

This Is Dedicated to the One I Love

Ava Morgan

“On second thought, just the number three,” Sandra called, glancing over the back seat. Though Jack had started his growth spurt—they’d had to start buying pants a few sizes up, the cuffs rolled over four times to reveal his ankles—he could make do with a double burger split between them. He was still asleep (thank God), his legs chicken-winged into his chest.

Hell, he could have the whole thing. She could lose weight—at least her boss thought so.

“The guys that come round here want to be wowed,” he’d call after her as she made her way through the back wings for a drink before her next dance, shoving aside racks full of rhinestones and feathers as he struggled to keep up. “They want to see the kinds of girls that get stuck up on a lunch box. And while you’ve got an ass that can move mountains, Mama, it ain’t making up for much.” They’d leave it at that, and she’d spend the night trying to ease her hips into the slimming silver straps of a bikini, trying to make the stars on her bra stretch wider than they were ever really meant for.

Sandra pulled the car forward, took her receipt from the pimply kid leaning out the window. It was always more than she expected.

So much for her hair; even now in the rearview mirror she could make out the brown rootline trying to reclaim its territory against the blonde fry. She’d have to call Tammy to cancel this weekend.

The car made its way past streetlights, past

mobile homes bundled in chain-link fence, until it found the highway, steering west along the Vegas strip. She always liked this time of day. Liked how the sky swirled before her and the high-rises as grease in a kitchen, expectation rising in the heat of a frying pan.

Jack was starting to come to. His face scrunched into a sharp inhale and he readjusted his legs. His hair, darker than hers, was already sticking up in the back.

“Late night?”

“You could say that,” he mumbled, not even opening his eyes. With his voice dropping, he sounded more like his dad each day.

“Here, I got you something.”

She passed the bag his way with a wad of napkins from the glove box.

“Thanks.” A pause. “There’s just one in here.”

“I’m not that hungry—remember those leftovers I brought home last night? I mixed in that green chili you like, threw them in the microwave.”

Her lies had a way of rushing on towards an overfull explanation. Jack met her with a weak smile in the mirror.

The car continued forward, light settling into chrome.

“You sure you don’t want anything?”

“I told you, I already ate.”

“Need a hand?”

“No, it’s fine.”

The crash of plates and flatware crescendoed, Sandra’s scouring of some blackened substance she couldn’t begin to name quickening in the scratch of steel wool against cast-iron.

She’d let the dishes pile on long enough: might as well get them over with.

Jack sat curled on the couch with a book, his head popping up every few seconds to check on the situation in the kitchen.

Let him rest. She stared straight at the suds browning up through her nail beds, at the window’s overlook on the blue grass separating the drylands from the parking lot, at the reflection of all behind her. All that worry.

Outside, a young couple hovered over a car hood, rolling a cigarette between them back-forth, back-forth, that red glow circling an entire horizon before the stars would roll around, settle down alongside the night.

Now here she was, slaving away at a pan.

It could be worse, she reminded herself. She didn’t cook as often as she should, and though the food stamps never stretched as far as they ought to, she knew of people who relied solely on peanut-butter sandwiches and chips, of people who skipped through drive-thrus so fast that their cup holders were lined with the toys most people threw out at the end of the Happy Meal.

At least they saved junk food for the rare occasion. Sided sit-down meals with a garden salad, often passed on soda.

Except on nights she worked doubles, coming home as Jack headed off for class and sleeping away the day in a pile of perfume, fries, and sequins.

Or when she couldn’t make ends meet.

It was all starting to pile up again.

In the weeks after they took Jack away, she’d had to enroll in a class on better parenting

practices, something her lawyer assured her would look good for the court when they filed for custody. She remembered the teacher now—his whine, how his nose pinched up with his moustache at the end of every sentence.

“Now, mothers,” he’d begun, “who can tell me where ice cream falls on the food pyramid?”

A silence. Three men in the corner crossed their arms. The instructor fiddled with his pointer stick.

“Well, we can rule out a vegetable because it isn’t green”—*SMACK!*—“a grain because it doesn’t come from wheat”—*SMACK!*—“and a fruit because its sugar isn’t naturally occurring”—*SMACK!* “Now what does this leave us with?”

A woman in a Cheetah Girls hoodie raised her hand.

“Yes, Amy.”

“Dairy—it comes from cows.”

The teacher’s nose twitched. He sucked in his cheeks.

“Not quite.”

The pointer made its way to the top-most section on the pyramid, a section filled with caricatures of pudgy kids double-fisting lollipops.

