

What Goes Up

The way he ate his food. It drove Renata up the wall. The *plink-plunk* of fork on ceramic. The wet smack as he chewed. She heard these sounds in the folds of her life: the sledge on spike in the yard, the lap of water against the docks. Sounds that practically begged her to leave Everett, to skip town and never look back.

She was going to end it. She'd been meaning to for months. But it was so easy, so god-damn *easy*, to coast. To come home from work at the docks to his meaty, smiling face. To scorch some tortillas, mumble dumb nothings, glaze out at a game show, and hit the hay. To wake up and do it all over again. Her friend Claire—married three years—told her that's what a relationship is: settling into a routine. Said she found comfort in it. *You know what I find in our routine?* Renata had said. *Everett's socks.* He left them all over the damn place. In the den. Beneath the couch. Once she even found a pair in the microwave. It was February, but please. It never got that cold in Tampa.

Renata knew what would happen if she told Claire what she planned to do. She'd cluck her tongue and shake her head. "Stick with it," she'd say. "You two just need to get that spark back." She'd talk about she and Hank and their bumps in the road. She'd tell Renata to have faith. "It's not easy out there after thirty," she'd say. "And besides, people can change."

But that was just it: Renata wanted someone for who they were, not for who they might turn out to be.

It was Friday so she twisted up the volume knob, steered her Jeep from the docks. Petty: "Learning to Fly." His tapes littered her car but it was possible she loved this song more than anything in her life now that Dad was gone. He used to play Petty all the time around the house when she was young. Hummed along as he fixed the screen door or tarred the driveway. Once she even asked him why he loved Petty so much. She must've been twelve and he was in the backyard digging up the stump of a rotted palm. It was muggy as all get-out and he was sunburnt and sweating through his Bucs T-shirt. From the portable radio, Petty peeled licks from "Breakdown," a song that spooked her then and still spooked her now.

Dad stopped digging. He leaned on the shovel and repeated her question like it was for Channel 8. “Why do I love Petty?” He blinked away, then back. He shrugged. “He’s from Florida too.”

She was young, but not so young to know Florida wasn’t any place special.

“So? Mom’s from Florida.”

He looked right at her, eyes blue as an iceberg. “But she wished she wasn’t.”

Standing there in her jellies, she felt uneasy as the soggy earth that sometimes fell in for no reason.

Dad must have guessed it, he put on a little smile.

“Petty makes songs to run to, that’s all.”

Which didn’t exactly make her feel better.

“Are you going to—run?”

He cocked his head to the side. “From you, darling? Not in a million years. I run from me,” here he touched his temple and left a smudge of dirt, “for a few minutes at a time.”

She left the industrial bloat, the low roads of rust and brick, and merged onto the freeway. Zipped past the manic billboards, past the glittering condos, the angled glass of pretty living. The housing boards she’d never pass, the leases she’d never sign. She cruised on beneath the blazing sky and tried not to think much about it. You couldn’t well be disappointed if you never let yourself believe.

She left the top up so she could hear Petty better. But “American Girl” came on next and she fast-forwarded right through it. It was something like blasphemy, but it was the one song she hated: no girl she knew was raised on promises. Not from around here at least.

Most of her memories of Mom had gone the way of old boyfriends. Hard to believe they were ever a part of her. When Renata was little, Mom used to drive Dad crazy by taking her places without telling him. She’d strap her in the car and away they’d go. They’d pick goldenrods in motel lots. They’d wander the Publix and steal candy. But most times, they wound up at the lake by the ball fields, watching the ducks. To her, they were the prettiest things, the way their emerald heads caught the gleam of the sun. The way their feet would stick up when they plumbed beneath the surface. “What are they looking for?” she’d ask.

Mom would pick dirt from her nails or study her loose ends and she’d smirk. “Their dignity,” she’d say.

Renata never got the joke. And it wasn’t that Mom eventually left that made her sad, but that she found ways to make light of beautiful things.

She exited the freeway and drove past the Hill Top Creamery where she and Everett had their third date, past the ABC where they often picked up cheap wine, past the high school where she first heard his name. That was the problem: she’d been in this town too long and Everett was all over it.

