Right Next Door

Bonnie Thompson

"You can come, but you can't flush." That's the first thing she says to me, my own mother. Not "I'd love to see you" or "This will always be your home" but just how California's in this desperate drought. "None of your famously long showers, either," she warns. "Three minutes and quit."

"It's only for six weeks." Outside my window, on Queens Boulevard, an Escalade cuts off a city bus. I need to finally complete my B.A., spring myself out of chronic assistantship.

"You should have—" she begins. During my final semester at Northridge, my father pitched over while putting on his socks. Massive coronary. Three of my profs passed me even though my head was a marshmallow, but I hardly even went to the fourth course. Since two attempts at night classes failed me—or vice versa—the compressed summer term is my last chance. "I can't give you my car," she says.

I press my thumbnail into my thigh, making little lines, like stitches.

§

A red-eye, a shuttle, a bus to the coast, and I stumble into Wrent-a-Reck. In the morning fog, the place smells like mildew. "I'll get you a sweet ride, chickie," the clerk says, ogling the black bra beneath my tank top. And when I pilot the bruise-colored Buick through town, it looks like hell: everyone's lawn a brown weedscape, pine trees so dry their needles have turned this evil red.

"Succulents," my mother sniffs when I tell her about the plastic flowers in the village green. Her dark hair is newly short—or maybe not newly; it's been three years—in an angular cut that makes her nose look even sharper. "That's what's supposed to save us: cacti and aloes and those monstrous agaves."

The English garden was always her thing, particularly hydrangeas, which she mail-ordered from some special outfit in Connecticut. Along the fence between our house and the Haddads', she did this thing where she changed their garish flowers from pink to blue. By spiking the soil with chemicals, I think.

I drop my duffel bag in my old room and then, even though I've been traveling for twelve hours and smell like dried spit and airplane bathroom, I

get back in the rattlebox Century and go see Johnny Iovine, who was my boyfriend in high school and who, as it happens, once had a big fight with my mother and threatened to burn our house down.

§

As I'm setting the table for dinner, I discover my father's last bottle of blue gin, stashed under the breakfast bar. I stand up quickly, banging my knee on the cabinet door.

We eat off disposable plates and drink bottled water, as if that doesn't come out of the town's sickly, depleted water table, just because she gets it in three-gallon jugs from the dispenser outside Vons. As the thick paper leaches the moisture out of our scrambled eggs, she tells me that one of the Haddad children is ill.

"April?"

"No, the other one." My mother raises one hand in the air, grasping. She says how before the Haddads found out how bad it was, they planted a vegetable garden and started raising chickens. "They spent so much time at that hospital down in L.A., the chickens had to go." Her knife skitters across the butter's swirled surface. "But now that girl is fixated on eating homegrown tomatoes. And I don't know where she's getting her ideas—" My mother's face

wrings itself. “First off, there’s no water. Worse, her parents should know that they’re the *last* things to ripen.”

“Lily,” I say. “Her name is Lily.” The toast scrapes a flap of skin off the roof of my mouth. “How is it,” I go on, “that I, who live on the other side of the continent, know her name, and you, who spends every day right across the fence, have no clue?”

Thus we pick up our endless fight. But at least this round has a bell—I’ll be out of here before those scrawny tomatoes even redden.

§

Introduction to Statistics—the essential piece for my Quantitative Reasoning requirement—is not enhanced by the intensive format. There’s an immediate onslaught of formulas and “coefficients,” with subscripts hanging off the numbers, sometimes two at a time, like bags on a pack mule. And the numbers aren’t even numbers, they’re letters that stand for numbers, except when they’re Greek symbols. Four hours a day, I stare at the blackboard, and the harder I try, the more my brain shrivels into a dry little raisin.

Back in my old room, which my mom has refurnished in Early American maple, all spindles and finials, I flip open my notebook. It’s a guest room now. And not that I miss my old Green Day posters, but as I sit cross-legged on the

bed, I get the hairy eyeball from this ghoul flanked by a boy-soldier and a fife-playing dude with a bloody bandage around his head.

Reviewing my notes from that morning's lecture, I drink a boatload of iced tea. Only it's like someone else wrote these lines, made those emphatic stars and arrows.

