

Momma Drove Like a Man

1.

I sat sandy-kneed, knees to chest in that '89 Chevy pickup truck momma drove like a man, cup holders collecting more and more identical sea shells she picked up along the beaches we visited. I never knew why momma felt the need to take something from everywhere-- she called them mementos. It's funny, but no matter how long or how far we drove, we always seemed to end up near a beach. Saltwater clung to my cheeks from another blowout and I felt her drive a little faster. I would always end up choking on my throat and momma always ended up mad.

We pulled into a gas station off the highway, and as momma rolled down the window I smelled the stench of seaweed and salt in the empty air and realized we'd never escape the sea. These dismal gas stations were my beacon of hope, my only human contact besides momma, but since she was a paranoid, she didn't usually let me leave the car. The lonely little people outside were my scenery.

"I gotta pee." Momma shut the door, craning her head through the window. "You better still be here when I get back. I won't have you whorin' around no more." And with those kind words, she spun on her drugstore flip flop heels and clacked away. The salty air mixed with the sweat on my face, and the little scrapes I had gotten on my chin from slipping on slick summer asphalt made me feel like I was burning. My throat was hot; I was melting faster than an ice cream truck with a broken freezer.

Momma always knew how to choke me up, not sure why I'd let her get to me. She was this sad entity of a woman that only laid eyes on a newspaper when she was using sheets to shield her face from the sun she insisted on living her life under. I thought she'd surely die from some kind of skin cancer the way she never put on sunscreen like I told her to. She thought she was invincible, I suppose. But I guess your ego gets built up when you're such a trooper like her. She was a trooper, I'll give her that. Putting up with all the towns and all the shit they served us on 4th of July paper plates.

That summer was so odd. We spent it's 4th of July in some town with a Q starting name. The townsfolk were hospitable, for the most part. So, we grabbed our camper chairs out of the trunk and trudged around until we found the street where the parade would be. We scanned the sea of people subsiding like some Moses type of thing for the parade and when we spotted a bit of empty space on the lawn, we flocked to it. Tropical birds in the woods, we looked like. Well momma looked like.

There was a friendly seeming woman sitting on the porch and momma went on up to her and asked if we were alright, spreading ourselves out on her lawn.

"Well, sit yerselves right down, missies. My lawn's open to anyone who feels patriotic on this fine day," the wrinkly-eyed woman with sandpaper skin smiled up at us from her rocking bench. She could have lived in ancient Egypt among the scarab beetle gods, her skin was so worn down. It was commendable, to live a life that long, I thought. So momma and I thanked her and spread ourselves out, being sure not to encroach on our neighbors' spaces. There we were, thinking we belonged somewhere, piled up with greasy food and greasy haired kids on each

others' lawn. There was a family eating mashed potatoes, strawberries, and drinking cold lemonade. My mouth watered. I hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday. I looked at momma.

"Can I run to a store and get food or something?"

"Sure."

I scooted my butt out of that chair and winced as my feet hit the pavement too hard. Marching down the street, I tried not to act like I was somebody because then I knew the aisles of people would all be staring at me. I didn't like being stared at. I saw a group of boys about my age spread out more, so not to squeeze their boy-ness in too close together because we'd all be dead or something if there was too much boy in too compact of a space. I kept my head down and pulled on my denim shorts a little. I was always looking away when I saw a big group of boys.

"Hey," one of them said abruptly as I passed in front of them.

"Hi..." I let a slight curve rest on my lips but looked away again. Momma didn't really like me getting involved with boys anyways. I didn't understand this- she was always getting involved with boys. Technically, they were men but I don't refer to them as it. I think you have to earn the titles 'man' or 'woman' or whatnot. You can't just grow up and expect people to respect you when you don't even grasp the idea. I especially notice this attitude with boys. Momma loved her boys, though. She loved when they made her want them, dumb. She loved the dance, the games. I hated it.

Sometimes these boys would join us for a couple towns, but they near always leave by the 3rd town we get to. Nobody can stand momma and I for longer than three towns. I don't know how I've even been able to stand momma and I. We get on my nerves, and on her nerves too, I guess. I've made her sound pretty awful. The age gap between us is significantly smaller than most momma's and their babies. Sometimes I can't even bear to look at her, we spend so much time together. Even when the windows are rolled down and there's wind whipping around us on the highway, I can't breathe around momma.

