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# BIG, OLD, WASHED IN WHITE

Mary Ryan Karnes

The first time I came to your childhood home I washed my hands in Sea Salt Neroli. Your mother came clicking down the hall rubbing her wrists together, dispersing amber perfume. She threw those shortbread arms around me like I was her own. Then she grabbed the rifle from the bannister and taught me how to shoot liquor bottles off the hood of her SUV. We got tattoos: Trust No Bitch on our ribs where the skin is paper. And we toasted to everything that night, when she taught me to always leave a sip in the glass.

You cut my hair above my ears and gave me a big white undershirt to wear around the house. In the morning you brought me coffee and asked Can you ignore a gift? You: Mr. Coca Cola to cure all hangovers. You: pickled okra in your ma's Bloody Mary. Half-dead crow in a dog's mouth as the thing trots up from the river.

Later I might go to space or lose a kidney or become somebody's mother. But those were the first days, when I spread like a starfish in the guest room and broke a piece of ancient china and nobody was mad, as I was a guest. But what happened, really? It's been a long time. How many glasses of \_\_\_\_ and hours have passed since I've seen a man like you curled at the foot of my bed?

On those first nights your mother sat us down. She had a secret. "Did you know we have a cellar?" she asked, "No one goes in it anymore, but they used to have key parties down there." She waited, her pupils huge, for us to ask what a key party was. Eventually I did: "A what?"

"You wouldn't believe it," she said. She pasted Delta Caviar on a butter cracker. "Everyone shows up and the husbands put their car keys in a gold bowl. The wives close their eyes and stick their hands in, and they grab a pair of keys."

"I see," I said.

"And the wives have to ride home with the men the keys belong to!" She erupted into laughter then crossed her legs like all the sudden it wasn't funny at all.

But I drove away. I locked myself out of all of you. The heat followed me. The land

was flat and the roads were narrow and the catfish farms smelled foul. Where we were and when we were, you drank too much and I cried. I was young. You made my hips widen. You gave me lines: laugh, smile, grimace. I gave you grays as thick as cigarettes and pitiful sticky notes on the bathroom mirror: sun and moon and stars, they said. Or “fail not in kindness today.” I was saying everything more to myself, but you were there.

About your body: it’s a noble one. God bless your grove of wiry shoulder hairs. God bless the blackheads on the sides of your nose and the smoky rose tattoo on your chest. Your heart beat four times faster than mine, and even if we loved each other again I’d still hate the rapping of your foot at the dinner table. I’d like to bless your mother, too, even if she’s too busy to call me back. Bless that temper. Once we sat in bed eating Texas sheet cake and knocking back a whole bottle of port, and it was the tenderest damn thing.

I took some bottles to a creek today and set them up right on the side, cocked a squirrel gun and squinted my eyes. The first few times I missed, but the last bottle broke open. Inside, a note from you. Trust no bitch, it said. I ate it because I was so far away no one could see me do it. When I’m lonely I do all sorts of wrong.

Whose back are you scratching now? Who are you telling you could eat her alive? Who’s getting squeezed till near-pop in the breakfast nook of the house on Geranium Lane? I have a message for her: chain yourself to the floor. When you think you want to go, you don’t. Love harder. Be better. Decide at this moment to bind yourself to that place. A good home, a good man, a mother-in-law who holds your hair after she’s given you too much milk punch. Bloom and grow, sister. Soil is good there but winter is merciless.

MARY RYAN KARNES is a member of the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. A Hattiesburg native and Delta fangirl, she writes mostly flash fiction.