ELLEN ADAMS

Quit Your Hiding

For J.M.

In my first life, I lived in Omak and my mother was a screamer. She was polite outside the house, polite enough. Inside, it was bills. My brother, me. A burnt ring of coffee stain from that morning's percolator. Whatever man she was seeing, whatever moments it went south. Even north was bad, when she closed the bedroom door with one. But I got used to things in Omak. In my first life, I thought a lot of things were normal, even the things that weren't.

It was normal to hide a black boyfriend because what was the point of bringing around the house something my mother thought was bad? I met Lionel when he joined the night shift at Yokes Pac-n-Save. When I lagged in re-stocking, he pushed his stepladder to my side of the aisle. It was a nice change because Randy, the sunken-in cheekbones guy Lionel had replaced, hadn't been a good re-stock partner. Hadn't been good company, either. Plus, Lionel took his smoke breaks with me, not the older men who worked frozen and refrigerated. When I figured that, alright, I had a crush on him, I thought of the silo. It stuck a couple stories up, between two wheat fields, outside town near the farmhouse we lived in before my dad went away. It was where I brought the guys I liked.

Out in the Yokes parking lot, the first bit of daybreak was coming on, and I invited Lionel to the silo. He followed me for the fifteen minute drive, and I thought it was sweet that he kept his headlights shining in my rearview mirror even though, by then, the road was light enough to see.

He pulled over behind me, and as I stuck my head out the window, I heard a rooster. Since when were there roosters out here? I said, "There's not a lot of room, so just leave your car on the side of the road," and then rumbled mine down the dirt, right under the ladder, shiny in the rising summer sun. Once I got onto the roof of my car, I

motioned for him to join me. "Don't break my glass," I said when he pushed my windshield for balance.

Thirty feet of warm rungs later, I showed him in the growing light where my white friends and I had scratched tallies into the silo-top plaster, using our car keys to mark our climbs. Lionel offered me a joint but I shook my head. He put it back in his Altoids tin. We were both wearing the black polyester pants Yokes gave us, wearing them even after work. At the restaurant where I serve now, I can wear jeans; Yokes, though, forced us to wear those pants that made me feel so dumb. And I felt silly for not wanting to smoke out, but I knew from Jeremiah that it'd just make me paranoid. I dug into the bottom of my purse and handed Lionel a cigarette from my soft pack. I told him about New Year's Eve up here, how Bruce Duncan had to sit on Jeremiah because Jeremiah got so drunk and kept moving for the ladder.

It wasn't until Lionel told me so that I realized how sad the story made me.

"Damn, you sound pretty bent up over this Jeremiah. He break your heart?"

"Hell no."

I saw Lionel arch an eyebrow.

"He's not my boyfriend or anything." I pulled my hoodie over my head, stuffed it into my purse.

"Where's his tally?"

"I dunno," I said, waving at the far rim of the silo where the sun was evening out with us, pushing our shadows back flat, making my eyes watery. "It's not like I'm keeping track." I turned away from the wheat fields and back to Lionel. "He's in Walla Walla now. Won't be climbing silos 'til his time's up."

Lionel didn't know what that meant, so I had to tell him. He smiled once I did.

I said, "They got a penitentiary near Pittsburgh?"

"Don't they have them everywhere?" He took a seat in the middle of the silo top. He didn't dangle his legs over the edge like the guys sometimes did. "So I was thinking tonight what you said about school. You gonna take the G.E.D.?" he asked me.

"Nah," I said.

"I've got some of the books. I could bring them over if you want to study sometime."

I looked at the sun. I squinted. Bring him to the house. My mother, my brother. "I live with my folks," I said. It wasn't a total lie.

When I turned back to him, there were spots dancing around his shaved head. "Aha," he said.

"Sorry."

He stood. "This fucking town."

I still hadn't asked how he'd ended up out west. "Lionel?"

He headed for the two tall loops, the top of the ladder.

"We don't have to go back yet," I said, but he was already between them, facing me, moving down. At the bottom of the ladder, on the top of my hood, though, he lifted his hands to my lowering hips. He invited me over, and I went.

