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Someplace Else

Rebecca Hotaling Nix

University of Southern Maine, Stonecoast MFA, itsrebec@yahoo.com

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Someplace Else

The morning after Tommy punched me so hard my eye looked like an overripe plum, I took the 9 train to Myra's instead of going to class. I always went to her house whenever Tommy and I had fights. I was thinking of some excuse I'd give her even though I knew she'd know the truth. I also knew I'd lie to her anyway. She wouldn't question it either way; that was the kind of friend she was.

The car was filled with typical yuppie commuters, women in stiff business suits and grey-striped dresses, high heel sticking out of duffel bags, middle-aged men wanting to trade their ties for t-shirts, listening to metal on their new CD disc-mans. I was lucky enough to get a seat because my head felt like it was full of cotton and my stomach was doing back flips. I read the advertisements above the windows instead of listening to the people talking about me over the screech of the subway wheels.

I hated myself for not remembering to grab the sunglasses from the top drawer of my dresser. I had found them on the subway the summer before, just sitting there alone on the hard plastic seat, when we were coming back from the Bronx Zoo. I started to reach for them, but Tommy yelled, *don't touch that, you don't know where they've been!* But that was the part I liked, wondering where they may have been. I told Tommy this and he said I read too many romance novels. He was smiling though, so I knew he wasn't serious. I slipped them into my pocket when he wasn't looking. After I got home, I hid them in my dresser, but I never wore them. I couldn't risk it. Tommy would have too many questions and I didn't want to make him angry again.

I was thinking about those glasses, about how their dark lenses would make me look mysterious and not like the elephant man when I noticed a little boy in a red hat who couldn't have been more than four staring at me. His mother, a massive woman reading an Anne Rice novel, told him, "Mind your business, boy," her eyes never leaving the page.

"Phew! You stink!" he said, before his mother pulled him back into his seat with one gloved hand.

I drew my knees up and pulled my sweatshirt over my head, trying to make myself so small that no one would see me. Sometimes I did that with Tommy and sometimes it worked. Peering from beneath my hood, I could see my reflection in the window on the other side of the car. My hair was stringy, clumped together in some places, and the purple of my eye made my otherwise olive skin look pasty. My clothes looked like I had slept in them. The truth was, I had. My sweatshirt was stained where I had wiped my nose and eyes. I wrapped my arms around myself like I was cold. Channel 5 said it was going to snow, but I didn't feel anything. I was already numb.

I knew Tommy was sorry. He always was. Most likely, there would be flowers and Chinese takeout waiting for me when I got home. He'd straighten up the house, sweep up the broken glass, scrub away the grease stain from the chicken cutlet he threw against the wall, put away the blanket that I had used in the couch after he refused to let me into the bedroom. He'd make it so there wasn't any evidence that there had been a fight at all. But all the straightening wouldn't make the swelling in my eye go down, not for a couple more days, at least. There'd be tears and kisses and he'd say "*it won't ever happen again.*" And for the next few days he'd make dinner, hamburgers shaped into little hearts, just to show me how sorry he really was.

At the thought of all that food, my belly rumbled and I realized I was starving. I hadn't even put the fork up to my mouth when Tommy started in on me. He had called me two full hours after my classes were over, but I wasn't home to answer the phone.

That's when it started...

I'd have to eat something at Myra's. I knew she wouldn't mind if I ate a bowl of cereal or a can of soup or something. She was always saying I was too skinny, and she liked to see me eat.

Her stop was next. She lived in the projects on 90th and Amsterdam in a rent-controlled apartment that used to belong to Tommy's mother before she died. Myra and Junior, Tommy's older brother, left the lease in her name so they would only have to pay \$162 a month. None of the neighbors told, though, because a lot of them were doing the same thing. Her next door neighbors were these two guys named Leo and Samson, but the mailbox downstairs still read "Harriet Winterbee." When we visited Myra and Junior, Tommy'd always get uncomfortable because he thought Leo was checking him out. I assured him it was just his imagination, even though Leo once told me, "Ay, mami, when you're through with him, you just send him right this way!"

