

## THINGS MY MOTHER NEVER TAUGHT ME

KIRSTEN CLODFELTER

Ally and I went through our felon-dating phase in November. My felon had served a few years for embezzling \$200,000 from his software company. His brown hair was starting to gray, and he kept it parted down the middle, longer in the front, like a style from a fashion magazine. He had the most perfect eyebrows I'd ever seen, beautifully shaped, with only a single stray hair between the brow and the eyelid of his right eye. I read his facial expressions solely by the way his eyebrows changed. I noticed them especially when he'd smile at me from my bed, one arm bent at the elbow and resting behind his head, watching me pull a clean T-shirt from the top drawer of my dresser. He could've been a model. When I told him this, he closed his eyes and said nothing for a long time. Finally, "There are disadvantages." He picked at the loose elastic in the waistband of his boxer shorts. I didn't know what to say. Instead, I turned on the radio. At least Ally's had stolen a car.

Before that it'd been surfers, brothers, just eighteen months apart. It was a disappointment, Ally and I dating two guys who were related. We wanted their childhood stories to be separate, so that she and I would have something to talk about after they left, when we sat at our plastic kitchen table eating microwaved bowls of tomato soup.

The younger one was mine. I watched the way his eyes often followed his older brother around the room. Even if it were Ally or I who was speaking, he was looking at his brother, watching for cues. I wasn't even sure if he realized he did it. When we were all together, I'd hide my mouth with my hands so he couldn't see the way I smiled at this. It was sweet. But his tan was better than mine. His stomach was tighter, more toned. He looked at himself a lot in the mirror, but I don't mean to say that it was like dating a girl. He just made me feel self-conscious as he watched me pull off my gray linen pants and my black tank top.

Before summer ended and the breeze that blew in off the coast

The Iowa Review

made it too cold to sit outside without a blanket or a sweatshirt at night, we gave the brothers back to the ocean. They were too distracted. Their hair was always stiff. Their sandy boards sometimes knocked things over on our porch. We liked them better when they weren't pulling the neck strings of our white bikini tops, when they were silent and alone and facing a wall of blue and then becoming the blue itself, maneuvering the exact angle of the foot or the arm, striking a perfect balance above the shifting water.

Ally and I never tried that again, dating brothers. We resisted even when we met the Golby twins one night in October while we were making margaritas down at Pacific Beach, and they offered to take us to La Vache for dinner. They thought it was so cute the way the two of us had similar names, Ally and Andi, as if we'd planned it. We really liked the mirrored spaces between their front teeth, but even that wasn't enough.

We might not have dated the felons, either, but they won us over playing pool at Rocktavio. They bet beers against each other, and we liked how easily they laughed, how they never got angry or mean about losing. Still, Ally and I broke up with them before Christmas. Some years we liked having boyfriends for the holidays, significant others to bake cranberry-walnut bread for or to sit with in the living room on Christmas Eve, drinking White Russians and wrapping gifts. But some years Ally and I preferred to skip the whole anxious mess and spend Christmas day at the movie theater, each buying a single ticket and then theater-hopping for the rest of the day. Our record was four movies one after another—then we got tired of suspending disbelief and had to go home, where things were real, where we knew what to expect.

Ally and I both did it on the same night—the break-up. We were afraid. We imagined the felons would become violent, that they'd produce a shank from their white, athletic ankle socks or the hem of their ribbed, sleeveless undershirts. The shank would be assembled out of our own kitchen utensils. We imagined that they'd threaten to track

down our families—my baby sister in Los Angeles, Ally’s mother in Morro Bay—that they’d reach across the kitchen table for Ally or the couch for me, and choke us. We imagined hiding beneath my queen bed and dialing 911 while an entire gang of criminals surrounded the house with machetes or assault rifles. But our felons did not put up a fight. Ally’s even cried.

I first met Ally on an elevator at Saint Christopher’s Hospital. She was wheeling a cart of food trays up the fifth floor where I worked, Medical Oncology. I was a few minutes late for my receptionist shift, but I stuck my hand out to catch the metal doors before they shut. “Thanks,” she said over the squeaking wheels of the cart. “Ellen still in 502?”

“I think so,” I said, but actually I had no idea. I couldn’t keep the patients straight day to day; the old women with their gauzy hair and green hospital gowns blurred together. I was surprised that Ally, who worked for food service, knew even one of them by name. It seemed impossible to keep track, as many as she saw while she made her rounds.

