

Stones

By Victoria Irish

My mom was a hairdresser, and so hair was the most important. Always tight with the braids she would decorate me with. "Be careful how you look when you leave the house," she would tell me, pulling my scalp into shape. "Ensure that your hair is always neat, your clothes have not one wrinkle. It sends a message, to have a poor presentation." I had a different nose from her, but I think mine looked the way hers used to look. She made her face to be a different presentation than the one she gave me.

I woke up in the motel, facing the door. I always chose the bed furthest away from the door, always faced the wall. This was the first thing wrong.

It was my third night here, that much I knew. I shifted to face the person taking up space beside me. Thankfully, it was a face I recognized. Rarely did I see him without his thick, black-framed glasses on the table beside him, mouth parted slightly. He had the face of someone who was kind as a child, and did not retain the quality. In this moment, though, he looked younger.

I knew that if I raised my head enough, I would see a mirror mounted to the wall across from me. Unpasting my skull from the pillow, I sat up and caught my own reflection. The world started to shift, but the familiar headache was not present. I might still have been a little drunk. The mirror showed me someone else. Light roots were just starting to halo in spite of the black box dye. My eyeliner was smeared under my eyes, and probably onto the pillow beneath me, if I bothered to move my head down and look.

Slowly, I brought my legs to the edge of the bed. My legs were scuffed, mysterious bruises already forming. On the nightstand beside me, my few belongings were displayed by my open backpack. I fished through the main compartment, collecting a clean pair of underwear, a lighter, and my glasses, the hinge taped on one side. I bent down to pick up the pack of Camels by the door. I don't smoke Camels, but it would do. I cracked open the door and slipped through into daylight, sporting too-big shoes and a stained sweatshirt.

My mother loved to walk. Maybe it felt like a little taste of freedom, to be able to turn on whichever corner she saw fit. One could go around the block, or keep going straight until the neighborhood changed too much to comfortably continue.

We were walking in a straight line that day, when she stopped to pick something up where the cement met grass. She handed me a flat, round stone. It was weathered smooth, meant for a river, not the suburbs.

"How do you think this got here?" She wondered aloud to me, admiring the sleek black surface.

I shook my head. I was at the age where my mother's tongue felt awkward in my mouth, like I was making too much of a performance by choosing one language when I knew another perfectly well. Still, I didn't want to betray her with English, so I chose not to speak at all.

"This is for you to keep. It was waiting for you." She tucked the stone into my hand, rubbing my knuckles as she closed my fingers around it.

The cigarette smoke started to soothe me. Looking out from the second floor of the motel, there was a cement railing that looked wide enough to sit on. I heaved myself onto it, cigarette trapped in my mouth and balancing on my knees like a child climbing onto their too-high bed, before leaning on the support beam to give my neck a rest from holding my head up. The view of the parking lot was nothing special, although I might have thought it was when I was younger. I used to regard parking lots as Midwestern Freedom, maybe the way my mother thought sidewalks were American Freedom. Now it was just flat and dark. I reached for my tangles of hair behind me, still puffing smoke, parting my knots to braid it back.

The man still asleep was called Max, whose shoes I now wore. I always thought it odd that he still went by Max, because that sounded like a boy's name, and now he was not. I went to high school with him, before he had dropped out. After that, I didn't see him for a while. It was probably three years without hearing from him until we had crossed paths again on New Years in a stranger's house. Still wearing his glasses and half-assed beard from when he was in high school, but with more tattoos and shorter hair.

He gave me a hug. It was friendly at the time, almost a brotherly reunion, but it was enough to seem like a lover, how a lover could be. I asked him *wherehaveyoubeen all thistime Max* and he said *i have nofuckinidea*, probably unable to recount where he had been ten minutes prior. I stuck by Max after that. More or less, we kept each other alive. I could keep his mouth shut and he could keep me moving. People thought we would always be something more, but we never were. It was comforting. Or I thought that it was.

My mother said to me, "When I was younger, I thought that if you tucked the right stone under your tongue, it could make you go invisible." We had just crossed the line of familiarity in our neighborhood walk.

I turned to her, laughing. "Why would you do that?" My tongue was clunky in my mouth no matter how I chose to speak, taking up too much air.

"Tía Silvia and I would stay out too late, and we knew we couldn't walk through the door without being noticed. So instead, we would look for a good stone." She laughed quietly to herself, and the silence lingered too long.

