

### *Not-mother-in-law*

You're driving drunk, or you will be. You're behind the wheel of an old Chevy station wagon that's older than you, and it's parked on the corner in downtown Reading, a town that has, for lack of a better term, fallen to shit—fallen to gangs, fallen to vicious insectlike growing herds of gang members, shutting down ERs when the shootouts in the clubs get moved to them, bullets flying over bullet-ridden torsos and striking the candy striper. You're trying to start the car. You can't start it, it's not your car, it's your boyfriend's mother's car, and you have to hold down the brake with one foot and the gas with the other, and you're pressing too hard on the gas, revving the engine, this would be hard sober. This would be hard sober, in the daylight, with no cars around, but that's not how things are. She's wheedling in your ear, your not-mother-in-law, she's saying no, not like that, silly, in the drooping and rising voice of a girl-drunk, a woman who you, drunk as hell, drunk as fuck, took the keys from, because you are the most sober of the three of you, and you're the only one who wasn't crying five minutes ago. She has cancer, so you're driving now, or you will be if you can just—ah—ah—ah—there it goes. You've started the car, but now you have to drive it. You tell her to put on her seatbelt, which she wouldn't do until you got the car started, wouldn't do until the car was ready to go, which it is, now, technically. The steering wheel is loose; so is her voice as you drive straight, scared straight, drunk as the night is dark. It's easier than you thought it would be.

They're working class, that's the nice way to say it. The real way to say it is white trash. You're not working class, and you never have been; your parents were

raised in poorish households but your grandparents were things like a teacher and a minister. You don't know what it's like not to answer the phone because you're afraid it's a collection agency. You actually used to think that Reading was a nice town, because your dad's parents lived in the one remaining nice part, and you visited them every holiday. In your head, Reading was one big suburb, and a Boscovs; it was candy dishes and bags full of leftovers and a nice place to raise kids, with a park just up the street. When you met your boyfriend you couldn't understand why he hated Reading so much, why he mocked it endlessly, until you started going there with him, going to places besides Sts. Constantine and Maria Greek Orthodox Church. And it's—well, it's working class at best. It's working class that's slowly being taken over by poverty. Your boyfriend's family, they're still solidly working class, scared to live where they do but too poor, too stubborn, to leave. Working class, white trash, that's what they are, and you used to make fun of them, with your friends, even your white trash friends. Everybody makes fun of them, even they do. Working class people are different from you, and these people are working class, that's just

The truth. The truth is, you're embarrassed, because you are like a whale out of water. Your not-mother-in-law, after she gets off second shift at the diner, likes to come to these clubs. Clubs that aren't the clubs you were thinking of, although Reading has those in bulk, the sort where you grind your ass into strangers for free 'cause you're drunk and the sort where you can get paid for it. No, these are small, private drinking clubs, members-only, and at this one she signs both of you in and pulls out six ones to pay for you. You meet her friends, and sit there saying nothing as she gets you a gin-an- tonic, your boyfriend settling for a Yuengling, you're the only ones not smoking. It's the

Saturday before Halloween and a lot of people are dressed up, you're at a table with Scooby-Doo, and Saddam Hussein is at the table next to you, and he is fucking drunk. She knows everybody, and they're all coming up with their apologies and their promises. He's complaining, your boyfriend's uncle, saying that this band used to be so good but now *their people* are starting to come by to hear them so they're playing *their music* and, you know, he doesn't have a problem with the people but it changes the atmosphere, and he doesn't like rap, *that music* just isn't his thing, they used to play Motown. His uncle and friends want to leave and go to another bar, another members-only club, but your not-mother-in-law says they can't do that, she's waiting for a friend, Tamika, and she says they won't let Tamika in that place, you know Grace won't. It's a curious racism, like a scab they can't stop picking at it, and you wish they'd stop speaking in code, excusing themselves, explaining themselves. You're not used to people all but saying, leave us alone, black folk; their roundabout logic grates on your ears like they had said nigger. Where you come from, there just aren't black people, and the few that there are get teased for acting white, and it's a racist community by absence, not by lynching. You leave later, after Tamika's friends from work meet up with her and she drives you all to another club, a club with Fellowship in the name, and

This makes you laugh. Oh, you all laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Laughing's easy when the drinks are coming at this rate, your not-mother-in-law is crooking her finger at the poor waitress every go-round, and gin-an-tonics keep replacing themselves, and every once in awhile a round of shots comes, creamy and unknown, and everybody pretends like they didn't order them, and whoever is paying stuffs the bills in the waitress' cleavage. Tomorrow, in between bouts of vomiting, you'll find out half the time it was

Baja Rosa, creamy tequila, and curse the motherfucker who even felt a need to invent such a thing, but her ex-husband, the first one, your boyfriend's father, will say that she's always loved them. You wonder who the designated driver is, since you're already drunk but your not-mother-in-law, whose car you took, is also drinking. You feel out of place in a restaurant that doesn't take credit cards or have an ATM, you couldn't buy a round if you were allowed to, which you're not, because you're not fast enough to order, don't even know how they're doing it. You suspect half the time the waitress is bringing drinks over randomly, confident somebody will pay her, and then one of them smells her, her smelling like a fancy perfume, some Estee Lauder shit. You dance, after the drunk sets in, but more importantly, he dances, with his mother, his mother laughing and pulling his arm and saying, I'm your mother, and I'm sick, damnit, dance with me. Later he even dances with you, after he leaves his uncle bewildered, unable to finish a sentence, after telling him that the two of you have never danced together, and they take pictures of it, of everything, of each other in the bathroom. Your boyfriend's uncle has raised 21 foster children, and he and his ex adopted the last two, but now he only has the girl, and she's 17, and he's doing it by himself because his wife ran off with a big black man—they never separated the families, kept the kids together for each bunch, even if it meant sleeping on the couch, or in the garage. You are heartened that people like this are everywhere, you are glad to see that

