SHINE

Yell bit Mom on the shoulder, so Mom finally kicked her punk-ass out. Mom made me put on rubber gloves and inspect the wound for signs of infection with a miniature flashlight and a magnifying glass. The wound was a perfect oval, as if Yell had attacked with a precision cutting instrument and not her teeth. There was discoloration—red, green, and purple like weather-beaten aluminum—but there was no pus, no gangrene. Funky tufts of fur didn’t sprout from Mom’s face, nor did she become a zombie. One day later, Yell’s stuff was jammed in garbage bags and boxes, and two days after that Mom organized a yard sale. I lugged grimy folding tables out of the basement, and Mom made placards, even busted out that fine and sophisticated calligraphy she learned at the Y.

She earned ten bucks off an old lady who haggled over Yell’s antique hand mirror for a solid hour. Mom closed up shop when a crusty white dude with only 2.5 teeth in his head asked: *Got any gently used stockings? I’d take garters, too*. Three days after that, Yell’s stuff was back in her room, hair-care products categorized by severity of kink, Freak ‘Em dresses hung with respect.

Two more days after that, Mom sighed and told me, “Avery, you need to go find your sister.”

Why’d *I* have to go? I wasn’t the one who put her ass out, and really, I was enjoying the peace. With Yell gone, I didn’t have to referee fistfights between her and Mom, or put up with her lousy boyfriends pissing on toilet seats, jerking off on the couch cushions, and calling me a scrub. Nor did I have to compile and catalogue the various death threats Yell attracted from ugly, bald-headed girls.

I was a sixteen-year-old slacker and wanted to spend my weekend playing videogames, killing ogres and saving kingdoms, and not bumming through the streets looking for my dumb-ass sister.

Yell hated my guts anyway and was forever trying to squash me under her thumb. When we were kids, she would punch me in the arm, and when I punched her back, she wailed like I had ripped her in half. Mom would braise my butt and make me stand on top of a milk crate one-legged, arms stretched out, heavy cans of soup in each fist. Yell mocked me in silence, her fake tears dried in salty trails, a smirk that could cut diamonds bright on her face.

I asked Mom once, *What did I ever do to her?* and Mom answered right away, like the question was an eventuality, same as sunrises, deaths. *You were born, Avery. Simple as that. Stop breathing, and y’all might just get along*.

Mom’s hyperbole was the grim truth. I could imagine the casket and my bloated corpse, cold and blue as a slab of undercooked beef, my tie pointed and sharp as a blade. Yell and Mom would hold hands. Shaking her head, Mom might whisper *I’ve never seen him so dignified . . . so handsome. Why couldn’t he carry himself like this in life?* And then Yell would frown bitterly, throw flower petals over me, sign the cross.

I figured looking for Yell was a waste of time, but I knew better than to tell Mom no. Her nerves were landmines, and I had enough shrapnel in my chest. I sighed, added a slump in my shoulders, and said, “Will do.”

She pinned me with a fiery glare, slapped my arm, and said, “Nuh-unh. Don’t do me like that, boy.” After a minute or two, she pulled an envelope out of her purse and said, “Be sure she gets this.”

I stuffed the letter in my back pocket, hoping it was laced with anthrax, the dramatic end to an enduring mother-daughter feud.

Mom pouted a bit and said, “Thank you,” which was unexpected and awesome, but then she rapped my chest and went back to commanding. “Now get, or you won’t ever find her. That girl’s slick and mean as I-don’t-know-what.”

\* \* \*

I wanted to believe Yell was slicing notched machetes through Amazonian flora as she tracked rare panthers, tarantulas scattering under her feet, falcons banking overhead like remote controlled planes, exotic flowers opening gaudy, wet lips. I wanted to believe she was Kumite fighting in Thailand—a musty, concrete theatre bristling with blood-lusting spectators, adrenaline setting claws in her spine, soiled gloves rolled in pulverized glass, she and the champ trading slashes across the chest like masochists posing as sadists. I wanted to believe all that, but I knew she was most likely chopping it up with one of her dickhead ex-boyfriends, smoking dirt weed and guzzling cough syrup until the ghosts of dead prophets dropped from the ceiling and empty Pringles cans became megaphones heralding End Times.

She could have been with Big Boulder, a lunkhead who once held his breath for five minutes on a stupid dare and subsequently forgot everything he learned in 9th grade—the imbecile believed babies are assembled inside a woman piece by piece through repeated copulation, and the union between numbers and letters is witchcraft. She could have been with Fly Ricky, a pretty dude known for having the silkiest hair and six baby-mamas by the age of twenty, or she could have been with Cal Rich, a roided-out, Adderall pill-hustling party monster. Dude couldn’t even grin without juicy veins breaking across his forehead. Neighborhood lore had it he drank so much protein powder whole biceps fell out the back of his ass when he sat on the toilet.

