

The Blue Room
By Gabrielle Hodge

The last verse of “Respect” reverberated through the car speakers. She let her leg rest against the door, feeling the vibrations of the song against her skin. Looking out the window, she mouthed the words and bobbed her head to the beat absentmindedly. Her attention was on the telephone poles running parallel to the road. They curved in the shape of a smile and jumped one to the next, keeping up with the speed of the car which, considering her mother’s driving, was impressive. She was reminded of riding in the passenger seat as a young girl. She would twist her little body so that her back was against the sliding door of the cherry red Honda Odyssey her mom drove. Then, she’d lay her head back against the ledge at the bottom of the window and watch the passing telephone poles upside down. From this perspective, they jumped like a game of leap frog, which she never enjoyed as her short legs were nearly always incapable of making the jump seamlessly. This never stopped her from continuously trying to stick the landing.

The song came to an end and she was forced out of her reminiscence. Her mother’s voice pierced her ears and a familiar pit formed in her stomach as a question departed her mother’s mouth that historically did not warrant a fun and light-hearted conversation.

“Sage, can I ask you a question?” her mother said hesitantly, as if she knew what she might be getting herself into.

“Yes,” her daughter answered, drawing out the *e*.

“Do you...love yourself? Like do you feel confident, or – do you know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Um, I don’t think anyone is confident all the time, but overall, I would say yes, I do feel confident in myself and for the most part, I love myself.”

Her mother stared intently at the road, one side of her mouth pulled back in thought.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you love yourself?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was just wondering about you,” her mother said, flustered as if she wasn’t expecting to be asked the question in return.

The pair pulled into a gas station and Sage got out to fill the tank. Her stomach growled as she waited for the numbers to stop and when they did, she told her mother she was going inside to get a snack and did she want anything? She asked for a Dr. Pepper and a Hershey’s bar.

Sage scanned the refrigerators for their drinks and heard a man’s voice close behind her. She turned quickly, surprised, and was met by a man at least five inches taller than her, dark beard covering his face like he had something to hide.

“Can I help you find something, young lady?”

She bristled at the use of “young lady” and the derogatory tone attached to it.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Are you sure? What you’re looking for could be standing right in front of you.” He took a step forward, arms out like Jesus, signaling he was talking about himself, a disgusting gap-toothed smirk stretched across his leathery face.

“I don’t think so,” she said calmly.

“Come on, I’m a nice guy. Give me a chance.” His voice had increased in volume slightly and Sage knew that only a few more exchanges of conversation could escalate to something dangerous. She also knew that men could be unpredictable and considering their size difference, she had to be careful about what she said and how she said it.

'I'm sorry, I have a boyfriend' is what came out of her mouth next as it seemed to be the default answer for women in order to dissuade a pushy man from pursuing her any longer. It always came out in the same way, a slight chuckle in order to appear calm and not upset at the man. Her eyes darted outside to her mother, hoping to spark her famous mother's intuition like the Bat signal or something. But her mother wasn't Batman, and the bearded cashier was still standing in front of her expectantly.

"I'm no snitch," he offers, as if permitting her to cheat was the last thing standing in his way and he could finally get what he wanted. "It'll be our little secret, honey."

She felt a knot in her stomach twist and wrench with a familiar sensation, one she knew was not to be ignored. She took two calculated steps to the side, having already mapped her escape route, and quickly rushed out of the gas station and back to her car.

"Where's my Dr. Pepper? Why were you in there so long if you didn't even bother to get anything?" her mother says, exasperated.

"The cashier was being creepy and I didn't feel safe, so I left," Sage answered shortly.

"Well..." her mother replied trailing off.

"Well, what?"

"I mean you haven't exactly left much to the imagination today, that's all."

"I wanted to be comfortable," Sage argues, shocked at what her mother just said.

Her mother only replies with a disapproving 'hmm' and puts the car into the drive.

"I sure am thirsty."

At this point, Sage had gotten over the shock of her mother's statement and was now angry and embarrassed, a special cocktail of emotions that only her mother knew the recipe to.

"So, it's my fault that a man can't take no for an answer?"

“No, I’m just saying, if you don’t want attention, then maybe don’t dress like you do, that’s all.”