After about the fiftieth time I have to pee, I'm gagging, like there's a big dog turd in the bowl. I grab the detergent jug in which I collected the shower water before it warmed up, and I lift the top off the tank so I can flush.

And she materializes! I didn't even know she was home, but the grating of the heavy porcelain summons her like a genie.

"This is a historic drought!" she screeches. "It hasn't been this dry for *twelve hundred* years. Don't you pay any attention to anything other than your own self?"

I point to the pile of rotting pee as evidence that, in fact, I pay plenty of attention. Except the lid is down, so the gesture fizzles. And then she seizes my misered gallon and marches outside with it, to her precious hydrangeas.

§

Johnny's living in this shacky complex near the sewage-treatment plant. With everyone using less water, he says, it "fortifies the aroma." If not for the

marijuana funk, his apartment would be totally uninhabitable.

"You know what's funny?" I lean forward to pass him the bong. It's red, yellow, and green, like the one he bought in the head shop downtown senior year. "My mom would actually be interested in the breeding of this stuff—like, plant genetics and whatever." Johnny's hippie uncle, in some secret location upstate, is the Luther Burbank of hyperpotent pot.

Johnny studies me through slitted eyes. "That's a picture from hell," he finally says. "Your mom and my uncle."

"Right?" I laugh. "Talk about *American Gothic*."

"I don't watch that shit." He scrubs a hand over his black thatch of hair. "How's she getting by?"

I shrug, sinking into the sofa's dip and propping my feet against the big plywood spool. This place is such a shitbox, but the apartments don't have individual water meters, so at least we can flush like normal people. "She's her usual warm, giving self."

"Not that." His fingers play over the bong like it's a clarinet. "I mean, how's she surviving moneywise. You know, without your dad."

A can of beer I don't remember opening sweats into my hand. "He had really good life insurance. And, you know, investments and stuff."

"Really?" Johnny's smile develops so slowly that time seems to go backward.

"Plus, now she has this job, like, managing a ceramics studio." The bamboo shade above me flaps in the sulfurous breeze. "Not real ceramics, though—the stuff's all precast. You just paint these plates and little ducks and whatever."

Johnny is repeatedly attempting to pick a sesame seed up off the plywood table.

"Those ovens," I add, "go over two thousand degrees. It's like every day she fires up her own chamber of hell."

"We should kill her," he says.

A gas bubble splits my chest. "What the fuck?"

"Then you'd get the insurance money and the investments and shit."

I reach for my hoodie and look around for the Buick's keys, even though I'm way too wasted to drive.

Johnny's head thrusts toward me. "You hate her, right?"

The keys are in my hoodie, which I've put on inside out. My head makes a combination nodding-shaking motion, like my neck is broken. I can feel the fob through the nubby fabric, but I can't figure out how to get at it.

Johnny pushes his lips into the bong, sucks in a flake, and starts coughing

like he's about to eviscerate himself. "Jesus," he eventually chokes. "Kidding. Wanna get a pizza?"

"The Double?" Below my shorts, my legs wobble like ramen noodles, coiling me back onto the couch. Johnny says how I'm even hotter than in high school, so we start having sex again.

It might not be Brooklyn-style, but there's nothing like a gooey extra-cheese from Pier Pizza when you're seriously skewed.

§

It kills me not to exploit Johnny's freely flowing water, only his tub is gross, mold sliming the shower curtain to tit height. So early the next morning, I'm spinning around my mom's kitchen, freaking out about how his uncle's überweed has fried my brain. As my wet hair drips down my back, I ransack the counters for my French press. I also can't find my vitamins or the glass jar of pink Himalayan salt I'm pretty sure I just bought.

The opening and closing clatter of the cabinets draws in my mother, wanting to know what's wrong.

"Nothing," I say over my shoulder, my voice coming out weirdly thin. "You have any idea where I put my coffee thingy?"

"It's in the garage."

I turn. She looks owlish, in horn-rimmed glasses I've never seen before.

"You know I can't stand clutter." She reaches for her Mr. Coffee carafe. "So, I thought, if you're not even here…"

Out of time, I drive the thirty miles to class with a caffeine headache vising my temples, making my right eye leak.