I don't blame Lionel for keeping secrets. Every soul's got something to hide. Look at me. I'm in my second life, serving battered shrimp and fry baskets and bottomless pops to families who probably think I'm from Tampa. My nametag says my name, and they tip me just fine. It doesn't feel like hiding, even if it is.

My brother Pete used to hide in the last row of the school bus while the other kids got out like they were supposed to at Omak Elementary. The drive to the bus chapel wasn't a nice one, through neighborhoods even uglier than ours, but I guess that's what he was looking for. When he got to school, my brother would hide in the handicap bathroom and wail so loud that the sound passed through the door and down the hallway. I was at the junior high where girls with younger siblings spread the word.

Pete kept at it when his teachers passed him up to Omak Junior High; by then, I drove myself to the senior high. My sophomore year, twice I got stuck picking Pete up at the bus chapel. "Knock that off," I said the first time, taking a fake swing at his head. "Quit all that hiding. You're making me miss history." The second time, I didn't say anything, to Pete or to my mother. And anyway, by then I was failing history.

Pete had no shame about hitting his head on things. The towel dispenser was one of them. You could tell because it got a dent in it. Maybe it was tiles too, but they all looked bone white as ever. He'd quit his yelling. You had to listen for the thumping. He broke the soap machine and got some blood on his shirt. They called me into the

office for that one, and then they called my mom. I skipped algebra and the rest of my afternoon, and Pete and I followed my mom's car home. When she parked, she took up all the driveway. By the time I'd finished parallel parking, she was in the front hallway swooping air into a big black trash bag, the side closet open to our shoes and Pete's gear. The season before, Coach Donnellson had said Pete and his behaviors shouldn't come to the boys' team practices anymore. Still, Pete started crying once he saw Mom putting his baseball stuff into the trash bag.

My mother screamed, "Enough of your head banging, you hear? One more time and I'm taking you to the bin, I will!" But the trash bag was a clean new one with a lot of air in it, and she didn't really throw his stuff away.

When there are questions you don't want to answer, you don't go asking them to other people. I guess I sensed that; for the most part, Lionel and I talked about Yokes, about the radio songs we were sick of the most, and a lot about firsts. First chipped tooth, first detention, first dog bite. First time, first big-league lie, first allergic reaction. I told Lionel things that I never told Jeremiah. But some things I didn't share. Like how I'd promised Jeremiah I'd lock all my love away until he got on parole. I didn't introduce Lionel around, and if I got asked about a black guy, I said, "Carpooling." My dealer, Bruce Duncan called him, sipping beer cans, wanting weed.

I told that to Lionel when we were on baking supplies and he said, "You never told me you hung around other guys."

"I've lived in Omak all my life," I said. "It'd be hard not to know them."

He stuck his hand through the top two rungs of the stepladder and pulled out a pack of lemon Jell-O. "My mom used to make this stuff." I could hear the powder inside as he shook the cardboard box. "She said there's not a woman in this world I should trust more than her."

I took the Jell-O from him and stuck it back through the rungs. "Don't get weird." I could hear the cardboard flat of jumbo flour bags scraping the linoleum behind me.

When I faced him again, he held the first sack of flour against his hip. He said, "You've got no clue about weird."

One fall afternoon in his bed, Lionel asked me how poor I was, and I said it was hard to explain. The only way I could figure it out was the Mexicans in town. "My mom thinks they'll steal from us. She says, 'We get nothing in this world, and then they come to take the shit we got left.'"

"Well, what about black people?"

I shook my head. "No way."

We left it at that. Then Lionel offered, "My mom's brokeass broke, but she's no hater."

"Then Pittsburgh sounds better, if you ask me."

He put his mouth over mine when I said it. A long while later, he pulled away and whispered, "She'd like you, too." I thought he'd want to have sex tied up again, but instead he sat me up and brushed my hair into a ponytail with his hands. "She'd like your hair just like this," he said, and when he smiled I could see the ear with the bit of missing lobe go up, then down. "She'd like your hair and your face and your neck."

