

Cocoa Season

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Right before my mom had to be put in the hospital, she was standing barefoot on the tile floor of our kitchen, screaming at my dad. She walked over to where he stood by the open window and kicked him in the butt. The look on his face made me think he was going to cry, but all that happened was that the banana he was holding got mushed against the counter, and he shouted, “Holy Jesus, Deborah!” My mom started breathing into a brown bag and looked like a zombie with her wet eyeliner seeping from her sockets.

I sat where I was, poking a spoon at some Cheerios while they left. I heard the garage door go up and I decided that I should sit down on the living room carpet. I played a game of not turning on the lights, even while it got darker and darker.

I hugged my knees and tried to think of some reason why my mom was unhappy. I had known something was wrong with her about a year ago when she lost control of her face and never stopped smiling. It wasn't a happy smile, it was just this thing there, like a big pentagon her face seemed to like making, her teeth flashing sloppily and her eyes watering. After that, she would smile at everything I told her, like “Mom, the meat in the freezer has green mold on it,” and she would nod and grin and tell me to throw it out.

One day in school they told us, “If you feel down, you should smile, because just the act of smiling helps you feel better.” I guess it's some sort of nerve science. I tried to think of my mom's nerves, but all I could pic-

ture was a bunch of sandbaggers standing in front of a hopeless flood.

She still went through her usual routines: making me breakfast while listening to Classical radio, buying fresh flowers at the farmers' market, and listening to me describe my day at school. She'd lounge with her legs peeking out of her terrycloth robe, drinking plum tea with honey. One day I was reading a story about patron saints of the Catholic Church and I told her that there were saints for things like beekeepers, lost keys, and even parents with disappointing children. She had thrown her head back and laughed from the back of her throat, and then sat up and said, looking right at me, "That stuff is more interesting than daytime TV, but we all know saints and angels don't really exist." Then the smile seemed to spread slowly back over her face, like it had been momentarily overturned.

I imagined a lot of things that might have happened to her to explain her behavior. She'd seen a trainwreck, or she'd been in a tornado that ruined her house. I couldn't see why I wouldn't know about these types of things though. I couldn't figure it out. I'd heard that my friend's mom had been pregnant with twins, and they'd been born purple and died after an hour. Maybe my mom was mourning for something I hadn't known existed at all.

When my dad finally got back and told me she was in the psych ward, I wasn't that surprised. I didn't know anything about her problems, but I imagined that it couldn't hurt my mom if someone else watched her for awhile, someone who could analyze her face without asking her to make orange smoothies or to get off the phone for just one minute from her long chats with her friend, Doloris. At the hospital she could just hide under the sheets for a while and eat off of trays.

I developed a hospital routine quickly. Dad would disappear and tell me to sit in the waiting room. I would walk straight over to the small table of free stuff and mix myself some powdered cocoa. Then I would sit down and pick up an animal magazine and look at pictures of monkeys eating off each other's backs and polar bears in their native climates surrounded by miles of ice, looking like kings.

My dad left for work at 7:00 a.m., and I quickly realized that no one would notice if I stayed home from school. I decided that I was going to start a project, which was to make a map of the world in the future. I looked on the Internet for a while and printed some different types of maps: aerial flight maps, highway maps, old fashioned maps with pictures of constellations on them, and maps that charted the movement of tectonic plates. After about a week of research, I began.

I skipped school about twice a week and woke up whenever I felt like it, preparing myself some Twinkies on a plate and laying out my huge piece of construction paper. I made circles with a protractor and read all about the sand deserts that are going to take the place of the Mediterranean Sea.

It was all going well until the administrators at school called my dad to say that they were worried. He took me to Baker's Square, ordered me a piece of coconut cream pie, and yelled at me as loudly as a person can yell inside a maroon booth at a public restaurant.

After that, I went to school every day and had to start seeing the school psychologist. She was an odd lady with copper-colored hair that was always tied into some kind of colorful scarf and wore a new pair of hoop

earrings every day.

She introduced herself by pointing to her nametag and saying, “I’m Ms. Hopkins, but you can call me Linda.” She sat down and sighed along with the cushion of her chair. “I just want to ask you a few questions,” she continued.

I told her, “shoot,” so she asked me my name (Joanna), if I played any instruments in school (flute), and what TV shows I liked to watch (“Animal Planet” and “David Letterman” with my dad).

She made a zipper with her knuckles and looked at it awhile, then cocked her head and asked, “What have you been thinking about these past three weeks?”

While I thought about it, she began digging under a leafy plant and eventually produced a dusty coffee pot, which she plugged in.

“Animals,” I told her.

She looked surprised and stopped for a second, slipping one foot out of her shoe and then putting it back in. Then she continued on coolly, turning on the tap in her small sink and pouring some water. “What about them?” she asked.

“Why they are always doing things that don’t make sense, I guess.”

She looked a bit puzzled, so I continued, “Did you know that Darwin died worrying about bees?”

“Why?”

“Because he couldn’t figure out why they would sting someone if all it did was make them die.”

“Isn’t that just what bees do? Does it have to make sense?”

“Yes it does. That’s the whole point, and Darwin never figured it

out.”

She looked at me carefully and then sat down again. She seemed lost as to what to say, and I wondered if she was any good at being a psychologist. We talked for a while about how much I sleep, how much I eat, and what I want to do when I grow up. I told her I wanted to be a psychologist. She smiled and I realized that I had meant it. I would be good at figuring out people’s problems, if only they’d give me a few clues.

After about a month, my dad’s heart clogged and he ended up in the hospital too. Luckily the whole deal happened while he was in the gift shop, buying himself a bottle of Tylenol and a *Time* magazine, so they were able to cart him right into the E.R. I tried to hurry behind them, beating through corner plants that seemed to be crowded into the hallway. Finally, a woman with a high voice and wispy bangs came and sat me down in a different waiting room than usual. She said someone would come back to get me soon.

It ended up being my mom, pushed out in a wheelchair by a nurse with teddy bear print scrubs. Once we got outside, she stood up in the light and I let myself pretend we were in a movie about someone who miraculously regains the ability to walk. She smiled weakly and offered to take me to White Castle. She was in the real world again, just like that, no tests, no cure.

We didn’t go in to check on Dad as much as he had liked to come see Mom. It was more like once a week. I didn’t go in the waiting room either, but instead came in with her. She would clutch my hand and we’d enter with a scared, church-like silence. We were all waiting for something.

Dad became wrinkled and waxy and smiled at me with a bored, loving smile. It seemed like the same kind of expression he'd wear driving by a sunflower field, just looking at some nice sight along the course of many things.

Mom started smoking again. After every visit, she'd walk out and cross her arms and blow smoke into the parking lot. I would lean on the window and watch. Whenever I had visited her in her hospital room, she had been watching TV and biting her nails, but when she saw us she would roll onto her side and answer our questions with a cheerleader smile. But now she had changed. She didn't smile much anymore; her face was finally free to smirk, frown, or just go limp while she stared at something she must have been seeing in her mind.

Summer arrived and I got to stay home all day with her, working on my maps while she folded laundry or read *Vogue*. While I drew, I imagined myself explaining the whole scenario to the school psychologist. I would start at the very beginning, with the time I found my mom crying to Doloris and smoking butts out of the ashtray next to the rocking chair. I would tell her, "There are many types of unhappiness," and then the psychologist would sit in her chair and drink coffee and nod. She would tell me I was wise, and maybe even tell me her own problems. She would ask me to be her assistant, and to listen to all the other kids like me who ditched school and wandered around the hospitals drinking cocoa.