§

As it happens, my French press and my vitamins and my salt are not only in the garage, they're on the back of a shelf, behind her old Maxwell House cans. It sometimes seems like after my father died, she started to actively hate me, as if it was all my fault, when really it was hers. Or like every minute I spent with him was one taken away from her, time she can never get back.

Through the window screen's moiré, I glimpse her in the yard, lugging that orange bucket over to the hydrangeas, their fat heads wilting in the afternoon heat.

§

The plastic bag dangling from my hand gives my thigh a cold, wet smack.

In the side yard, the cutting garden my mother began in the fall, before it apparently stopped raining forever, is gone. Last I'd noticed, it was brown stalks and ratty seedheads, but now it's just dirt. She's got to focus on the shrubs

and the trees, she told me, to preserve the garden's "bones." Leave it to her to make even plants sound ghoulish.

After class, I picked up a tub of the ice cream Lily and April had loved when I babysat for them. It's neon blue and hot pink and tastes like you're at the circus.

I found out what's actually wrong with Lily—at least, something more specific than my mother's waved hand and "*You* know." Johnny and I were walking on the path between his apartment and the sewage plant, passing a joint to mask the odor. "It's some seriously wicked shit," he said, swiveling his head to see if we were being scoped. "There was this barbecue fund-raiser because they're hemorrhaging dough over there. It's fuckin' criminal is what it is." He blew out a thick plume. "A kid like that and this gnarly fuckin' brain tumor."

The wind pulsed from behind a bubbling brown pond, and I jackknifed and heaved but nothing came up.

Squeezing past the hydrangeas now, I scissor my legs over the split-rail fence, and I swear, the Haddads' backyard—it's another world.

They must be giving the big F.U. to the water restrictions, because that garden is lush: strapping blue-green kale leaves and jungly artichokes and

these stout, bristly tomato stalks. When I bend to smell what looks like oregano, a lizard scurries away, leaving feathery tracks in the soil.

The doorbell chimes hollowly, as if the house has been emptied out. After a while, there's a sound like sheets being dragged across carpet.

§

April's hair is the color of wet pine bark, and her nose is developing the hook I guess it was always destined for.

Lily's not here, she tells me. None of them are. Yesterday she came home from school to a note about an emergency trip to L.A.

"I was supposed to go over to Ashley's house," she says, her eyes cast to the side.

"Were you scared?" I lean over to intercept her gaze. "To stay by yourself?"

One narrow shoulder makes a half-circle under her thin T-shirt.

A twelve-year-old girl all alone overnight—right next door. "You should have come over!" I exclaim.

She curls one bare foot over the other. Her flared jeans are too long, the hems black.

"Cotton Candy?" I hold up the sweating bag.

"I don't think Lily still likes that flavor," she says. "But maybe she can eat

it if she gets those mouth sores again."

We go inside, past the cases of vanilla Ensure on the kitchen counter. As I'm wedging the carton in among the chicken parts and Amy's entrees, I ask, "You have dinner last night?" and April's black-olive eyes swivel toward the frozen burritos.

Seventh grade: when you go from being the kings of elementary school to the dipshits of junior high. A totally hateful year—so maybe that's not helping the whole pit of sadness over here.

"How do you like Home Ec?" We sewed cute sundresses with spaghetti straps, and we cooked: chili and lasagna and actual deep-fried doughnuts.

April again lifts one shoulder, lets it fall. She looks like a refugee, she's so bony. She could be Indian, I think, or Pakistani. My mother calls the Haddads Arab, but they're Lebanese, or Mr. Haddad is, anyway. I mean, they're American, right?

"School ends next week," she says. "But we don't have to take Home Ec."

My chest deflates. What hell seventh grade would have been without Miss Keeley, in her apricot lipstick, her shiny engagement ring tinkling against the aluminum flour sifter.

"So you never got to make Miss Keeley's super-fudge brownies"—April

looks away, and I hear my voice rise, like I'm some idiot talking to a puppy—"with cream cheese in the batter?"

"Cheese?" She scrunches up her face. "Eww."

"OK, no cream cheese," I bargain. "How about chocolate icebox cookies with chocolate chips and M&M's?"