Lionel's room above the State Farm was a small one, but he did nice things with it. He kept and cut shapes out of the cardboard boxes we spent our eight hours unpacking. He had stars and a dolphin and what looked like Christmas trees but he told me were arrowheads. "That's an Amish hat," he said, and then explained what Amish was. He had cardboard everything, and sometimes you could see where it gave way in the pressure of his cutting, that line where its corrugated inside snapped. When I pictured him cutting them, he was calm, the way I imagined someone over a book at the library, or the Lutheran pastor at home with the Bible. I said, "How come you never cut your cardboard when I'm around?"

"It's just what I do when I get homesick."

By that time, I knew that whatever it was, it must have been bad if it had him stuck in Omak. I said, "It's okay. I get homesick for bad things too sometimes."

One of the produce guys who used to go hunting with my father had a hunch too; he told me to be careful of Lionel. "Can't believe they put him in dry goods with you," he said. "One look and you know he's bad news." As if Randy stealing Western Family battery packs had been better news. I didn't need that old man's warning, a man I once caught with his hand in my mom's curls, my own hands busy

with the rifles I'd been given to bring into the farmhouse, a man who years later asked after my brother in a way that was clearly not for Pete's benefit.

I'm no dummy, but I guess I was caught by surprise because the morning's when you get it. With the nightshift, though, my wake-up came halfway through the day. What *was* dumb is that I climbed the steps behind the State Farm and left a letter for Lionel explaining why I was going to Seattle. What I should have done is just gone and went. Told Lionel I was really, really sick in bed. After all, it was winter by then. People get cold. People get sick. But I'd gotten this funny conviction. In the same drawer I kept all my leftover binder paper were letters from Jeremiah about the kids he wanted to have and the places we'd take them. On the back of an envelope, he'd doodled a ladder that went from one corner to the next, and my mom had handed me a steak knife to open it so I wouldn't go wrecking the loop. I thought about my letter to Lionel for a long time, before and after I wrote it. I thought about our first morning at the silo, how nervous I was climbing down. I added a P.S. *I hope you will forgive me.*

I told my mom it was a Yokes special training. I didn't tell her I'd taken Pete's sleeping bag and would stay in my car the night I reached Seattle and the night after the clinic. When I got back, she said she'd seen a black man with his car running, out in front for three days. "I drew the curtains," she said, sitting back down at the kitchen table after she'd adjusted the TV antenna. "Mickey's up North, so I called Frank, but with his pickup on blocks he couldn't come over. I says to myself, if that black man don't budge, I'm calling 911. But then he must have found some fancier digs to stake out."

"Who robs a house in broad daylight?"

"Pete was banging his head about it."

"Where's he at, anyway?"

"Thought you'd get a welcome wagon? He's mad you disappeared."

I told her that was nonsense, that it was just three days and that I'd explained it to him, which I hadn't, but all I wanted to do was curl up into my bed, into my body, and forget the clinic's waiting room, and the stirrups too. But my mother pushed her chair back from the kitchen table and started screaming about how different I'd been acting and all that gas I must have wasted, being uppity about a grocery

store. The last thing she said before I slammed my bedroom door was, "Quit agitating your brother!"

I screamed back, "Quit screaming!" And that's how I knew Pete was home, because the thumping started. And later that night, when I'd finally been able to fall asleep, one of my mother's men came by and she made herself happy.

Lionel should have been at work when he showed up in the streetlight night. He was a no-show at Yokes that shift, which, the store manager later said, was reckless because Lionel must have known that I'd requested four days off, that the night was understaffed.

The snow had quit, the snow that had made my drive over Snoqualmie Pass so drawn out. I could see across the lawn to his car, could see the sidewalk up to the stoop, could see the driver door swing open over the curb. A little light went on inside his sedan, but most of it came from our stoop.

It's easy enough to tell someone's been drinking because they don't act like themselves, but that night with Lionel, he seemed truer. I think it was Pittsburgh revving inside him. Before, Pittsburgh had been a parachute billowing behind him, a drag no matter how hard he pressed the gas. But that night, it was Pittsburgh pushing him forward, not drunkenness.