“This, mothers, is where we find ice cream: the land of sweets, trans fats, and *dullardry*.” He let the word hang over them, fill the air.

“Say little Jimmy won’t stop crying on his way to his dad’s house; are we going to give him an ice cream cone to cheer him up? Say little Jimmy got a D on a math test he really studied for; are we going to give him an ice cream cone and tell him to do better on the next one?”

“No! Ice cream is a pathway to malfeasance, to bottom-feeding, to illiteracy! You mothers have been given another chance to examine your ways and change. What are you going to do when Jimmy asks for an ice cream cone?”

At the time, Sandra cried. Those were her crying days: in bus stops, in bathroom stalls, on

break behind the diner, after filling out forms and standing in line for hours on end in her stilettos, her one good pair of shoes, once for a night out, then for looking well-kept, legible, legal. She'd graduated high school. She'd done good with her life. How could anyone talk to her like that?

Hunched over the kitchen sink, her scrubbing quickened pace. The solid bits were starting to chip away, that grit sliding down towards the drain. No matter her nail polish. Her skin.

"Shit!"

The grit sliced through skin and she pulled the cut to her mouth, sucked blood.

In a second Jack was standing over her with a towel, running her hand under the tap.

Outside the window, the young couple was turning in for the night, snuffing out their light. Stars had descended over the drier flats, a prairie dog whistling out from the distance.

But she knew the fridge was stocked—at least until the weekend. And she had a bank account in her own name, something those classes had never explained but that she had pursued anyway. And Jack was a healthy boy—a kind boy—a boy who didn't mind green beans.

They would never become those caricatures. Not on her watch.

*In the summers before we were women,
we snuck through the walls with the farm puppies.
We found hips with the youth chased out, an
old kitchen still ripe with genesis and dust.*

Sitting at the kitchen table over his English assignment (they were beginning their poetry unit, the scansion sheet just by his elbow), Jack couldn't help thinking about Mom.

What he knew of her childhood was little. It took on the shape of a farm, a lot of yelling.

He had a hard time imagining her as a girl. Sure, she was girlish—all those magazine quizzes,

her laugh making her seem younger than his friends' moms—but never really a girl. He could picture her with braids, a pail for collecting eggs and a bible on her hip, but her trajectory always pointed towards motherhood—"guns and puppies and my gold colored shoes."

Now he troubled himself over the words, what Falkner meant by hips with the youth chased out and how they were found, not grown.

In supermarket tanks the lobsters would pile their crowding bodies on top of each other and we would wonder if they even knew that the others were alive.

But those were supermarkets: meat was still meat. If not from his growing up with gas stations instead of groceries, the year Mom dated Mark (fat old drunk) had taught him to savor every bite he could get.

So much for "Ellis County, Kansas"; his translations were of no use, each attempt getting further from the original. He set his sheet on the countertop, red pen ready for Mom's comments in the morning, and slumped off to bed.

Jack spent the night struggling against the sheets, against the box springs. Dreams swirled in and out of worry: he couldn't picture himself as a collective "we" from which to witness and contribute, leaving him unsettled. Winds picking up across the desert, scraped against the walls, the prairie dog calls once more turning towards a howl.

Later that week, Sandra found the flier hung up to the refrigerator door with its promise of discount hockey pads, skates, and club uniforms. Everything a boy could ever want.

Except a stick.

She'd waited for him to pad out of his room—watched as he took giant, careful steps to

avoid the edge of his oversized plaid pants—made sure to hand him a cup of coffee—before broaching the subject.

“I don’t know kiddo,” she said, sliding over the flier. His cheeks flexed, his tell when he was trying to keep calm.

“You know how tight things are lately. I don’t think I can balance out a hockey stick this month, let alone registration fees, gas to get you to practice and games.” Each word got quieter and quieter.

“But I’ve got it all figured out!” he said. “All you’d have to do is sign a paper and my fees are paid for—it’s really just the stick.”

She took another sip of her coffee.

“The school said they’d take care of most of it because of—well—because...” He was always embarrassed to say “our situation” because he liked it here. It was better than Denver. Better than some of the other motels, other towns, they’d had to pass through just to get here.

“...because of how it is. But they can’t cover the stick: those you have to get custom-fit.”

He waited, wrapped one of the pants’ drawstrings around his finger.

“What do you think?”

Sandra sighed, stared out the window. It was the times after she’d quit when she most needed a cigarette.

“I can’t make any promises.” They drank their coffee in silence.

