

ACCEPTANCE

Kim Venkataraman

The doors closed and the elevator descended, picking up speed. Every few floors it stopped, the doors opened, and people filed in, then once again we descended in silence as the building emptied out for the weekend. Even though it was early for me to be leaving on a Friday night, I suddenly felt completely, achingly tired. Maybe I'll say that something came up at work. Mom won't be surprised, and it will help her impress the relatives that her daughter is too busy—too important—to get away from work, even for a weekend.

Out on the street I walked slowly toward the parking garage. My suitcase was in the trunk, and I had a full tank of gas, but I imagined driving instead to my apartment, stopping for Thai food on the way. I could stay up late and watch a movie, sleep in, go for a long run, and get a pedicure. A weekend of freedom sounded heavenly. My phone rang.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Are you on the road yet? How’s the traffic?”

“No, I haven’t left yet. Actually...” I hesitated. I could feel the stillness of my empty apartment pulling me. “I’m just getting to the parking garage now. It’ll probably be really late when I get there; you don’t have to wait up.”

“Oh, honey,” she laughed, “we didn’t go to bed until midnight last night. I’m sure we’ll still be drinking wine on the porch when you get here. Drive carefully; can’t wait to see you.”

“Right, bye.”

I closed my eyes and my breath caught when I tried to swallow. I inhaled and tried again, the pressure unbearable in my throat. Oh, fuck, I thought, not this again.

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The next morning, I went downstairs and scanned the hotel dining room from the doorway. Thankfully, the traffic hadn’t been bad, and I’d arrived last night at 9:30. But other than my mom and her sister Joan, I hadn’t seen anyone when I arrived. I searched the room table by table, looking to see who was there.

“C.C.!” my Great-Uncle James joined me in the doorway. “How are you? How’s life in the big city?” He winked and steered me toward the buffet. I watched his mustache as he spoke. Even as a kid I’d been fascinated by it. It was gray now, but it still covered both his lips. “At least you’re not the last one down. Trisha’s always been the pokey one. Remember when she almost missed the ferry to Nantucket because she overslept, then locked her keys in the car?” He laughed again. Of course I did, we all did. It was one of those stories that was repeated at every family gathering, and everyone laughed just the same.

Although I wasn’t hungry, I put two slices of cantaloupe on my plate and looked around for my mother. There were signs on some of the tables, “Baker Family Reunion—Four Generations of Family Fun,” just like the invitations sent by my Aunt Molly. There’d been similar gatherings at Lake Winnepesaukee and on Cape Cod when I was growing up, although they’d stopped about ten years ago. Someone—Molly probably—had decided we should start them up again.

My cousin May came up and put her arm around me. “Come sit with us. Did you choose yoga or the hike?” She led me to a table by the windows where my Aunt Cindy, Uncle Dave, and May’s sister, Dee, sat.

“Hi there, C.C. When did you arrive from the big city?” Dave chuckled.

I sat and reached for the coffeepot. “Uh, last night.”

“How’s your job...?”

“So, which did you choose...?”

May and her mother spoke at the same time. I glanced at my plate, unable to make myself pick up my fork.

“You first, honey,” my aunt said.

“So, yoga or the hike?” May leaned forward as if she couldn’t wait to hear my response.

“Neither; I’ve got some work to do.” I couldn’t help turning to scan the room again.

“Well, that’s too bad,” they all agreed.

I hadn’t bothered to bring the schedule that had arrived with the invitation, but I remembered there were some morning activities, an afternoon boat ride and genealogy slideshow, followed by cocktails and dinner. As a kid I’d actually enjoyed these reunions. There were about a dozen cousins when I was growing up, some older and some younger than I. While the adults were busy with their golf or bridge or long, drawn-out dinners, the kids would roam the hotel and its grounds with a freedom that I found exhilarating. Regular life

was organized and scheduled and calm, while the family vacations were thrillingly independent with lax bedtimes and unlimited soda. There were jokes told by the older cousins, and stories told by the ones that lived in the city and rode the subway by themselves. I looked forward to the reunion weekend each summer, but thinking back now, I realize how stressful it had been to constantly be on guard. I was always afraid I'd be the last one to get a joke, or roll my eyes at something that only the little kids didn't get. I grew up during those family reunion weekends, pretending to know what things like "blow jobs" were, long before I had any idea. Pretending I knew how to smoke, when I'd never even had the chance to hold a cigarette. The exhaustion of keeping up, of the pretending, was something I hadn't thought about in ages, and yet it felt uncomfortably familiar.

