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# Parable

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MARK M. MARTIN

*Parable*

She was usually still asleep when I got home from school, but that day my mother was awake, sitting on the edge of my bed, the wallet cradled like a heavy stone in her open hands. As I approached, the floor of our mobile home creaked each guilty step. I had not expected her to find it. I had no story prepared. She looked up at me, her tired eyes puffy and red from the medication.

“I found it,” I said.

She stared back at me, uncomprehending.

Riding my bike home from school the week before, I had spotted the brown leather square in the middle of the road and quickly circled back. In one thoughtless gesture, I swept it up, tucked it in the front of my underwear, and rode off. While she slept in the next room, I counted the money, four twenty-dollar bills, squinted shamefully at the face on the driver’s license. He had a moustache and long, red, unkempt hair. I pushed the wallet to the back of my drawer and covered it with socks.

“We have to give it back, don’t we?” she said. I stood before her, silent. “I mean, we can’t take someone’s money, can we?”

I had not considered that this would be too much for her. My father would have known exactly what to do. With him, there would be no questions, only answers, definite decisions. She turned the wallet over and over in her hands, studying it.

“There’s eighty dollars,” I said.

She carefully spread open the pocket, counted the money with her fingertips. Then she lifted a flap that I hadn’t noticed, which revealed yet another pocket, a secret pocket, and many, many more green bills.

The year I’d found the wallet was the only year I lived with my mother, a consideration that my older sister—after many explosive weekend fights—refused to entertain. I, on the other hand, had promised her every summer that I’d move in with her when I entered the sixth grade. Her face lit up whenever I mentioned the idea, and more than anything in the world, I craved her smile, her

laughter, the way a plant craves light. I grew taller in those rare moments of happiness.

Still, I wasn't ready when the time arrived, but I knew I had no choice. To tell her no would have meant disaster. She would have crumbled.

My father watched me pack. He knew about her bouts with depression, but only the details my sister, Karen, and I were willing to share after weekend visits. They divorced when I was one; Karen was four. For reasons still unbeknownst to my sister and me, he excommunicated my mother, interacting with her only when necessary. Karen moved in with him soon after the divorce; I lived with my grandparents until I was five, at which time my dad also took me in.

"You going to be okay?" he asked, as I poured all of my belongings into two, well-traveled suitcases. I nodded.

He told me to call whenever I wanted to come "home."

We fell into a routine the year I started the sixth grade, my mother losing jobs as fast as she lost men; me, the comedian, keeping it light, making fun of our poverty, learning what cues would send her into a downward spiral, doing my best to head her off.

Her mother died when I was nine; her father (who owned the mobile home we now lived in) continued to offer financial support, but could no longer handle her emotional ebb and flow. He had decided to move in with his sister, essentially turning his back—like the rest of the family (her brother, her aunts and uncles)—on an illness no one seemed to understand.

I was six when my mother was diagnosed as manic-depressive, now called "bipolar disorder." It was 1973 and the doctors recommended anti-depressants, barbiturates, and the like—all of which produced horrifying side effects: darting eyes, incessant, teeth-chattering monologues, un-evoked fits of rage.

I remember watching her one night as she poured herself like hot lava through my grandparents' house, scorching everything. "My skin is crawling!" she said, grinding her teeth. My grandfather followed her around, searching for his daughter inside the stranger, his sympathetic words falling flat, useless. And then she turned on him. I was sitting on the sofa when she snatched the glass, four-cornered ashtray from the coffee table. "Don't you understand," she

said, "I can't take it anymore." Her eyes were wide and wild, like an animal's. "I could kill you right now, do you realize that?" she said through clenched teeth. My grandmother pleaded with her. My grandfather's face was red, and he was shaking.

"I could. I could bust your skull open with this ashtray!" she said.

"Mom," I said. I was crying. "Mom, don't."

"Please," my grandmother begged, "look what you're doing to your son. Look how frightened he is."

Her entire countenance changed when she looked at me. It was as if she had forgotten that I was sitting there, just a few feet away. It seemed, at that moment, that she had returned from a distant place. She apologized, placed the ashtray back on the table and disappeared down the hall.

When they started her on the more effective drug, Lithium, the anger diminished, but she would never be the same. She was not the same physically, either. She gained weight. Her eyes became dull and permanently puffy. After a while they began to bulge, making her look insincere, scared.