“Yesterday she threw her lunch tray at my face,” Ally told me. She lifted fringed bangs the color of wet sand off of her forehead with an index finger and showed me the purple-green skin above her left eyebrow. She paused for some kind of dramatic effect. “I like her. She’s got a lot of life left in her.” Later, the two of us met down in the cafeteria for Diet Cokes.

Not long after, we moved in together. We picked a house on the beach that was only falling apart a little. It had been painted blue, but the wood underneath showed through in places, so the house looked bruised, like it still had some healing to do. We rented it from a divorced fifty-something, and Ally flirted with him while we signed the agreement so he’d cut us a break and give it to us for \$1,400 a month.

A few weeks in, with stacks of unpacked boxes still lining the dim hallway, Ally found me upstairs as I stood half in and half out of our shared bathroom, blow-dryer in hand. She was still in her pajamas. She wet her toothbrush and told me to grow out my hair. “Guys like

it better long. It reminds them that they're the man." She tugged at the damp ends of my brown hair, which fell an inch from my shoulders. "Plus, sometimes they like to pull it." She pointed to my blow-dryer. "Can we share this? I left mine at Derrick's, and I don't think I'm going to get it back." She looked down into the sink and laughed in a way that sounded hollow, like she was still searching for the funny part. "I'm always giving away my things."

In the mirror, I tried parting my hair on the other side. "Of course."

Ally taught me other things too: To pair a short skirt with a conservative blouse, because it left something to the imagination; she said that when I did my make-up, glitter didn't matter, but to make my eyes smoky instead, to play up their darkness. "You're lucky," she told me one day when we'd crammed ourselves into a dressing room at Kohl's, "you look so exotic."

My mother never taught me these things. She didn't come from Ally's school of leave-a-little-to-the-imagination. She combined all of it—the short skirt, the revealing, silky top, the gold glittered eye shadow, the tallest heels she could match from the scatter across the floor of her closet.

A nurse from the pediatric ward who used to spend her breaks on my floor, chasing around some doctor who had an affair with her for about three minutes, once told me this: Adults are likely to break a bone during a fall because they automatically tighten their muscles, but most children under the age of three will not. They don't yet equate pain with falling, so they don't tense their bodies as they rush to meet the ground. They haven't learned that falling hurts. Because of this, a broken bone in a toddler usually indicates abuse. The child isn't afraid of the pavement or the staircase, but she will stiffen at a loud voice or a raised hand, understanding what's to come.

I met a man in the checkout line at Wal-Mart in the spring. He was wearing a green shirt with an embroidered guitar on it. I liked the col-

or—like mermaid scales. I was buying 2% milk and cold medicine for Ally. This was in April, after the surfers and the felons, after my and Ally's Christmas, after another man too, a nurse from Saint Christopher's who worked the night shift. Ally was dating our neighbor Grant by then, but he was showing little expertise in sick-girlfriend care.

"You shouldn't drink dairy when you have a cold," Green Shirt said. I snapped my head in his direction.

"Yeah, I know," I said, defensive. I found myself regretting that I hadn't come from work but from folding load after load of my and Ally's clothes at the Laundromat. I wished I were wearing my hospital scrubs, a giveaway that I might know something about being sick. It didn't matter that I was just the receptionist. I listened to things the nurses said. "The medicine isn't mine." Then I noticed he was cute.

"For your boyfriend?"

I exaggerated my annoyance, fluttering my lashes as I rolled my eyes up toward the white, fiberboard ceiling tiles. "That's a lame pick-up line," I told him. I smiled my real smile and let him see that my two front bottom teeth were slightly crooked.

His name was Antonio. When he walked me to my car, he carried my shopping bag. He asked me if "can I take you out sometime" was a better pick-up line. Then he asked if it wasn't too much trouble if I could give him a lift to his apartment so he wouldn't have to ride the bus.

"My car's in the shop. I'm getting the timing belt replaced."

I laughed as I unlocked his door. "I don't really know what that means."

After that, I saw him almost every day. Antonio and I said things we wished our mothers and fathers had said to each other, so when the telephone rang while we were kissing on his couch, I whispered, "Let the machine get it."

When there was a break in the kissing, the part when I leaned back to look at his face, to remind myself that his eyes were brown, the part when he touched a finger to the ridge of my collarbone, I told him about the coke dealer I'd dated a few years ago. The Miró painting

hanging above Antonio's couch reminded me of him—the thick black lines leading nowhere and then crossing back over themselves, the spotted blues and greens that almost formed a recognizable shape but then didn't.

“I didn't know what he did when we first met. But by the time I figured it out I liked him too much for it to matter.”

