

Crash
Anonymous, Peabody College

Crash.

The girl's heart stopped, then resumed, beating twice as fast as normal (though the abnormal was starting to become normal, so perhaps it just beat twice as fast as it did half the time). She removed her headphones, sighed, and checked the time.

12:06 am.

Much earlier than usual.

For a second, the girl did not move. Then she got up and opened the door to the living room and kitchen. She scanned the floor first. Nothing but a beer can fresh from the freezer sideways against the wall. And her mother, of course, standing (if one could call it that) over it.

"Are you okay?" the girl asked, rote.

"I'm fine. I was just—holding my water."

Her mother was, indeed, holding a frozen bottle of water.

"I think you dropped something."

Neither of them looked at the beer can.

Her mother hesitated to answer. "I know."

"Okay."

Then the girl's mother suddenly came stumbling toward the girl and her bedroom. The girl did not flinch, though she wanted to run. But nowhere she could run would be far enough.

Her mother stopped a few feet away. They stared at each other. The girl did not move. The mother swayed involuntarily back and forth and sometimes side to side. Her sock-covered feet in her broken plastic slip-on shoes probably didn't help, but the girl thought the grip might be preventing her from actually hitting the ground.

"Are we just going to stare at each other?"

"You came to me. I was waiting for you to speak."

"I was waiting for you."

"I have nothing to say."

Her mother lurched forward on her toes. She stopped. She stood at an angle for a bit, trying to pretend she meant it. Then she righted herself.

Her mother had been standing in that same spot two hours earlier, when she had said,

“I’m sorry I can’t do anything right.”

And the girl had replied,

“Well there’s one thing you could do.”

And the mother said,

“That’s what you say.”

And that had been that.

So by this point, two hours later, the girl was angry and tired and knew this meant it would be a long night of listening for more sounds, louder and scarier sounds, coming from the kitchen.

So she said,

“You can’t even stand straight.”

And her mother pulled her feet together, which had previously been sticking out to opposite sides of the house, and pulled her chest into a proper posture, which the girl appreciated, and stuck her chin out.

Then she fell forward as if she had been pushed abruptly from behind and went careening arms first into the girl’s doorframe. Again, the girl didn’t flinch. No use.

The mother did not move. The girl did not move. They looked at each other with pity and anger (and maybe a bit of fear). Finally, the girl’s mother spoke. (Though “spoke” may be too nice a word, the words came out garbled, and the girl could only understand them because she had had twenty years of practice.)

“You know what? You’re being bad.”

“Because I don’t want you to fall down the stairs and kill yourself?”

If she were being honest, the girl had been thinking a lot recently about her mother falling down the stairs and killing herself. Just last night, around four, she had heard a large sound coming from downstairs and didn’t get out of bed to check on it like usual. And when she heard her father go down there the next morning, she was both sad and relieved not to hear him screaming in terror at the sight of her mother’s blood all over the floor.

And yet, she stayed up and waited. Though she no longer imagines herself wrapping a string around her mother's body and holding it steady as she descends the old wooden steps.

Her mother went back to the refrigerator and opened the door. She pulled out a water bottle, though this one didn't belong to her, and she was already holding one in her hand. She put it back. She pulled it out again.

"Are you just going to stand there?"

The girl did not move.

"I just want to see what happens."

Her mother placed the water bottle back in the fridge. She played with the label of the water bottle in her hand and pulled it off. It stuck to her fingers, so she tossed it onto the table. Just another something the girl would have to pick up in the morning as she filled the countless other unlabeled water bottles that perpetually lived on the kitchen counter.

Her mother shut the fridge. And waited. And swayed.

Finally, she reached down to pick up the beer can. She probably should have asked for help, but she knew the girl would not move. Still, she managed to pick it up without toppling herself, and stood again.

The girl's mother turned and walked towards the stairs, almost ending up in the dining room because she was leaning too far left.

"I'm going to fall down the stairs now."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Her mother wobbled down the stairs, making it to the bottom.

The girl did not move.