‘That’s all’, as if it was just a casual suggestion with no darker implications. Usually, Sage would fight back, but she was too stunned to argue with her mother right now, maybe later, maybe when they weren’t stuck in the same vehicle for hours. Typically, her mother’s misogynistic views could be untangled with a gentle and informative conversation, but gentle was the farthest thing from Sage’s mind right now and she knew from experience that her frustration would only be matched by her mother and it would escalate to something ugly, a seething monster spitting at its own reflection in the mirror. So, she sat perfectly still, not wanting to insight any further comments or conversation of any kind until absolutely necessary.

They continued driving, only the sounds of the highway’s imperfections filling the tense space between them. There was at least a half hour left of their drive which was supposed to be a fun road trip for the mother and daughter. They were going to have dinner at their favorite Italian restaurant that was just a little too far to be frequented as often as they’d like, and then once they had eaten enough pasta and breadsticks to make them rethink their decisions, they would go to the art museum downtown that Sage had wanted to visit ever since she took an AP art course the previous semester. Now, she had just finished her last finals of high school and it didn’t seem true to her quite yet, that she was actually done with it, with it all, the musty classrooms and dead eyed teachers, crammed hallways and P.E. classes. There was an infinite land of opportunities ahead of her and at this point, she only felt hopeful of what was to come.

She is awoken out of this daydream of endless possibilities to the sudden halt of the car, brakes screeching. Her mother’s driving kept her anxiety in business. A meaningless sorry came from her mother’s mouth, meant only to keep Sage from complaining. After barely making it

through two more yellow lights, they arrived safely at Pomodori Scoppiati, which literally translated to “burst tomato”. Sage always found this amusing and somewhat random until she learned that this was a cooking technique in which tomatoes were cooked until they literally burst, creating a pasta sauce. She felt compelled to get a dish with burst tomatoes in order to let the staff know she was educated enough to get it. She never did, though, because the alfredo dishes always called to her much louder than burst tomatoes.

She still scanned the menu for a reasonable amount of time, knowing that no matter what, she would continue to get the same dish as always. The waiter came to the table and took their drink orders. A few minutes later, he came back to the table to take their order. He shifted his weight to one spindly leg and hovered his pen over his notebook, bony elbow sticking out a little too far in an almost comedic way.

“So, what can I get started for you two?”

Sage went first and asked for the chicken alfredo.

“That’s a pretty big dish for a thing your size. Have you gotten it before?” He looked her up and down and then looked to her mother as if this silly little girl didn’t know what she was getting herself into and needed her mother to tell her to get something more suited for ‘a thing her size’.

“Yeah, I’m fully aware of the size of the dish and I think I can handle it. Thanks,” she said, tone sharp, patience gone.

The waiter raised his eyebrows, surprised that she spoke at such a volume, that she was ordering something so large, that she talked back to him like that.

“Got it. And you?” he asked, looking to the mother.

“Well, I’m trying to get my summer body ready, so I’ll take the wedge Caesar salad, please.”

“I’ll put that in right away,” he says, side eyeing Sage as he turns on his heels and saunters to the kitchen.

“Well, you’re in a mood today. This was supposed to be a fun trip for us, you know,” her mother said, stirring her iced water.

“I’m in a mood? Me? Because I didn’t fuck a pedo gas station attendant twenty years older than me or because I didn’t order a smaller entrée?” Sage asks, genuinely waiting for an answer.

Her mother looked stunned and Sage didn’t know if it was because of the language she used or what she actually said.

‘Sage!’ is all the mother said, unable to form a proper answer most likely. Her daughter maintained eye contact with her, demanding a response. The mother’s lips parted slightly, hoping that the words might come if she gave them a head start, but they didn’t.

“I just mean you’re so mad.”

“Yes, I’m mad. I’m mad because you don’t realize that saying I didn’t leave much to the imagination after a grown man kept pushing himself at me is taking his side. I’m mad because you said that his inappropriate actions towards a 17 year old girl were completely justified because I was asking for it. I’m mad because I simply want a big plate of pasta and a complete stranger is commenting on how much he thinks I should be eating.”

“I’m sorry. I would never say you were asking for that—”

“But that is exactly what you implied, though,” Sage interrupted.

“I didn’t mean to. And I like that you eat whatever you want. I’m jealous of you because where does it all go? You’re still so skinny!” her mother said, a genuine attempt to lighten the mood, although the comments only made Sage sigh.

“I don’t like it when you compare your body to mine,” she responded calmly.

“Oh, I was just trying to be silly.”

