

Excerpt from “Saltwater”

What I meant when I said I had a problem with neighbors was that a man who had loved my mother for a long time took me swimming at the dock by the power plant. I was twelve. When we got home, he said to me, “I love you, Peanut, do you know that?” I had no idea. He kissed me and held my arms tight. I made him an omelet and he bought the house next door. His name is John.

I am married to a good man and I make him omelets, too, and he picks up the long list of groceries I text him and something extra too – a little puffy cake, crinkly bags of gummies, my favorite soda. We have a tall son whose hair and eyes are dark like mine. He helps me tear up pieces of stale bread and blend them into crumbs to lay our fish across. Our lives are easy because we’re agreeable. We notice when each other’s lips are dry and pass the chapstick without asking. We drink tea in bed together all piled in a heap and read stories and watch our crime shows and my son pretends to cover his eyes when the detectives prod the naked bodies of murdered women.

John brought me to his house most days after school. He had very blue eyes. He told me we were in love. He talked and talked and when he was done talking it was too late. All of eighth grade (my first period), ninth grade (my first kiss from a boy my age), tenth grade (my first high school boyfriend), John talked. He didn’t mind, he thought it was nice other boys saw me like he did. He looked like an old movie star, the kind whose pants are worn high and pleated. In eleventh grade I fell in love with my geography teacher and John broke my collarbone.

Home from work and twenty years later, I lift paper bags of fresh produce from my trunk. I kiss my husband on his temple, on his neck and the top of his head and I find a nice television

show for him. I ask my boy about homework and I don't mind how he answers. They sit together and I bring them cold tap water with lemon and sugar and I don't call it lemonade.

In bed I read to my husband about the year of the dog, and he laughs and says that sounds about right. I say he is a good man, and he says he is a good dog. He falls asleep naked in my arms, and I concentrate on the contents of the fridge.

In the morning, my son asks if he can go to the new neighbor's house to play XBox. We are an agreeable family, and we say yes. What a welcoming son we have.

My mother calls, says, "You know who was in church today? John was in church! Do you remember him? He still looks good. You had a little crush on him, didn't you, Peanut?"

"He was in love with you," I can hear my father saying to her.

"Anyway," she goes on. "We invited him for dinner next Sunday – he's back in town, you'll never guess where he moved."

My son comes home with a fruit basket from the neighbor, a reverse welcome.

"Whose XBox were you playing, baby?"

"A man named John's."

You already knew that. So did I.

I think about setting the basket on fire. Returning it filled with roaches. Or crushed and rotting. I feel fourteen again, using my mother's red seam ripper to slowly destroy the doll John gave me. Like hers, my hands shaking and pointless. Like her: an amateur. I tell my son not to go back. I ask him to show me which house. "You didn't do anything wrong, baby. This is just bad fruit."

John is still handsome. A blond Jimmy Stewart but with no goodness and a mouth I want to slap. His lips are always wet, and he's always licking them. Licking them in a house he bought on my street, a new street, a different street, a new and different house than the one he grew me up in.

"Peanut," he says, arms wide, eyes the wrong kind of kind. I hold out the basket to him and he holds my forearms, his thumbs finding their old homes. My frozen kid-mouth won't open. I drop the basket and it lands neat, nothing falling out of place, cruel.

"Hey," John says, trying to find my eyes with his, windmilling his fingers under my elbows. "Keep it. Please. I picked out each piece of fruit! I shined each one. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you. To be home. Did you see the Meyer lemons? Your mother told me what a cook you are, what a little baker. Lemon meringue's her favorite, Pea, make your mother a nice lemon meringue and we can bring it over together. Unless you're still jealous of her, huh, Peanut? I'm just teasing. Hey—just teasing? God, look at you, my little woman! Come here." He licks his lips.

"Don't ever look at my son again," I say, my stupid voice higher than I want, the anger vibrations sounding like adolescent cracks. I tear my arms from his, walk home quickly and lock myself in the bathroom. The fingernails of my hands leave pink half-moons up my throat like a zipper.

I say a prayer to my future self. I tell my husband I am out of soap, we kiss, I drive.

At the grocery store I lift apples, pears. I press my thumbs deep to bruise them, bury them down again. I pull a cherry loose, chew, swallow the pit like a pill, another prayer, which is this: I never told one person.

Let me never have to.

I lift an orange, dig my fingers in until I feel the sting of its juice under a hangnail. The sting is so right I smile, remember soap.

In the toiletry aisle I flick open the golden caps of shampoo bottles and sniff, close my eyes. I hear clicks and turn to see another woman doing the same thing. Our eyes meet mid-whiff and we laugh, she holds her bottle up in a cheers. I laugh and don't stop laughing, then crying, then have to sit my butt in the dust of the aisle, a sharp shelf pressed hard against my back like a principal's cane. My breath chokes me on its way out, and even as my vision goes I hold my hands up in apology.