

Men Don't Leave Me

by Roxane Gay

Father left on a Thursday. He took only a green vinyl suitcase filled with his clothes and the pack of cigarettes he always left on the small table near the front door. He didn't hug me. He didn't hug any of us. Instead, he shook my hand, his grip so firm I felt the bones of my hands crumbling in on themselves. His palm was sweaty but lodged in the center of it was something square and hard that he left pressed to my hand. He did not say goodbye to my mother, my sister, my brother. He planted his hat firmly on his head and as he made his way to his car, he kicked our toys and bicycles out of the way, clearing a path for himself.

I ran up to my room, closed the door behind me, then leaned against it and sank to the floor. In my hand, a tightly folded square of paper. I brought my hand to my nose, could smell my father's cigarettes and his cologne, bourbon. I carefully opened the note. In his precise handwriting, an address and the words "our secret, and in my chest, a bright splintering rush of joy.

The next day after school, instead of going home with my siblings, I told them I had things to do. I took a bus to the other side of town watching the buildings sag lower and lower, their facades growing darker, tagged with graffiti, the people became more hunched and hollow. I took the bus all the way to a trailer park where laundry hung outside to dry and loud salsa music blared from cars on cinder blocks and Christmas lights lined every door. It was the most perfect place I had ever seen. I knocked on an aluminum door bearing the address in my father's note and after a while, a woman wearing a thin, gauzy pink robe answered the door. She had a long face and dark circles beneath her eyes. Her cheekbones were incredibly high and her nose ran to a neat little point, then turned up. Her lips were painted dark brown and she smelled like sex, or what I imagined sex smelled like, and too much perfume. She looked down at me in my tank top, torn jeans, canvas sneakers and sniffed, then stood to the side, one arm holding the doorjamb. I ducked

beneath her and found my father, bare-chested, sitting on an easy chair, smiling. He slapped the card tray next to him, sending its contents flying every which way. "I knew my girl would come," he said. "I just knew it."

The story would become that my father ran away and no one knew where he was. My mother shared the story with anyone who would listen—my siblings and I, our teachers, our friends' mothers, her boyfriends, her boss. With each telling, his leaving became more dramatic, more violent. "That man just walked out on his children. That's what hurts the most," she would say. "They had to see him, screaming at us as he walked out the door, his filthy spit flying everywhere. He broke a window. He cut me here," and she would hold out her arm, pointing to an invisible scar. Father never called, never stopped by. Eventually, my mother and brother and sister forgot about him, and my mother remarried—a guy named Steve who managed a McDonald's and always brought us cold French fries at the end of his shift. My mother acted like those fries were something more than they were. She held her arms wide open to him and his polyester uniform and said she loved a man who tasted like salt and grease.

Until I graduated, I visited my father in his trailer every day. He worked the late shift so he was just waking up when I stopped by. He let me drink coffee and sometimes, beer and pretended he could help me while I did my homework. He told me why he left, recounted my mother's transgressions, told me how he wished he could have taken me with him but my mother would have never let me go. He told me how much he loved me, how I was different, I was his. Some nights, I came home late. My mother would be sitting on the couch in the family room next to Steve, her legs draped over his, drinking beer in foam sleeves. She'd inhale deeply and frown, say, "You smell like your father," and I would shrug and enjoy a terrible thrill knowing he was with me, in my skin. Lying in my bed, I recalled each perfect details of our visits—his crowded trailer, his girlfriend who never wore anything but thin bathrobes while she made us fried chicken and eggs, the ashtrays piled with stale

cigarette butts, his boozy laugh, his wet lips against my neck, his hand in the small of my back. I fell asleep every single night holding the note he left me, holding our secret, feel its warmth pulsing in my hand.

