

Broken

By Christopher Shiner

Betty zinged from stovetop to refrigerator to kitchen table like a bumblebee, her high-pitched whistling reverberated off the walls, both singsongy and piercing.

“God, mom, what is that smell? What the hell are you doing?” Jacob asked as he slid his backpack under the kitchen table and slumped down into a chair.

“Making breakfast, dear, eggs and bacon and waffles!” Betty chimed.

The air in the kitchen had become a fogbank. Smoke issued from the stovetop and griddle in charcoal streams. The ceiling over the stove was covered in soot and grease like black cotton balls stuck to the ceiling tiles. As she flipped the crackling bacon, a stillness crept over her. She stood motionless over the skillet, staring through it. The eggs and bacon dissolved before her mind.

*“Where are you going? Danny, please, just tell me where you going?”*

*“None of your fucking business. And I swear to God, if you follow me I’ll make your left eye match your right.”*

*“Who is she?”*

*“Shut up! Will you just shut up! I said it’s none of your business.” Danny pawed her neck with a big clubby hand and slammed her head against the kitchen cabinets, shaking the cabinet doors open. Dishes cascaded over the side.*

“Mom!” Jacob shouted. “Earth to mom, we need you back at base camp.”

Betty’s head shook a few times. “Just a minute,” she warbled. Betty scraped the eggs and bacon onto a plate, and pried the waffle out of the griddle. She set the plate in front of him with a smile. Jacob gawked at the plate; its contents looked like the charred ruins of a bombed-out building. He couldn’t tell where the eggs began and the waffle ended.

“Have you heard from him yet?” asked Jacob.

“Who, dear?” Betty asked as she glided over to the sink and turned on the faucet.

“Danny, mom, have you heard from Danny? Who else would I be talking about?”

Jacob winced at the burned wreckage on his plate and pushed it away from him. “I heard you guys again last night. You think I could sleep through that? Why do you let him treat you that way! I hate him!”

“Well, I just don’t know, sweetheart. I thought maybe you were talking about one of your cute little friends.” Betty picked up the broken shard of a white china plate from the sink and began to scrub it clean. “You better eat all your breakfast, sweetie, you’re still a growing boy who needs to keep himself big and strong.” As she stared at the china plate, it too began to melt from her vision.

*“Listen, you dumb bitch! How many times do I have say the word ‘divorce’ till you realize we’re getting one. You know, I almost get tired of having to beat sense into you. You think I was going to wait till I had another place, to start seeing someone who could hold my interest for more than five fuckin’ seconds?” Danny grappled her wrists and brought her face-to-face. “Go bake a cake or something. Being able to cook is about all you’re good for anymore.”*

“Mom, just stop. You don’t have pretend like nothing’s wrong. I’m not a little kid you have to protect. I swear, I didn’t know that he had been sleeping around on-”

“Stop what, dear?” Betty singsonged. “Are you going to stay at Johnny’s tonight? What a sweet young man.” Betty continued to pick up the broken shards of dishes soaking in the dishwater and vigorously scrubbed them, whistling a little now and then.

Jacob stared a little harder at his mother. Darkened bruises ringed her wrists and purple splotches spotted her neck and face, all badly concealed under heavy makeup.

“I’ll kill him if he ever comes back, I swear to God! I’ll take a baseball bat to the side of his stupid face if he ever comes near you like that again,” Jacob said, as he opened up the kitchen window and the side door in order to clear some of the smoke that still clung to the room.

“Jacob! Now that’s no way to talk about your father.” Betty said, in a soft, motherly voice. “Your father and I have had our difficulties lately, but there is nothing to worry about. We’ll work everything out, I just know we will.” Betty gave a wide smile of reassurance, scooped up his untouched plate, and made her way towards the trashcan. As she moved, the floor sounded like gravel as her shoes crunched tiny broken dish shards scattered all over it. Betty tossed the entire plate, food and all, into the trash, and turned to wipe off the tabletop. “Oh, my goodness, what time is it? Jacob, you better be going to school, you don’t want to be late.”

“Screw school, what the hell is the matter with you!? Why are you acting like this, are you on crack? Just stop it! It’s all right mom, I hate him too! You don’t have to hide it.”

“Hide what dear?”

“That’s it, I’m staying home from school. I’m not leaving you alone today. He might come back, and you’ll need me here to protect you.”

*“Keep Jacob out of this, he’s a whiner just like you! My God, I can’t believe I’ve put up with this shit for so long. Oh, and don’t worry about my taking your precious car.”*

*She's picking me up. And don't you come to the door when she does, or I swear I'll make you and that little pansy shit pay for it later."*

Betty shook her head with short little grunts, trying to clear her head. "Nonsense, you are not playing hooky. Your father and I will be all right. You're going to school young man, and that's that. Okay, sweetie?"

"You'll be all right? You haven't talked to him since he ran out last night after he beat--"

"Now Jacob, really, that's enough of all this nonsense. Go to school, sweetie, and when you get home I'll make a nice big dinner for you. Then maybe we can play Monopoly or something."

"No! You never stand up for yourself! Never! I'll call the police, we'll get a restraining order."

"We'll do nothing of the kind, sweetie. Honestly, you're so full of fire sometimes, just like your father."

Jacob's eyes filled with tears that crashed down his cheeks as he shouted. "He's not my father! Stop saying that! I'm nothing like him! Nothing! Not ever! I'm not leaving! I'm not! He's never touching you again!" Jacob's face scrunched up as he bolted down the hallway. The slam of his bedroom door echoed through the house.

