

RACHEL DUGAS

*GREEN EYES*

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The best thing about Lilly was that she was a sound sleeper. When she was just a tiny baby falling asleep, we would lay her down on the linoleum next to the stereo, trying to teach her to dream, without interruption. It was Mark's idea, and it worked. Six years later, she can still sleep through anything. It comes in handy.

Like any two young idiots in love, Mark and I rarely saw eye-to-eye about anything. It was about a week before Lilly's second birthday that we started seeing hand-to-arm, and then hand-to-face. Pretty soon, I was seeing things from the bottom of the stairwell.

Thankfully, Lilly dreamt through it all.

At the time, I was working at a craft store on the other end of town. I would walk in with my head down, unable to watch my co-workers' mouths as they gasped, their thoughts stumbling as they wondered what kind of questions they should ask. I told the girls that I wasn't looking, that I tripped over Lil's toys, or tumbled down the stairs. I thought I was being so clever. But I guess they saw right through it. I can't even imagine what they really thought. I could hardly face them then; I can't face them now.

It's almost winter. The cold wind cuts my eyes as I go out to grab the boxes I've been stashing in my car. Back inside, I start filling them with what's left of our lives. Although Mark works all night, doesn't get back home until morning, I still feel the need to hurry. My hands shake with panic. A sense of overwhelming fear, approaching fulfillment, runs through my body.

I finish packing. I've filled two boxes with our clothes, our documents, my journal, and five hundred dollars I've been hiding between the mattresses. It's taken me a long time to save. I had to stop working when the bruises became too difficult to hide, and I had run out of stories. Because Mark made all the money, I had to resort to sneaking a couple of dollars here and there, hoping every night that he wouldn't figure out what I was doing. Thankfully, much like Lilly, Mark was in his own dreamworld; always so drunk, he just never noticed.

As I look at an old family picture lying on the desk, I become overwhelmed. Sitting down on the bed I think about the last time I tried to leave. Like before, this was not a situation you walked away from with dignity.

I remember walking to the payphone on the corner, dialing my parents in Saskatchewan with a broken nail. This was in the summer, three or four years ago, when Dad was still alive. I held my mouth as the tears came. I could hardly speak. The night before, Mark had knocked a tooth out. I was too ashamed to go the dentist.

Shame is a funny thing. That broken tooth still causes me a lot of trouble. But I'm still too ashamed to visit my dentist; I erase his messages.

Mom answered. Whimpering, I tried to explain to her that I was terrified for both Lilly and myself. I told her I needed help, told her how I needed to stay with them for a while. All she could say was that she loved me before quickly passing me to my father. I heard him clear his throat, cover the mouthpiece, while Mom gave him a muffled synopsis of what was going on. He came on the phone.

“Nikki? What's going on over there? What's this I hear about you leaving Mark?” Sensitivity was not my father's strong suit.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said, pausing for a moment to dull the pain. “Lillian and I need to come and stay with you for a little while.”

He cleared his throat again.

“Nikki, you can't leave your family, you've taken vows. I'm sure you and Mark can work it out.” He spoke slowly, the way he did when I was still Daddy's little girl. But I felt no feelings of nostalgia.

“I know Daddy. It's just that I need to get away for a while, get my head on straight. We're not happy together and I think it would be best if we spent some time apart.”

I was rambling. I didn't want to beg. I had to get out of here, but I was too embarrassed to tell him the truth. I guess I thought it was my fault; I guess a part of me still does.

“Listen to me Nikki, I'm only going to say this once. Lilly deserves to have her mom and her dad around. Your mother and I had problems, too, but we worked them out for the sake of you and your sister. You just need to put some effort into it. I know that Mark loves you and I know that you love ...”

I hung up the phone. It wasn't part of the script. I couldn't stand to listen to his voice for another second. A high school Phys-Ed teacher and football coach, my father was what one might call a good old fashioned hard-ass. He was a tough man, his words commanding attention. He and mom had just celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and I'd never seen him lay an angry hand on her; I don't think he ever did. I remember thinking about their anniversary and I forgot about leaving Mark. I caved. I once again resigned myself to the life I had signed up for when I married Mark.

