

THE RHODODENDRONS IN THE WINDOW

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Manny's mother was an overprotective mother. She was too fussy. While Manny dawdled on the edge of the garbage chute in the kitchen, peering down into it at a pile of glittering, broken beer bottles on a ridge, her mother watched her from drooping eyelids and with a distended frown from her rocking chair in the middle of the room. Sometimes she glanced worriedly at the frying pan, hissing on the gas stove, but her permanent frown, and the light wrinkles at the corners of her mouth, these came from four years keeping her daughters out of trouble..

"Get away from there!" was her favorite complaint, which she uttered now, lurching forward in her chair. The chair complained as voiciferously, and as viciously, as her with a protracted wooden growl of its own. "You'll fall in and you'll kill yourself." Manny's mother had long, long arms that slid out from the sleeves of her dress and plucked Manny from the garbage chute and with an admonishing bump deposited her back on the floor by her side by her purse where it was safe. "You sure are a handful, but at least your sister is content to stay at home in the kitchen." Her mother was not beyond a laugh, though it emerged distorted from her mouth around a yawn. "You, however, are already an entrepreneur!" Then, while Manny was still in reach, which was never for long, her mother combed out an incoming curl on Manny's head with her fingers and pat her on the diaper. "Just you wait and see how much of that energy you have when you get kids of your own!"

Manny didn't understand any of this, but then she didn't need to. All that mattered was that her mother was always waiting in her rocking chair, arms as long as railroad ties, to keep her protected from the glistening wonders of life, which included the dew, drinkable, on the rhododendrons in the window, the electrical socket, which was like a little kissable face, the stairs to the living room, untrustingly walled off by a plastic screen... Her mother's pillowy and

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spent chest was no comfort when there were things to see, touch, taste, swallow. This was the order in which she examined and then devoured a stick of her mother's lipstick, looted from her childproof bag on the floor. It tasted like earwax.

Her mother's sigh was at once exhausted and exhaustive. "Oh, Manny. I suppose I should be grateful that you aren't already putting it on." There was nowhere safer to put the bag so she moved it to the other side of the rocking chair, a movement complicated enough that Manny's sister, cradled in her mother's lap, half-woke and gurgled happily. At that, Manny's mother looked worried. "Isn't she *beautiful*, Manny?" she said worriedly. "She's the one I should really be worried about. She's already irresistible." But her sister was asleep again, and Manny had wandered over to the metal dog bowl and was watching her reflection, so there was no one to hear the words but herself, which is all worrying is, really.

Then Manny fell into the dog bowl, or rather put her face in it. Under the surface of the water Manny opened her eyes and thought she might have been swallowed by the girl she had tried to kiss there, and that this was what was past the human throat: rainbows rippling in ribbed succession on rings of rust, because she had tried to kiss the rippling rainbow girl and had fallen through her wet, wet lips and woken here. It was cold inside the throat, and breathing, she was surprised, was impossible. She began to choke.

Out again came her confounding mother's arms from their sleeves and with an admonishing thump Manny was beside her again, and then there were more thumps against her back, each helping along a tiny regurgitation of water and violent air. Manny thought her mother was hitting her for trying to escape.

"Why can't you be like your sister?" the mother asked, but Manny was not jealous. Her sister was dull and unenviable, but her mother did not agree. "You are so beautiful," said her

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mother into her lap once more. "You look just like your father. Actually, no, you know what you look like? You look like you're hungry." Then her mother had let Manny's sister down to the floor and was standing at the gas stove where the skillet alternately rang with metal against metal and hissed with the long outward suspension of a snore. Manny combed experimentally at a curl on her sister's head, and then flinched when the face opened up; it expanded with a pleasing symmetry, the eyes unfurling, the red lips stretching out on either side exactly like the ropes and sails on a sailing ship. Manny leaned in close and kissed the lips in the pool of her sister's face. They were waxy like lipstick, not wet and cold, or ersatz like the electrical socket which tingled. They were dull, like earwax. Her sister gurgled happily at the kiss and then went back to sleep because their mother had begun to hum "A Pretty Girl is like a Melody," a subdued and tedious sound that mingled alternately with the hiss of the skillet and the hiss of her ironing at the counter. Her mother checked anxiously over her shoulder and laughed around a yawn. "At least *someone* has time for her beauty sleep." Then she was sitting down again, and Manny's sister was on her lap again, and everything but the impatient skillet, spitting bits of fried potato past its spathe handle onto the floor, was back to normal, and was once again uninteresting and unjealous.

It was to the skillet handle that Manny next endeavored, this time up the enamel face of the oven on its knobs and dials, unfaithful pitons that twisted under her feet and in her hands as she ascended. A rushing sound came from within the enamel ovenface, and then again as her mother gasped. A momentary fury of long arms snatched Manny from the oven surface and sat her down on the other side of the rocking chair, once again by the purse, and then with alacrity they reset the oven. The smell of burning was rubbery and rich.

"Well," came the mother's breath, "I guess I don't have to tell you that you'll be going to

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bed without supper tonight!" She shook her head and then the doorbell rang and she shook her head again. "I'd hate to see what you'll be like in ten years. Don't you move." The rocking chair complained woodenly as Manny's mother groaned as she stood up as her sister whimpered as she was set back on the ground. From down stairs, Manny recognized the word "honey," and her mother hurried after it.

It was not long before Manny was once again in her mother's purse. There were colored pencils and little clamshells filled with waferlike cushions and dust and little tubes of what could have been toothpaste. In a pocket Manny found a mirror with a handle like the skillet handle. She gripped it and waved it over her head so rippling rivers of rainbow light fell on the rhododendrons in the window and on the electrical sockets and mixed with the water in the dog bowl. Then she turned it on herself and saw herself framed between the iron and the skillet, perhaps for the first time not a little girl's face with rippling lips to drown in, but a long, open shape that was recognizably hers and recognizably flawed. She flinched, but stared at it further, appraising it for value and finding it lacking... something. Something of effort. Something of authenticity. Something at the corners of the mouth. She thought maybe she could fix it so she dug back into the purse for the colored pencils and set to work fixing the shape. Her wan, waxless lips slowly became full and heavy, her eyes round, the corners of her mouth wrinkled, until she was *beautiful*. She looked over at her sister, sleeping nearby, to make sure.

At the head of the stairs, where her mother had left the plastic screen crumpled to the side, Manny called for her mother below, where she could hear the wet slither of kissing, but her mother did not come for her. She called again, but there were no long arms to snatch her to her mother's breast. She wanted her mother to see her effort and her jealousy, for which she

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was sure she would be complimented.

The stairs were steep, so she failed to make even the first step. From then on, the second and the third and the rest were easy. She heard herself tumbling like a distant thunder—unstoppable even by justice—with the delight of an adventuress. Then there was a flash and a snap of lightning, and she saw her mother's beautiful face at last.

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