She made her way up the gravel drive and parked next to Everett's rusty red pickup, half on the grass so he had room to get out. She opened the door and stepped into the den, halfexpected to find him sitting there in his chair barking at the ball game. But the TV was off and the room was quiet and she was surprised to feel relieved. She hadn't noticed until she took off her shades, but she'd walked in with her teeth clenched and her fists balled up like she was set to defend herself. Which in a way, she supposed, was true.

She stepped down the hall to the bedroom in the back. She leaned against the bed, unlaced her boots, and slid them off. She tried to fight it, but her eyes drifted to the nightstand: a framed photo of she and Everett grinning like fools. Their heads took up damn near the whole picture, especially Everett's. That big melon head she used to tease him about back when laughing together was easy.

When they first started dating, she'd take him down to the lake and he'd bring along a sack of crust for the ducks. They'd sit on the bank and chuck bits in the water and point at the flurry. They'd talk about their lives, what they hoped would be. Pretend like their cards weren't already dealt.

Once she even asked Everett the same question she'd asked Mom all those years back. A mallard with frayed edges, that couldn't manage to nab but one or two bitstipped his head beneath the water and waggled his feet. "What's he looking for?" she said.

Everett thought for a second and crumpled the empty bag. "A little piece of mind, that's all."

She hung her work shirt in the closet and slid on her old sweatshirt from the cheer team. It was about as soft as a blanket and just as comforting. Everett always said he couldn't picture her as a cheerleader. "Women like you eat cheerleaders for breakfast," he told her once. But what he didn't know was that she joined the squad because her butt looked good in the jumper. And so she could sleep with Jasper Phipps who played tight end.

She took out her studs and set them on the dresser and there they were: a pair of dirty tube socks going grey at the toes. For the *love*. How many times can somebody ask? She took a set of scissors from her nightstand and went to work, turned those socks into ribbons. While she was at it, she opened up his dresser drawer and sliced up all the rest. Then she flung the shreds over Everett's side of the bed. She caught herself in the vanity mirror, breathing hard, hair all over the place, and wondered if she was crazy. Bitching about socks and eating habits like they were the end of days. But shit, if he didn't hear her out on the little stuff, what then? A lifetime of monotony, that's what. The slow erosion of respect like a beach that's been left to rot. Sure, they'd talked vaguely about marriage, the names they'd give their kids. As if it was all inevitable. As if time alone would make it happen. But it had begun to feel as though they were talking about a different couple altogether.

In the kitchen, she poured herself a wine to cool her nerves, looked out the window at the shed out back where she knew Everett was at. It was the only place he was ever at lately. When she asked him what the hell he did in there all day, he just shrugged and said, “Work and all that,” like she was a dummy to even wonder. When they first started dating, he tried to impress her by making things for the house. The kitchen table out of pine. The bread box out of birch. Once he even set a stack of lumber out back for the future. “Kids can’t grow up without a swing set,” he’d said. But now they’d drifted apart and it seemed he went out there so he wouldn’t have to be in the house. Well, he might as well that pile of wood with him, because as far as she was concerned it would be tinder before it was a playground.

The door to the shed banged open and there was Everett in jeans and a tee he’d cut the sleeves off of. She jumped and spilled wine on her sweatshirt and her brain went blank with panic. She tipped back the rest of her wine and tried to dab the stain with a rag. He’d probably think she was drunk, which pissed her off. He didn’t deserve the upper hand.

He trudged through the yard and came in the back door wiping his hands on his shirt. He didn’t see her right away. She stood stock-still at the sink like she didn’t *want* to be seen. But then he rounded the corner and lifted his big moon head and caught her eye and winked.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” he said and turned down the hall without wiping his boots.

And that was just it: he didn’t make any damn effort anymore. Coasting. Like once he had her, he could put it in neutral. She wished it made him less handsome.

He went into the bathroom and she heard the long, thunderous stream. They did it once in that bathroom. Went at each other like clumsy teens. Hell, there was a time they did it in every room in the house, as if they had something to prove. Even had a running list on the fridge. Everett would grin as he checked off the den, struck a line through the washroom. They hadn’t touched that list in months.

He flushed the toilet and ran the sink and made his way back down the hall.

Then there he was, right in front of her, tall enough to eat an apple off her head, and clueless as could be about his fate. He leaned down and pecked her on the cheek and scratched her with his scruff. Smelling like sweat and weed and sawdust. She winced at the kiss but he didn’t seem to notice.