“It doesn’t make me feel good about myself. And it’s not healthy for either one of us. There’s no point in comparing us because we’re both different and that’s normal and that’s okay.”

Sage ate her third breadstick and placed one on her mother’s plate, pushing it just an inch towards her.

“It’s okay to eat what you want. We drove all the way here. Enjoy yourself,” she said with kindness in her voice.

Her mother contemplated her choices for a few seconds, smiled, and picked up the breadstick, cheering it with her daughter’s. They chuckled. The mother looked at her daughter inquisitively, wondering where this mindset possibly came from and where to find it. She saw her own face sketched in the structure of her daughter’s. A mother looks into the eyes of the little girl she birthed and wonders what kind of dismembered and restitched version of herself her daughter will become.

“So, are you interested in anyone?” the mother asks.

“No, I want to be single right now.”

“I don’t get you sometimes. What’s your gripe with dating?”

“I just don’t want to do it right now. I’m working on myself, going to the gym.”

“You don’t need to lose weight,” she says, a concerned motherly tone Sage hadn’t heard in a while.

“I go to the gym to gain weight,” she informs her.

“Well, that just doesn’t make sense,” the mother chuckles.

“Yes, it does. I lift weights because I want to gain weight and be stronger. It’s good for my mental health, too. I have more energy and my head is clearer,” Sage says.

“Wow. I’ve never thought about it that way before.”

When Sage had first joined the gym around the corner from their house, that had not been the reason she went. She was thin and wanted to be thinner. She did cardio for too long. Then, she saw a strong woman with thick muscles and a confidence she dreamed of, and she began to lift weights. Slowly, her mindset changed from trying to be one of the girls on her Instagram explore page to wanting to nourish her body and strengthen her bones. She gradually deconstructed her aspirations of wanting to be skinny with a fat ass, running herself ragged in order to be worthy of love, torturing herself on the treadmill because she ate one too many brownies at her best friend’s housewarming party.

Sage convinced her mother to get dessert and they shared a large thick square of tiramisu, espresso dripping from the bottom of their spoons.

Back in the car with full stomachs and new perspectives, Sage and her mother talked more than they had in a while. They drove ten minutes through downtown Boston to the Museum of Fine Arts. Tickets were bought and the two walked through the halls, inspecting the plaques and learning new bits of information about artists all around the world. Sage’s eyes darted all around the rooms, soaking up all the details so as to not miss a single thing the museum had to offer. She took in the deep greens and browns of Thomas Cole’s “Expulsion from

the Garden of Eden”, being sure to dive into the dark parts of the painting, looking for hidden gems that perhaps no one else had seen before. Her body swayed back and forth ever so slightly as she looked at the painting of Fitz Henry Lane’s “Salem Harbor”, letting the calm waves move her body in the same rhythm as the sailors in the boats in front of her. Her pinky lifted mimicking the girls drinking tea in Mary Cassatt’s “Tea”, and she wondered what the girls might be talking about and if they would be able to relate to each other in any way. She decided that they could have because at the end of the day, whether it was the 1800s or the 2000s, they were all girls. And all girls can relate to each other about the way society treats them and what is expected of them.

She ventured outside to the Japanese garden, Tenshin-en, admiring the Japanese architecture throughout. She took deep breaths of the floral scents wafting through the garden. She wanted to bottle the scent and take it with her everywhere she went. Her mother trailed behind her, just slightly less interested, but still enjoying the art.

They returned inside following the designated path in order to ensure proper traffic flow. Sage told her mother little snippets of information she knew from her class about various artists and her mother listened, enjoying hearing her daughter talk about something she loved. They walked up to a painting of a woman laying on her side on her bed, cigarette in her mouth, books strewn at her feet. It was Suzanne Valadon’s “The Blue Room”. The woman wore a peach tank top and green and white striped pajama pants. Her stomach lay softly to the side and her rolls showed through her tank top. Her black hair was pulled back in a loose low bun. She lay on a fluffy indigo comforter patterned with leaves and flowers. Her mother stared in awe at the painting and Sage thought she saw a slight wetness to her eyes.

“I’ve never seen a painting of a woman who looks like me in a museum before,” her mother said, as if she had never expected to see that and never would and had come to terms with that long ago.

“She’s beautiful,” said Sage, feeling oddly close to the woman in the painting, like maybe they knew each other in a past life.

“Yes, she is beautiful,” her mother said.