Last time Yell was out fucking with Cal Rich, he called me at two in the morning. The connection was fuzzy, overpowered by background noise, girls laughing like delicate, loopy birds, Pleistoscenic bass thundering, glass breaking beneath Toxodon hooves. Liquor and hot musk steamed through the receiver. Cal grunted and told me, *Come get your sister, homie. She wildin’ harder than a mug*.

I found Yell on Cal’s front porch, soupy vomit slicked down her chest, tank top and bra rumpled as if a blind man dressed her in the dark. No shorts, no underwear, nothing covering her bruised thighs. Narcotic rage thumped in my head, made me woozy. I glared skyward, but the moon and stars offered no counsel.

I cracked the front door a sliver and glared inside. Cal and his boys raged, their party beach-themed, white sand on hardwood floors, tatted up babes in neon bikinis, semi-automatic Super Soakers, fake palm trees rustling under box-fan breezes.

Cal’s boys were all mini-Hulks, crossbred with bovines, unabashed gigantism in their blood. Any one of them could have devoured me in two chomps, and they were crazy as Hell. One dude did jump-squats with babes giggling on his back. He ripped into a smoked turkey leg between reps. Another dude was down on all fours, out-slobbering and out-barking a big-ass bulldog. They traded affectionate head-butts. For real. Cal sipped something viscous and crimson from a golden goblet as he watched the festivities from his leather recliner, satisfaction softened his pulpy face. A brick smashed across his forehead would atomize into powder, do him not a lick of harm, and still I plotted an attack with Kung-Fu techniques, Swift Panther Claw, Thousand Lotus Palm Strike. Employing the proper usage of ferocity, surprise, and a broken bottle, I could at least gut Cal before his boys stomped me into a subatomic particle. Bravado told me to *Nut up.* Cowardice told me *She’s not worth it*. Wisdom told me *The situation’s not worth it*. Yell told me *ssshhhlllgrrrb*. I brushed a chunk of beef out of her hair and she said it again: *ssshhhhlllgrrrrb*.

I abandoned the offensive, took off my pants, and shimmied them over her hips. I hefted her on my back even though she reeked like a level-ten sewer slug. She drooled on my neck and asked *sssshhhhhlllgrrrrrbbb?* I snapped: *Fuck if I know. Don’t ever do this dumb shit again. I will hunt you down and kill you myself. Swear I will.*

\* \* \*

Mom’s letter sizzled against my butt cheek like a hot coal, but I didn’t dare open it—what if it was sealed with a curse passed down by Egyptian queens? If I had transgressed boundaries and opened it, I might have been transformed into a toad—or worse yet—my balls might straight fall off, jiggle out my pants leg, and get swallowed by a gutter—for real. It would happen to me.

An old man with rheumy eyes and one hand once told me, *Ain’t no sense meddling in the affairs of females. You won’t fix nothing, and you might just get hurt.* He pointed his stump at me and said, *How you think I lost my damn hand?*

Besides, I had to figure out which of Yell’s busted-ass ex-boyfriends to challenge first. Cal could hurl me over the horizon me like a discus, and I feared Fly Ricky might molest me, turn me out, have me buying him the latest Jordan’s and keeping my toenails pretty. But Big Boulder was easily confused by shiny metal and polysyllabic words, so I decided he could get it first. I loaded my backpack with essential questing items: cans of warm Vess, hard candy, two real ninja stars, and a wooden kama blade. I grabbed my bike and set out.

A lumbering Cadillac nearly clipped me as I glided passed St. Louis Avenue, the driver's face dopey and apathetic with the latest kush. Miss Diamond was at her usual spot by GO! GO! Inn, raising the hem of a velvet dress, fabric curved like a bat’s wing, neckline low, sweat on her chest, man-made pheromones fuming off her, cheap cigarettes and vodka. At Natural Bridge I was flanked by a dangerously obese dude p-pu-put-puttering in a motorized wheelchair. His t-shirt didn’t fit, and he had three king-sized potbellies stacked right on top of each other. No lie. Cop cruisers zipped by like slot cars racing an electric track, the officers inside no more than Lego men, blockheads. I rode past dead zones and dead zones and dead zones, defunct storefronts and buildings like sick men with twisted bones, sunken chests, and smashed-in faces. Weeds tangled through my spokes, vegetal edges scratching my calves, milk thistle stalks stout as royal scepters, spiny buds of amethyst. Honeysuckle exploded through chain-link fences. Wild chicory blazed ethereal blue. I turned onto Garrison and hit a filthy mess of kids playing freeze tag.

