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Libration

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Libration

Abstract

The house is cool. Quiet. Calm. Billie leaves the door open behind her, ready to run out again if her dad is awake. She can make out the shape of the furniture, but the details are blurry without her glasses. She knows enough from memory to step out of the way of the coffee table, around the squeaking floorboards, to put her hand out to tell her body just where the sofa reaches.

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Libration

Fiction by Jenni Moody

The house is cool. Quiet. Calm. Billie leaves the door open behind her, ready to run out again if her dad is awake. She can make out the shape of the furniture, but the details are blurry without her glasses. She knows enough from memory to step out of the way of the coffee table, around the squeaking floorboards, to put her hand out to tell her body just where the sofa reaches.

Upstairs her sister, Jean, is fast asleep with her stuffed animals. The nightlight in her room a faint and tiny star. She couldn't have slept through all of the yelling. Not Jean who calls out into the hallway every time Billie comes in late at night from a party. Jean with her child's smile. The one Billie is here to save.

She pauses at the bottom of the stairs, listening. The summer crickets are at their loudest. A car passes. The headlights sweep around the room, and when they hit her face she ducks away. Her hand grips the smooth knob of the stair railing. Her bare feet arched against the hardwood floor, ready to run.

*

The planetarium is slightly dingy. Spider webs hang between the Styrofoam planets in a display case. An old woman sits behind a counter by the door. She takes a long time to count back the change from the twenty dollar bill that Jean's father gave for admission.

There's a group of schoolchildren sitting in the best seats. They're a year older than Jean, and from a different school. They all wear matching shirts that say Chesterfield Academy. The private school. The kids have a map of the moon taped to clipboards. Their small hands hold pencils with spoons taped to the top so that they won't be accidentally stolen. One boy smiles at Jean, and she turns her body so that her father cannot see her wave back.

She has a marble and a rubberband and a small plastic pony with purple hair in the pocket of her dress, but she doesn't take them out to play with them. Billie warned her not to fidget. But Billie isn't here with them. She's gone out to a party, and their dad was pretty mad about it. The rubberband stretches, pops, stretches between her thumb and middle finger, hidden in the soft pocket of her hand-me-down dress.

Jean and her father sit together on one of the old benches. She counts the number of people there. Just under twenty. Across from her there are some men. When Jean goes back up to the counter to pick up a free star chart she passes them, the smoke of campfire lingering in their clothes.

“Did you skin it yourself?”

A man with a bright orange hunter's cap spits a dark liquid into his soda bottle. “Yeah. Hung her up in the back yard.”

Jean sits down again beside her father and spreads the star chart across her lap. She can hear every word they say, as if they had cupped their hands up to her ear.

“What about the foal?”

The man's bottom lip is puffed out with chewing tobacco. It makes his words muffled and heavy. “I'll get her next season.”

It is a game she and her father play. They sit across the room from some people who are obvious newbies, and they don't speak for the first few minutes. They listen to the people on the other

side of the planetarium, to find out what secrets people reveal when they think no one is listening.

*

Billie's hand sweats. She wipes it on her pajama bottoms. Her dry throat aches, her mind fizzing a bit at the edges. But she doesn't have time to get some water. He could wake up any moment. She takes one step onto the stairs. She waits. She listens. Glass shifts in the garbage can in the kitchen and makes a clink. She thinks she knows the type of glass by the heavy smell in the room. Dark green bottles with thick bottoms, the rim stained red with wine.

But they were at the planetarium until at least 9 p.m. That's how late they ran when Billie was a kid. He must have started drinking right when they got home.

A high whine and water running through the pipes stops her. He must be awake. She runs back to the front door, bumping into the sofa along the way. It grunts as its wooden feet scoot across the hardwood floor. She crouches down on the front step and puts her head between her knees. Counting her breathing, measuring it, congratulating each slow exhale.

Her red Mustang sits by the front curb. There's a streak of white on the front bumper. Her mother's the one who put it there.

Billie considers running up to one of the doors, ringing the doorbell, and asking the person to call the police. All along the quiet street the front porch lights stay off. No windows lit by lamps or the blue glow of television. It's 3 a.m. on a Saturday. This is a gated community, a place where engineers and businessmen and even an astronaut have come to retire. People who have paid to not be part of these kinds of situations. Billie wonders if the police would just throw her out of the gates to the community.

Her breathing steadies.

