

She's Back Home

(excerpt from Fragments of Phoebe Copyright Lisa Eismen 2002)

(September of 1968)

My grandmother's butane lighter is hot and the flame is set so high it licks the tip of her nose.

Ouch! She says but keeps moving. They will be home any minute and my grandmother is both excited and nervous. She hustles about the kitchen with a lit cigarette clenched in her fingers. My grandmother is edgy, I can tell because she won't stop smoking and cooking. The oven has been on since early in the morning and there is more food on the kitchen table than there are platters for. Nanna has taken over the house and motherly duties since my mother has been in the hospital.

Not much has been said to me or Austin since she's been gone, but I know something very bad happened when she played that last game that left her bleeding and doubled over into the whites. My father and Nanna would talk deep into the night. The smell of burnt coffee wafts through the air; I cannot remember a time when I hadn't smelt it. My mother has been gone for a long time, in children's time, it is like years but was probably more like a month.

At last, the sound of car wheels on the drive is heard, everyone drops what they're doing. My Nanna licks her hand and smooths down one of my wild red curls with her spit. She yanks on Austin's bow and picks up Ruben. The screen door creaks and my father guides my mother inside to the kitchen table.

She looks at the three of us looking up at her, no one is saying anything because she smells different and looks like a monster. Her head is half shaven and there is black thread sewn onto her left temple. Austin starts to cry. Ruben walks up to her a little bewildered but not frightened and crawls on her lap. He wants the sugar bowl and some of the little Eskimo cookies Nanna has made.

Hello Mama, I say and pull a bunch of handpicked dandelions from behind my back.

She looks at them and says, *I'm tired, I'd like like like to lie...down now.*

The doctors come and go, they give her some sleeping pills and headache pills and now

father is home a lot more than he ever used to be and he acts nervous and he dotes on her when she is around. He sits myself and Austin on his knees and tells us everything will be fine in a voice no one has ever heard him use before. His voice is shaky, it's the same kind of voice he used when he first received the phone call from Mr. Beledere. And now he never seems to talk to any of us without that horrible smell of liquor on his breath and skin.

Mother never seems to want to get dressed anymore and is always in her robe. This is okay with us because now she never makes us get dressed either. All four of us stay in pyjamas all day and eat cereal from a box while dad is at work. She doesn't hold me the same way, if at all. If I am lucky enough to get a kiss from her now, it is a quick sweep on top of my wild and uncombed hair; her kisses are dry and parched and feverishly paced.

She has gotten into the awkward habit of carrying Ruben around wherever she goes. She wakes up one morning and discovers frost edged on the inside of her bedroom window and scrapes it off with her gold lipstick case. She methodically checks each window for frost as if it were a disease.

The house is cold and drafty. Curtains blow with small breezes from the lack of weather stripping and everyone is bundled up with sweaters and socks over their nightgowns.

Winter's..., she mumbles under her breath on her way around house. She is checking the windows for drafts and she puts a hand on a frosty window. Her heat melts the frost and leaves a smudged handprint on the pane. The entourage follows her everywhere, into every room, up to every window she scrapes and pounds on. As if playing follow the leader, I do exactly what she does, and Austin does what I do; scrape after she scrapes, and melt tiny handprints next to hers.

It's cold, she pronounces, *if only...* she trails away again and sometimes entire words are cut in two. Most sentences never get completed, *move to to to to to Florida...* she mumbles as she walks away.

The autumn turns into winter and the frost on the windows turns to ice and enough gathers on the North facing sills to make little ice balls but she says nothing. At least she has stopped complaining about the weather. But some delicate balance between inertia and energy has been disturbed and now she has nothing to concentrate on. Her pacing becomes more frantic

and erratic, it is harder to keep up with her. She mutters things and talks a lot, to no one but Ruben who cannot understand a word she says. It doesn't take her very long to find a new focus. She starts to complain softly at first, under her breath with half finished words and meaningless streams of cut-off phrases about a presence constantly surrounding her. Often enough, I look around for this invisible source of aggravation but cannot find it. And it isn't until the day she purposely backs up onto my barefoot with her fluffy high-heeled slippers that I realise the source of this new provocation is me.