

Victoria Landazuri

### String of Pearls

The house stood, looming before me like some faded recollection drifting back to the surface of my mind. The cold October air whispered and scratched around me, beckoning me in. And there I was on the sidewalk, feeling tiny as ever. I stood there for a good minute, just staring up at the place. I almost didn't know what I was doing here; part of me wanted to just get back in the car, to turn around and go back to my family, those faces who looked at me with such love. But I knew this would be my only chance, and if I didn't go in I'd regret it forever.

Stephen had asked if he should come along. Emily echoed the words in her little bird voice, staring up at me with those brown eyes that matched her father's. They'd both wanted to see the house where I'd grown up, now that my mother had finally sold it after years of silence. Perhaps they'd imagined something different from what it was. Something prettier. But a few short words and a look made it clear that this was something I had to do alone. I took a long, frozen breath, slowly in, slowly out, and started towards the porch, a feeling I couldn't name rising in my chest.

The ancient, twisted wooden steps groaned under my weight like an old man in his death throes. I imagined that was the first thing the new owners would have fixed. I felt around in the potted plant on the railing, fishing out the key that Mom said would be there. I stuck the key in the lock and turned it like I'd done so many times before, the door yielding with a satisfying click. And with one more hesitant pause, shorter this time, I crossed the threshold.

The house was a ghost of what it had once been; most of the old furniture had already been carted out, and it looked like Mom had given up on cleaning as soon as the place had been sold. The living room was dead silent, with no trace of the life it had once held, none of the hurried footsteps that grew slower and heavier as we aged, none of the laughing or yelling that had followed me throughout my childhood. But the second the smell hit my nose, it all came rushing back to me. That smell, that woody, dusty sweet smell had always been there, never changing no matter how much we did. I'd never really taken much notice of it before, but right at that moment it felt like the most beautiful thing in the world. It calmed me, reassured me, and I felt some semblance of home. My original home, not the second home I shared with my husband and daughter. And then I just wanted to see it all, drink in every last detail etched into the wooden paneled walls one last time before my chance was gone.

I took a few steps farther into the living room, hardly noticing the scuffed floor. With a tiny excitement I spotted the notches drawn on the side of the archway that led to the dining room, black against the white paint. We'd drawn those notches to measure how tall we'd gotten, me and Elliot and Brian. We always knew how it would turn out: Brian would be the tallest, Elliot just an inch or two shorter, and then me, ever the midget. At some point Brian, in all the four years he had on me and the two he had on Elliot, dismissed it as juvenile, deciding he was too cool (and too tall) to play our little game. But that didn't stop us; we'd continued the tradition for years after that, before it eventually died out. I kept walking.

The massive old oak table still stood in the dining room. I guess Mom hadn't yet found the manpower to carry it out. The corners of it were the slightest bit worn and worried where

I'd used to gnaw at them when no one was looking. I'm told I was a biter as a baby. Before I even had teeth, I would want to eat anything I could get my chubby little hands on. Instead of playing with me, my toddler brothers would just offer me their fingers to chew on. My aunt Talia used to have a photo taped on her fridge of me biting her nose when she'd brought my face too close to hers. Of course, Mom would be horrified whenever she caught me trying to take a bite out of the table, but that certainly didn't stop me from trying.

I didn't get much easier to deal with once I'd grown out of diapers. When my brothers and I were too young to object, she would have us all eat together at that table, maybe in the hopes that we could bond as a family. We'd never get much bonding done though; a typical Madigan family dinner usually involved Brian taunting, Elliot whining, and me, little Kate, playing absently with whatever doll held my attention that week. Of course, usually someone would get food in my hair and that poor little doll would end up chucked at the perpetrator, all devotion to it forgotten. Let it never be said that I couldn't hold my own against my brothers. And poor Mom, caught in the crossfire, trying her damndest to keep us all in line. Dad would never say a word, just buried himself behind his newspaper, despite Mom's objections. He never once glanced over to look at any of us, even if we weren't fighting. As we grew older, the dinners grew less and less eventful, and after a while stopped altogether. We were just too busy doing other things, I guess; Elliot would be furiously doing homework or working, Brian would be out with his friends or with some girl (or both), and I'd busy myself with being an antisocial teenager. That alone took up a lot of my time, now that I thought about it. Past the table lay the sliding door out to the yard, where'd I'd sit out on the prickly hot grass when it was

warm and write poetry. Looking back, my poems were terrible, but at the time they were my masterpiece, a perfect window into my tragic, misunderstood soul.

Yeah, I don't know either.