During the year I lived with her, I quickly realized that sleep was the only freedom she could own. The mornings she had job interviews were the worst. I would wet her washcloth with warm water, climb on top of her, gently wipe the sleep from her eyes. Those mornings I was Mork from Ork, or Elvis, singing her into the waking world, my legs shaking the mattress, my lip curled up at the edge.

There was three hundred and eighty dollars in the wallet. It was clear to me—the decision was going to be mine. Only weeks before, she had been fired from yet another job, too many missed days. She came home that night, parked in the front yard, extinguished the headlights. When she didn't come in, I knew something was wrong. I went out to her, found her slumped in the driver's seat. I leaned in the window; she turned on the dome light and we counted the change in her wallet. Eighty-five cents worth of dimes and pennies.

"This is all we have," she said.

I opened the door, knelt next to her in the grass.

"Don't cry, Pa will help us," I said, meaning my grandfather. Behind us, the sun-cracked palm fronds clattered and wheezed

against the aluminum skin of our trailer. I told her we would get by. I held her hand.

Of our childhood, weekends spent at the mobile home visiting my grandparents (Pa and Ma) and my mother, I remember very little—only tears on Friday night because we had to say goodbye to my dad, then tears again on Sunday evening when my dad picked us up and we had to say goodbye to Pa, Ma, and Mom. During the summer, we lived at University Lakes Mobile Home Park, and it was then that my sister and I really got to know my mother, or at least the abiding traits the medication did not erase. For her, conversation came naturally. My grandfather always said she could get a statue to talk. In grocery stores and laundromats I watched the less wary open to her over and over again.

The problem was that when she got started, she couldn't stop talking. She seemed to lack the internal gauge most people use to discern a comfortable conclusion. She expected all conversations to lead to invitations. To her, no subjects were taboo; she was shameless about her illness, an open book, willing to discuss her emotions with strangers as candidly as one comments on the weather. The rainy days, the sunny days, she was never afraid to expound upon the mercurial feelings that governed her life. "I'm sad today," she would tell the woman at K-Mart helping my mom find the right sized panty hose. "It's my illness. . ."

"Mommmy," I would say, gritting my teeth and tugging on her sleeve, rolling my eyes. At the time, I thought she was just begging for compassion. I appreciated the kindly ones who would talk to her. Even the ones who just listened found a place in my heart—secretly, as a child I often wished I could go home with them. But looking back on it now, I think she was seeking out her kind, looking not for someone to pity her, but someone *like* her, anyone with the ability to understand.

Knowing that my mother could not make the "right" decision about the wallet made me sad. She stared up at me like a child, her eyes filled with questions.

She was still in her silver nightgown. What made her wake up today, I wondered.

"We should take it back," she said.

“I know.”

I told her where I found it, how I stuck it down my pants that day and rode home.

“No one saw you?”

I shook my head.

It was all we talked about that night. I couldn't believe how much money was really in the wallet. By bedtime, she still hadn't made a decision. I lay awake thinking about it. Through my window, I studied the dark skies. My eyes were fixed on the moon, but all I could see was my mother's face.

My father taught me never to steal, and I'd found no reason when living with him. He kept a jar of quarters for my sister and me in the top drawer of his dresser, money we spent on candy bars and sodas after school. If we needed something that cost more than a handful of quarters, all we had to do was ask him.

My mother, however, in her unbalanced days before Lithium, swore by the Bible, but lived by reckless necessity. My sister and I followed her late one night through the luminous aisles of a 24-hour Zayres. I remember being tired, lying on my back in the lingerie section while my sister helped her pick out bras. We seemed to be the only ones in the department. No one monitored the fitting rooms. My mom grabbed me by the hand, ushered us into an empty cubicle, drew the curtain closed behind her. Not enough room to lie on the floor, I slumped onto the mini-bench next to the clump of bras my mother unloaded, rested my head against the wall. Her back to the mirror, she pulled one from the tangle, slipped her arms through the straps, fastened it over the one she was wearing. Two bras. Frantic, she untangled another, frilly bra from the fray, slid her arms through and reached behind to snap the clasps. Three bras.

“Mom, what are you doing?” my sister said.

I watched, confused, as she added another bra to the layers, and another. My sister's eyes widened; my heart quickened. Perhaps I was too young to understand, but I remember. I remember being afraid, being ashamed. I remember quick-stepping behind her toward the exit, too frightened to cry. I remember her wild eyes darting as she turned the key in the ignition, the world around me suddenly uncontainable and buzzing, somehow bigger, as she aimed her yellow Ford toward the highway.