April's eyebrows rise. And, as my father used to say, I've got a customer.

Despite the cheery white eyelet valences, the kitchen's too dark, and it smells like disinfectant. My offer of a spin in the "lame-o limo" elicits a wary snicker, so we get a bunch of stuff from Vons and cruise back to my house.

I'm flouring the cutting board while April makes daisy mosaics out of the M&M's when she curls her knuckles against the counter and says, "So you know Lily's going to die, right?"

That T-bones me. I go, "It's amazing what medical science can do these days." And instantly I feel like just one more shit-spouting adult in her life.

Turning to squeeze her shoulder, I try again, repeating something I once heard Miss Keeley tell a crying student: "I'm sorry, honey." April stares at me with those depthless eyes until my heart cracks.

I forgot the part about how you're supposed to chill the dough. "Yep, Sherlock," I drawl, "that's what *icebox* means." So we detour to the drop method,

dotting each sticky top with the bright little buttons. When the timer dings, we fall on the cookies so fast that the melted chips burn our tongues and drip onto our T-shirts, and April laughs.

At the sound of slamming car doors, followed by voices—my mother's caw hailing the Haddads—April slips away. My hand stretches toward the sprinkling of white on the back of her shoulder, like spilled baby powder.

In the foyer, my mother watches April retreat outside, gas fumes seeping over the cookies' fragrance. When she closes the door behind herself, there's an expression on her face I can't decipher.

Then she steps into the anarchy in her kitchen and sees the glob of butter on the fake-wood floor. "There goes your morning shower," she snaps, stamping on the trash can's pedal and dropping into it what sounds like broken glass.

§

"The thing is," I tell Johnny around an analgesic toke. By the third hour this morning, I was making drawings where the big Σ chews up all the little $\hat{p}$'s and spits out their hats. "The thing is," I say, "she wasn't always such a bitch."

"Your mom used to be hot," he says, "you know, for a total cunt," and across the twilight of his rat's nest, I bug my eyes out at him.

But she did. Somewhere along the line, she traded stylish and slender for a neuter uniform of khakis and oxford shirt.

"The Change," Johnny adds. I ignore that, too, because who is he to be talking about my mother's hormones?

I pull the tip of my ponytail across my upper lip. She used to do that with her own chestnut hair, saying, "I am dee Frito Bandito!" to make me giggle. "When I was, like, eight," I remember, "she let me adopt this stray kitten, a flea-ridden tabby. I named him Stripey," I say, and Johnny snorts. "But now when she finds strays?" Under my bare heel, something grainy grinds against the plywood spool. "She traps them and takes them in to have their nuts sliced off."

"My uncle's coming down next week," Johnny says. "I gotta find some funds for more dope."

§

The first test is an epic fail.

After everyone has flooded out, I make my way to the front of the lecture room, where the instructor is gathering up his papers and filing them into his briefcase. In a small voice, I ask about my chances of passing.

His black beard bounces as he tells me there's another exam and the final.

On a square Post-it, he writes down the percentages, how each one is weighted. He says, "So you do the math," and his small red mouth makes a semicircle around a grid of even white teeth.

Motioning for the fluted test pages in my hand, he flips through them, scoffs about how I'm misusing Pearson's coefficient, or maybe it's Spearman's. I can't really take it in. It's like I'm in one of those stupid Charlie Brown specials where the adults all sound like muted trombones—except I'm actually an adult now, so how can that be?

§

After a valiant study session at Captain Java's, I head home for dinner. When the maroon chariot gurgles into the driveway, my mother pops up like a jack-in-the-box from behind the drooping hydrangeas—apparently even all my shower water can't satisfy those guzzling mopheads. She twists away, then back toward me, and the empty five-gallon bucket bangs against her legs as she crosses the yard to tell me she's leaving.

There's a bachelorette party, of all things, at the studio. "The bride is in her eighties," she says. "They're all going to make fused-glass bowls." I trail her toward the house, my backpack's strap cutting into my collarbone.

"The poor woman," she goes on, swiping her feet on the doormat, "never

had any of the usual fuss the first time around—well, she eloped, so it's her own fault. Anyway, the gals are trying to make up for that."

