

What's Done, What's Left to Do

by Melanie Yarbrough

When she was just a little bit younger, Dana wanted to be known around town as something other than the girl who used up all the machines at the laundromat with her little brothers' Spiderman underwear and her grandpa's pants soiled with God-knows-what. Something other than the movie theater girl whose fingers always felt slightly greasy no matter how many times she washed, who often had popcorn in her hair from snacking while the movies played. When she married Conor Philips, the recent Georgia Southern grad who started working at the high school the year she graduated, she felt that she'd begun to shed those versions of herself. They married in the summer after she walked across the field in a purple gown with gold tassels. Everyone knew what that meant — that a student and a teacher had been romantic while one was a student and one was a teacher — but to admit that that happened between people with a forgivable age gap would be admitting it happened between others, and those were cans that remained closed unless pried open.

She didn't fully stop feeling like that girl until almost a year later, when she baked her first-born in the backseat of her Honda Civic parked in front of the Winn Dixie. She'd forgotten he was back there, the way she sometimes forgot to cut her nails before leaving the house or forgot the milk at the grocery store that she'd gone specifically to get. She'd forgotten the milk that particular day, not remembering until she reached the threshold of the store, where the blasting air conditioner met the hot air from outside and created a palpable barrier, like the place that feels like a moment where a rainstorm begins and ends. She'd turned back around, muttering some obscenity and rolling her eyes at herself as the cashier who'd

just rung her up swiped the perspiring gallon across the sticky checkout counter.

Later, in the parking lot, sitting Indian style on the hot asphalt amidst the sharp sounds of the ambulances and the cops shouting — what had they shouted at her? — she didn't allow herself to calculate the time she'd spent backtracking to the refrigerated aisle for the milk, the seconds spent deciding between the 2% milk her husband preferred and the fat free that she felt she needed after having Ben, God rest his soul. The time — “the critical minutes,” the doctors said — that she could've reversed the heat's damage. She tried not to picture the blisters, the open mouth, the sweat that at first she thought were tears. Of all of the horrible things she'd feared for her son, she'd never seen this one coming. This was not a broken heart, a college rejection letter, a fractured bone.

Conor came from school; his hair was mussed and he was crying. She had not been the one to call him, and she was surprised to see his red pickup pull into the parking lot. She watched as the cops tried to turn him around, realizing too late that he was the father, that he was allowed to witness the rolling away of his son. They waved him through, and even in his hurry he pulled the truck perfectly into a spot. He didn't see Dana at first and she sat watching him. Since the afternoon when she realized the crush she'd developed on her English teacher was reciprocated, she had always seen Conor as someone in charge of her, as though she'd simply passed between babysitters. With the overlap, she'd never felt the lull between school and everything else. That afternoon, with the asphalt's heat numbing her thighs through her jeans, was the first she felt the emptiness of an ending. She watched Conor punch the side of her car. She saw in his face that this was not something he was prepared to overcome; they would not band together. She picked at the edge of her tennis shoe and knew her husband would leave her.

Her trial fell a week after Conor packed up a suitcase and headed to Memphis to his parents' house. He couldn't drive around on those streets anymore, he said. She pretended to understand, pretended that the world was not tilted slightly since what happened, that she couldn't look at things straight anymore for fear she'd lose her balance. She was in a constant state of motion sickness.

The night he left, she stood in her parents' doorway, a familiar stance she'd taken many times as a child. Her father was asleep; her mother, still up, was thumbing through an old Reader's Digest and moved over to make room. Her mother held her and did not say anything. All she'd had to do was keep her son alive, and now all that was left were so many things that were easier.