I'm twelve. The day after I find the wallet, I'm standing in my bedroom, using an Astropop as a microphone to sing along to Terry Jacks' "Seasons in the Sun." I am impatient for summer to come, can't wait to go to the Youth Fair—it is where I imagine I will spend the money. My friend, Billy Schultz, and I will ride every ride in the park. He will think I am a prince with all the money I have to spend; all the things his parents have said about my mother will evaporate as fast as pink cotton candy on the tongue.

Some days after school, Billy's mother makes us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Kool-Aid. We climb onto his bunk bed with the Mickey Mouse sheets and fill in the blanks for Mad Libs #7. "Fart" is our favorite verb. One time we had an Italian cook *farting* the special of the day: *big hot boogers* for his customers to eat. We could not contain our laughter imagining it. That big plate of steaming boogers on the table. The unsuspecting customers paying top dollar to devour them.

No one knows it, but my stomach is always in knots. I avoid going home, always finding new, longer routes to ride when I leave my school, Greenglades Elementary. Coming home for me is like being a contestant on *Let's Make a Deal*—I never know what I will find behind door number two.

I'm beginning to read people, to understand what they are thinking before they speak. I am becoming a master at forecasting the weather in my mother's eyes, when they're open. And if I didn't get her out of bed every day, who would?

She finds men in bars to fall in love with, but it always ends the same. One night, I hear her speaking to one of these men on the phone. In tears, she begs to see him one last time just once more please I love you please.

I stay up late with her, and sometimes—still in our pajamas—we get in the car and drive to the latest lover's house to spy on him. *Do you see his truck? I bet he's at the bar. Why, why did he lie to me?*

In my dreams, I am always falling, or wanting to run away from someone or something chasing me, but I can't; the air around me is thick as taffy, resisting all movement. I begin to dream regularly about plane crashes. In one, I watch a giant plane fall into the horizon, see the smoke rise, and then a mass of people running toward me. A man approaches first. Palms up, covered in blood, he reaches out for my help—a long, metal pole protruding from his chest.

Soon, I develop a stutter that will take two years to dispel. When nervous, I try to speak, but nothing will come out, just the first syllable of what I want to say, stuck there, the sound repeated over and over again. I will learn to think ahead about what I want to say, rehearsing it over and over in my mind, forming the words silently with my lips before trying to utter them. When answering questions from a book in the classroom, I will learn to count the number of questions and the number of students before me, so that I can prepare my answer, so that when it is my turn, I will be ready to speak.

The day after my mother discovers the wallet, I am at school, staring across the round table at my best friend, Tyrone Baker. I say nothing to him about it. I can't stop thinking about her, how I wished she had spanked me and made me return it right away. I imagine my sister at her school, laughing with her friends. I think about my dad in his blue, pest control outfit, driving "The Great White," the name we gave his work truck. I miss them.

Tyrone taught me how to drum on the desk with my thumbs, but today I am unresponsive. I feel as though I am floating in a giant bubble; there is a great silence around my ears and my body that envelopes me, carries me to class, to the cafeteria for lunch, and to the playground. Outside, the usual excitement seems foreign, distant. Overhead, heavy white clouds slip past. All the children are running and shouting, a cacophony of shrieks and laughter rising from the fresh, green grass.

I found her in the bedroom when I got home, but she was not sleeping. Her bed was made. She was cleaning. A good sign. Her spirits were up. I had hoped that she would return the wallet while I was at school, but she hadn't. It sat atop her dresser, a square, brown bulge. Was it bigger?

"You're awake."

"I cleaned the bathroom and vacuumed the carpets. Did you see the living room?"

"Looks good."

"I'm making dinner. We're going to have meatloaf. Your dad loved my Snyder Loaf."

She never cooked. We lived on fast food and TV dinners. I was always happy to find her this way, but it was rare. I knew it wouldn't last. It was the wallet, I was sure. Thinking about the money is what brought her back.

I snatched it up, fell backwards onto the bed. "What are we going to do?"

She smoothed the hair away from her eyes with the back of her wrist, sat down next to me. "Did you see his license? He lives near here."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No."