Betty shook her head and hummed to herself again as she finished wiping off the counter. "Oh goodness, will you look at that," she said, noticing a fallen picture beside the kitchen pantry. Its glass cover lay in jagged fragments on the floor. "Oh, Danny's favorite Norman Rockwell. He'll be furious. Well, nothing that a new frame won't fix. I just need a hammer and nail."

Betty placed the picture on the kitchen table and headed for the hallway. Sunlit shafts of hazy light broke into the hallway at odd angles. The shafts looked like broken shards floating around the dim silhouette of her body as she walked towards a door at the end of the hallway. Betty creaked the door open and turned on the basement light. The rotting wooden steps descended into the gray dark and disappeared. Approaching the bottom, she flicked on another switch by the bottom step and the room brightened in musty illumination. Dingy cardboard boxes lined the basement in the back to her left, along with old pieces of furniture, toys, bicycles, and tons of gaudy knickknacks. She reached into her dress, took out a large key, and approached a rusty metal door in the middle of the farthest wall to her right. With a hard clank the deadbolt released, the door screeched back on its hinges and opened to a small concrete room about twelve feet in length and width, with a drain hole in the middle of the floor. She slid her hand up the outer wall, found the switch and flicked it on. A naked bulb overhead plunged the room in sterile light. Betty immediately shielded her eyes and sucked in a huge drought of air.

*“God, you look gorgeous.”*

*“Danny, now quit it... do I really?” a strange voice said.*

*She could hear them on the porch. Slowly she reached for the front doorknob, gently twisted it in its socket and swept the door backwards on its hinges. There they were. In each other's arms. Lightning sprang through her brain. It burned down her spine and back up through her skull.*

*“What the hell are you doing? I told you to stay inside! Or was I just talking to myself again?”*

*“Danny, who is this?” the woman said. She was as tall as Danny, dark chestnut hair broke over her shoulders. She wore a black sequenced gown that glittered in the moonlight. Very pretty. Very very pretty.*

*“It’s nobody.” He looked Betty dead in the eyes. “Nobody.”*

Betty grunted the vision away again. She walked over to a large workbench that sat against the back wall. She opened a drawer, found a hammer, and started to look for just the right nail.

“Sweetie, you really ought to talk to your son, he’s getting quite distraught over this whole matter. I really can’t blame him, all of this has been quite stressful.” The figure sitting in a chair in the middle of the room gave no response.

“Well, anyway, what have you been doing all day? Did you work with your tools at all? Ronny called for you, wanted to know if you wanted to get a beer with him and the boys tonight. Of course, I told him you were tired and would maybe like to do it another night.” A skin of moisture clung to the gray cinder block walls. A baseball bat leaned against the back right corner, a dark red streak of dried blood running from its tip to the midpoint. A tiny pool had coagulated into black at the tip. She found a medium sized nail among many containers filled with them, and turned her full attention to the figure slumped in the chair. He was dressed in a pair of black slacks and a dark formfitting sweater. The normal slope of his head was interrupted on his left side, at which point it began an odd concave dip about one inch deep. His buzzed haircut was mottled with a sticky red gel on the side of the injury. The blood had coagulated over his open left eye and congealed down that side of his face. His skin and face had begun to take on the same sick grayish hue and feel of the hard concrete blocks in the walls.

“What did you say? No, I don’t think he’s going to forgive you, at least not for a while. Honestly, sweetie, how did you think he was going to react? Well, that’s just like you, never thinking ahead. Oh, well, you’ll just have to make it up to him. If you ever decide to quit lounging around down here like you always do, maybe you could come up and have a nice normal family dinner like we used to. Okay? Well I can’t stay down here, I’ve got lots of housework to do upstairs. I’ll try not to vacuum too loudly. I wouldn’t want to disturb you while you’re working with your tools. I’ll see you at dinner then? All right, I’ll turn the light back off. I know you like it that way. Have fun.”

Betty turned towards the huge, rusty door, hammer and nail in hand. Her eye caught a long red smear by the light switch. She crept toward the stain with slow, careful steps. The smear ran dark and dull red for two feet from the light switch until it disappeared behind the tall cedar shelves to her left. With her face inches from the dark smear, her head rotated left with odd slowness, and her eyes followed it behind the shelves till they were met with a pair of eyes staring back. The woman’s body was wedged upright between the shelves and the wall, and the smear stopped behind her head. Her hair flowed in thick, chestnut waves over her shoulders and the straps of her black sequenced dress. The sequenced dress glittered a little in the dim light behind the shelves. The little tiny dots of light danced in hypnotic patterns, catching Betty, fixating her. “Very pretty. Very very pretty,” she whispered. Her cheeks became splotchy and flushed. Her breathing sped up hard and short, then, slower, slower, slower. A shrill cry rose from her chest and burst against the walls. Her body heaved as more shrieks wrenched from her throat. Tears scorched down her cheeks and shattered as they crashed against the floor. Gagging reflexes lurched her head up and down as she supported herself against the dried

streak on the wall. Her gagging cries were finally replaced by harsh grunts. Her right hand clamped against her eyes. Her grunting came louder and harder, desperate and harsh. Her head shook violently, hysterically. She clawed at her hair like it was crawling with bugs and she had to get free of them. In time, her breathing steadied and her body slackened. She brought herself upright. A soft hum filled her throat as she straightened out her dress.

“Well, I don’t think Jacob would approve, but, if you like, you can ask your friend to join us for dinner. Up to you, sweetie.” She reached for the light switch and flicked it off, then exited the room and locked it back. As she moved up the steps, her humming echoed down the stairs and back towards the back room with the metal door. The figures inside didn’t even notice.