They, the group you're with, mock the line dancers. Every song, country or not, there's a group out there, led by who your not-mother-in-law calls Fabio, doing a slight variation on some sort of line dancing, not very enthusiastic, moving their feet in a choreographed, absent-minded way, like sex between two people who don't really like

each other that much any more. They line dance to Cher, and you all choke on your drinks laughing, which is topped two songs later when they line dance to the Talking Heads. She gets up and dances her own way across the floor, taking her own time on the way to the bathroom, moving slowly, the tiniest goddamned woman you've ever seen, and you marvel that she gave birth to three children. There is no rap here, and there's nobody who'd want to listen to it either, that's the

Elephant in the room. It isn't until later, when you go back to the first club, or bar, or whatever it's called, drinks and drinks later, the three of you at the bar, that she starts hugging him for ten minutes at a time, her fingers clutching at the hair near the base of his neck the same way yours do when you cry in his arms, but she has better reasons. You've never been in a bar before at last call, and you can't, literally can't, drink your last gin-an- tonic, which has got to be the seventh or so on top of the five or six or some number of shots, it sits in your mouth on a numb tongue and you just can't swallow it. Her friend's daughter comes up to hug her because everybody knows her here and everybody knows what's going on, so your not-mother-in-law stops crying, and puts on a brave face. After you are introduced—and everybody you've met tonight is so kind to you, even though you feel like a sore thumb and pointer finger and pinky finger all at once—you hazily listen to the story that your not-mother-in-law was there for her graduation, a graduation she didn't have to be at, because *her* mother was too hungover to go, had too much fun

The night before. A night like tonight, you wonder why everybody here is drinking so much if they have to go to work tomorrow, because even though she's making your boyfriend promise to call you out of work tomorrow, she will go in to the

diner, she will go in every day until the day before her surgery and collect her shitty three-dollar tips, and she's had more to drink than you. You wonder if everybody keeps hugging you when they meet you and when they depart the conversation because that's just how it is—and you, raised in an emotionless organic-white-bread world, are stunted—or if it's because everybody is fucking-A drunk. She's gone back to burying her face in his shoulder: she's not sobbing, but she is repeating herself: she's not ready to go, she's not going to ask anybody for help, but most of all and over and over she's a bad mother, isn't she. She's a bad mother and she should have called more often and she shouldn't have had so much to drink; you realize, watching the tears soak into your boyfriend's T-shirt, that you don't know much about her at all

because you've been resting on your assumptions. Until this evening you only knew what you had heard from your boyfriend and his father; let's call it mixed reviews, from both of them; you know she has a weakness for abusive men and you know about her young boyfriend who had a machine gun mounted at the top of the stairs and just tonight, you found out she married again, briefly, but then he broke her arm in four places but she still talks to him anyway because he has cancer, and there's the everpresent cloud over every discussion that she drinks too much and maybe even uses drugs. In fact, you had expected somebody more strung out, not this—funny?—yes, funny woman, telling you about the time she dressed your boyfriend up as a pregnant woman for Halloween, when he was in third grade, but she's not laughing now. You're glad his uncle, her brother, is gone, because you found out a minute before you met him that he carries a concealed weapon on his body, and actually half the people you were drinking with do so, and you couldn't stop thinking about it all night. You didn't know anybody who

owned a gun, not personally, until your junior year of high school. This is clearly not your world, but drunk, drunker, drunkest, you are at least beginning to make sense of it, and you think you have been able to fit in for the last few hours, drunker than you've ever been before, and that is why you know, absolutely, as she hugs a few more people and you all walk surprisingly well out to the car that it is the right thing to do, as you take her keys from her willing hands, promising that you will call out sick tomorrow.

And now you're telling your mom, on the phone, telling the story but leaving out the part about the driving, because she hates that more than almost anything, and there's even a clause in her will voiding your share if you're ever charged with a DUI. So of course she asks, the obvious question, who was driving? and you can't lie to her. You tell her it was you, and how scared you were, and you leave out how easy it was, and you say, it was a bad situation, and there was no way out of it. And in the pause that follows, you can hear all the commercials and pamphlets, the advice, the called cab that didn't happen, calling a friend, sobering up in a nearby restaurant, the question and answer sheets the PTA used to hand out at the beginning of the school year telling parents not to be your child's friend, the demonizing on every 6pm local newscast of some overconfident drunk who made splinters out of himself herself and a tree, the senior who crashed his Corvette into a sign your junior year—you hear it, the catch in her breath, as she, who has gone from the lower to the upper to the lower-class areas of the country, processes, and fights her upper-class desire to judge and—and she says, yeah. Yeah, that's what it sounds like.