Outside, the palms rattled in the breeze. I wished it would rain. "Mom, I think we should take you shopping. You need new clothes, shoes."

She turned and stared at me for a long time, then through me. She was thinking about it.

"Maybe I was meant to find it, Mom. There's \$380 in here," I said, turning the wallet over and over in my hands. "He must be rich."

"We can't spend it," she said. "Can we?"

"You need a break, Mom. You've never had a break." I stood up, excited. "Look, we'll take the money, but we'll mail him back the wallet. Okay?"

She looked up at me. I ran my hand through her hair. "You can go to the beauty parlor. We'll have dinner at a nice restaurant. You can buy those knee-high boots you like that your friend, Valerie, wears. You'll look great in those."

"It's not right," she said, biting her lip. But when she smiled, I knew we had made our decision.

Friday evenings were block party rituals at our trailer park—women leaning on cars, swapping rumors, their daughters rainbowing the street with thick chunks of colored chalk. Family men, weary emperors of the work week, would swarm a beer cooler, their boys begging the long pass, pure ecstasy to hear a father cry *Go deep!* Nothing more beautiful than that football in wobbled flight, the confused pack of sons scrambling, falling over each other to catch it.

One Friday, during the year I lived with her, my mom was sitting next to me on our front steps, her first time out in a week. I knew how our neighbors felt about her—they were candid, shameless

with their comments—but still, I was happy she was outside. It was dusk, her favorite time of day. I remember thinking: *she's smiling. Smiling!* Her curly brown hair was flattened from sleep to the sides of her head, but her eyes, green like mine, were untroubled, alert. I remember hoping the sun would never set, craving the light, the music of her voice mixing in conversation. We were shadowless in our shade, the hem and haw of a lawnmower blade somewhere in the distance. I remember bending closer to her, the grace and physics of her gestures, the charity of her presence.

I was invited to everything that year: movies, swim parks, picnics, and in the beginning, so was she. But they could not sustain conversations with her, and the more someone pulled away, the more she clung, desperate. I attended sleepovers, but when I wanted a friend to sleep at my house, their parents denied permission or made excuses. I began to resent my mother for being different, but I am most ashamed now for the many times, when she wasn't invited, I found myself making excuses for them.

At the mall, we were impostors, paupers pretending to be rich. Three hundred and eighty dollars seemed to us like \$1,000 or \$10,000—endless. We spent it all in a few hours: blouses and shoes for her, the sexy, black, knee-high boots she wanted that zippered up the side, swim trunks for me, a *Planet of the Apes* t-shirt, and the Aquaman action figure from *Superfriends*. I loved Aquaman because he could communicate telepathically. In between stores, we found a bench and ate pretzels and ice cream. I made her laugh by mimicking the silly face she made each time we paid for something.

At home, she wanted to model everything for me. She put on her favorite record by Tony Orlando and Dawn, danced around the bedroom singing "Sweet Gypsy Rose." It surprised me that I didn't feel guilty. From what I'd learned from the Lutheran school I was attending when I lived with my father, I expected guilt to be something that rises up in a person, like it or not, when they have sinned. I felt nothing. Her happiness overwhelmed me. I hungered for it.

But something was different. I was different. I couldn't shake the sadness that sprung from her not being able to make a decision about the wallet. I saw her differently now. Maybe it was because I was older or because the year of living together had finally taken its toll on me, but I knew, watching her dance before me, her delicate

shoulders undulating to the music, that at the end of the summer, I would return to live with my father. Like everyone else, I was going to turn my back on her, and I hated myself for it.

“Put on the boots, Mom,” I said, pulling them out of the box for her. “All the men will want to dance with you. I want to see you in them.”

She sat down next to me on the bed and I helped her put them on, slid the zippers up. “I don’t know. You think I’ll be able to dance in these?”

She loved to dance, had won a dance contest once when she was in high school. “Of course,” I said. “You could dance on stilts.”

She stood, used my shoulder to steady herself. Then she started dancing, hands open, palms up to the ceiling, the way she always danced, bringing them down only to snap or clap to the music.

“Dance with your mother,” she said, and I did, letting her spin me around the room. “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Old Oak Tree” came on and she sang along. The floor of our trailer shook and the pictures of us on the dresser vibrated, but we didn’t care. Lost in the music, we sang and danced. I imitated her, palms up, as she shimmied backward across the shag carpet, laughing and singing, reaching for my hands.