

## L-O-V-E, Krystal Suit

The babysitter tells me that I'm a Mommy's girl. I think about this as I help Mom get ready for work in the morning, as she moves about the house unsmiling and silent, but for a soft "Thank you, luuk," when I hand her a shoe.

Remembering the time that she taught me to spell "love," I feel the brown carpet beneath my knees, cool glass under my forearms, the pencil in my hand, and I see the white spaces I haven't filled yet, the almost-letters that I've attempted. Over the sound of the television, I hear the foreign-but-familiar accent of Momma's words as she asks "What you doing?" And steeped in my efforts, I tell her that I am writing. I imagine her blinking, even more skeptical of my ability to write than of her own, as she had never learned and I had yet to be taught. Nevertheless, she asks, "Can you spell 'love?'"

And thinking about it, I nod.

Then I begin to string my almost-letters together, weaving thoughts of love into their shape, willing them to say "love." But she stops me and says, "No, luuk, not like that," and slides the sheet across the table. I place the pencil into her open palm, and she writes the letters L-O-V-E, slowly, in all capitals. When she offers it back to me, I shrug, telling myself that my way is just different.

I think about the time that I jumped feet-first into a pile of fire-ants, even though Dad warned me that they would bite. Again I see them march up my long socks in neat rows that amaze me even as they bite my ankles, my calves. Then my shrieking overpowers the sound of Daddy's lawn

mower, and he jumps off, yelling for me to go to the water hose. As he sprays my legs, half of me thinks that he is a genius. The other half observes that my socks and shoes are getting wet.

When he shuts the hose off, the first thing he says to me is “You didn’t believe me, did you?” And I remember that the reason I jumped was that I wanted to know what a bite felt like. I pinched my arm to see, but it didn’t hurt, and I concluded that the only way to find out was to jump.

The baby sitter told me once that I’m a Mommy’s girl—but when Mom leaves, I do not stop to think about it. Mom tells me that she’ll be gone for a year, to work for her friend in Oklahoma. I know that this is important, that nothing will be the same, but it is hard to feel the things that I have never jumped into. When she tells me, I shrug.

But at the airport, I feel the anxiety begin to bite at my insides. At every check point, on every subway ride, in every waiting area, I think that now is the moment, now is the moment that she’ll be gone, now is what it will feel like forever, until they tell me that it isn’t, that she isn’t going yet, and there is one more place to go—until there isn’t, and they cannot stop my cheeks from tingling, my nose from burning, my eyes from swelling, because now is the moment.

The house is bigger, quieter. At night I hear the rumbling solo of my father’s snores. I sleep because I am afraid of the dark. Over the phone, I tell Mom that I love her, because that is all I know to say. When Mom sends me birthday cards, they always say “LOVE MOM,” in all capitals, and the letters of the words make me think of the time that I tried to teach her how to read and write, but she did not try to learn, because she felt unhappy here, and she does not like when I try to teach her.

I think that Mom will not come back. I do not keep track of time. When I look at the babysitter, I want to tell her that I do not think I'm a Mommy's girl anymore, or if I am, I am a poor one.

One night, I dream of my mother's broken voice resounding in my ears as she cries that her daughter does not love her. The echo leaves a biting in my throat, a burning in my chest. And when I awaken, I know that I will always remember the sound of her loneliness reverberating in my mind.

In the wake of my dream, my mother calls—and I speak warmly to her, carefully filling our white spaces with the vast love and affection that I feel strongly. I know now that she is human because she makes mistakes—and I love her because that is all she wants. What matters is that she is my mother as I am her daughter, in this moment as in all the moments that pass.