The colder seasons brought a different sort of memory. One evening it was snowing out, and Mom had made some hot chocolate. I was in one of those moods where I didn't feel like she was trying to ruin my life, and I sidled up to sit beside her on the couch. After a content silence that can only be brought about by hot chocolate, she began to tell me a story. One day, years ago, on a day just like that one, I'd somehow gotten out of the house and into the snow. I was about four or five, if Mom remembered correctly. I guess I had never seen snow before; I'd wandered around the yard for a good amount of time, just playing and marveling at the perfect whiteness. Mom had noticed I wasn't in the house and came looking for me. A thousand terrible thoughts went through her mind when I came rushing back into the house some time later, cheeks flaming, tears and snot running down my face, wailing that I'd seen a ghost. She'd gotten me to stop sobbing long enough to tell her that I'd seen someone out in the yard. Frightened, she went out into the cold, ordering me to stay inside. But the yard was completely empty, save for my little tracks across the snow-covered dirt. We never did find out who it was, or if there had even been anything there, despite my insistence that I'd seen it. I didn't ask Mom if she'd seen any tracks other than mine, any bigger tracks; something told me the thought was too uncomfortable for her to say out loud. I myself don't remember this at all; on some nights after she'd told me that story, I would lie awake and try to recall that day.

Sometimes, for a fleeting moment, I thought I could see it on the edge of my consciousness, a nameless, faceless shadow, coming slowly towards me, its feet crunching on the frost.

The couch we'd sat on all those years ago, that mass of cherry wood and faded red velvet, was gone, now just a rectangle on the floor where the wood was darker than the rest. I couldn't help feeling a twinge of sadness; that couch had been there for as long as I could remember. In my lazier days I'd lie there on my side for hours on end, staring mindlessly at the TV. Of course, I was usually kicked off so that Brian could offer his girlfriend of the month a seat, and then proceed to do the exact same thing I had. Or make out sloppily, but I'd usually left the room by then, so I couldn't be sure. I couldn't count how many times that had happened, or even how many girls he'd been with over the years. They'd all kind of melded together for me. They were all the same anyway: slender, pretty, usually blonde, quiet because they didn't have much to say, giggly when Brian said something "clever," and apparently rude to their boyfriends' little sisters. I'd gotten so many dirty looks from each of them every time I walked by, as if I were interrupting something. I couldn't imagine what; it's not like they were actually *talking*. I didn't really mind though. I was almost amused by it. *Enjoy it while you can, bitch*, I would think. *He'll get bored of you. He always does.*

I tried not to think about why girls liked him so much. I mean, to me he was just Brian, my big brother who could be a dick sometimes, but was generally a nice guy. Still, I guess I could see what attracted people to him. He was tall, athletic, good-looking, his red-brown hair always perfectly tousled (I couldn't for the life of me figure out how he did that. He just rolled out of bed looking like that.). And he really did have a way with people, a sort of charm that I

could tell was wasted on the idiot girls he dated. He could talk someone into doing a lot of things for him. Hell, he did that to me practically every day when I was too young to say no. And when I'd finished doing his chores or whatever he'd asked, he'd give me a smile, that smile that came so easily to his face, and he'd reach out and ruffle my hair, like I was a damn puppy. Then came the day when I figured out how to tell him to fuck off and do it himself, and he never asked me for favors ever again. He knew better.

Elliot never had girlfriends the way Brian did. Or if he did, he never brought them home, or even really talked about them. He probably could have, if he'd wanted to. He was just as cute as Brian, if a little skinnier. And he could be nice, when he wanted to. The thing is, I don't think he *did* want to. He was just kind of born with this quiet snark about him. His tongue could burn like acid when someone pissed him off enough, though usually he would just brood in silence when that happened. His humor was about the same; a joke meant to be funny could easily hurt someone, and after a while he just stopped trying to make people laugh. It seemed he would much rather bury himself in books and work. He was weird about the whole topic of dating too. I could never tell if he was dismissive of it, or if it just made him uncomfortable. Brian tried to figure this out practically every day, though. He would constantly nag Elliot about why he didn't have a girlfriend. Whether it was out of a genuine interest in his brother's life, or a desire to get on his nerves, I wasn't sure. A little of both, I think.

"Come on, I think you'd enjoy it." Brian had purred one day, stretching across the couch and laying his head in Elliot's lap, directly on top of his homework. I was precariously perched on the armrest. "I know plenty of girls who would kill to have a Madigan boy."

“Speaking from experience, I take it?” Elliot said dryly, shooing him away. “I’m not touching anything your mouth has been on.” Brian sat up at that.

“What’s the problem, little brother? I’m trying to help you. A good fuck might loosen you up a little.”

“What are we talking about here? Sex or a girlfriend?”