"I'll just be in there for a minute," she thinks.

She stands up and steps back into the house. Her hand lingers on the front door, making sure it will stay open when she lets go.

Jean.

The keys. Her glasses. Her phone.

She walks into her father's house silently, feeling for the first time like a thief, even though it is a name he has called her before.

*

“You little thief.”

Jean holds the glossy star chart on her lap. She picked it up from the table by the front door. But she hadn't stolen it. The lady behind the counter had nodded to her, told her it was alright to take it back to her seat. She looks up at her father, wondering if he is making a joke.

“Put it back.”

His voice is not unkind. But it is stern, and Jean does not argue. She travels the stars one last time, her fingers rubbing over the small, glow-in-the-dark paint that traces the constellations. She hopes that it will rub off on her fingers.

She folds the map together. Spoons and bears and sisters all bending into each other.

Maybe Billie has an old star map she doesn't want now that she's older.

The lady at the desk gives Jean a smile and presses a sticker onto her t-shirt before she can protest. It is a star. Jean sits beside her father, swinging her feet, hoping that when the lights go off her star will be visible.

*

Billie makes it to the top of the stairs without too much noise. She peeks around the corner, and the door to her father's bedroom is shut. Her hand rests on her throat, as if it could shield her windpipe. There has been no time yet for mirrors, but by the ache of her skin she will have to wear a scarf around her neck to her classes tomorrow. Not an hour ago his hands were on her neck, his rage filled the house.

Just like your mother. Sneaking in late at night.

The hallway floor is full of squeaking boards, all the way down to her bedroom at the far end. She steps and the floor groans, as if tired of all of this late night moving about.

Billie waits in the hallway, ready to run down the stairs and out of the house forever. She's waiting for the sound of the door unlatching, for his stumbling forward with his fists against the wall. But his door stays shut.

And so does the one with the glow-in-the-dark star sticker on the doorknob.

*

The show starts. The lights dim slowly, a rapid dusk falling. On the dome the stars appear. Only a few at first, but then more and more step out of the dark. Stars that can't be seen from the city. A woman gives a tour of the constellations with a laser pointer. Beginning at the North Star, she works her way around the sky, using the red beam to draw the swoop of a bear's back and the belt hanging from Orion's hips.

When the sky has been mapped out, the slideshow begins, and the woman guides her audience across the moon. The kids with the clipboards stare in awe, and then scribble on their maps as the woman names the seas. Jean pulls the head of her plastic pony out of her pocket to take a peek at the slideshow.

Jean thinks of the moon as an emotional journey. Maybe in the future there will be a tour you can take through all of the romantically named areas.

The Ocean of Storms, where you face your fears.

From there into the Sea of Vapors, where the past comes to settle its score.

And then into the Sea of Serenity, and finally the Lake of Sleep.

*

Billie's father does not wake up.

She steps into her bedroom and stands in the dark.

Broken glass lies scattered across the floor. She leans into the room and picks up her shoes. She shakes them to make sure there are no slivers of glass inside and runs her hand into the toes to be sure. Then she slips them on and steps into the room.

Her glasses have fallen onto the floor, but they are not broken. She puts them on and looks around, measuring what she can and cannot take.

There's a sound in her closet. A soft knock. Billie steps into the closet, presses her ear against the wall. Knock knock knock.

It's Jean in her bedroom. They haven't talked to each other through the walls like this since before their mother left. Back when the fighting between their parents was so bad that they couldn't risk running through the hallway to the other's room.

They don't have a code. The knocks don't correspond to letters of the alphabet or phrases. But because they are sisters, they know what the knocks mean.

I'm here. I'm okay. Are you there?

Billie listens to Jean's raps on the wall, the knuckles of her first two fingers readying a reply.

*

The children in the planetarium begin to pick on each other. They shift in their seats, hitting one another on the head with their pencils. The woman with the laser pointer tells the tech guy to bring up the lights, and she places a tin cooking pan on the floor.

“I’ll need some volunteers,” she says.

Jean jumps to her feet. There’s a tug at the back of her t-shirt, pulling her back down onto the seat. Her father lets go of her t-shirt and gives her head a pat.