They romped, wheedled *You’re it* and *Nuh-unh!* and swatted arms and legs as if a furious cloud of wasps had descended. Boys lunged, snatched bolos and berets. Girls broke into smooth, zebra-esque strides, hurdled over street cones and stone flowerbeds. My stomach was a caldron, absolute jealousy and nostalgia mixing; sweet, poisonous fumes rising in my chest. Me and Yell used to play. We swept ankles in hopscotch, aimed for faces in four square. I knew she’d rather maim me than lose a thumb war, and yet her voice always had some mysterious power over me, could cleave the dark and drag me back home.

As I rounded the corner and saw Yell sitting on Big Boulder’s porch, chopping it up with two goons, I found my voice didn’t have the same mysterious power over her. I glided to a stop and shouted her name, “Yell! Hey, Yell!” The goons gas-faced me, and Yell crossed her arms. I shouted again, “Danielle!” But right then, she couldn’t spare me the comfort of a familiar, *Fuck off* or *eat a sick dick and die*. She seared me with a look and stomped inside the house.

I stalked after her, passed the snickering goons, ready to unleash my kama blade, sever necks and tendons, cut them down, but the goons were silent and still, ugly as gargoyles. They spat no insults, raised no hands.

This just wasn’t their fight.

Yell’s hair spilled over her face in copper spangles as she split open a strawberry cigarillo with a letter opener. She delicately broke up a nugget of weed, her fingernails sports car red. She abruptly stopped processing the weed, cocked her head, and stared at me like I was an apparition there in Big Boulder’s trashy living room.

I cleared clothes, sporks, and dirty paper plates off the couch and plopped down across from her. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

She shrugged and snorted. “Shit, I don’t know. I ain’t his keeper.” She rolled and licked the blunt artfully. “He’s probably out eating paint chips or beating his head against the wall—whatever it is mongoloids do.”

She flashed a mean, toothy smile, and I felt better, brave even. She sparked the blunt, took a sagacious rip, and spewed fluffy cumulous clouds of sticky smoke. She passed it to me. I ripped it and tried to hold a deep breath, but the smoke was coarse and harsh as wool, thrashing my throat and lungs. I sputtered thin vapors, and thick strands of slime oozed out of my mouth.

Yell retrieved a tall can of warm beer from a couch cushion and cracked it open. “Damn, Avery—you’re weak as fuck. You got them baby lungs. Nobody respects a young man with baby lungs, especially not a girl.” She took a swig of beer and passed it to me. So I drank and ripped that blunt again. I fought the urge to gag, held in the smoke for a full three beats, and exhaled a neat, respectable contrail. Tight cords in my shoulders and back slackened and snapped, limbs instantaneously loose and rubberized—that weed was no punk.

Yell grunted approval and snatched the beer back as a space-time tear opened in the living room. Me and Yell drifted through the cosmos, ashtrays over Andromeda, dirty sneakers and comets careening; tall-can satellites.

“Hey!” Yell’s voice lassoed my foot and yanked me back to earth. “Hey, shit-for-brains!”

I banished the visions, sat up, and drawled, “What?”

“What do you mean, *what*? You the one up my ass. What do you want?”

My hands had become monstrously huge, the gnarly hands of a hobo-eating troll. I fumbled in my back pocket for Mom’s letter and dropped it at Yell’s feet. “Mom said you need to come back home.” Muscles in Yell’s neck tightened. She’d shoot the messenger and jam his head on a pike, no problem. I thought about the dude with one hand and regretted taking this quest. “And I guess you’re supposed to read this.”

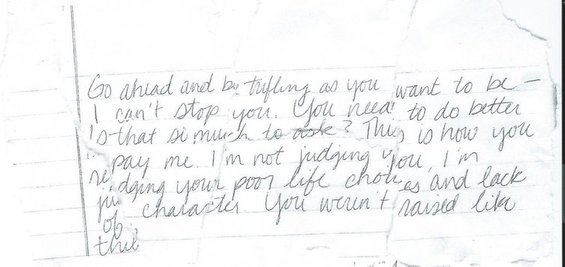
Yell studied the letter like a lynx contemplating the best strategy for stealing meat from a snare. She started to stoop for it, then stopped and raised an expertly arched and annoyed eyebrow at me. “What?”

“Nothing.”

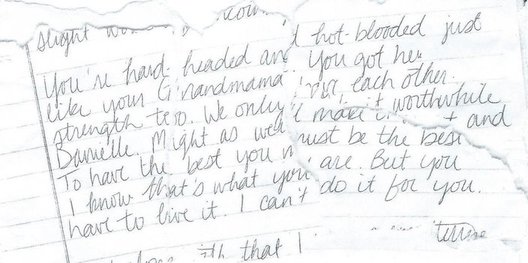
“Stop looking at me then.”