"That's sweet." My pack thunks onto a kitchen stool like a load of bricks.

She pulls her pruning shears from the pocket of her chinos and uses a paper towel to clean them, the blades glinting in the low sun. "It's folly to think you can get back what you've missed," she says. "And she's already so *old*."

My arms are crossed around my shoulders to peel my sweatshirt off when a memory rises. "Remember Mrs. Perry?" I say. "And the health aide?"

Before the Haddads, this tiny old lady lived next door. When she got sick and couldn't afford help—Lord, that place is cursed—Dad arranged for an aide to come every day, the woman sworn to tell Mrs. Perry that she was from Medicare. "That was *so like* Dad," I say. He'd knelt down, the scent of tobacco enveloping me, and winked and whispered, "On the Q.T."

My mother's head flies back like she's been slapped. "That wasn't his idea," she says stiffly. "It was mine."

This blindsides me. It freezes me with the gray sleeves straitjacketing my arms, and then my mother seizes her purse and leaves.

After my father's funeral, I scraped through that last semester and bolted. Went to live with some punk-band fellow dropouts in a dump of an apartment

in Queens, at the far reach of the 7 train.

And I blamed her. She was the one, I told my friends, who'd thrown all those parties, so that my dad would smoke and drink, who'd fed him steaks and bacon and gin martinis. And who fought with him constantly, hardening the walls of his heart.

I strip the sweatshirt off and root through the cabinets and the fridge, looking for something to eat that's not frozen or in a can. It's like a bomb shelter here: all the food able to survive the apocalypse, with the cockroaches.

But she really got me with that "It was mine." So now she's erasing him, taking credit for all the wonderful things he did.

§

I'm having an awful Monday, the worst, most head-splitting, bleary Monday ever, like Monday factorial (Monday!), but only if that means Monday times all the other Mondays, not Monday multiplied by the nicer weekdays. During the class's one meager break, I hustle over to the student union and pour myself a cup of Ethiopian roast, and when I go to pay for it, there's nothing in my wallet. Literally no bills, just three grimy pennies.

Freaked out about having been pickpocketed, I call Johnny at the bottle store where he works part-time. But he just goes, "Yeah, I forgot to tell you."

His uncle's in town, and he took all my cash so he could get an ounce. I'm like, "What the fuck?" And he goes, "Hey, you're smoking at least as much as me."

The sun bouncing off the concrete plaza stings my eyes. "Fuck you." My phone's timer bleats. "And by the way, not anymore," I add, and I hang up.

§

I quit going to Johnny's funkhouse and spend hour after hour with my textbook and notebook, sitting cross-legged on the prickly carpet at the living room coffee table.

It's a bitch memorizing so many formulas, keeping straight which to use when. Then one day, screwing around with the equations, I find a way to make the same data say two diametrically opposite things, and this clear light washes into my brain.

The afternoon before the second exam, now total buddies with Pearson and Spearman and their ilk, I spot my dad's binoculars on the mantelpiece. I'd forgotten about that, how right before the end he'd discovered nature. Trained on a dove in the dry grass, they reveal a shiny black eye surrounded by an aquamarine ring. Maybe this was what drew my father to birdwatching: the transformation of the ordinary into the beautiful.

Before dinner, Mom and I have a drink together, for the first time ever: gimlets made with Dad's blue gin. Which, of course, is colorless; only the bottle is tinted.

While she rinses off veal cutlets, I sit at the counter and tell her about the field glasses. We laugh, remembering when he started: Dad in his navy suit, a Winston dangling from his mouth, sneaking around the privet hedge, trying to catch the birds unawares.

"What was that one," I ask, "the black-eyed jughead?"

"Junco, I think." My mother drags a glistening strip of flesh through the whisked eggs.

"Junco, that's right!" My moistened finger sneaks into the breadcrumbs, like when I was a kid. "That always seemed like such a mean name."

"It is kind of, isn't it?" Her smile crinkles the bridge of her nose.

The gin tingles down to my fingertips. I say, "Hey, didn't he keep, like, a list of birds?"

"Two." She turns to adjust the flame below the oil. "One of every kind he'd ever seen, and one of just the birds in our yard."

