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peace

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# peace

— Kelly Kujawski

“WHAT IN GOD’S GREEN EARTH are you needin’ with old Christmas bows?” Momma asked quizzically, murmuring something about it being July. “I swear, you girls don’t give your Momma a moment’s peace!” Despite her irritation she rooted through that black hole of a closet — pulling out gaudy Hawaiian leis and dirty, scuffed high heels that were used to play dress up — until she found those bows.

“Just ‘cause Momma.” Laine drawled in a faint Kentucky twang. It was too hot to think of a more creative reason. She inspected the generic bows. They were a little smashed, but they would do. Laine felt her heart do a little giggle flip. The giggle always ballooned up so fast, pulling tight, until it popped and she could feel little tingles all over her skin.

It was a weird thing that happened when something actually went right; like on days Momma’s eyes unglazed and suddenly she’d be making cookies. Momma would dance a little while mixing the dough, doing her best Motown impressions. Those were the days Laine prayed would last forever. But they never did. Mostly Momma just stayed in bed or on the couch watching her soaps. When Laine and

her sister Lucy got too loud, Momma would put her hands over her eyes and whisper, “Go play outside.”

Laine made her way through the kitchen door and ploughed across the tall unkempt grass of their backyard. Lucy was waiting by the gate. “Did you get ‘em?”

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“Yeah, but they’re all smooshed.”

Laine knelt down next to Lucy.

“We can’t put *those* ugly things on *scared* land like this.” Lucy’s stubby five-year-old finger pointed to the mound of dirt that displayed borrowed flowers from Mrs. Galore’s next door garden.

“That’s *sacred* land. not *scared*, stupid. ‘Sides it was all Momma could find.” Laine unconsciously picked a red-brown crusty scab that resided on the top of her bony knee. “And I’m not gonna’ bother her no more, she’s sick.”

“Sick — again?” Lucy quit looking through the bow bag. Eyes widened

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and worried, she stared at Laine’s mouth for the explanation.

“You know, her eyes are all puffy and pink and she keeps sniffin’.” It was just better if Lucy thought Momma had a cold. Laine knew better. Her heart was always heavy with truths that a seven-year-old needn’t know. Momma didn’t need to lie anymore. Just a short glance where Momma’s eyes couldn’t look into Laine’s, always said more than enough. “She’ll be okay.” Laine said in her big sister voice.

Lucy’s hand began digging through the bag again. “I can’t find no more blue ones.”

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“This ain’t some dumb game Lucy. It’s important...it’s for real.”  
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“Just pick out two purple ones — then go on to the shed and get Daddy’s shovel.” He wasn’t around much anymore and might not notice if they used it. She’d remember to clean it carefully and put it back just as it was. Last time she wasn’t careful, there was an “episode.” For weeks she wore a long sleeved turtleneck even in the heat, to hide the welts that he said hurt him more than it hurt her.

“Fine!” Lucy’s shout was more whiny than rebellious. She lay two bows on the mound and marched off toward the shed. “But if you think I’m gonna’ do all this stuff and then not be allowed to play, you’re crazy.”

Laine stood and turned to face the house. Momma’s slouched silhouette filled the kitchen window. “This ain’t some dumb game Lucy. It’s important ...it’s for real.”

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Momma wrestled with Laine’s beloved Donald Duck glass trying without success to remove the last traces of chocolate milk stuck in the bottom. Her fingers felt waxy from the cheap liquid detergent that failed to make luxurious suds like the woman on TV claimed. Did everything in her life have to be a lie? Her marriage was. There was no love, no honor...only eggshells. She felt like plunging her mousy head in the murky sink and blowing some goddamn suds into that water. But, that too would turn out to be a disaster. She wouldn’t have the energy to pull her food-soaked head out for a breath, and then she’d drown. And worse yet, they’d find her with soggy Cheerios in her hair in this

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godforsaken robe that smelled like rotten milk and cigarette smoke. What then, would become of Laine and Lucy? They'd have to face life as those poor little girls whose Momma drowned in a sink full of dirty dishes.

Momma's head hung inches above the water as if trying to decide which way the day would start. She was distracted by Lucy's small scratchy voice. She raised her head to the view outside the kitchen window and watched the girls digging in the yard. Momma tried to remember what Laine and Lucy were whispering about while eating their oatmeal this morning. But she always felt foggy and never remembered much. Was it something about caskets? No, it couldn't be. What would interest them in that? Momma thought of going out to talk with them ... maybe spend some time playing with them. But she felt drained. Momma shuffled to the bedroom. She lay down across the bed and closed her eyes.

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It was glorious — just like Laine imagined it would be. The real fancy kinds of headstones cost too much money; their homemade version made up of flowers, old Christmas bows and

her statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary would have to do. She wondered if it would be too weird to ask Momma for a real headstone for her birthday. The stale summer breeze teased the flowers. For a moment their world was calm and beautiful under the loving eyes of the Blessed Virgin.

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"Lucy, do you think this grave needs to be deeper?"

"Well if it does, *you* are diggin' the rest." Lucy dusted her hands and dramatically flung her knotted hair behind her shoulder.

Laine sank her skinny body down into the earth and let the dark moist mixture wriggle between her toes. She lay back and stared at the empty blue sky. She took a long slow breath pretending it was her last. *So, this is peace*, she thought. At every funeral, she heard someone say something about it. "Doesn't she look

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so peaceful?" cried Aunt Clara about Grandma. And she really did look happy, lying there in her best blue Sunday dress, all stiff, with a slight smile. It had been a long time since Laine saw her Grandma smile. When a policeman came for Daddy one night during supper, Grandma smiled. She patted Momma's hand and whispered "Better that he's gone. You're not needin' any more bruises on that pretty little face of yours." It didn't take long for Daddy to find his way back home and for the bruises to find their way back onto Momma's face. She had to wear sunglasses the day Great Grandpa Owen died. Nobody even asked why she wore big sunglasses on such a cloudy day. They just stared at the ground mumbling and fumbling.

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"Owen was a good man, he'll be missed."

"He suffered so much, I thank the good Lord he finally found peace."

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Momma led the limp little girls through the den toward her bedroom. "Daddy won't be back tonight — c'mon now and sleep with Momma." He had left, only minutes before, in a flurry of slammed doors and thrown dishes; leaving behind broken glass and shattered childhoods. The air was still so heavy — it was work to inhale and exhale.

The cool sheets called to them; the darkness soothed them. Laine pressed her body tight against Momma's.

"Sugar, scoot over. You're makin' Momma hot."

A slow, sweaty murmur filled the room. "I miss you Momma."

"Miss me? Child, am I not here with you night and day?"

Laine laced her fingers into her Momma's. "Momma, wanna' know somethin'?"

Momma's eyelids, heavy with sleep, widened slightly. "Mmm hum."

"I can't wait for you to die."