

## THE RED TOP

*Grace Campbell*

When Friday comes we are going to get those shoes I need. *I can't think about this right now*, my mom says with a quiver of bent bobby pins positioned between the lips that usually tell me plenty about what she's thinking. She teases the augmented hair up into cathedral bangs with the plastic Goody brush and reaches for the Aqua Net. Then everything from dust-speck fruit flies and split ends to our struggling interaction is suspended mid-air.

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My mom strikes a few pins into the fraught tease and then there's enough room for more words to venture out. *Friday we'll do it. Kay? I promise you.*

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Through the paned bathroom mirror she looks over and makes eye contact, which is her preferred way. The eye-bounce off the inanimate thing. The visual ricochet. I'd rather not with the look but I know this is part of what she

does, and I know she needs me to see her doing it. I don't have my mind made up solidly about what constitutes a lie, but either way, maybe believing her is the least I can do. *I promise you, Margot, we will do it.*

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Her glance settles on mine with the same awl of register I feel when someone says, *I bet you one hundred bucks you won't.* And I wonder: Will I? And I wonder: Do they even have a hundred bucks? Who has a hundred bucks to bust on a dare? Not me.

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My mother's eyes are made up in satin tints; colors whose names promise we're all on a vacation in Maui. Which is what the screaming slash of high-volt blue across the mini tank of Aqua Net suggests as well. And her lotion: a shimmery coating of chemicals made to deliver the wincing smack of coconut, and maybe mango. Something that makes her feel far away. Even her dress. Gauzy layers of sheer material dipped in a confused ombre of pastel, seemingly designed to unpetal on a gust of beachside wind. I have never seen the dress before, and I wonder where she is going and where she will spend the night and how she'll possibly stay warm because I know she will not be back before the evening becomes un-Mauiquesque.

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She pushes the bleeding eyeliner off her lower lid with a hand that suggests doubt in the entire endeavor. The skin below her eye tugs itself along like it's also reluctant to be part of this whole thing she has going on; like the eyeliner, I too have no language besides a smear of some unsatisfactory color with which to close the deal on this thing we both suck at.

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Friday comes, and she stops at the bank to deposit the paycheck from the job too fresh to remember, whose name is in the upper left-hand corner. Straight from there it's to the liquor store to snag a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label because it's the new boyfriend's favorite. Or is it Red Label? Or is he really *that* new a boyfriend? We both have this separate life situation going on. I think she mostly loves this boyfriend because he is not my father and I don't have my mind made up about whether or not that's a terrible thing, though all anecdotes point to the boyfriend as probably being a terrible person. I think a few slugs off that slender bottle for myself might make it easier for me to answer these questions, or to not care either way, but I'll find my own. Answers and whiskey.

Friday arrives, and my mother makes it home two hours after the five o'clock whistle with shopping bags from the fancy boutique in the village, and she's already got the new earrings in and she says, *Put on your shoes we're going to get foot-longs and curly fries and milkshakes at The Red Top.* My little sister Gloria yelps like she might pee, which works properly into my mom's desire to send Gloria out the side door and leave her there for a while. I put on my shit shoes and we go.

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An hour and a half later our stomachs are begging for mercy and we're drunk on chocolate milkshakes and I don't even like that flavor. But what's important is that my mother slides it across the table of the Red Top and says, *Look, it's better than Easter and Halloween,* which tells me the flavor is already decided and the flavor is *This Is A Delicious Thing I Have Bought For You.* I wish I could save it somehow. Vacuum seal it in the back of the fridge for three days from now when she's been gone for 72 hours and there's nothing else in the kitchen to eat, which her current display assures me is a thing that isn't really happening and never does: No Johnny Walker, no restless man who waits somewhere in the suburbs for its arrival.

Gloria and I are doped on corn syrup and Crisco and the solidified but unidentifiable meat composite smothered in sauerkraut and spicy mustard. Before we can nudge ourselves away from our food hangovers, there we are at Putt Putt. We play through seventeen holes of miniature golf while Top Forty tunes seem to blast from every surrounding building at once. The teensy scale lighthouses and turf-covered goat ramps stress me out almost more than my mother barking to *hurry up and hit the ball because people are waiting behind us, Jesus Christ*. She thunders into that quick-snort laughter whenever she says Jesus Christ. She wraps her nails around my shoulder and reminds me every sixty or seventy seconds that we're having heaps of fun. I fail again and again with the sweaty metal club and win at demonstrating, for the thousandth time in my fifteen years, my total lack of coordination in front of another group of waiting, watching strangers. I wish again for the possibility of pulling Jesus aside for a moment to ask him if he ever meant his name to be like some syrup of Ipecac that brings up thick bubbles of humor. I wish again to be blessed with any physical acumen. I wish to be the kind of girl that believes in grand purpose or Jesus but I'm really just a run-on sentence in dead shoes with a belly full of someone else's fantasy meal.

Then I mention about the shoes and my mom says that hot pretzels at that little pagoda by the Gap in the mall sound like a great idea and let's do it. And I say again about the shoes and she reminds me there's a shoe store right next to the Gap, and Gloria and I match our upended eyebrows together and my mother sees this and insists there is and has always been a shoe store, well, maybe not *right* next to the Gap but very close. At least, on that side of the mall. The side with the hot pretzels. She says again about the little pagoda. I feel her hand and her laughter still clamped to the side of me and can't tell if I want her to try harder or much, much less.

