

An Ode to Voicemails from Borderline Mothers

I left the cupboard open this morning.

I'm sitting on the gym floor icing my feet, thinking about leaving the cupboard open this morning. And when she gets home before me, she's going to see that I left the cupboard open this morning. Then this evening, when I finally get off the train and walk through the parking garage into my apartment; I am suddenly in Montgomery walking a tall-grassed path from the school bus. And there she is, in that plywood kitchen, saying "You left the cupboard open this morning." It's like running through a field of dandelions and getting stung by a wasp on the ankle. I'll have to reply, "I know. I'm sorry." She'll sting again with, "Well if you knew then why'd you leave the cupboard open this morning." We'll start bickering and her whipping flames of a well-kept fire scorch the hunted rabbit that I was.

But now I'm in my thirties, lo-mein scented sweat, onion, garlic, raining down into my wicker skin, worrying about leaving the cupboard open this morning.

So, I call her old number and leave voicemails for an unfortunate stranger. And then I listen to the voicemails she left me on this little answering machine in my pocket.

She whispers into the phone, years ago about a cousin's wedding gift. Or about needing help dusting the china dishes. Inconsistencies and resentment; opaque like milk. Cupboard bickering hiding within the useless words, the silly voicemails as flesh in clothes. But, as I listen, I can only get the words and their meanings down to their underwear before I start getting starry-eyed about blood being thicker than water.

But those voicemails keep playing. They play on trains and in elevators and on car rides, and in the early morning when the sun is just coming up. In one of them, she says she loves me with a capital 'L'. That big ol' thing never made sense coming out of her mouth.

But sometimes she'd catch me at home, and I'd just sit there with my TV paused, listening to the phone ring and ring until it stopped and I knew she was gone. Relieved, I wouldn't have to listen to her tongue slap the roof of her mouth or the newest recant of Facebook obituaries or her latest too many fingers in the sweet pie of debauchery and her needle in the haystack vices. But it was those late-night voicemails that always sounded the same, like a rushed, drunk—sad, little girl on the receiving end of her very first break-up.

And then there were the voicemails she left that last night, the ones I just let ring and ring. It was like listening to a noose tighten until I finally had to delete her from my voicemail box.

Voicemail Deleted.

Voicemail Deleted.

Voicemail Deleted.

Voicemail Box Empty.