“I’ll sign the form, though. See what we can do.” And when she’d seen a smile start to poke out at the corner of his mouth, just enough, she continued with: “I never pictured you in the rich-kid sport. Soccer, maybe, but hockey?”

“What’s wrong with hockey?”

“It’s a fighting sport.” She laughed. “All this time just to get you a dentist and you want to bust out your teeth?”

“I’ll be careful.” The grin had spread across

his face; her boy was back.

“Plus they fit the stick to you, so it’s not like the field-hockey girls all hunched over the turf.”

“Or the skirts.”

He started to laugh. “Or the skirts.”

“*Mitch!*” Sandra yelled as a balding head ducked to safety behind a corner. Though backstage was always a labyrinth of oversized wigs, shoes, and glitter, she knew that, on those legs, he couldn’t make it far.

She cornered him between the filing cabinet and water cooler, tropical feathers bursting from every point of her crossed arms.

“I need to talk to you.”

“Well, Sandra.” He was gulping down air.

“It’s nice to see you, too. Won’t you have a seat?”

And when she didn’t move: “Very well.” He wiped the sweat from his glasses.

“What brings you by the office today?”

“You told me yesterday that you would fix my schedule so I could get more hours. What did you do instead?”

“Sandra, please—”

“What did you do instead?” She was shaking now, the anger welling up through her shoulders.

Mitch wheezed. Gave that little smile, that knowing smile.

“Look, Sandra, this has gone on long enough. Have a seat.”

He pulled a table away from its make-shift vanity lights, the bottles rattling as it squealed across the floor, and she sat down, making sure tower a good foot above her boss.

“I don’t know how to sugarcoat this, so I’ll just throw it out there. You’re not pulling your weight.”

And before she could get started: “Oh, don’t look at me like that. I’ve been saying it to you for

months—these guys want a little more than just a good dancer.” Her mouth snapped shut, and Mitch continued: “Sure, you can do as many flips and spins as you want, but if you’re not gonna go with the workout plan I gave you last time”—she crossed her arms over her stomach—“or work on your stage presence beyond just your physical strength, then I don’t know what to tell you.” He filled a paper cone and drained it, the sweat dripping into beads along his forehead.

“We’ve decided to give Jasmyn a try. She’s not great, but she’s what they like. Something cute, and something who *knows* how to use it.”

“Places, girls!” came the stage manager’s cry, and a thunder of heels galloped down the hallway as a group of women in thigh-highs and brassieres rushed to line up for the burlesque number, readjusted their straps.

“You know, you’ve got a good shape. I’m just turning out what sells, Mama.”

She couldn’t nod. Couldn’t even move.

Seeing his exit, Mitch made a motion of getting up, of heading out before the curtain.

He turned around, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but if you just had the tits to match those hips, we could start negotiating a little more stage time. A full-bodied woman: that’s what they really like.”

Sandra stared flat at the yellowing perfume bottles. At the layers and layers and layers of eyeliner filling in the table’s cracks.

“I’m gonna give you a number—he’s a good man, practically a family friend. We send a lot of girls his way. We can even fund it part way, have you work it off in installments?” A chuckle.

He pulled another cone down from the water cooler, quickly wrote down the number, then passed it her way between his fingers like a cigarette.

“Just give it a thought, won’t you?”

And with that, he was gone, swirling away

into the fog machines, into the neon lights awaiting him on the other side of the curtain.

The night passed on in a fugue state, its scents and colors blurring together. Everything passed over her: the “Fifteen minutes!” followed by its “Thank you, fifteen!,” the “Good night, gentleman” and the “Farewell, ladies”—until Sandra settled herself against the car seat, started the ignition, pointed the headlights home.

“Pick-a-little, talk-a-little, pick-a-little, talk-a-little, cheap cheap cheap—”

“Will you turn that fucking thing off!”

The TV went silent as Jack muted the volume, turned on the subtitles. He was watching *The Music Man* as a break between his math and history reading. Without the music, though, the men before him fell rather flat, and he wandered his way back to the kitchen, made a sandwich with the leftover pickles and honey mustard. It would have to do.

Mom was still hunched over the counter. Shifting her shoulders to block his view from the legal pad in front of her, from her repeated curses over a calculator.

Now was not a good time to bring up the permission slip; he swallowed down the thought alongside a bite of the sandwich, made a face at the taste.

A car honking rattled the window pane.

“My cue!”

At her look: “Max said he’d take me to the rink today. I’m borrowing some of his skates so I can learn to move in them.”

She didn’t even make a sound, just nodded.

He gave her the obligatory hug. Promised he’d finish his homework. Promised he’d be back before dinner—“Just a break from this heat.”