A waitress came to clear the breakfast dishes, and I excused myself. "I better get some e-mails sent; I don't want to miss this afternoon's fun."

"Right, of course," they all nodded eagerly.

Stopping at the front desk, I asked for the Wi-Fi password.

"Of course; your name?"

"Cecelia Barnes."

"Here you are." The clerk handed me a piece of paper.

“C.C.!” I turned to find my mother holding a rolled yoga mat. “I’m heading to yoga—”

“Yeah, I gathered.”

“Are you coming?”

“No, I—”

“Oh, that’s too bad!” she interrupted. “I promised Janice you would. She’s disappointed Michael couldn’t make it this weekend, and she wanted—”

“Well, sorry, I can’t.” And I walked away.

I took the stairs two at a time up to my room. Breathing heavily, my hand trembled as I put the key-card in the door. I knew it was a mistake to come. But in the next moment, I also knew it would be fine. It always was. I’d learned a long time ago that the best thing to do—the only thing—was to say nothing. Even better, think nothing, feel nothing, remember nothing.

I managed to avoid everyone all day, staying in my room through lunch and the afternoon. The room phone rang twice, and I ignored it. Although I hadn’t really intended to work, I did get some reading done and started on a report that wasn’t due for another week. But I also spent hours lying on the bed, staring at the floral wallpaper and watching pine branches waving outside against the gray-white sky. The clouds must have been changing and moving

high above, but as long as I stared, the sky remained solid, white, and unyielding. Finally, I changed for dinner.

Downstairs, I got a vodka tonic at the bar and took it out to the porch that overlooked the lawn and the lake below. The shape of the sun, visible through the white curtain of clouds, was starting to slide behind the hills. Already the lake was taking on its nighttime hue, a blue-green so dark it was almost black. A boat sped on the far side of the lake, its motor a distant hum. I inhaled deeply. It not only looked a lot like the inn where we used to go, it had the same cool, pine-scented air. A group of kids were on the lawn, some playing croquet, some throwing a Frisbee. I recognized my cousin Barbara's kids and a few others. One of the twins, Henry or Luke, caught a girl by the waist and flung her to the ground. Straddling her, he pinned her hands above her head. As she laughed and wriggled, I thought I was going to throw up. I moved away from the railing.

"I'm surprised you came. I didn't expect you to," May said, startling me. I stared at her. Did she know? Did everyone? Was my secret shame just another one of the family stories? I felt dizzy, as if I was losing my balance.

"I know work must be really busy."

The world tipped back to its familiar angle. “Right. Can I get you something from the bar?” I asked as I moved away.

Waiting for my next drink, a burst of laughter came from my mother’s cousins, the loud ones from Boston. Soon I’d need to start making the rounds and saying hello to everyone. I’d avoided it as long as I could. Without thinking, I took a pretzel from a nearby bowl, but when I tried to swallow, I began choking. My drink had been going down so easily, somehow I’d forgotten about my throat. I dropped the rest of the pretzel on the bar.

Another drink in hand, I went back outside to the porch. Clusters of empty white chairs dotted the lawn, abandoned until tomorrow. After dinner the teens would get ahold of some beer or a bottle of booze, and bring it down to the dock or another spot out of sight of the adults, as my cousins and I had. I could feel the lump in my throat aching and pulsating. I took a swig of my drink, holding it in my mouth before willing it to slowly slide down my throat, as I willed the memories to go back to where I held them. For years I’d been able to do it, but what if I couldn’t do it anymore? What if the harder you tried to push something from your mind, the more it forced itself to the surface, like a ball being held under water?

I took a deep breath. What if I *did* let the words come out? What if I spoke about the night after the bonfire, when Michael had changed from my older cousin who joked with me and chose me for his badminton team into someone who brutally pushed me to the ground and held me down while hands and fingers and weight pressed and pushed and I fought to breathe? I held on to the porch railing and tried to swallow. I told my mother, didn't I? When she and my father—it was the last summer they were together—came back to our room, late and loud and clumsy, and I was sitting in the chair by the window. She was surprised I hadn't gone to bed. When I couldn't seem to get up and brush my teeth and lie down on the pull-out couch, I told her then. Didn't I? *Something happened; Michael hurt me.* Didn't I explain it right, the thing -- I didn't understand? The bruises on my thigh and my arms, didn't she ask about them the next day? *In the woods...Michael.*

"C.C.," a voice said, startling me.