When the train stopped, the little boy in the red hat called "See you later, stinky!" before the door closed behind me. I walked the two blocks from the station to Myra's with my hands stuffed in my pockets. It was raining a little bit, turning the already blackened snow into gray slush. There was a cop on 90th, and I hoped that he wouldn't look at me and start asking questions, but he didn't even see me. He was too busy stopping traffic so six Catholic high school girls could cross the street. Saint Mary's was a private school unfortunately located in a low income neighborhood. The rich parents made sure there was always a cop there, and usually I thought it was a great idea. Not today though. I didn't need any questions from the cop. I just didn't have the energy to lie.

By the time I reached Myra's door, I was soaked through, puddles forming in my sneakers, making a swish-swish sound every time I took a step. The door to the building was open and the hallway smelled like old piss. The City stopped fixing the lock because too many people were breaking the glass when they forgot their keys, so bums sometimes slept in the hallways, or relieved themselves there, or both. I tried to hold my breath, but it didn't help. On the elevator door, a yellowed sign informed me it was out of order, and I guessed that the City was sick of fixing that too. Since Myra lived on the ninth floor, I started my way up. Instead of the stairs ahead, I thought about how the semester was almost over and I would finally get to see my mother over winter break for a few days. Tommy would at least let me see her for Christmas.

By the time I got to the second story, I was already out of breath. I felt so weak that I just sat down right there on the dirty stairs. I watched a huge rat as it squeezed its bloated body under the radiator. He walked slowly, deliberately, safe in the knowledge that no one was going to kill him or even try to. I could hear a door open many flights above, the person walking down the stairs. Only then, did the rat disappear, so like the rat, I thought "*prepare to be killed*" just like that, matter-of-factly. Except unlike the rat, I wasn't even the slightest bit worried. I had stopped caring sometime before, I don't remember when exactly.

I could hear the footsteps getting closer and I played out the scene in my mind. He would be a huge man with thick, callused hands. He'd pull me into the storage closet next to the elevator, the one that used to hold cleaning supplies before the City bought the building, the one that was littered with empty beer bottles and used condoms. He would put a knife to my throat, like the one my mother uses to carve the Thanksgiving turkey. I wouldn't struggle, I never struggled, but he wouldn't know that. He'd push me down, one of his hands strong enough to hold down both of my own. After it was over, he would slit my throat, quickly, painlessly, and in the morning someone would find me. When they'd see my eye, think the rapist did it. Tommy would cry, "Look what he did to her."

My attacker was closer now. I could hear him turn the corner on the landing above me. I braced myself for his hard hands, the pulling of my wet jeans, the tearing of my panties with the knife...

"Oh my God, Denise, is that you?"

I looked up, ready to face my killer who somehow knew my name.

But there was no rapist, no knife, just Samson, Myra's next door neighbor. I looked at him with a blank stare until he threaded his arms around my waist and half-carried me up the stairs. When we passed Myra's door, he shook his head, "No, she ain't home."

Samson's apartment was laid out exactly like Myra's, but was different in every other way. Instead of torn linoleum there were pastel carpets, instead of chipped paint, patterned wallpaper. It smelled like spring.

"I usually have a no shoes rule," he said, leading me to the white leather couch, "but this is an exception if I ever saw one." He went to the kitchen and poured me a mug of coffee. I drank a few sips, it was hot and strong, and I drank it like it was medicine. Samson sat next to me on the couch and looked at me. "Should I call the cops?"

I shook my head no.

"Tell me what I can do."

I didn't answer him, but when my stomach growled, he said, "Let me at least make you some breakfast."

What I really wanted to do was get cleaned up. I was really embarrassed to be in this beautiful apartment wearing wet clothes, smelling of the subway and old sweat and dried blood. I didn't know Samson that well, but I suddenly felt close to him, maybe because he helped me up the stairs, maybe because I really needed somebody, anybody, to be close to.

"Samson," I said, and he poked his head from behind the stove "how horrible would it be if I asked to use your shower?"

Before I knew it I was standing behind Samson's lavender shower curtain, steam billowing around me, my hair full of strawberry-scented shampoo, soapy water coursing down my body. I scrubbed it with a washcloth until my skin turned bright pink, healthy, like a baby, masking the faded brown and blue of old bruises. I stepped out and wrapped myself in the white towel, folded neatly on top of a pair of men's pajamas. I wiped my hand across the mirror, clearing a strip of condensation so I could survey the damage. My eye was still swollen closed, but the rest of my face looked almost normal, the blood washed out of my hair. The pajamas had wide blue and green stripes and they made me feel clean and new, innocent, like when I was little and used to wear my father's shirts to bed.