The children race to the woman, and she hands them each a rock. They stand over the cooking pan and one by one drop their rock. On impact, white strands of flour bounce out and stretch across the top layer of brown cinnamon. Jean listens to the soft sounds of impact. The thuds sound like heavy footfalls. The woman calls these rays of debris ejecta. A teenage girl slumps over in a fit of giggles, and her friend smiles beside her, her cheeks reddening. The woman only has a few rocks left. The children begin to fight over who can drop them into the pan.

The woman holds the rocks out to Jean. “Why don’t we let someone else have a try?”

Her father swipes at the back of her shirt, but Jean sprints forward to clutch at the rocks. She’s careful not to look back at her father’s eyes as she raises her hand and lets the first rock fall. But the pebble only makes a small spray. She tries again, raising her hand high above her head and letting another rock go. A puff of white flour flies across the pan. But it isn’t enough. The last rock Jean throws. It bounces off of the corner of the pan with a twang, the rock flying into a faraway corner.

Jean runs back to her seat as the adults in the audience laugh. She draws her feet up to her chest, tucks her head in between her arms. She wishes Billie were here to tell her it’s all right. To make everybody else be quiet.

Beside Jean her father laughs in deep, thunderous roars.

*

It is hard to walk away. She picks up her backpack full of college textbooks. She opens a duffel bag and begins to stuff clothing in it, hangers and all. There's a laundry bag in the closet from her brief stay in the dorm before her father stopped paying. She opens the bag and begins to fill it with shoes, jewelry, hats, stuffed animals.

Billie shoves her phone and her car keys in her purse, and then lifts the shoulder strap over her head. Everything else she can leave behind.

She turns to look around the room. Jean stands in the doorway, her stuffed rabbit in the crook of her arm, covered to her toes in her Disney princess nightgown. Billie shoulders her backpack, swings her purse over to the side so she has room to run, and picks up Jean.

Jean wraps her tiny arms around Billie's neck. "Don't go."

Billie walks down the hallway, into Jean's room. She picks up Jean's school backpack and throws clothes inside. Jean's forehead is warm against her neck, and she remembers holding Jean when she was a baby. When their mother stopped getting up at night to feed her. Reading stories about sailing away from monsters in an enchanted boat, and swearing not to step onto that boat without her little sister.

Jean stretches out her arms, sleepwalking through their morning routine of putting on her backpack. Billie stands in the doorway with Jean balanced on her hip. Three. Two. One.

Ready.

Run.

*

The lecturer tells everyone to give the kids a big round of applause, then the kids are sent back to their seats.

One of the men across from Jean raises his hand. The lecturer points at him, and he leans forward.

“What about the other side of the moon? You know, the dark side?” He starts to hum some Pink Floyd.

The lecturer looks tired, like this has happened before. Or maybe it happens every weekend. But the lecturer has a strategy for dealing with these types of questions.

“Does anyone know why we only see one face of the moon?”

One of the kids sitting on the front row raises his hand.

“Because of the tides?”

The lecturer nods, smiles. And describes how the moon is tidally locked, how it does not turn in its orbit like Earth does.

The kid looks confident that this is the end of the discussion, but the lecturer asks another question.

“So how much of the moon can we see?”

The kid raises his hand again. “59 percent”

“So if we can only see one side of the moon, then why can we see 59 percent, instead of just 50 percent?”

The kid shakes his head. He hasn't gotten that far yet.

"It's because of something called libration. The moon has a slight wobble, and this allows us to see just a little bit more of the sides that are usually hidden."

The lecturer turns to the Pink Floyd guy, ready for his retort.

But he doesn't hear the kid's answer. He's too busy looking at the photograph on the projector screen of a crater called Pythagoras. A grin spreads across the man's face.

"What's that jerk so happy about?" her father whispers.

Jean sees it.

In the center of Pythagoras, there is the outline of a man. His body splayed out as if it were the chalk outline of a crime scene. Beside him lies his dog.

Jean knows the man and his dog aren't real, their images just the shadows and light giving a shape meaning. Like shapes in clouds. The face of Jesus in toasted bread.

The man across the room turns to look at Jean's father. And from the cold look in the man's eyes, Jean knows that he has heard her father's whisper.

*

At the door to her sister's bedroom Billie listens. There's no sound in the house, no stream of light into the hallway from her father's door. She takes a deep breath.

She runs down the hallway, down the stairs, to the front door. It doesn't matter now if he wakes up.