Antonio leaned back against the arm of the couch. “That's dangerous,” he said. He was sweating. I told him a story that I didn't usually share, that I hadn't even thought much about since coming to San Diego. The first time I ever drove drunk was when the coke dealer and I were dating. I was nineteen to his twenty-eight. We had gone to his favorite bar, Bellow's, where the coke dealer knew a bartender who served me four vodka cranberries without ever making eye contact with me.

After the drinks, the coke dealer took me to his Ford in the parking lot. He slid his hand over my jeans and along my thigh, and I leaned back in the seat, feeling sexy and drunk, desired. After sex, he sent me home. The drive back to my mother's was twenty-five minutes. I groaned in protest and let my head drop hard against the passenger-side window.

“Just stay between the lines and go the speed limit,” he said. “You're golden.” Then he turned the key in the ignition of his truck, and the engine hummed, vibrating the cab.

I told Antonio, “I woke up in my bed and wasn't sure how I got there. So I called things off the next day.”

He said, “That guy's an asshole.”

I nodded and closed my eyes, so I didn't have to watch him watching me anymore, so we could go back to kissing without lingering on a story a sad girl might tell.

The thing is, I told Antonio a lie. That next morning after the night at Bellow's, after waking up disoriented in my bed, my jeans on but my shirt off and my skin and my hair and my comforter smelling of smoke, I did not call the coke dealer and break up with him.

Kirsten Clodfelter

The relationship had actually lasted for another two months, until I heard from a girl we both knew that the coke dealer was sleeping with someone else. That's when I stopped calling him.

After that, I'd see him around the city sometimes when I was running errands—getting gas or buying groceries—and he'd nod to me as if we were barely acquaintances, like I'd never sat in his kitchen while he made us grilled cheese sandwiches at three in the morning, like I'd never seen the mole on his left inner thigh or learned all of the best lines to his favorite Saturday morning cartoons.

When I like a guy enough, I make him wait awhile for sex. This is one of Ally's recommendations, something my mother never taught me. I made Antonio wait five weeks and then one night when he came over after his shift at the coffee shop, I pushed a condom into his palm and then locked my fingers in his. He looked at the carpet and grinned, and I jumped onto him, wrapped my legs around his waist and kissed him, like you might see in a movie when two people are acting like they're in love.

Antonio carried me upstairs. I was nervous, and the spot behind my knees started to sweat. The place where our skin met—the freckled underside of his forearm, the backs of my legs—became slick. The mattress made no sound when he laid me on the bed. For a while we just kissed, and this was my favorite part: He undressed me slowly. He left his clothes on at first, something the surfer never would've done. The cotton of Antonio's T-shirt rubbed against the taut skin that covered my ribcage. He kissed my stomach, ran his tongue over my hipbone, where there was a tattoo of a ladybug, for luck. I got that tattoo last year with Ally. The ladybug for me, and on Ally's right shoulder were her father's initials and the date his motorcycle crossed the yellow line on 101.

Before Antonio even took off his khakis, before he even needed the condom I'd slipped into his hand downstairs, he focused only on me. I kept my eyes shut and imagined that Antonio was a giant and I was

no bigger than Thumbelina. I balled the comforter up in my fists, squeezing so hard that the joints in my fingers ached. I tried not to hear my own uneven breathing.

Antonio built the tension within my body, then stopped, moving away to kiss a tan line or the place just above the bend of my knee where I'd nicked myself shaving that morning. He paid careful attention to the tremors in my legs, to the tightening and un-tightening of my thigh muscles, so that by the time he finally let me come, for a moment I felt like everything else was gone from the room—or maybe like I was what had disappeared.

But if I'm being honest, I don't always like sex. By the third month, I'd begun acting when Antonio dimmed the lights. I said things like, "I've been thinking about sucking your cock all day," when really I'd been thinking about whether or not I should cook the chicken in the fridge or order Chinese for dinner.

Ally doesn't understand about the acting, but we have a lot of conversations about it. Ally's mom wasn't like mine. Ally's mom didn't ever wear high heels or jean skirts, and she didn't keep a string of boyfriends whose names and faces I could no longer catalogue. But she did keep one after Ally's father died. That boyfriend was Thom, and as Ally's mom got older, Thom took what he needed from Ally instead.