"You think you know what's best? You think you know?" he howled.

I heard a bottle crashing and remembered his Altoids tin.

"I see you peeping!"

My bedroom was dark and he was bluffing, but I only realized that after I'd ducked back from the window. And then I realized that if I could hear him, the neighbors could too. Footsteps came down the hallway, past my door.

Maybe she thought it was one of her boyfriends. I'd never seen one in the front yard, but then again I worked the night shift. If I ever see Pete, I plan to ask him, "Pete, did Mom ever have psycho boyfriends out front?"

The dead bolt, the front door. "What the hell is this?"

"Let me at her."

I'd told Lionel my neighborhood, but in our five months I never told him Evergreen Lane.

"I'll call the cops on you, you—" I'd never heard the n-word that loud, that public.

The next noise was a slap.

As for what comes next, I see it more than I hear. I see it all the time in Tampa. I see myself in my bed, and it's only now that I can tell myself, "Get the fuck up. Quit your hiding. Tell the truth." I see my nose on the glass. I see the picture that the other lawyer painted—a dark night, a six-foot-one man—"a man like any other, a mother's son"—pushing my own mother down the stoop steps. Then Lionel's lips moving: "You think you know a good father?" Then my name, my mother on the ground. "Do you, you whore?" I see the light from the front door on his black pants, kicking. Then I see Pete's silhouette, then his shadow, then the baseball bat that'd been taken from him twice. He swings it and swings it and screams.

I had options. I can see them now. If I'd stopped Lionel from kicking her, if I'd said, "It's not her fault. It was my decision." Or if I had just told her, "Mom, I'm dating a black man." If I'd held back Pete or pushed between them, saying, "This is a lovers' quarrel, not a robbery." But I was still at the window when the ambulance came, and that's another thing I've done wrong. After that, the lawyer told me not to go see Lionel at the hospital. "It wouldn't sound good," he said.

Pete got him six times with the bat, but in court they all kept saying four.

In my second life, I could leave for my brother, but I could never visit Lionel. His skull gave way and he died under the white knit blanket of the hospital bed between 6:00 AM and 6:54 AM, between the nurse's rounds.

In court, it was said that Pete came to our mother's rescue. When I listened to the rest of it, my hands pressed against the polyester of my Yokes pants, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what that deathbed looked like. I was wrong.

Lionel's mother had taken a picture of him, flat and dead there, his head white with gauze except for the black holes of breath. She mailed me that photo not long after Pete got put away. The mailman didn't know better when he brought it up our stoop.

Lionel's grandparents had named his mother Bea. Bea Darnel. Darnel, her maiden name. For all I know, Lionel and me were on our way to

breaking up, but in Tampa, sometimes, I feel it was me who murdered him. Maybe it's too late now to go giving my heart to a dead man, but, either way, I quit writing Jeremiah.

Bea Darnel sent me another letter almost a year later. She didn't mention his father, or the Pittsburgh beatings that Lionel's lawyer said redeemed his final stand in our yard. Bea barely even mentioned the past. "Lionel my son was my only child," she wrote. "But you know that. Stop on by if you'd like to come visiting. A young person might do me some good." I haven't been religious since Jeremiah, but I will say her letter is the only grace I've found since that night. Not that I've written her back. By the time I got that small, folded paper, I was living as far from Omak as I could manage, and my mother was far-gone enough not to realize the Pittsburgh return address. She put that sealed envelope in a package she sent to the Tampa YWCA, the last place I ever told her I was. The receptionist for the YWCA hostel likes battered shrimp. I waited on her and she remembered the name on my tag, and the next time that parcel. I ate what was edible. I kept Bea's letter. It makes me sad to think of my mother in the Omak Post Office, but it's not like she's getting on any airplane.

I guess I'm saving Bea Darnel's words to show Pete if he gets out of the bin, or if I go back. If. Twice since I settled out here, I've phoned the house just to hang up, but most of the time my world in Tampa's quiet. Some nights, I'd call it peaceful. I smile at my customers. I keep busy with my shifts. I cut things out of cardboard too. I'd like to keep it that way a while longer.