I obliged her, turned around, and listened as she slit the letter open. I craned my neck just a little and kept her in my peripherals. In her hands, I knew a dull letter opener would be enough to pop kidneys, carve vertebrae. I turned and saw she wasn’t menacing, but reading thoughtfully, holding the letter open like a Dead Sea scroll, her lips moving. Her expressions were rushed watercolor. Confusion bled into doubt; doubt bled into contempt; contempt bled into a cautious tenderness. But then she swallowed, huffed and absently rubbed her belly. Thunderheads moved in across her brow. She folded that letter over and over and bit her lip red. She tore the letter into pieces and threw it in my face. I expected this. No surprises there.

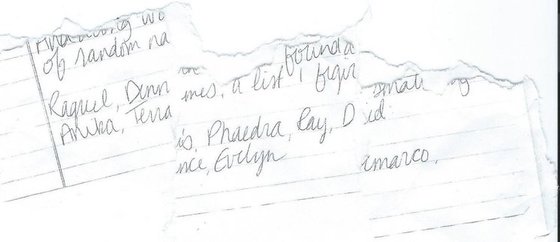
Since Yell broke the letter’s seal herself I figured I was safe from testicle dismembering hexes. I kneeled on the floor, put the pieces together, and read what I could.

Mainly there was Mom’s lexicon of Eternal Judgment and Guilt:**

Deadly blows to the head and heart. But mixed in with the lethal onslaught were slight words of encouragement:



And then there was that short list of random names:



Hot Damn!

Reckoning dispelled my high, and I saw clearly—I knew. I pointed at Yell and told her, “Awwww, Danielle! You’re—”

But she cut me off with a slice of her hand and said, “No.”

I clenched fists and stammered. “What do you mean, *no*? You’re—”

She sliced at me again and said, “No, Avery.” Her lips were a flat, angry line, but her hands trembled—and what could I say or do? If I tried hugging her, she’d power-bomb me through the coffee table. Beneath her meanness she was bony, lonesome, and weak. Everybody knew that much. But she didn’t need a soothing hand or kind words—she needed to feel strong. Strong enough for herself; strong enough for my nephew or niece.

A lunar belt of magazines and musty socks soared overhead as I ripped the blunt and schemed. Yell snapped her fingers in my face and hollered “Puff, puff, pass, shit-head!” And then I got it.

I stubbed out the blunt and said, “I’ll play you for it.”

Yell crossed her arms and said, “What the fuck you mean you’ll *play me for it*?”

I told her, “Like I just said. I’ll play you for it.” I opened my hands and beckoned. “C’mon, Hot Hands. You win, and you do whatever. I win, and I get to pick the name.”

She tried to snarl, but her eyes were wet and unconvincing. “Boy, don’t play—”

“No, c’mon. Rex, if it’s a boy. Vanessa Laquisha Donetta Annette Delores Colt the 4th if it’s a girl.”

“You’re not funny.”

“C’mon, play me.” I snatched her hands. She didn’t resist. “You know I’ll whoop that ass.”

She slid her hands under mine and said, “I go first.” She flashed that sharp smile. “Oooo, boy, I will slap the stink off you.”

We knew the rules. Best two out of three. Flinch three times and you lose. Winner mushes loser upside the head and busts a victory dance.

Yell’s offense was clever and brutal. She tickled the fat part of my palm and—SMAK! slapped my right. She jerked her shoulder and—SMAK! slapped my left. She hypnotized me with eyebrow dances and googely eyes—SMAK! SMAK! SMAK! She half-committed to an attack and made me flinch once. I disengaged, shook the burn out of my hand, reengaged, and—SMAK! She burped in my face and—SMAK!

Either I had smoked too much, or she had five hands. During a rapid fire assault, she faked me out two more times and won the game. She mushed me upside the head and hooted.

My plan was sound in theory, but I had made one awful miscalculation: Yell always won Hot Hands when we were kids. By the time she was done, my hands looked like I had stuck my fist in a bowl full of fire ants. Welts bubbled on my flesh like air trapped in pizza dough. She’d laugh and call me a pussy, a loser, a punk-ass scrub, but I’d keep playing her and playing her until her hands looked just as bad as mine.

She won the next two games, easy. I would rather have been skinned with a dull straight razor rather than face her again, but I held my hands out and beckoned. I told her, “Best three out of five.”

I would play the best twelve out of fifteen to give Vanessa Laquisha Donetta Annette Delores Colt the 4th another chance at life. Shared pain is a crux of love. Accepting scorn that cuts deep and nicks bone is the truest vow. No wise man can tell you that, and even though I’d never be the most faithful brother or greatest mentor, I could do this one thing: offer my flesh and endure.

Yell rolled her eyes and popped her neck. She adjusted the chunky bracelets on her wrists, smirked, and took my hands in hers.