Allegations

Old Estella drags her lawn chair three blocks to church every Sunday. She sits up front closer to the pastor than the Lord ever intended folks to get when he created the pews.

 "It's like she's trying to suck up all the righteousness with no regard for the rest of the sinners." Mama passes out judgments like Halloween candy and can’t resist making the same comment every week as we follow the winding crowd inside.

 Appearances, particularly at church, matter to Mama. She spends two hours each Sunday morning redesigning the structure of her face with makeup, slipping on undergarments that unnaturally push and pull at her ample figure. Even if she could get really close to the Lord via Pastor Brodie who, when he doesn't shave, looks vaguely like Brad Pitt, I doubt God would recognize her.

She desperately wants to be noticed. I don’t.

 "If I let you stay home, she'll see it as a revolution," Greg, my new father, explains. He lives in his makeshift library in our home. He even sleeps on the leather sofa, and Mama comes down to join him on nights when she's cold or lonely. If nothing else he's taught me that the best way to weather my mother's storms is to let her have her way.

 "My friends decided yesterday that they hate me,” I tell him. “I can't face them in church. We're all so exposed, and you know they'll be watching me and not the Pastor."

 He nods and reaches for a volume of Twain. Parenting through pages, he jokes. He tells me the authors know life better than he does. He didn't learn to read until he was twenty-four and treats the skill respectfully; fragilely as if one day he might wake up and no longer recognize the words. When we moved from our apartment overlooking the ugly end of the river to a half-free, half-attached house, it won him over with wall-to-wall oak bookshelves. Mama loved a stained-glass dove perched at the top of our front door.

 I found a room in the back corner of the house with baby blue and white skeleton wallpaper, and they let me claim it for my own. Really, the room claimed me. It seduced me with its simplicity and the offer of a place so secure and nestled in the heart of the home. I wanted to reach out and remove the bones from the wall like Operation. It urged me to investigate the inside of things.

 "You're going to church. I'm not." Greg softens when I sink down in one of the reupholstered armchairs and sigh until there's not an ounce of air left in my body. "Mama needs company."

 He's so nice to me that I can't bare to tell him Mama's got plenty of male companions at the church. If he were my real father, maybe I wouldn't sit silent. There’d be invisible, familial ties that wrapped around our waists and bound us together like slaves. I remember a time before Greg, and it wasn't filled with books or leather couches or a house with its own three digits. I don’t dare say a word.

 "Mina, put on something nicer."

 Mama calls to me from the kitchen where she simultaneously works on her makeup and scrambles eggs. She hasn’t even seen me this morning but is just guessing I'm done up all wrong, and when I leave Greg's fortress, hanging from the stair railing is a matte gold dress and patterned tights. She's loaned me one of her purses, pre-stocked with an enamel compact and yellowed handkerchiefs. Mama misses the Twenties and likes me more when I remind her of that era rather than the decade where I was conceived. Greg is old, too. His scalp shines through feathery blond hair, but maybe he reminds her of an older time and that's why she plucked him from the local market with papayas and sardines.

 Changing in my bedroom everything appears clinical. When we moved to the house I felt my life subtly determined as if future me was compelled to be a doctor. Now when I slip on the gold dress, it reminds me of the paper gowns at the family doctor, where my mother took me for precautionary pills and the nurses told me funny stories to make me forget they were inspecting me on the inside, like fruit, to tell if I was rotten or not.

"Paying now is worth not paying later," Mama told the receptionist as she handed over her grocery allowance Greg bestowed upon her each Monday.

 The church is always packed, and Estella drags the lawn chair like every other morning, the metal feet groaning along the ground. The congregation knows better than to offer help. It's part of her Sunday ritual. Mama tsks and runs her hands through her black hair, finger curling the edges.

 "Mina, walk like I do," she advises. Her hip swings out and shifts her body, but all I can imagnie are the bones creaking inside of her, grinding like the metal against the pavement. When I try to walk that way, I fall over my own feet. She's always there to steady me. "Too fast. We'll practice."

 My former friends aren't angry with me, really. Their mothers are simply holding on to their husbands like clinging ivy, and it's Mama's fault. So the daughters have decided to snatch up their friendship in case I could somehow tarnish it, too. Loralee gives me a quick wave from her hand tucked at her hip, but I suspect she just needs to stay cordial with me for the Biology lab tomorrow. Osmosis.

 "Decisions, decisions."

Mama strips off her lemon-scented gloves and touches them against her lips. Where we sit will make all the difference in the world. Stacks of bibles are precariously placed to ward us off like the Devil. No man in the room will look into her eyes. The wives, though, they stare with their lips parted and letters formed, ready. S…B…C…The first time I could read lips I played hangman, rearranging the alphabet until I recognized what they were implying.