He moved to the fridge for a beer, twisted the top and flipped it on the counter like an old coin. *Plink-plunk*.

She cleared her throat to work up the courage.

“You gonna leave that?”

“Well, gee,” he said with a crooked smile. “Happy to see you too.” All innocence and charm and dumb good looks. Then he took a swig of beer and drifted over to the den where he slumped in his chair and fired up the TV.

She followed. She set herself between Everett's chair and the TV and folded her arms over her chest. It was hard to look at him. Why was it suddenly so damn hard to look at him?

He craned his neck to see the screen, to see around her. Might as well have been looking through her. When it was clear she wouldn't budge, he piped up, and tipped his chin at the screen.

"C'mon now, lemme check the scores."

"No," she said and shook her head. "Huh-uh. I want to talk to you." Her voice caught her off guard, sounding all low and hazy.

"Uh oh," he smirked. "This sounds serious."

"It *is* serious, Everett. Which you can hardly ever be."

"I'm all ears, hun." He turned the volume down with the clicker, but barely.

"Don't call me that," she said.

"What?"

"*Hun*. Don't call me that anymore."

He rocked back. "The hell for?"

"Just *don't*, alright? Just don't." Ugh. She sounded like such a goddamn baby. Claire would punch her if she could hear her now. She cleared her throat again.

"OK," he said. He switched off the TV, put his palms up and lowered his voice. "Alright. Whatever you say."

His hands. That they could make something out of nothing. That maybe he could've done with her what he could with a slab of wood. That maybe that's what she wanted all along.

He scooted to the edge of his chair and rested his elbows on his knees. He looked up. "What should I call you then?"

She crossed her arms and bit her cheek like Mom used to do. She looked away. "It's not even about that."

He lifted his brow like she was crazy. She *hated* it when he did that. "Tell me, hu—what's it about then?"

But it was hard to say exactly. Her eyes skipped around the room. The shelves they hung together. On the mantle, the old captain's clock she'd kept from Dad's. She tried to think about the moment it all turned on them. But it wasn't a moment. It was the gradual slipping away, like when you let go of a balloon.

"Is it the ball games?" Everett asked, his voice rising. He looked scared all of a sudden, could tell by her face it was something real. "I won't holler anymore." He tried a weak smile. "Swear."

She shook her head, still couldn't bring herself to look right at him. "It's not the damn *ball games*."

“Well, then *what?*” He stood up and flailed his arms. He was getting impatient and she could tell he wanted to fix it and move on, like a faulty piece of furniture.

“Do you remember Claire’s wedding?” she asked, surprising herself. It caught Everett off guard too. He knit his brow.

“Well, sure. Course I do. What about?”

“Do you remember, right after we met—we were dancing, and this one song came on, and I’ll never forget it. When that song came on, you looked at me and you told me about a dream you had. You were hitchhiking and somebody looked just like me picked you up and this song was playing on the radio.”

“I said that?” Everett asked. The corner of his mouth crept up like it probably had done then. “That’s pretty good.”

And suddenly she started to think he made it all up.

“You remember the song then?”

“What?”

“The song, Everett. Do you remember what song was playing?”

“Shoot, I don’t know. How long ago was that?”

Now *she* was the one getting impatient. She could feel her neck getting hot. “Just tell me.”

“Look, is that what this is all abo—”

“*Everett.*”

“Christ. I don’t know. I mean, shit.” He studied his feet for a second, then looked up at her with the sincerity of a child. “Don’t Stop Believing’?”

The hell? She studied his face, tried to see if he was messing around. But he wasn’t. Not in the slightest. He *meant* it. It had been, “You Don’t Know How It Feels,” but he had no idea. She chuckled to herself, shook her head.

“*What?* What was it then? If you’re all pissed off about some *song?*” he said, “A song from three-some years ago? Then I don’t know what to te—”

“I’m bored Everett.”

“Bored?” His face screwed up and he put his hands on his hips. “With what?”

“With *us*, okay? I’m bored that everything is the *same*. Every day. It’s . . . we hardly even *talk* to each other . . .”

“Jesus Christ,” he said, raising his voice. “Talk? And what is it you want to talk about?”

Against her will, she began to snivel, to feel the tears coming. *Please God*, she thought, *don’t let me cry.*

“Huh? You want to talk? Then let’s talk. I’m right here.”