About two months ago, everything changed. Late one night, after Mark had left for work, I put Lilly in the car and drove to the twenty-four hour pharmacy downtown. My period was a week late. This happened a lot because of the stress, but I knew that morning that something was wrong. While inside, Lilly started to whine about some doll she'd seen. I told her she could have it, not having it in me to argue with a tired and cranky five year-old. So I got what I needed, and she got her doll. She carried that little rag doll in a pink dress to the cash while I tightly held the small box. I couldn't look at the cashier. My eye was still bruised. Shame is a funny thing. I quickly shoved the change in my purse and gave Lilly the keys to our car, telling her that I had to go to the bathroom and that she was to wait in the car.

“Can I start the car, mom?” she smiled up at me with her green eyes.

“Yes, but wait until I get back, okay, monkey?”

“Okay. Then can I drive home?” she asked earnestly.

I couldn't help but laugh. She was always testing, exploring. I went into the first stall in the ladies room. The walls were painted a hideous, chipped pink. I pulled the test out of the plastic bag and ripped off the packaging. I took a deep breath and said a little prayer. Just then, two young girls came in, talking in high speed chatter while they fixed their already perfect hair and make-up. I waited until they left in a flurry of glitter and sparkles, jealous of the simplicity of their young lives, their easy confidence.

The worst part about these tests is the waiting. It says on the package to wait two to three minutes for an accurate result. I studied myself in the mirror while I waited

for the blue or pink verdict to appear, trying to pass the time, trying to appear nonchalant to my reflection.

I stared at my wavy brown hair, realizing that I couldn't remember the last time I had cut or styled it. I stared at my green eyes, just like Lil's. I noticed how faded they had become. Their brightness had disappeared, and dark circles had taken their place. There was a bruise on my neck, haphazardly covered with make-up, and my skin was pale and pasty in the fluorescent light. I admitted to myself that I looked unraveled, much older than my twenty-four years.

Finally, the three minutes ended. I looked down at the test.

Pink.

Fuck.

I quickly threw out the test, went back into the stall and vomited neatly.

I now had another life that was completely dependant upon me.

How could I possibly do this again?

I came out of the stall, splashed my face with cold water, and wiped my hands on my sweatpants. Heading out to the car, I brushed the tears from my eyes. Dizzy, I absently wondered if the new baby would have the same bright green eyes that Lilly and I shared.

"Shove over," I said to Lilly, getting into the car. "Five year-olds can't drive, silly." My voice was wavering; I struggled to get it under control.

It was decided. With or without my parents' help, I was out of here. I was already scared for myself and for Lilly and I was not about to bring a new child into this situation.

Mark can't find out. I had to keep this hidden from him. He hadn't even wanted Lilly in the first place. A second child might have pushed him over the line that we'd been tangoing for years.

When we got home, I put Lilly to bed and called my younger sister, Andrea. Only two years apart, we had been best friends when we were young. Yet, we'd only spoken a handful of times since I'd married Mark. The last time we spoke was when dad died. But we spoke for hours that night, catching up for the first time in years. Her life seemed glamorous next to my own: she was single, with no kids, working as a lawyer. Her voice begun to stir feelings within me of jealousy and regret.

Unlike Mom and Dad, Andrea was very understanding. She offered to fly us out that night. But I guess I wasn't really ready. She told me that Lilly and I were welcome there, with her, anytime. I broke down. My tears wet my lips as I thanked her over and over again.

When I hung up, I started hoarding. Money, boxes, courage ...

"I think I have enough," I whisper to myself, picking at the bedspread. It was a wedding gift from Mom and Dad, but it had faded over the years after countless washings.

I close the box and bring it down to the car. As I turn to go back inside and wake Lilly, I look up at the house Mark and I have shared. The siding is crooked and in need of a paint job; the small garden is an overgrown tangle of dead weeds and vines; the windows are too small and neat. I take a deep breath and open the door. I walk up to Lilly's room to wake her up, open her green eyes.

It's time to go.