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Why Claire Left

By Meghan Callahan

I remember it was springtime. The green shoots of tulips peeked out from the last snow of the season, daring nature to prevent them from budding. All that life lurking right there, under the surface. Hardy. Funny how it's the beautiful things that never quite die, like there's just too much life left in them to fade out.

Something I've never told anyone is how I didn't even like her at first. Her lipstick was a shade too bright, and smeared into the corners of her smile where laughter had left wrinkles. I don't usually notice little things like that, but Claire was always smiling. She made it impossible to stop looking at the details. It was like you had to pick her apart because the effect of the whole thing was too much for the eyes to take in. She was staring into the sun, she was light coming off of water, and she was a shooting star and oil spilled in the street and the edges of broken glass glinting all at once. But for some reason all I could see was that lipstick slash, the imperfections marring the mouth that was younger once, framed by flyaway gray hair.

Claire wouldn't let anyone call her "Mrs." anything, or even "Ms." She insisted, with a kind but unyielding determination, that everyone just call her by her first name. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I could tell you her last name, if I ever knew it at all. I was seventeen when she started coming into the gas station where I worked every Tuesday and Thursday after soccer practice.

Her purchases never differed, regardless of sales or new brands. She got three tins of cat food with the peel-off lids (tuna flavored, and she didn't own a can opener), a glass bottle of root beer, and a pack of cinnamon gum, which she would leave for me.

"Hello young man," Claire would say, smiling in that radiant, lipstick smeared way, "and how are you today?"

"Just fine, thank you," I would always answer, pulling my hands out of my pockets and trying to stand up straighter because she'd treated me to a lecture on posture once. Often as not I'd have something in my mouth---a toothpick, a jawbreaker, a paperclip I'd bent out of shape with my teeth---a bad habit I'd picked up from the other guys on the team. I remember a fascination with mouths in high school, the tricks lips and tongues could pull after so many years of useless eating and speaking.

"You ruin your teeth with those things," Claire always scolded, and without fail she'd pull down a pack of the cinnamon and slide it to me. "Try this instead, why don't you. This is the flavor my husband liked."

I'd thank her as I rang up her order, bagging it in paper (never plastic) and off she would toddle, leaning heavily on her three-legged cane, with the faint scent of something cottony and clean lingering behind her. Best estimates of the neighborhood put her at around seventy-five, but looking back now I don't believe it. My vision of time may be skewed, with my own children grown and gone, but I would be willing to swear she wasn't a day over sixty. Her shopping trips became a comfortable routine with us, something I'd look forward to the same way I looked forward to the end of my shift. The only other place Claire was known to visit regularly was the library six streets down off of Fourth and Main, and then only for children's story hour on Wednesdays. I was the one who saw her most frequently, and I felt important because of this, benevolent, even. Bagging her items was a good deed.

I worked at the gas station for three years, but Claire is the only customer I remember with anything resembling clarity. The moment of my life that stands out most was that spring evening, with the setting sun streaming through the glass door and making even the grimy tile seem phosphorescent. I can still see the way she sagged against the counter when I close my eyes, her too-bright pink painted mouth distorted in a silent gasp of pain. By the time I'd gotten out from behind the cash register she was on the ground. The paramedics were there in twelve minutes, but I would find that out much later. I don't remember dialing 911. I don't even remember the CPR. When I had a chance to see my reflection in the

mirror later (an hour? several? was it even that evening?) the only mark that it had occurred was the lipstick smudge at the corner of my mouth, like a vivid scar.

The diamond wedding ring on her hand dug into my palm, and I remember thinking that I'd never before realized thin her fingers were, or the web of veins running underneath her tissue-paper thin skin. Stacy Evans' dad had to peel my fingers off one by one, slowly.

At the funeral, we learned there had never been any cats. Whenever I picture those hands, aged and trembling a little as she carefully counted out precise change, I picture the peel-tops of the cat food (tuna flavor) and the large diamond left by someone who'd passed into memory long before her heart shivered to a stop underneath me.

And I never did become that soccer star I'd dreamed about, and lately some memories have gone hazy, coated with the spider web strands of age. But I've never forgotten Claire and her gray, flyaway hair and the cotton scent of her perfume.

And the only gum I ever chew is cinnamon flavored.