"Cecelia," I said, turning to look at my cousin May. "I go by Cecelia now; no one calls me 'C.C.'"

May gave me a half smile and stood next to me at the railing. "Fuck, no one in the real world calls me 'May-May' either, but that's what families do, right? Name you and label you and forever you will be that way, amen."

There was a harshness in her profile as she stared into the distance. “I’m forever the pudgy, good-natured cousin. You’re the smart, capable one with the great future.”

I didn’t respond, instead taking a long sip of my drink and staring at the last of the light disappearing behind the hills.

“Of course, that means Dodo is a sophisticated world traveler who was too busy to settle down and marry, not that she’s a closet lesbian. And Great-Uncle Walter was a family man with an endless supply of kids that he doted on, not micromanaged and beat.” May sighed. “And the list goes on.”

I drained the last of my glass. “So, you’re telling me everything isn’t quite as perfect as it seems?” I let out a small laugh.

“It never was, and never will be. I don’t know how screwed up other families are, but this is how our family is.” May nodded at my empty glass. “Ready for another?”

I looked at her and nodded.

“Good. I’m going to need at least one more if I’m going to make it through dinner without blurting out that Tom and I are splitting up, and that the girls and I are moving back with my parents next month.” She put an arm around me as we went back inside.

Moving through the buffet line, I spooned small amounts of random foods on my plate. I knew I wasn't going to be able to eat any of it, but it didn't matter. Glancing around the dining room, I caught May's eye and she gave me a small smile. I realized I was standing in the middle of the room with my plate in my hand, and headed to a nearby table with several empty seats. The room pulsed with a mixture of voices punctuated by sharp laughs, the giggling of kids racing around the tables, the crying of a baby.

It didn't feel like ten years had passed. It felt the same, everything felt the same. The parents who used to smoke and drink manhattans had turned into the grandparents, older and thicker and grayer with tent-like clothes and comfortable shoes. The kids of long ago had become the adults, and there were new teens and babies. We had all simply slid into the roles that were waiting for us. As the seats filled in around me, I considered the comfort in this. What came before passed, and the present was always being replaced. Everything, good or bad, was eventually buried and forgotten. Maybe that's how it worked. Silence and time yielded acceptance.

"Hi, honey." My mother sat down at the table with my Aunt Joan. They were in the midst of a conversation about gardening.

I pushed the food around my plate, thinking about the fact that I hadn't eaten all day, and was feeling the effects of the drinks I'd had. But maybe I didn't need to eat. Maybe the lump in my throat—which felt as if it had been growing all day—was all that I needed. Maybe I didn't need anything at all.

“So, Cecelia,” my Aunt Joan asked, “how are you?”

I looked at her for a moment. She'd always been my favorite aunt. Her son and daughter were older, but I remember her joking and laughing with all the kids, egging us on when we were jumping off the dock, and buying us sundaes in Chatham.

“I'm not sure.” I was surprised by the words, but realized as soon as they came out that it was true.

Joan looked at me carefully. “Are you happy; do you like your life?”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see my mother smiling, about to speak.

“Honestly? Not really.” My eyes stayed locked on Joan's face.

She didn't look away, or laugh, or dismiss what I'd said. She only continued to look at me, then nodded.

I inhaled deeply and swallowed. “I'm not sure I really like my job, or even living in the city.”

Joan reached out and rubbed my arm.

“Really, honey?” my mother asked.

I looked at her and nodded slowly, realizing that it was in fact true, and maybe always had been.

My mother continued to watch me. “Be true to yourself, Cecelia. You can’t go wrong.”

I felt myself start to tear up as I thought about her words. I smiled at her and then picked up my fork and took a bite of chicken. I chewed slowly, and then swallowed.

Kim Venkataraman grew up in Maine, and lives outside Boston with her family. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Forge*, *The MacGuffin*, *Redivider*, *Spout Magazine*, *Nassau Review* and other magazines. She is currently finishing a novel based on her grandfather's experience of being orphaned at the start of the Depression.