"Cool." My gaze travels through the living room, out the slider, to the privets, as if I can somehow re-create all the things I never paid attention to.

"How many were on them?"

My mother's back shrugs. "Oh, I wouldn't know."

"We should look!" I rise, assuming the lists will be stashed near the binoculars.

She waves a hand as the hot oil sizzles. "All of that stuff is gone."

"What, like, in the attic?"

"Oh no—*gone* gone. I threw it all out years ago."

The wooden stool thuds against my tailbone. I never looked at the lists, but I can picture them: my father's neat columns of numbers, the letters all in capitals. She just dumped them in the…*garbage*?

My mother talks louder, saying how that's what they tell you to do in bereavement groups: you have to get rid of their clothing, their shoes, you have to move on, you can't cling—

"His *shoes*?" It's like she amputated his feet.

"It's not as if you were here," she snaps, "being any help at all." When she pivots, her cheeks are blotchy from the gin. "You came home once, with your hair shaved off and this *hoop* through your—"

"It was a gold—"

"So what, men could lead you around by the nose like a cow?"

An ice chip shatters between my teeth.

"I don't know what's happened to young women," she wheezes as the oil crackles behind her. She's always been slightly allergic to juniper, scrapes in the garden swelling into welts. In the pan, the flesh starts to burn. "With your shorts cut up to your whosit and your bras hanging out—like you've got all the backbone of a blow-up—"

My ears are stoppered and ringing like after a hardcore concert. I don't know if "you" means my generation or specifically, pointedly, me, but before she can get to the money shot, I'm gone.

§

With a bolt of anger bisecting my brain, I drive: past our old fire-pit hangout on the beach, the Cal-Mex restaurant where I waitressed, the golf course on whose now-parched fields I lost my virginity. What the fuck: that *I* wasn't any help? As the rattly Buick gallops along the empty state park road above the bluffs, a broken moon glitters in the choppy waves. Everyone says that parents aren't supposed to have a favorite kid, but all kids pick a parent, don't they?

The engine shudders outside a sprawling yellow roadhouse with springy wooden porch boards. Not much is happening in Chester's on a Tuesday night.

Then I recognize a guy I knew in high school, and we start shooting pool in the back room. It's all so automatic, my fingers wrapping around the cue and sliding down the shaft. When I mention that it's chilly, Vince gives me his flannel shirt, his pecs jumping beneath his Metallica tee.

§

My eyes fly open, my heart battering my ribs. Thirty miles away, the bearded instructor is passing out the tests. My feet scrabble for the floor, as if I can still race into that lobster-clawed chair and start jotting down μ's and χ's.

Fizzy with gin and beer, my head refuses. Sour phlegm, like spoiled milk, coats my throat, choking me with the familiar taste of failure.

§

Screw it. If I'm doomed to flunk the course, there's no point in sticking around this torture chamber. Under a high-pressure waterfall, I scrub my skin raw. Then I throw all my clothes into my duffel bag, cramming the dirty stuff in with the clean.

Slithering around the kitchen, collecting my French press and vitamins and pink salt, I can hear my mother coughing in the master suite. Not her day for blasting up the hellfires, I guess.

Outside, the sky is low and beaten. The crapmobile tilts at the banked

curb, and my bag jounces across the back seat. Through the corner of my eye, a worker in a shapeless tan jacket is tending the yard next door. The Haddads are back in L.A.

Something red puddles from beneath the passenger seat. I crawl across the cracked vinyl, my face flushing as I recognize the Metallica logo, and I jam it back under the springs, slicing my finger. Cursing the jagged metal morphs into cursing my mother, who doesn't understand me or even care to.

With the cut finger bleeding salty iron onto my tongue, I squint through the curved windshield at her barren front yard, her hydrangeas now fully dead, and the Haddads'—

The smell of heating plastic makes my head spin. That's my mother. Cloaked in my dad's old field coat, she's sidling between Lily's tomato plants with her bucket, stooping to dribble water onto each one.

I can't move, can't even blink. Envy and shame and something brighter churn into a ball of lava where my insides used to be. As the old vinyl craters beneath my knees, I back out of the car with my hands up.

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