

White Shoulders

By Alison Wright

The scent stops me in my tracks as I step into room 107.

Can it be?

I pause, my hand lingering on the blackout curtains. For a second, I cling to the comfort of not yet knowing.

The sheets lie in a jumbled mess, but I can't focus on them. The smell pulls me through the suite like a timid bloodhound. I find it in the bathroom, the counter scattered with toiletries.

There she is: a half-empty bottle of White Shoulders, its gold plastic cap chipped. An ordinary thing, yet euphoria rises in me like a child on Christmas morning.

Would Lacey ever feel that way on Christmas?

I lift the bottle with trembling hands. Lighter than I remember. One inhale and tears swell in my eyes.

How does this smell still carry so much power?

Grainy images flood my mind: Mom's fearless eyes, the camera always around her shoulders. Fourteen years feels like a lifetime.

Crumpling to the tile floor, I pull my knees close to my chest. I clutch the bottle like a life preserver.

"Jessica," Dad softly murmured, kneeling and pulling me close. His uncertain hand smoothed my hair again and again. His heartbeat thundered in my ear.

“It’s Mommy, sweetie...” his voice cracked. His hand in my hair froze. “She... went to be with Jesus.”

At six, I couldn’t understand. Mommy was in New Orleans taking pictures for the paper. She promised she would be home soon and that we’d make a special dinner together for Daddy.

“Does this mean she will be gone longer than she thought?”

Dad’s jaw clenched. This was the first moment I felt it—that shift in him. Back then, I didn’t have the words. Later I would: it was like he was sinking in quicksand, but still trying to convince me the ground was solid.

The next week was a blur. Doorbells, casseroles, whispers that cut sharper than funeral hymns. At visitation, Mom looked almost the same lying in the casket, no sign she’d caught a stray bullet in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I remember Mrs. Tarver’s ham, Mrs. Landry’s asparagus casserole, Mrs. Broussard’s four layer delight, the words: “bless your little heart.” I swore to never say them.

In the kitchen, the ladies whispered:

“Diane had no business in the projects with those junkies.”

“What was she thinking? Leaving a child behind for that?”

“And Frank... he’ll have to raise her alone now.”

I watched “Inspector Gadget,” pushing food around my plate and pretending not to listen.

After the funeral, the house swelled with people—the church congregation, some of Mom’s students I’d never met, and a handful of Dad’s accounting clients. Dad stood unbroken all day, barely a tear as the casket was lowered, so it startled me to hear a sudden rise in his voice from the front porch.

“You’ve got some nerve!” he snapped at a man I didn’t recognize, snatching an envelope from his hands. “These are what got her killed.”

I hid in Mom’s bathroom, locking the door. On the vanity sat her perfume. I clutched it and crawled underneath the counter, wanting to hold on to her scent forever. I pressed the bottle against my face. I must have fallen asleep like that, the imprint of the woman on the bottle etched into my cheek, until the house finally emptied and Dad broke the lock to pull me out.

Now, twenty years old, curled on another bathroom floor, I wonder what Mom would think about the woman I’ve become. A single mother cleaning hotel rooms, far from home. Would she recognize me?

Even Dad probably wouldn’t.

I thought about calling him after Michael left, when the fear set in.

Rent, groceries, childcare?

But his voice was in my head. The last time we spoke—when I told him I was withdrawing from Hopkins, following Michael to Portland—he unloaded.

“You are throwing away your life for this guy,” he spewed. “When it falls apart, don’t come knocking.”

He had drunk away any drops of mercy that might have made him kinder. The bitterness in his voice deepened year by year, bottle by bottle. After I left for college, there was a new bite to his words—like the clank of an empty fifth of Jack hitting the bottom of the trash bin.

More than once, bank account dwindling, I held the receiver in my hand ready to punch the digits of the only home number I'd ever known. Surely if I begged for forgiveness, he'd send plane tickets for us, for the sake of his granddaughter. Lacey could grow up in a house with a backyard. But before I could finish dialing, I thought about what that call would mean. The depressive drinking, the nastiness if you dared to disagree with him—the reasons I went away to college in the first place.

Was that the life I wanted for her?

We can survive without Michael or Dad, I told myself. Applying for welfare crossed my mind, but that would be admitting defeat. I have a job. A brain. It had to be enough.

Wiping my eyes, I rise from the tile. Too many rooms left with Rosie out today.

Inside the guest room, I take in the parallel life: expensive suitcases, duffel bags, a child's pink bunny tossed on the bed, sunscreen smeared across the dresser, kid-sized Ugg boots. Family vacations, water parks, summer camps.

Who buys Uggs for a child?

The perfume still sits warm in my hand. I turn back toward the bathroom, intending to return the perfume, walk away, and pretend I never touched it.

She would never miss it. She can afford another.

I don't take the perfume because she can replace it.

I take it because I can't.

Sliding the bottle into my apron, I feel lighter and heavier at the same time, as if I've done something wrong, and yet essential in one motion.

The day passes quickly, a haze of bleach and linens. The weight of the bottle in my pocket pressing me to work faster. By the time I reach the break room at the end of the day, the bottle feels like a secret I can barely contain.

That's when I see the woman at the front desk holding a sunburnt little girl, maybe four years old, asleep in her arms. The girl looks so peaceful, like she doesn't have a care in the world. "An item's been stolen from my room," I overhear her say to Tim, the manager. "A bottle of perfume."

I grab my purse, drop the perfume in it, and slip out the back door.

At home, the phone is already ringing.

"Jessica," Tim's voice said. "A guest claims a bottle of perfume is missing. Room 107. Did you see it today?"

"What are you saying, Tim?" Panic lodges in the pit of my stomach. I contemplate making up a story that the bottle fell, shattered on the floor, and that I forgot to report it.

"Jessica, you know I've got to follow up."

"Tim, you know I would never do anything to lose this job. Besides, why would I want her perfume?"

"Listen, you were the only one in there. It looks bad. You haven't had any strikes before so let this be a warning. It happens again and I'll be forced to fire you. "

Lacey wails in the background. Dinnertime.

"Whatever, Tim. I need to feed my kid."

I hang up before he can say anything more.

That night after I put Lacey to bed and the apartment quiets, I place the bottle of perfume on my dresser. A makeshift shrine upon Ikea's best veneer.

I gaze at the woman etched onto the glass, her shoulder displaying a confidence I've never felt.

As I trace the curve of her image with my finger, a fragile strength wells inside. My mother's shoulders carried her camera into danger. Mine carry a daughter through uncertain streets and hallways that smell of stale smoke.

They are not the same shoulders.

But they are the ones Lacey leans on.

And for her, they must be enough.