As I approached a supermarket, I noticed a couple of boys leaning against the side of the ice machines. They looked to be at least two years older than me. A trail of smoke lifted off their fingertips and I realized they were smoking cigarettes. All the boys momma liked smoked cigarettes, and they liked smokin' on the highway so me and momma always got out of the car reeking of them. I didn't see any appeal. Momma kind of seemed too, not really sure why. She likes the mysterious boys but I don't see anything mysterious or handsome in lighting your lungs on fire.

One of the boys nodded at me. I smiled, and shoved my hands in my pockets. The boys were wearing these get ups I've never seen before- slippery looking black jackets and ripped black pants and it was just all too bulky to be wearing that in July. I glanced behind me at them as the sliding doors opened and saw the cuter boy put out his cigarette. He would have been more handsome if he hadn't tried to make himself look so damned stupid.

"Hey," the less cute one with dirty blonde hair said as I slid out of the sliding glass doors, praying they wouldn't notice me. "I'm Davis, and this is Boone." I wasn't sure why he

was introducing himself to me, but I did the good thing and shook his callused hand, throwing my name right back at him.

“I’m Tallulah.”

“That’s a name,” Boone murmured.

“It’s my name...” I said, unsure of how to respond to that small quip. They both laughed.

“You here for the parade, Ta...” Boone fumbled for a moment.

“Tuh-lew-luh” I said.

“Tallulah. You here for the parade?”

“Yes,” I practically spat. Their coats were making me anxious in this sweltering weather--I was sure they’d pass out at any moment from heat exhaustion.

“I guess we’ll see you around, Tallulah.” I nodded goodbye, and thought *probably not*. I’ve never stayed in one place long enough to make friends.

I got back to momma and the sea of people and it seemed as though it had thickened. There were at least twice as many people sitting on that one lawn. Momma waved and patted what looked like a half an inch of space in the grass next to her.

“Not much room,” I remarked, to which the people next to momma tried to scoot over. “Oh, sorry.” I said. They shrugged. A family of three. I threw chips at momma.

“Thanks,” she said. My skin had never felt this thick before, I observed, wiping a blanket away from my forehead. The first float began to roll by. Some local insurance company. There were pretty women on it, but I didn’t think they worked there. They weren’t wearing any kinds of business suits like the men sitting in the chairs on the floats.

Several floats rolled by. Mostly local businesses, with pageant girls waving and pink sausage men wiping sweat away with their suit sleeves. All the floats kind of seemed to be different variations of each other so I lost interest pretty quickly. And who knew what any of it had to do with our nation’s independence...

“Momma,” her neck was craned around the block, as the next float was approaching. She was just eating this crap up. She whipped her head around after a second.

“Yeah?”

“Wanna go?”

“No.” She craned her head back around, looking just as bird-like as ever. Around her neck was a silver necklace with a clear blue charm on it. Another memento of hers, but nicer than the usual ones. She never bothered to get any for me.

“Do you think we’ll stay the night?”

“May as well, wait out the holiday traffic...” Her speech was garbled by the approaching marching band and I picked at the lawn.

2.

It was just like I’d seen momma do it my whole life. I never tried before though. It had always looked so easy, and it was. She didn’t explain to me that it was against the rules until I was nine. I was so scared when she told me that, I began to cry. Of course this infuriated her, and she started to shout at me. So then I sucked it up like she told me to. She’s still taken things ever since.

This one was short, with a little metal pendant of a sun on it. The ‘chain’ part was just a thin string. It was simple, shiny, concise. The woman in the front was reading a paperback that I imagined was some sort of sex book. I slid it into my pocket; it slipped in so easily. I moved to the other side of the store and looked at some of the little locally made stone-stud earrings. I knew not to leave right after. I’d picked up that much from momma. After a few more glances around the store I said thank you to the older lady in the front and tried not to look at her too much. I didn’t want a grain of me to like her. I could only look at her for long enough not to know what kind of shirts she wore. It would be too personal. The first footstep out of the store was exhilaration. A deep tension released as I turned the corner at the end of the block. When you realize something comes easy to you, you see a world of possibilities.

3.

Me and momma started working in a team after that first time I took something. We got really really good at being sweet *anddupe*-like. We got crafty and managed to take hundreds of dollars worth of things at once. It was our biggest operation that got us caught; designer sun hats from a store that’s name sounded like some random rich nobody.