And as he made his way to the door, his

voice a little wobbly, he sang:

“Good night, ladies
Good night, ladies
Good night, ladies,
We’re going to leave you now.”

In the summers before we were women
In the summers before we were women

Sandra couldn’t get the words out of her head. They reminded her of the days when she and her baby sisters jumped through the living room listening to The Mamas and The Papas, of the day she got her first pair of pointe shoes. Sweat lighting her hair, her afternoons, she had always known she would be a dancer.

It took her years to trade grease fires for a dance pole and, despite the crowds, despite the atmospheric currents of glitter, she had found her place, moth-bitten curtains and all.

Sandra still listened to those records, still practiced her numbers with Mama Cass whispering a little prayer to her from her MP3 player. The stars had always pointed out her direction for her, shining bright above her like spotlights. But she’d long ago learned that California dreamin’ wasn’t a reality, at least not one she could reach. With Jack in high school, even doing well, she’d lost the energy to keep running.

She looked down at the spreadsheets before her and their red ink. Looked out the window across the parking lot with its swarming bugs, its cigarette butts.

Why fight it?

Setting out into the night, Sandra turned up the car radio, trying to drown out Jack’s reaction, Jack’s face, if she even suggested packing camp again. But those lines from his homework wouldn’t let her rest, coming in clear through their own

mental FM station:

In the summers before we were women,
we snuck through the walls with the farm puppies.
We found hips with the youth chased out, an
old kitchen still ripe with genesis and dust.

Funny how it all turned back on center.

When they left Denver, Sandra had stashed as much as she could into her coat pockets, saving her purse to pack up Jack’s clothes. She’d scooped him up from the couch, blankets and all, remembering his library book at a last glance. She’d waited until she knew Mark was well beyond the property line before turning the key, the ignition giving way to a whine.

The roads had stretched black before her, smoke rising over the refinery. The underpasses opened like a jaw beneath their tires, threatening to swallow their 1994 Honda, stars, and all, and she’d tightened her grip on the steering wheel pleading for the transmission to hold out, for the gas to make it just far enough west.

They’d breached the mountain passes in a snow storm, cabins buried on either side.

At some point Jack had sat up. Pulled the blanket around their shoulders. Helped her scan the sidelines for deer.

In the summers before we were women,
we snuck through the walls with the farm puppies.
We found hips with the youth chased out, an
old kitchen still ripe with genesis and dust.
We found our mouths could touch without kissing and
pulled at the ticks blooming on dogs’ bellies,
butterscotch jewels toughening with their blood—

guns and puppies and my gold colored shoes.

*I pressed my ear against one body. Its shining skin
with the ticks hanging off, black mouth and
steaming tongue, all that goddamn humming.
In supermarket tanks the dark lobsters would pile
their crowding bodies on top of each other and we
would wonder if they even knew that the others
were alive. We brought the rifles, but forgot
to clean them. We forgot a lot of things. Someday,
I will finally understand why Slim shot that dog.
Why we opened stalls and found mother spaniels
with silver braces cupped deep inside their cheeks.
We pushed our mouths against the warm backs
of those babies. If you go down deep enough,
we thought, you eventually have to get emptiness.*

*We kept our eyes open, girls and puppies and
the sore muscles of God, licked our canine teeth.
Then we shot all of the branches from a tree
that was already dead, and I showed the puppies
little bubbles of air inside the metal shells. Our lips
pressed together but we never kissed, even once.
We were too busy looking for all of those bullets.*

“Well, no use turning back now,” Sandra said to herself, trying to build up her courage.

She killed the headlights, watched as this motel’s parking lot melted into sky. She’d bundled up in a sweater to hide her nipples, avoided her eyes in the mirror. Why was being braless so unsettling?

One of those rooms held the doctor’s office. Just the name made her stomach churn.

Stepping out into the cold, Sandra tried to imagine the chill of the ice rink in which she would wrap herself every Saturday, no matter the hour. But the night clawed after her thighs and a coyote scampered past, stared.

“I thought you wanted this,” it called, open-

eared.

Her lips fought against her, softening into a frown.

“I did,” she said. Not even a whisper.

She called the number to get in the door. Accepted the cigarette from the man who greeted her. Cataloged the absurdity of it all, the everydayness of it all, in discrete moments. The rearview, if not judgmental, was at least skewed.

And, like with so much before, she realized that there was no choice at all.

Not when you really looked at it.

Editors’ Note: This piece contains the poem “Ellis County, Kansas” by Julia Falkner.