

Tough Shoot

Manhattans. The first ingredient in a Manhattan, Vermouth, in its heavy, full bottle bought special for tonight, comes down from the cabinet.

My mom, my brother, my girlfriend, all of them waiting, sitting on the huge couch that takes over my apartment, stretching out from the far wall, curving around until it's flush with the front door frame. Its skin covered up with clean blankets, cushions rotated over and over like the balding tires on an old car.

This is all my mom's idea. A surprise. She's never been much for drinking. She'll pick out a sixpack when my brother visits at Christmas, and if he doesn't kill off the lot, the remainders will wait out the next year, stuffed into her fridge right next to hummus and homemade oil and vinegar. Her lonely lady fridge, the kind crowded with everything but real food.

Manhattans. My grandmother's drink. Today, she's gone. Her body gone. Machines and the hospital and calls and calls and calls. Then nothing. Too much, then gone.

Bourbon is next. Warm brown in the way of borrowing a stranger's coat after she's had it on awhile. The warmth needles your skin back to life and you hate how in love you are with something that easy.

The bourbon off to the side, hiding behind the full vermouth. No need for mom to see how me and bourbon are getting on.

We used to take my grandmother to the Black Knight, the only steakhouse in town. So dark and smoky the salads had a bitter crunch. My grandmother hooked her cane on the edge of the table, leaned back in her seat. Her Manhattan showed up in a squat lowball glass with a heavy bottom. Some places will serve a Manhattan in a martini glass. But that's a newer thing, fashionable. Not so much a Black Knight thing.

I'd ask for the maraschino cherry cased in the drink's amber.

Those cherries bit into me. The liquor so strong, crawling off the cherry and cutting through my tongue, drilling at my teeth, sluicing into the pockets of my cheeks until the sharp candy of the cherry came to my rescue. The liquor too much, then gone.

Maraschino cherries. The last ingredient. A cherry into each of four shot glasses, all from different states. Then two parts bourbon, one part vermouth, dash of bitters, stir in ice and then pour. Arizona, Utah, Wyoming, Illinois. Not the usual way, the shot glasses, but this isn't a crowd of drinkers. The usual way doesn't call for mixing in a touch of cherry juice either. But again.

Handing Wyoming to my mom, our thumbs together on the side sit too thick for the short glass. I set the glass down on the table and she picks it up. Our thumbs together, too much.

My brother is Utah. He wipes his finger and thumb through the corners of his mouth.

Arizona for my girlfriend. Her teeth over her bottom lip. The only person who gets away with calling that a smile.

We say things we remember about my grandmother. Things we want to remember.

How she took us to stupid kid movies. How she would take us to anything just so long as we promised it wouldn't be so bad as Bill And Ted's Bogus Whatever. How sometimes she would laugh at the movies, her old woman laughs racking through the theater like shotgun blasts over a lake.

How she was ever stopping herself from saying Shit. How she'd say Shoot instead if she caught herself. How she didn't always catch herself and ended up saying things like Bull Shoot or Tough Shoot.

How she took my mom for her first drink at the Millionaire's Club, a place about as likely to host a millionaire as the Black Knight would be to host King Arthur.

The four of us hold up our glasses. Then sip.

Bottoms up, Arizona.

Cheers, Utah.

Salud, Wyoming.

Prost, Illinois.

My mom. The liquid hits her lips, and my mom wraps her hand over her eyes and weeps. Ugly crying. Her eyes covered, her lips pulled tight. She's teeth all the way back. Crying so that she forgets herself, forgets her mother's drink. I lift my palm up underneath her glass to take it away from her fingers while she shakes. The smell, the taste. Too much. Then gone.

Me and my brother sit close in and put our hands on her back. We don't know what to do with our hands. Our touch. We've never figured it out. Holding my mom while she cries. Hugging my brother. We're the brothers sharing hugs at the airport dropoff with all the grace and warmth of grade schoolers forced to make up after a fistfight, both boys still tasting playground gravel.

My brother's ribs through his shirt when we hug. My mom's back so small. My girlfriend given up on asking for my hands. Given up on pulling my hands to her stomach. To the roundest parts of her legs. To her face. Given up on touch. It's not enough. It's too much. Then it's gone.

We try. No tissues in the apartment, so it's toilet paper for mom. She cries it out on the couch, its cushions bolstered by cardboard slabs wrapped in towels. Cries into toilet paper on her son's curb couch.

It's over after a few rips at the toilet roll. She can finish up a cry. She's tough shoot.

Then it's time.

My mom stands and I bend deep. She touches her lips on my hair. Her lips press together and squeeze out a sucking noise. A stage kiss. The same one as always. Big, then gone. She pulls on the door until I lean in to flip the deadbolt. Then she swings the door and walks through. She leaves it open for my brother to follow. The cold air from outside pushes its way in to her spot.

My brother rubs his fingers down the corners of his mouth. Then he rubs at the insides of his

coat pockets. He follows. Through the door. Gone.

My girlfriend. She slips mittens from the pockets of her long coat. She told me how she lost the wheel driving with mittens on before. But she puts them on now and holds one mitten hand to my face. I put my hand on top of her mitten. Squeeze the space where her fingers must be. Then she's through the door. Gone.

They leave me. Me and my sticky liquor fingers and a red cherry ring on the counter. Me and the couch and all four shot glasses just about full. Cherries gone, just like my grandmother's Black Knight Manhattans. But she's not here to finish the job. Tough shoot, Manhattans. Lined up on the counter. Too much.

To Arizona. To leaving it on the table. Leaving half a smile and all of a drink. Bottoms Up.

To the time you chipped my tooth, Utah. Cheers.

To Wyoming. Motherless. Land of surprises. And crusted hummus. Salud.

To Illinois. For its heartland. To me. For mine. Prost.