**The End is Where it All Begins**

Heather Diamond

Your deadbeat father is resurrected and half-dead, and you call me from across the world to say you don’t know how to feel. *Tell me about the divorce*, you say, and I’m transported to a Texas phone booth in the rain.

There was a train.

We lived in one of the suburban circles of hell outside Houston’s city center, in a generic apartment complex called Kempwood in the Trees. There were no trees, and we had an eviction notice. I was driving home from my minimum wage job in a department store where I tabulated endless columns of figures I often had to redo because my mind wandered.

You were four and in the front seat because we didn’t know about safety back then. I’d picked you up from daycare. I’m not sure which one because they changed whenever I couldn’t pay. The traffic was as clogged as usual. It was late fall, and the sun was going down, the streetlights blinking on. Blinding Gulf Coast rain like God was dumping his bathtub.

The frenzied wipers slapping portholes into the deluge. My hands clutching the steering wheel. Streetlights daggering off the wet asphalt. A train thundering parallel yet seeming to hurtle toward us. Its whistle shrieking and my tears spilling hot. Pulling into the first parking lot I could find and stopping the car because I was shaking shattering sinking drowning.

There was an affair.

I was twenty-four, and city life was a long way from the small town in the Ozarks where I had tried to piece together a life. The perfumed aisles of cosmetics and accessories dazzled me. Soon I was using my discount to purchase a lipstick here, a scarf there. My boss noticed. He called me into his office and suggested dinner.

I could claim I had no idea he was a shark in a feeding tank, but there were clues. He had a live-in girlfriend plucked from our department. A co-worker slept with him and bragged about it. There were winks of temptation. Flutters of attraction. It was a confusing time. Ms. Magazine told us women were equal to men. Cosmo taught us to use our feminine wiles. I said yes to dinner. I lied to your father who had lied to me for years. When I understood I was dessert, I pretended to be a seductress instead of a conquest. Someone who could savor secrets and lead a double life.

You’re old enough to know that sometimes a hand appears out of nowhere to hoist you out of whatever pot you are stewing in. Sometimes you mistake the hand for the answer.

There was a bounced check.

The boss moved me to the mailroom. I worked with college students my age who got me thinking that maybe I could do that, too. I enrolled in art classes at the university and told your father school meant more to me than he did. That if he fucked this up, I was leaving.

Be careful what you say.

Getting booted out of college for a bounced tuition check splintered the last trap door before I hit the cellar floor.

There was a truck.

Your father’s stepbrother had camped on our sofa for a month. The two of them stood in labor lines and when they didn’t get picked, they played pool for cash. Mostly they lost.

I’m not sure which of them came up with the truck demolition scheme. A threat is a dare to country boys, so when the truck was slated for repossession, those two downshifted into delinquency. Why give it back when they could destroy it? Plotting at the kitchen table, they hatched a plan they considered genius: a gasoline-filled balloon suspended over a burning candle. They scouted out a ravine, drove the truck in, and pulled long faces as they reported it stolen. One less unpaid bill.

There was a phone booth.

You clung to my legs inside the glass walls, the overhead light illuminating us like figures in a Hopper painting. You were sobbing and pleading *Mommy, Mommy what’s wrong?* I couldn’t say. The train rumbled through my lungs, rattled my ribs, spun my lie-trussed heart. It barreled out of my mouth when I dialed home, roared what I hadn’t dared to think: *I want a divorce.*

He wept. I became Antarctica. I counted the acoustic tiles in the bedroom ceiling and then the holes in each tile when he tried to thaw me. He left Texas the day after Thanksgiving with his thumb out and a promise to send money that never came.

But that comes later. Returning to that phone booth, lit up like night’s confessional, I want to reach down and take your small hand. I want to dry your tears and mine. I want to tell you, even now when you have your own children and stories, that this space, this ending, this is where it all begins.