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We hustle out of Putt Putt, take our paper scrips for little prizes that we don't have time to collect and pack our bodies into the white Hyundai. My mom rips the car into action and the second the cracked dashboard ignites, she sees the clock and look what time it is and we'll never have time to make it to the mall. Gloria says, *We're on the same road, all you have to do is go straight.* Then the salvo from my mom's mouth about traffic, do we understand traffic is a thing, no we don't because we don't know adult things. Do we understand red lights and speed traps and speed limits? Gloria squeezes the side of my leg like a fistful of tickets that can't go anywhere but into some urgency that will be traded

later, in service of that delicious thing our mother paid for. There's also that fistful of tickets substantial enough to have my mother's name printed in the local paper under their annual Village Citizens with Most Unpaid Traffic Violations shame column. But my mother's smack-back through the rear-view mirror, eyes wet with Don't You Even reminds us those tickets and their outstanding fees are not a thing that have ever happened.

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Finally: the Hyundai down the hollow lonely of the unincorporated town roads. Under-inflated tires over potholed streets bent in odd, unreliable angles that we trust only through some half-registered tuck of familiarity which may or may not actually be trust. Back toward our house. Gloria sighs and skids her finger down a small pool of mist she makes with her mouth on the passenger seat glass. She adds some zigzag work and it becomes a crown. Then a princess. The same one she always makes with the same barbed eyelashes, same empty cradle mouth. Gloria's own happy ending for every time we are coming home worn thin and prizeless. The streetlights will make her imaginary royalty glow for little blips of time. She plunges her elbow into my arm so I will look over and pretend the face is brand new to me. I'd rather not with the fantasy but I know this is who Gloria wants us to be and she needs me to see it before it

evaporates. Even though all signs point to us being decidedly un-fancy, I don't want to make Gloria's mind up about it, so I nod vigorously to close the interaction.

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We stop at the swinging red light at the edge of the neighborhood we have skimmed our way into calling *home* through financial half-lies on paper. I know these things because I am cursed with the capacity to pay attention, *Jesus Christ*. Through the pocked silence of the gritty AM dial, my mother clears her throat. *I said maybe, Margot. I said maybe we would get those shoes*. She says about the paycheck, where did we think that money was going and what about the chocolate milkshake and the footlongs and the Putt Putt but no we didn't think, and how much money does she have, not that much and she's not made of money and Gloria says, *Plus all those speeding tickets* while I wonder what exactly our mother is made of.

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My mother gives Gloria the visual ricochet through the mirror and says, *I'm trying, Jesus Christ*. No follow-up laughter, no badly needed Ipecac, no hand on the shoulder, no heaps of fun. Just trying. Then she taps the eyes forward again and says nothing else. The tropical tints on her eyelids have gone tepid

with the balance of the evening. Tomorrow, the words Final Notice and the balance owed will spread across a pink-tint letter whose color will not ombre even when the nights without heat grow decidedly un-Mauiesque.

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I look down at my shoes and can't see them, though my toes throb, spent in the blowout of Friday night paycheck Fun Time. The breath-cast royalty cameo has evaporated from the window beside Gloria because princesses bail on you, faster than restless boyfriends in the suburbs. Silently I count out the weeks remaining in the summer and divide it by how many days I can realistically go barefoot. I red-light at the intersection where I might turn and think about purpose because we, all of us in the Hyundai, are not religious people.

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But, this: Some things should pass quick as the consistent strobe of streetlights and sometimes they're busted out from their own separate life situation and I get that. Suddenly, through the mystery composite of silence, my mother asks again if I remember that she said *maybe* and here I thought new shoes had become a promise the flavor of *this never happened*. I flash back to the bathroom interaction but remember mostly the eyeshadow, the typhoon of Aqua Net, the tropical entreaty to which I am not invited. Then like the quick slice

of a bobby pin through a complicated mess of something highly augmented I remember the eye-volley. I know she's looking at me right now inside the half-broken car, waiting for me to look back but I don't. Then I wonder if I should try harder or much, much less.

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From the folded up little scrip of my mouth I say *I remember*.

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I remember when I was smaller and we would pass Putt Putt and I would tell my mother that miniature golf seemed like a thing rich people did and my mother saying, *Some time we'll go there and do that place to the nines*. I remember the rapid exchange misfiring, the compulsory nodding, the sour digestion of the fact that sixteen of seventeen rounds in any sport was a few zip codes beyond the neighborhood of my interest. I kept a running list of the things I supposed rich people did, was all.

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A truth I wear around like the eviscerated lining of shoes that were cheap knockoffs to begin with: impostors, a functional thing that tries very hard but ultimately misses the point. A thing you can definitely not run in. At least, not for long. After a few more blocks I add, *It's okay*. I feel the clasp of the visual

ricochet around me and I slide it back toward the front seats, a thing I decide is not nor has ever been happening.

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*I can't think about this right now*, I tell myself. What matters is that Gloria is beside me settling her arms around my stomach and is it not full, is it not happy? I think about the Putt Putt universe delivering fake sphinxes and Eiffel towers ready to be conquered by a deft swivel, some skill you might not possess but at least you get to try. *This is a delicious thing I have bought for you*. Really, who cares that none of us are on that beach or in that desert or under a massive steel structure in the middle of Paris. The volt of blue slashed across the side is nearly the real thing.

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I don't have my mind made up about what solidly constitutes a lie, but don't these things mean heaps of fun? Don't these things unpetal on a gust of borrowed adventure? Don't these things mean that my mother is someone who is trying? *I am paying attention*, I remind myself, like a fistful of tickets for prizes I will not have the chance to claim.

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**Grace Campbell** is a founding editor and writer at Black River Press. She is a 2018 June Dodge Fellow at The Mineral School. Her chapbook, *FWIW*, was a finalist for the Turnbuckle Chapbook Competition at Split Lip Press. She was awarded third place in the Atticus Review Flash Creative Nonfiction Contest (2018). Her work has appeared in *Gravel*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Spry*, *Jellyfish*, *Chagrin River Review*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *The Santa Ana River Review* and other places. She enjoys tinted lip balm and extremely sharp scissors.