That was a long time ago, and Ally doesn't really talk about it. What Ally does talk about is how most of the time she wants sex to hurt. This is what she was telling me when we sat outside on the porch swing a few mornings ago, early, before the summer heat made us too lazy to get out of bed for the day. We had a carton of orange juice between us, and we were waiting for Antonio to come pick us up and take us to breakfast at La Casa de Waffle on Laurel Avenue. Ally craves hash browns pretty much all the time.

She put her bare foot on the railing and rocked us in the swing. Her toenails shimmered opaque purple in the sunlight. Then she said that when she had sex with Grant, she begged him to go harder, to hurt her. "Sometimes I cry, and he just won't."

I tried to imagine Grant naked and sweating on Ally's pink, plaid bedspread, probably wanting to stop right then but her fingernails were digging into his back, scraping symmetrical rows of tiny crescent moons into his skin. Ally said that sometimes she wanted him to fuck her so hard he made her bleed.

She shifted on the wooden bench, bringing one knee in toward her chest. She pushed against the railing with her other foot. She said, "Sometimes I need a man to have sex with me, do you know what I mean?" Needed it. Like a fix if we were the kind of girls who did a lot of drugs, or like a craving—the kind that made Ally and me drive to Wendy's at two in the morning after we'd smoked a little bit of pot or had a couple of beers. But I didn't know. She looked away from me when she talked, so I stared at the back of her head. She needed to dye her hair again.

240

I couldn't think of anything to say after that. I raised the carton to my lips. The juice was warm by then, a little too sweet. Sometimes I didn't mind sex, the way a man pressed his whole body against mine, the way he wrapped his arms around my shoulders like if he let go he might become lost, the way I could tell if he meant it or not because he would look me right in the eyes while he was coming. Sometimes I even liked it, but I didn't need it the way Ally said she did, the way a man needed it. Most of the time, I was doing it for them.

Without meaning to, I've given the smallest pieces of myself to the men I've dated. I wonder which ones they've chosen to keep after they've gone, which parts of me they've found left on their dressers or underneath their beds, or pulled from the lint catcher in their dryers.

The felon will remember that I wasn't good at making eye contact. He'll remember that every time I told a story about my mother, I looked away. He'll also remember how surprised I was when he told me this, that anyone would pay attention to this small action—something that in the five years since I'd left home, no one had ever noticed, including me.

The surfer will remember that I painted my nails bright orange all summer, that I was a strong swimmer but a tiny bit afraid of sharks, that I didn't like to be carried into the ocean.

The nurse from Saint Christopher's will remember me for being the only girl he ever knew who liked dark beer—black and tan, specifically.

The man I met the night my car got towed from Fifth Avenue will remember that I wore too much make-up. That I laughed too long after he told a joke. That when he offered me a cigarette, I couldn't help but wrinkle my nose when I shook one out of the pack. I asked him to light it for me, since I didn't smoke. It didn't matter. He never called.

The coke dealer will remember that I loved grape bubble gum and that I called more than he wanted me to. He'll have a pair of silver earrings that my mother gave me that year for my birthday, and he'll keep them in a dish on his dresser where he throws loose change, and then when he moves to a new apartment he'll throw them away.

When Antonio leaves, he'll keep one blue sweatshirt that I once left in the back of his Honda. He'll remember the tremor in my voice the night we sat on the balcony of his apartment, our fingers twined so tightly that there was no space left between our touching palms, and I talked for the first time about the way one person can need another. He'll keep three cards I wrote to him and then tucked under his pillow or beneath one of his windshield wipers, so that he can look at the slant of my handwriting and the way I sign my name. He'll remember that once after I called my baby sister I got off the phone and cried all night because I missed her.

The swing stilled, and Ally put one arm around my shoulder, her warm skin sticky against the back of my neck. We heard the sound of tires braking on asphalt, and Antonio pulled up in front of our house and honked the horn twice. The noise was too sharp in the quiet July heat. Ally stood and slipped on her flip-flops. I screwed the cap back on the carton of orange juice.

It used to be that Antonio would walk to the door when he picked me up. Now he mostly waits outside and honks. When we got in the car, he turned down the music a few clicks but said nothing. I kicked off my sandals and propped my feet up on the dashboard as we turned off our street. I gathered my hair into a loose ponytail—it's gotten pretty long—and pressed my toes against the cool windshield. Behind me, Ally hummed a different song than the one on the radio. Antonio swatted at my thigh. When I pulled down my feet, I saw the smudges I'd left on the glass, a hazy outline, just the idea of what each foot looked like before it had gone. I saw that eventually I'll give away piece after piece of myself until I'm stripped bare, left with nothing. I wonder what kind of a man will want me then, and what I'll be able to offer him.