

THE RUNAWAY (I)

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

WHEN THE PHONE CALL COMES, Josh is upstairs, in his room, listening to Eric Clapton on earphones and fingering the guitar frets. The ring breaks through the music, a tinny whine, and at first he thinks the CD is going bad. The song ends, the phone keeps ringing, and Josh knows something is wrong. It is eleven at night.

He removes the earphones and places his uncle Jeremiah's guitar carefully on his bed. It's his dad calling, he knows, another church Board meeting gone late, but still Josh's stomach knots, the way it balled tight the last time the phone rang this late two years ago. The Army captain had called from far away, his voice crackly from static, and on the extension Josh heard the man describe how Jeremiah was airlifted to a hospital in Germany, he had gotten blown up in Afghanistan, and if they wanted to see him, they should go before he died. His uncle didn't die, but he lost a leg and broke three vertebrae, and the thought of seeing him crippled in a wheelchair unable to hunt, to walk, to be normal, makes Josh too uncomfortable to visit him fifteen hundred miles away in South Dakota.

Josh creeps down the stairs. Downstairs, light from the kitchen leaks into the living room. The new cream sofa looks like some obscene ghost. He likes the sound of this phrase—obscene ghost—and wonders how to work it into lyrics.

Mom sits at the table, murmuring into the phone. She always murmurs. She used to yell, a lot, or at least express herself with a loud voice, but now she just mutters under her breath. Her voice used to embarrass Josh, especially in public. It didn't matter if the gym was packed for the concert or she was at the other end of the mall, Josh could always hear her voice, stalking him. But now, she's quiet most of the time. She went quiet when she returned from Germany after seeing Jeremiah. Then, the church crap took away

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what was left of her mojo. She lets Josh have his way most of the time, but there are times when he would rather her scream at him than lock herself into the garage with her canvases and paints.

Ice clinks. Her fingers grip the glass so hard he is sure it will splinter in her hand.

"Yes, yes," she says and slugs back the rest of the drink. "So it is done. At last."

She hangs up and stares at the door, as if she expects it to open any minute. Josh's stomach flip-flops and he tries to remember the couch, the cool descriptive he thought up. She stands up and walks to the door, takes the keys from the hook, still in dad's old pajama bottoms. Josh likes that his mom wears his father's clothes. She slides into her Crocs and opens the door.

There is no sound—not her feet on the linoleum, not the door creaking open, not the sound of crickets. The car starts, soundless. The headlights carve a path through the dark, a camera flash in the window as she backs the Civic out the driveway. Her purse still hangs on the knob by the door, and seeing it is all that keeps Josh from freaking out because he knows she can't go too far or too long without her purse.