I could smell the breakfast Samson was cooking: toast, eggs, bacon. And I could hear him singing with the radio "*my mama told me you better shop around.*" As I ate, Samson watched me, silently willing me to tell him.

When I wouldn't say anything about what had happened, he talked for the both of us. I only caught little bits of what he was saying. I watched him move around the kitchen, putting things back into the cabinets and refrigerator, slamming the doors behind him. With every slam, a bomb went off in my brain.

"... I swear, I've tried to get that man to watch his cholesterol, but he says it's a Latino thing, and I said 'is it a Latino thing to die of a heart attack by 35?' But does he listen? Of course not! Men!"

He stopped and looked at me like I was supposed to make some sort of comment, but I didn't know what to say. I must have eaten too fast because I felt sick. I sat back and watched Samson wash the dishes, his hands in lemon yellow rubber gloves. I looked at the

clock shaped like a sun over the sink. It said 10:30. If today was a normal day, I would've been in calculus.

Then I heard Myra's voice singing a song in Spanish, her heels on the concrete floor in the hallway. I started to get up, but Samson held my arm, gently, like a lover.

"Do you want to know how long Leo and I have been together?"

"Okay" I said, not wanting to be rude, but impatient to see Myra.

"Twelve years. If you are going to be with someone for a long time, you have to be willing to put in the work."

I looked at him, wondering if he was about to reveal some dark secret about his relationship.

"Relationships, they take a whole lot out of you."

I wanted to tell him that I knew that, that being with Tommy seemed like nothing *but* work, but I remained silent. He continued.

"The trick isn't the amount of time or the work, that's not it at all. The real trick is finding someone who's worth it." Then he walked into the bathroom and handed me a plastic bag with my wet clothes neatly folded inside. He said in an almost-whisper "I know what happened to you, Denise. He's just like Junior. I hear him hit her. Don't think things are going to change." And then he just walked away into the bedroom, where I imagined high thread-count sheets and matching accent pillows, closing the door behind him, without saying goodbye or even letting me thank him.

I could hear Myra's music thumping from out in the hallway, so I banged on her door hard. I was amazed at how everything else in the building was falling apart, but the grey metal doors were as strong as the day they were put in, solid as tanks headed for battle. I knew battles had happened behind these doors, just like they happened behind my own.

The music stopped and the door opened and there was Myra, "Neecey! Why you in pajamas?" she laughed.

I just looked at her and she looked back without another word. I walked past her and plopped down on her burnt orange couch, the torn parts repaired with duct tape. She didn't say anything about my eye, just like I didn't say anything that time her arm was broken. I guess we considered it a courtesy. But this time, I *wanted* her to ask, wanted us to sit down and talk about Junior and Tommy and the things that happened.

"Bring me out something to wear so I can give this back to Samson, underwear and socks too," I called to her, hoping that maybe it would be easier if we were both dressed.

I could hear her rummaging through drawers in the back bedroom. *This time, I thought, she's going to come back and ask me. She'll tell me how to make it stop, tell me what I can do to make it right. Tell me, at least, how to make it bearable...* She came back a few minutes later and threw me some clothes, and I changed right there in her living room. There was no way she could miss the bruises on my legs and back and stomach.

She sat down at the kitchen table and sighed. For the first time in our entire friendship, I felt like she was really looking at me. She gave me a half smile and lit a cigarette. Neither of us spoke.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see a roach making its way up the refrigerator. She ran her fingers through her rusted steel wool hair, the color that can only come from dying black hair blonde. Once I was dressed, I sat down across from her. She had a cookie in one hand, her cigarette smoldering in the overflowing ashtray in front of us. "You want a drink or something?" she asked, "Iced tea?" When I said yes, she filled a glass up with water from the tap and dumped five spoonfuls of instant tea in it.