You just don’t get it, she wanted to say. But she was afraid if she said anything the dam would break.

He sorta laughed to himself, all condescending. “Well, I’m sorry if you’re *bored*. This is *life*, Renata. Grow up and get used to it.”

It was strange to hear her name. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d said it out loud.

A look descended on his face, all smart and proud like he just won *Wheel* or something. It pissed her right off.

“No,” she said, surging past the tears. “I won’t get *used* to it, Everett. I don’t want the rest of my life planned out for me.” At last her anger let her say the real thing. “Not with you at least.”

He reeled back like she’d punched him. Like someone burned down his shed. “That’s not true.”

And he might have been right. But that didn’t mean it was supposed to be.

“Just come here,” he said.

She shook her head.

“Come *here*.”

“No,” she said, and the tears started chasing her down again.

He stepped towards her and by instinct, she stepped back.

His nostrils flared up and he breathed in and out. His big shoulders rose and fell. He looked like chaos, and she wasn’t so sure he wouldn’t hit her. He’d never done it, not even close, but then again, how well did you really know somebody?

Everett grabbed the TV remote from the side table and cocked back like he was about to chuck it so she flinched. But he set it down again. “So what am I supposed to do now?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. Almost whispered it.

“Huh? Tell me.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Tell me what I’m supposed to do, Renata.” His eyes were wild, and she could tell he was scared stiff, thinking about where he’d go.

“*Goddamn it*,” he hollered and he moved towards her and she breathed in quick, but then he was out the back door and stomping through the yard towards the shed.

It had seemed all romantic, meeting him at Claire’s wedding. As if the swell of hope around Claire and Hank would somehow spill over to the two of them. But with time it had only gone to show how far apart two couples could be.

The shed door swung open again and out steamed Everett. His face was red and his hair was a shock. He stuck his head in the back door and looked at her with fire in his eyes. “Go right ahead,” he said, his voice flat. “It’s open.” Then he tromped around the side of the house and she heard the engine rev. It took a minute, but the crunch of gravel from the drive slowly drifted away.

She swung the door open and right away it smelled like him. Musty and warm and a little sour. Light leaked through the vinyl skylight he'd put in. Sawdust motes hovered and drifted like tiny planets. It was quiet; her heart thumped. She hadn't been in there since Everett first built it.

It was still tidy. At least partially so. Cans of paint and thinner lined the floor like little soldiers. Dust all swept up along the edges. In one corner was a stack of chairs he made to give to her boss Raymond for his porch. Leaning against the wall was a half-done bird feeder he'd always promised to finish. It was like he'd begun rearranging, but ran out of time.

Over by the workbench, a stool caught her eye. On the seat rested a lumpy object the size of a big doll, shrouded in a dirty rag. She picked up the shape. It was heavier than it looked so she put it back down. Without really deciding to, she pulled off the rag. It was the rear end of a duck. Everett had gone and carved out a duck that looked as though it had dipped its head beneath the surface of whatever it rested on, in this case, the seat of a stool. She picked it up again and inspected it. The little webbed feet were sticking up, except one of them hadn't been carved yet, like it had got stuck in a chunk of wood. She couldn't believe the detail, the way he'd etched layers in the plumage, made it so some of the feathers even looked frayed. She covered her mouth with one hand and almost dropped the damn thing. Her instinct was to hug it close, cling to it like a buoy, but instead, she set it down the way she found it, and draped the rag back on top.

She walked out the shed and shut the door and fastened the padlock, testing it twice to make sure it was set.

Back in the house, she couldn't sit still. The wine was empty, the TV was off. She tried to distract herself by dusting the mantel and arranging the fridge. But it didn't work.

She got into the Jeep and fired it up. Petty was howling, which she couldn't bear, so she killed the tape and put down the top. Down the street she stopped for a moment in front of the old house she and Dad had lived in. For a while she thought about keeping that house, but the walls just felt too heavy. She always hoped to find it unkempt, the grass wild and the siding warped like no one had dared to live there since Dad. But the lawn was mowed and the mailbox was cute and there was a little bike with training wheels tipped over on the walk. Other people lived there. Other people building a life.

She lowered the clutch and drove off, felt the wind rush in, and took the familiar roads that guided her toward the lake where she hoped he'd be.