"Putting rocks in your mouth is a little bit disgusting." I said, to break the tension.

My mother laughed again. "It was disgusting. It was disgusting and it was freeing. The funniest part is that it always worked, somehow. We could still be seen, but for some reason, it just kept working, so we just kept doing it."

Her pace started to slow, looking at the endless foreign sidewalk in front of her. "Let's go home."

I made to turn around, but she reached for my hand still holding her stone.

"Across the street." She guided me to the southern rows of homes. "We've already seen everything this side can give us."

I had reached the tips of my hair in my braids, but without any ties, I just let them dangle, destined to eventually unwind once again.

The night before flashed in my mind. A couch, with worn out green leather. The cracks on the armrest looked like veins. I must have stayed sat there for an eternity, if

that's what I could recall best. Someone who wore the face of Max broke through the nothing. His voice always sounded like it was made to be soft but pushed into harshness. Maybe that's why I remembered him yelling at me last night so intently, watching his mouth move until sounds started to come out of it.

I could only remember one thing he said, and one thing I said. "Open your mouth." He held a Something in his hand.

"I don't want to go invisible."

I turned my body so that my feet could dangle over the parking lot. I never went to college, even though she had wanted me to. It started as a gap year. Then I tried community college. I couldn't keep myself in class, couldn't keep myself sober enough. I could barely keep myself in class when I was in high school. I had no car then, and still didn't. Sometimes I didn't know how I was so good at being everywhere but where I should have been as a kid, but then I looked down at the painted parking spots and remembered. It's easy to be free when you carry a backpack to your name and have no perception of the last 12 hours.

I heard the door behind me click open. "Did you take my fuckin shoes?" The back of my head nodded at Max. I heard his sigh, clearly too tired and unbothered. A moment later, he was climbing onto the ledge beside me, all legs and faded tattoos.

He winced at the sunlight. "The fuck are you doing out here?"

I shrugged. He peered down at me through his chunky glasses. Or rather, at my cigarette. Pulled it out of my mouth and right into his.

"What do you remember from last night?" He said, breath short.

“Nothin much, really.” I only ever spoke English now.

“Makes sense why you’re so calm.” He exhaled. “The cops were out here looking for you last night.”

I flexed my feet to keep his shoes from falling. “What?”

“I mean if you bothered to check your phone you’d see it’s broken.”

I hadn’t even thought of my phone. I used it so rarely now, I never had anyone I needed to talk to. “What does that have to do with the police?”

“Dunno, honestly. I don’t know if you dropped it or spilled fucking vodka on it or both, but that shit is gone.” Despite Max’s profanity, he was soft spoken. More just recounting events than anything. “That’s why the cops came, I think. You were trying to fix it while it could still turn on, pressing random buttons and shit, and it started calling.”

“And what, I didn’t have the brains to hang up?” I reached for my braids, making sure they were still intact.

He paused to breathe in the smoke. “Not just the cops. It called your mom a bunch of times first, while we were still out. I think because she’s set as an Emergency Contact on your phone.” Somehow, this was worse than the police looking for me. “And not on purpose, no. Your phone had a mind of its own.”

I stared at young trees lining the far side of the parking lot, sparse enough that they should be embarrassed of their lack of companionship. Distantly, I knew we should both be more concerned about the conversation at hand. I should be concerned for myself.

“So what,” I pulled the Camels out from under my leg. “The cops stop by and see I’m right as rain, don’t bother to look into me at all, and that’s that? Crisis averted.”

“When they got here, we were just sitting in the parking lot. Obviously we couldn’t do anything about it, so we just waited for them to leave and then came back in to sleep. Didn’t look too hard, if I’m honest.”

I dug around my brain for a moment. If the police came to the motel to trace a call and did not find me, did that mean they were still looking?

“My mom probably thinks I’m dead. And you couldn’t think of any other solution?”

“Well it’s not like I could talk to them. At least I fucking remember my night. Just use my phone to call her, I don’t care.”

I didn’t know my mom’s phone number. Hadn’t had a reason for years. But I wouldn’t tell him that. Instead, I let my feet relax, his shoes dropping onto the asphalt below. Max sighed.

“I’m gonna push you off the ledge.”

“Then you’ll have to walk down for your shoes and my body.” I swung my legs back in and went inside.