She's almost to the front door when Jean freaks out. She struggles in Billie's arms, pushing against Billie's chest, trying to get free. When Billie holds her tighter, Jean starts screaming. She hits Billie in the neck, and Billie stumbles back, her arms opening. Jean hits the floor with a heavy thud and then runs off, up the stairs, her backpack bouncing.

"Jean!" Billie whisper-calls.

There is the sound of a bedroom door opening. The upstairs hall lamp turns on, filling the corner of the living room.

*

Outside the planetarium, people stand staring up at the dark sky. The tech guy from the planetarium show has his personal telescope out on the grass field. He's trying to focus in on the moon, but the weather is against him. There's a line forming behind him, waiting to look through the eyepiece.

The teacher hands out ice cream to the kids from a red and white cooler. The kids try to manage eating their fudgesicles and avoid getting tagged by their classmates who have already finished eating.

The teacher tries to call the kids over to wipe off their sticky hands, but they're in full play mode. Jean and her father stand in line to look through the telescope. The tech guy has finally calibrated everything.

The kids playing tag use the line for the telescope. They weave in and out of the adults, hiding behind legs, feinting in and out of the line while being chased.

The boy who knew all of the answers during the planetarium show stands beside a tree. He smiles and beckons her over. When Jean's father leans down to look through the telescope's lens, Jean runs to the tree. She doesn't stop until she's behind it, out of sight.

*

“Jean!”

Billie can see Jean’s tiny feet poking out from the top of the stairs. If she can just get Jean to come back down they’ll have enough time.

“Please Jean, please.”

She moves forward. There is a crash from upstairs, the sound of the floorboards creaking. The sound of his footsteps on the stairs freezes her.

Jean’s voice is full of trust. “Dad!”

Then there is the slap of his hand against the wall, steadying himself as he comes down the stairs. Billie runs.

She locks the car as soon as she’s inside. By the time the living-room light turns on she has started the car and shifted it into drive. When he stands on the front porch, his white hair sticking up like a madman’s, she is pulling away from the curb. He stands there on the front step, holding Jean in his arms.

Billie hits the steering wheel. “No!”

She wants to roll down her window, to shout at Jean to run and get in the car. But she remembers the day her mother left, and how Jean wouldn’t even hug her goodbye.

There is a look in her father’s eyes that she has only seen once before. As Billie drives away she looks in her rearview mirror and watches as he closes the door and turns off the front porch light.

*

The boy hands Jean a fudgesicle. They sit together behind the giant tree. It's evening, but the moon is full and glowing. Her hands grow sticky, the thick chocolaty ice melting in little streams. The boy pulls a star chart out of his pocket—the same one that Jean's father made her put back.

He holds out the map as if to bargain. "Want to kiss?"

Jean shrugs her shoulders.

"Haven't you ever kissed anyone before?" he asks.

"No, 'cause I'm a lady."

The boy leans in and kisses her cheek before Jean can turn away. His lips are warm and sticky, and Jean rubs her cheek where he touched it. He tosses the star chart on the ground and then runs back to the group near the planetarium. There's still half of the fudgesicle left, but Jean doesn't feel like eating it anymore.

She covers the popsicle stick and the small bit of ice cream left on it with a leaf, and picks up the map. Pressed between two fingers, held at a corner, because her hands are dirty and sticky.

Her father is waiting for her.

She's afraid he will take away the star chart again, or make her give it back to the planetarium lady.

He kneels down, face to face with Jean. He pulls a tiny paper packet from his wallet and tears off one of the ends. It is one of the moist wipes that they get when they go to eat ice cream together on Sundays. The cloth from the packet is warm, and her father uses it to wipe away the stickiness of the fudgesicle on her hands, and a streak she didn't know was on her face.

Her father picks her up, and she wraps her arms around his neck. They walk past a school bus, the boy who gave her the map watching her through the window. He tries to pull the top part of the window down so he can lean out and yell something, but he presses at the latches over and over and they don't give way. Jean spreads the star map behind her father's back as he carries her to the car. In the darkness, the tiny stars begin to glow. The dirt of the forest beneath her fingernails, and the warmth of the boy's kiss still on her cheek.

Jenni Moody holds an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and is a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. She's lived in a dry cabin in Alaska and a small town in Japan, and was once chased by a family of bears through the Yukon at midnight. She collects stamps (inked, not licked) and writes in the company of her partner and her two black cats in Huntsville, Alabama. Her website is jennimoody.com.