I study the ties. It’s how Mama communicates with the men. My pills aren’t the only things she purchases with the grocery money because Greg loves letters and hates numbers and dotes on his almost wife. The men, who have been with her intimately and can’t go to work in the morning on time or focus their eyes on the computer screens, wear her gifts. She gravitates to them without their wives ever knowing the secret code. All Mama cares about is what decorates the outside, the handsome men. Their wives are too busy tending to the inside to notice the ties. But Mama has eyes like a hawk.

“There. Mina you scoot in and make your hands pretty in your lap.” She slides her own palms into her bag and tags the back of my neck with her scented lotion so I am a living, breathing reminder of her presence. I’m next to Mr. Jenkins who wears a turquoise tie that looks like ocean water from Fiji. Greg took us there on *our* honeymoon, because he swore we’d all be married now.

Mrs. Jenkins unbuttons the top of her blouse and whispers something to her husband that turns him red and makes his leg twitch slightly.

“Please be seated,” Pastor Brodie begins.

Mama crosses her leg and strokes her ankle, playing with the gold anklet lingering just above the bone. Mr. Jenkins isn’t biting. He leans forward, pretending to be riveted by the Pastor but really listening to his wife’s covert message.

For the first time in church, Mama has lost control of her congregation. Whatever Mrs. Jenkins is doing, whether she’s promising him heaven or hell when he gets home, it’s working.

“Excuse yourself,” Mama commands. “Pretend you’re ill and excuse yourself.”

“But the girls…”

My former friends are waiting in the back, hanging out by the banquet hall with intentions to rip me apart, and Mama is serving me up like dinner. Today of all days she’s made me up in her image, a reminder that I can’t really be that different from her, can I? Not to them, anyways.

“For me,” she wheedles.

She has mastered these two words, and I grip my stomach and lurch past everyone, collapsing in a sweat in the empty children’s daycare room next to a stack of ragdolls.

“She makes us sick, too.” Amanda Wheeler looks twenty by virtue of her size, not style. I worry that she’ll blink and be an old woman before she knows it.

“We can’t do this here.” I fold my hands in prayer. “This place isn’t about her.”

Mr. Jenkins son steps forward and spits on my dress.

“I saw you sitting next to my Dad. You’re as dirty as she is.” He spits again, and a strip of blood travels down my arm. He’s bit his own lip in disgust.

“I’ll scream,” I threaten. But there are six of them and their ugly silence is louder than any sound I could muster.

“You’ll take all that off,” Amanda motions to my clothing. “The boys stay.” The Jenkins son and Kyle start to shuffle but obey her and freeze to their spots on the kaleidoscope carpet. “Underwear, too.”

At sixteen my body is underdeveloped. There is nothing of note for them to leer at save a few pronounced spots where my bones, annoyed at the restraint of skin, jut out. I close my eyes and picture medical school where naked bodies will be purposeful. No one makes a noise, and when I open my eyes they are gone and my clothes are shredded on the ground.

I start to pick up the old rotary phone in the back to call Greg to save me but think better of it when I realize he will ask questions I’ve got no answers for. The August morning is dry and warm, and for a moment I sit on the windowsill and feel every inch of me toasted hot. My body may not have inherited curves, but I am strong and solid. When I place one foot in front of the other I feel like I am hardening. In fact I know that the second I set foot into the main area, I will be cool as stone.

Pastor Brodie sees me first and crosses himself for the sake of my soul, not his. The only others who have walked down the aisle as slowly as I proceed are brides covered head to toe, ready to make a lifelong promise. I’ve got a promise to make, too.

Mama is nearly touching Mr. Jenkins who has fallen out of his wife’s spell as he strokes his tie. Except now he can only look at me. He watches my face. To his credit he only watches my face and removes the tie from his neck, laying it by his feet.

Small children giggle with one spouting out *boobies* before covering his mouth with a gummy hand. The women I feared are smiling at me, and Mama’s scowl is shrinking like a grape wizened to a raisin. For the first time I see the lines that surround her mouth, the passages of time creating tiny prisons around her youth.

“Please turn to Psalm…”the Pastor instructs when he sees no one rising to stop me, and so I continue my procession. The carpet scrapes along my feet, and people shift and move Bibles to let me sit down. A few lay down their jackets. I keep walking because there is only one person brave enough for me to sit by. Estella twists as effortlessly as if she’s turning a page and smiles, motioning for me to sit with her on the ground next to her lawn chair. She wants me to come bask in the righteousness but more importantly to escape the darkness behind me.

The service continues, and she places a delicate hand on my shoulder in case any of my resolve should slip away, I can surely borrow hers. Pastor Brodie lovingly describes the journey ahead, the thorny struggles we are all meant to fight, and the demons who disguise themselves in many ways. I will sit in my bedroom tonight and dream of being a doctor, knowing that I have managed to peel away the skin of the church and see for a moment what exists on the inside.