It may very well have been the most terrifying experience of our life. I still feel the cold bony grip of that toothy women on our arms as momma and I began to leave. Looking at her freckled nose in the holding room above the store, momma suddenly looked like a girl my age. I was seeing her in a new light, her disappointment weighing into her collarbones like a young kid as she slouched in that itchy red chair. I remember not being able to see much around me. People were probably staring as we were practically dragged by our ears up there but the only things in my vision were my weapon of choice (my hands) and momma. Pink burned in my ears. All we really got in the end was a stern talk from a slippery suited, mustached man. It was all very demeaning, but I suppose we were criminals by the definition of the word. According to one of momma’s boys, Joaquin, it was our cream complexion that helped us slip out of any serious consequences.

I actually liked Joaquin. He stayed with us for much longer than usual. Eventually I stopped being afraid of him; I wasn’t skittish around him like most of the boys momma picked up. I knew he wouldn’t touch me. He didn’t put burning things in his mouth. And he looked mama and I in the eyes.

4.

Momma and Joaquin were in the bed next to me. I stood, walked over to the window that overlooked a dingy parking lot, and shoved the blinds together. I didn’t like seeing parking lots. Who wants to see other sad people coming and going? The bed sheets were itchy, so I lay on top of everything as I came back to the bed. All I had to drink was the \$2 pepsi cola left in the barely running fridge, but Joaquin said it was alright; he would pay. I think that was maybe me and momma’s third time in a hotel. It never felt right- I always felt as though I was sleeping in somebody else’s bed. I would have rather slept in the car, especially when momma slipped Joaquin a handy when they thought I was asleep...

Momma was clicking through stations, trying to find something trashy to watch. She wanted to see a worse version of herself. But she was clicking through and stopped on the news

channel for the first time, I think because Joaquin liked the news and she liked Joaquin. A boy's face flashed across the screen. I recognized him, it was Boone, from the Q town! A gravelled, unsympathetic voice fumbled over his name. He was found dead with a needle in his arm.

5.

Joaquin had just come into some money. Momma wouldn't tell me what kind of money, just that he'd come into it. That phrase never made sense to me "come into some money". But, Joaquin had some now, and he wanted to buy us things. T Momma liked this. Momma seemed very, very happy about this. She was just a young girl sometimes, with her excitement. There was this local boutique that she was drawn to immediately, in this town we were passing through for lunch. I always thought she had tacky small-town lady taste but we *were* tacky small-town-ladies. I suppose if I wanted to look like momma and own my tacky small-town splintered roots I'd have to wear flowy things from boutiques like that.

Momma and I went into the store. The walls were lined with square canvas paintings with tropical animals on them. I was afraid the whole time that the lady up front was suspicious of us. I was afraid people were suspicious of us ever since the incident. Sometimes I woke up Joaquin screaming (momma was a heavy sleeper) having dreams about going to prison. He told me that I had a lot of luck, even though it definitely wouldn't feel like it. I had luck for reasons and in ways I wouldn't be able to comprehend. He also said he would look out for me and momma, because he loved us. I wish I could have told him that we loved him too, but I was nervous. I don't think me and momma told him that enough, if ever.

There was this dress. It was one of those dresses that seemed like it was everything a dress could be. It was this mature, low cut, summer dress with little delicate flowers. I pulled it into a dressing room, pressing the door closed with my back. A mirror intruded on me, fluorescent, too close. But I pulled everything off and the dress on, stepping into it. Unsure of whether it was really as pretty as I thought, I stepped outside of the dressing room and asked momma what she thought.

"You look like a slut."

The whole store turned it's head.

6.

The glove compartment of momma's car was a treasure trove. It was where she stored all of her jewelry, make-up, "womanly goods" as she called them. It was her vanity. Fumbling through it with something in mind to find is difficult, so I kind of just flipped through her things. I came across a little emergency sewing kit grandma gave us because she thought sewing kits were still relevant. I had an idea.

The kit resting on my knees precariously, I finally found some sterling studs momma wouldn't miss. Unclipping the latch on the kit, I pulled out the longest needle that seemed to be the closest width to the stud. No hesitation, I let the point pierce my lobe. It was always a mystery to me why momma never took me to get them done. Then, I stuck the stud in, crimson copper furling around the new piece of metal in my ear.

Momma probably wasn't happy I dripped blood on her newly upholstered passenger seat, now that I look back on it.

