked at you, the lines around your eyes, your mouth, something shining in your face, said okay and looped up the box, slid off the chair. I'll be right after you, you said. Go on. Go on. You crouched down among the shoes like you were looking for something.)

You picked me up from school one day in spring in a silver car, the sun glaring off the windshield. It was a few weeks before your move, your house stuffed in lumpy cardboard boxes that sagged on your porch and dotted your living room. I hadn't seen you in a while – you'd been busy, you said when I called. I'll be done soon, you promised.

You opened the door for me and I slid in, hands scrabbling on the new seats. The inside smelled like leather and rubber, bitter and digging into the back of my throat. I asked you what it was.

My new car, you said. I had to sell the old one. This one will be better for California.

You were humming as you turned the key, the car rumbling to a start. I tugged the seat belt in and out, bare legs slipping. The radio blinked too many lights, held too many dials. I missed green, wondered why you couldn't wait six more years, but held my tongue and nodded. It's nice, I said.

You said it was. This is a good car, you said, smiling bright and swinging into the road.

(I hunched over the box and shuffled down the aisle, shoes crowding in around my head threatening to topple and my steps like sandpaper in the quiet. The clerk was examining her nails, dark under her eyes, and I walked past too fast, curling my toes in my sneakers, hands clammy, stopped in front of the exit. I slid outside in pieces, feet and legs and knobby knees and arms – and then alarms, sudden and loud. I dropped the box with a thump. The clerk clacked over, all surprised eyebrows and round red mouth, knelt down beside me, said are you okay? I scanned for you, your rough hands and calm voice, but you weren't there, not right behind me, and the roof of my mouth soured, pulled back, the hollow in my throat wrenching the way it does just before tears. The clerk said no no no don't cry. I bit my tongue. The clerk picked up the box and fingered the leather, looked at me, said hey look just keep them, okay? She put the box back in my hands. Hold on to it, okay? she said.

You appeared, blurry outlines, picking between the boxes in your worn old sandals. The clerk stood up. You said what's the matter? and the clerk said no nothing she just – tried to carry the box out but it's all good just let her keep them. You made your shocked face, eyes and mouth wide, and said no no I can pay, but the clerk said no. Just take it, she said. It's fine. You looked at her for a moment and came up to me, took the box, took my hand, big fingers confining small ones, and led me out of the store.)

You took me shoe shopping once. You loved shoes, said they were there for you always, let you go places, and when you walked down the aisles you breathed in deep and told me to remember to smell too. Afterward, in your old green car, you slipped off your shoes and put on the new ones, leather cool around your feet, tags dangling, and grinned at me, eyes glinting conspiratorially. You said you'd been needing a change. You said debt gets old. Sometimes you need a hand. You said, Let's do this again sometime, okay?

I always say okay.

Now you're on the phone asking for money. This one's it, you say. The jackpot. All you need is some cash to jumpstart it. It'll work this time, you say.

I watch the window, the gold-washed grass and clouds. Sunset skeins my hands.

You believe me, right? you say.

Sure, I say, cradling the phone. Sure I do.