Myra thought it was stupid for me to try to get an education. "What are you doing that for, Tommy got a good job, let him take care of you," she'd say. No matter what I said, I

never could convince her that going to school was a good thing, that just because Tommy quit school so he could work, it didn't mean I needed to stop too. She mentioned once, when we were a little too drunk on Margaritas, how she thought about registering for classes at the local community college, but Junior didn't think it was a good idea so she never followed though. When I asked her why she didn't go, she shrugged.

How could I explain to her how important college was to me, how hard I had worked to get into Cooper Union, how my mother had drilled me on vocabulary for my SATs for hours and hours? "What you gonna be after all this school?" she'd ask me with a laugh. I could never answer her. After two and a half years, I still hadn't declared a major. How could I think about a major when there were so many other things going on? I sipped my drink, the undissolved tea collecting at the bottom, like a clot. Myra hardly ever had anything in her house that didn't require adding water: instant coffee, Rice-A-Roni, Lipton Cup-A-Soup.

I wanted something real.

"Listen..." I said, trying to find my voice, "things are really bad with Tommy."

She smirked, "Don't be stupid, you got a good man there."

I don't know what I expected. Not sympathy, but... something. Myra waved her hand at me, annoyed. "What, 'cause you had a little fight? Come on, girl, get over it," she said, dismissing me.

I could feel my face getting red, like I had been slapped all over again.

"He beat me up, My'." I pointed at my swollen eye for emphasis, not that it was possible that she hadn't noticed. "And you know this wasn't the first time, either." But she wouldn't look at me. She walked over to the window and looked out. The sky was flat and grey like the eye of a dead fish.

"What, you thought that if Tommy went to college it would take the projects out of him?" she snickered, still not looking at me.

"No," I said.

I was lying though. That was exactly what I thought. I thought that if I could convince him to go back to school, if he continued to hang out with the Cooper Union crowd, if he was happy, that eventually he wouldn't get so angry all the time.

Her hands were clamped into fists, pressed against the window sill.

"It's not right that he hits me." I whispered, and then, "And it isn't right that Junior hits you."

Myra spun around and made like she was going to lunge at me then, but she didn't.

"You don't think a man got a right to hit his woman if she pisses him off?" She was baiting me, the comeback to my response already formulated in her mind. And that's when I saw Myra in a new light: In me, she saw a chance to justify her own life.

The room suddenly seemed too small, everywhere I looked I saw my future, the greasy dishes in the sink, the Fruit Loops bloated and floating in the dirty water, the unswept floors, the continued abuse.

And then I needed to get out, to breath air that wasn't stale, thick with Myra's broken dreams.

"Listen, I have to go," I said pulling on my wet sneakers. I grabbed the bag full of my drenched clothes and headed for the stairs. Myra ran after me, cursing, but I didn't stop and didn't look back. As I spiraled down the stairs, Myra yelled behind me from the landings above, "Why'd you think it would be any better for you, huh? Go back to Jersey, white girl, and don't come slumming around here no more!"

I threw open the outside doors with one gigantic push and inhaled. The air was cold and dirty, but I didn't care. I welcomed it into my lungs, allowing myself to really taste it, to

really feel the snow that had started falling, collecting and melting into my still-damp hair. Three girls from Saint Mary's were smoking on the corner, safe from the harsh looks of the nuns, the cop nowhere to be seen. I pointed to my bad eye and said

"Don't ever let some guy do this to you." I didn't wait for an answer, but I could hear them laughing behind me.

I threw the bag full of clothes into the nearest garbage can. I bought a subway token and sat on the hard wooden bench in the station, and thought about my mother, about Samson, about Myra, and Tommy. Across the platform I could see a homeless man digging through the garbage looking for something to eat. Maybe he'd come across my clothes, maybe someone else would, maybe no one would.

I leaned my head back against the subway map and stared up. Hundreds of lines went this way and that, connecting all five Burroughs, Jersey, millions of places, millions of people. Somewhere down the platform I could hear a baby crying, its mother singing to it in some language that wasn't English or Spanish or anything I had ever heard. Somewhere, far down the tracks, deep in the black endless tunnel, the train was rumbling towards me.

Rebecca Hotaling Nix teaches English and creative writing in an urban, multicultural high school. She has a BA in English, an MS Ed, an MFA in fiction, and is currently a doctoral student. Originally from New Jersey, she currently lives in Central New York with her daughter and husband.