“Are the two mutually exclusive?”

“No. I just...leave me alone.” Elliot scooted away.

“Leave him alone, Brian.” I said, giving him my best little-sister glare. Even if he tried to hide it, I knew this was a touchy subject for Elliot. I think Brian knew that too. He ignored me though.

“Okay, then, maybe we should just find you a nice big man to cuddle up to.”

“Shut up.” Elliot and I said in unison. I could see Elliot’s face turning red.

“I mean, not that there’s anything *wrong* with that.” Brian smiled, eyes shining, his voice dripping sweet. “Everyone’s gay once in a while.”

I think I punched him then. Or Elliot did, I don’t remember. It wasn’t a hard punch, just enough to shut him up. He did, for a bit; a couple weeks later, though, he started right back up again. So it went.

There were a million more memories that came and went with that couch. They were all so faded, so many that they made my head swim. I stared down at the floor, suddenly

wondering if I should keep going. *This is your only chance*, I repeated to myself. I turned and headed for the stairs.

Upstairs the house was even emptier. My old bedroom was completely bare; there was absolutely no trace of the little girl named Kate who had lived and grown up in here, and who now had a little girl of her own. I only stopped in there for a second before backing out; there was nothing to see in there anymore, which to me was even sadder than the couch's absence. I imagined Brian and Elliot's rooms would be just as empty. I was almost ready to leave. *Just one more stop*, I thought as I headed down the dusty hall. The door to my parents' room was slightly ajar, as if inviting me in. Their bed and Mom's old dresser was still there. When I was little I used to rummage around on the dresser top and put on any makeup and jewelry I could find, until Elliot caught me at it one day.

"Don't I look pretty?" I had chirped, bright red lipstick smeared around my mouth. Elliot looked at me for a second, the tiniest hint of a smile on his lips.

"Wash that off," he'd said before walking out, "you look like a baby prostitute." How he had known what that meant at age ten, I have no idea. I imagine Brian told him. But no one had told me; a few weeks later my recently-engaged aunt Talia was showing her wedding dress to Mom, her face all done up along with the dress. She'd looked down at me and grinned.

"How do I look, Katie?" she'd said. I smiled toothily back at her. Then, in my brightest voice, I said it.

"Like a *grown-up* prostitute, Auntie Talia."



I guess I just thought it meant a person who wore makeup. I wasn't *totally* wrong. Regardless, any plans she'd had of making me the flower girl went up in flames right there. The honor went to my cousin instead. And I hated them both for it.

It was only a couple years later that the arguments started. It was the middle of the night when I was woken up by raised voices coming from my parents' room. I'd crept down the hall towards the crack of light coming from the door. I didn't catch most of the fight, but through that crack I could see Mom, her face flushed, brandishing what looked like an earring at Dad. As young as I was, I knew this was something I wasn't supposed to see. So, as quietly as I could, I snuck back to my room while the argument continued, got back under the blankets, and tried my best to sleep. A few days later I'd worked up the courage to ask my brothers what was going on. The room they were sharing at the time was right next to my parents; they must have heard it too. Elliot said nothing, staring stonily at the floor. But after a bit of prying, his mouth set in a tight line, Brian said simply,

"That earring isn't Mom's."

"So?" I'd said. Brian's mouth tightened further.

"She found it in Dad's car."

Some part of me knew what he'd meant, but it took a long time, years maybe, for it to really sink in. Things were hard after that. A lot of silence, a lot of secrets. I'm still not sure my parents knew that we were aware of what was happening. Either way, they never talked to us about it together. It just wasn't something you wanted to discuss. From then on they'd tried to

keep their problems quiet, and we did the same. Over the years I said nothing, Brian grew bitter and distant, and Elliot grew flat-out angry. One evening, when just the three of us were home, they got into a fight too. I'd walked in to find Elliot pinning Brian on the floor, yelling in his face. From what I could gather, Elliot had wanted to confront Dad, after years of silence, and Brian tried to talk him out of it, which I guess Elliot took to mean that he was on Dad's side. I'd never seen Elliot that angry before, and never did again. My voice joined the yelling as I tried, to no effect, to pull my brothers off of each other. Eventually Elliot just got up and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. I turned my attention to Brian.

"What the hell did you do?" I fumed at him. He looked down at the floor, breathing heavily.

"Don't interfere, Kate." He said quietly. "I don't want you involved too."

"Well, tough shit!" I screamed, all determination to play dumb gone, "We're all involved!"

I don't know if Elliot ever did talk to Dad. If he did, I don't think he got the answer he'd wanted. For all his snarky talk, Elliot was always one to fix things. He had a very clear idea of how the world should be, how people should act. But Dad didn't fit that idea, and this wasn't something Elliot could fix. Over the years, his tidy, orderly world fell apart because of this, yet he kept it locked up inside, hardly talking to even me about it. We all just went on with our lives the best we could, despite everything. And now, years later, here I stood again, staring at my parents' aged bed, the strange emptiness I'd felt since Dad died coming back to me. It had been in this very room, I realized in numb shock. He'd been here alone when it happened. A heart

attack, the coroners said later. It had been after he came home from a run. He never went to the gym like Mom did. He always went running. It helped him think, he used to say. And we never took into account all the smoking and drinking; it seemed so much a part of him that I guess I never really noticed. Mom had been the one who found him. I was fifteen.

Something in me snapped then. For a while I just didn't care about anything. I got into fights over stupid things, slept with boys I didn't really care about, slacked off at school. He didn't notice when I was a virgin who got straight A's and didn't drink or do drugs, why would he care about what I was doing now? It was like I had nothing to prove then. Nothing to lose.

Brian moved out of town not long after that. We depended on him and Mom to hold it together. But this was something he couldn't talk his way out of, like he did with every other problem in his life. When it came down to it, he just couldn't face the hard stuff. After all these years of defending him, telling myself that he had a good reason for leaving, I'm willing to admit that. We don't talk much anymore; he has a life of his own now, one that I don't think includes us anymore. And Elliot, poor Elliot, he stayed where he was, just trying to keep us all together. What was left of us, anyway. It was clear that with Brian gone, he felt like the responsibility fell to him. I think he still blames Brian for walking out on us. I hope he doesn't.

I still talk to him and Mom. Strange as it was to think about it, the last time I had been to this house had been about ten years ago, for her birthday. I was just out of college, still deciding what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. All of our old neighbors were there. Elliot was there too; we hadn't been able to get in touch with Brian. Mom insisted on making her own cake. She seemed so happy, surrounded by her old friends and children.

But something changed after that day; she never invited us back to the house again. When we got together she always wanted to meet somewhere else, like a restaurant or our houses. One day I had worked up the courage to ask her why. It was not long after Emily had been born, and while the baby slept we had coffee. Mom was silent for a long time, staring into the blackness of her cup. When she finally spoke her eyes were distant.

“I don’t know, Kate. It’s just that...it doesn’t feel right anymore, seeing you and Elliot in our house without Brian and your father being there.” She looked up. “Don’t get me wrong, having you and your brother with me last time was more than I ever could have asked for. I just miss the days when it was all of us together. And I think that house brings out the worst of that thought.”

We talked some more after that, about a lot of things. About Dad, about my brothers, about Stephen and Emily. But there were still more things I wish I had said. In the years that followed the talks grew less and less frequent, until the day that Mom called to ask me how I would feel if she sold the house. Even over the phone, I could hear the sadness in her voice. She just wasn’t happy living there anymore. I don’t think she had been for a while.

Some sort of madness took hold of me, and I crossed the room to lie down on the old bed. I lay there for what felt like hours, just staring up at the dim ceiling. It was hard to even remember Dad’s face after all these years. As hard as I tried, parts of him were still in shadow. I wondered what he was thinking in his final moments, if his life flashed before his eyes like in the stories. I wondered if, for at least one moment, he regretted what he’d done. I wondered if he thought of Mom, of Elliot and Brian.

I wondered if he thought of me.

I'd been selfish all these years, I realized. I'd spent all those years going down my own shame spiral, not thinking about how it must have hurt for everyone else too. I didn't stop to appreciate the things I should have either. I loved my family, my parents and brothers and Stephen and Emily, loved them more than anything. But so much was bandaged over, so much hidden away that I couldn't share all of me with them. All of these memories, those I'd shared and those I never voiced, strung together like pearls. Some bright with hope, some black with fear and sadness. And some, dull and mundane, having no lasting impact on the ones around them. I was ready to share them now. I would talk to Elliot, apologize for everything I put him through, when it must have been just as bad for him, and maybe try to convince him to have a talk with Brian. I would see Mom again, after all those years she'd spent alone in this house, where we'd been too focused on our own lives to see her as much as we should have. And I'd call Brian, make him feel welcome again despite the distance that had driven us apart. I would find answers to all the questions I'd been too afraid to voice before. It wasn't going to be easy, but I would do it. I stretched and got up from the sagging mattress, closing the door behind me. I wanted nothing more than to go home then, to see Stephen and tell little Emily a story. I won't tell her everything; I won't tell her about the mattress or the earring or the ghost in the snow. Not now, at least. But I would pull out some bright pearl from my life and tell her all about it.