

Hook

by Claudine Thomas

The baby picked up the forgotten beer can by the side of the fold-out couch, and swallowed a mouthful of cigarette ashes. His coughing and choked cries alerted Raine. She dropped her phone and snatched the boy up into her arms. She wiped the soot from his lips with the bib tied loosely around his neck. She needed him to stop fussing. Ms. Pat would be angry about the noise. She held him close to her chest, shushing into his reddening ears. But he refused to stop crying as he squirmed in her arms, fighting for freedom and air. Her son's breath smelled like Jordan's fingertips, smoky and hot.

Raine moved her son to her hip while she looked for his bottle. She kicked Jordan's shirts from beneath her feet and cursed under her breath to keep her own tears from spilling. The text message had distracted her. How could it not? It was easy to lose track of the baby when an unexpected opportunity to change your life, appears across the screen.

Come live with me, read the text.

She found the half-filled bottle tucked between the couch cushions, turned upside down, rubber nipple pressed against the frayed upholstery. She sighed and noted the new wet stain. Another reason to make Jordan's mother angry.

Jordan's mother, Ms. Pat, allowed them to move into her basement while Raine was pregnant. Just until they got steady on their feet, his mother said. But Jordan struggled finding jobs that paid enough money, and when he found one, he struggled to keep it for long. He blamed unreasonable bosses. She wondered if they smelled the alcohol through his clothes the way she did.

Raine quit waitressing after she delivered the baby because she couldn't find a day care she could afford and trust—criteria that proved incompatible. On the baby's first birthday, his mother gave Raine a wall calendar. It was hastily wrapped in faded yellow paper, a clown face smiled

back, its red lips open wide and waiting—a gift to mark the passage of time and impatience.

The bottle soothed the boy and he relaxed. He blinked in slow motion and laid his curly topped head on Raine’s shoulder. She relaxed too while listening to his sucking noises and little sighs.

She searched for her phone and found it by Jordan’s gaming console. She exhaled as she pulled up the latest text message. Amanda had sent it last night after the baby had fallen asleep. Raine had stayed up late waiting for Jordan to come home from work. She’d been watching the numbers on the cable box and counting the seconds before each digit changed, each transition representing money and time spent drinking and not on baby formula or saving up for their own place. Her anger had made her hot, so she took off her t-shirt and propped herself up against the cool pillows on the pull-out bed. She sat in stillness wearing only her bra and panties. She felt the beads of sweat drip down her belly and crawl into her stretchmarks. If Jordan walked in now, she had thought, would he touch her like he used to? Before the baby? Would she let him?

Amanda wanted Raine to leave. Come live with me, she texted.

Throughout their friendship, Amanda was the one who pushed. They first met on the playground, many years before boys like Jordan got in their way. They had played on the swing set all afternoon—each one pushing and pulling against the wind, pumping their legs to go faster. Amanda kept leaping from her seat in mid-air, landing feet first and waiting for Raine to do the same. She never did.

Raine never knew how their friendship lasted over the years. They had little in common. Amanda spoke freely and moved through the world as if it were something to grab and control. Raine preferred to stand back and watch, unsure of how to access a world that always felt shaky beneath her own feet.

The year they graduated high school, Amanda moved to Florida, hundreds of miles away. At the airport, Raine gave her friend a picture of her ultrasound with a banner across the top that read, “Good luck Aunt Amanda.” They tried to keep in touch afterwards, but it was difficult. Amanda never liked Jordan so Raine was hesitant about sharing news with her friend. And the excited energy in Amanda’s voice was painful to hear—like a high-pitched squeal from a balloon that released its trapped air. Amanda once offered to

send money to buy things for the baby Jordan couldn't afford, but Raine refused.

Leave him and bring the baby, read the text message. We'll figure out things together.

Amanda shared an apartment with her sister and found a good job working in a hotel near a resort. She said she could get Raine a job there too. She wanted to send Raine money for the flight. She sent pictures of the apartment and the hotel to lure Raine in.

Raine knew the sun was likely shining where her friend stood. She bet Amanda could hear the birds and feel warm breezes through cracked windows each time she woke up. Raine missed breezes. The paneled, windowless walls of the basement enclosed the musty smell in the air. She tried using aerosol sprays to cover it up. It never worked. Years of cigarette smoke and spilt beer were caught in the seams of the cushions and refused to be coaxed out.

Raine stared at the message and listened to her son's breathing as his suckling died down. She stood in the middle of the room and knew it was morning by the sounds above her head. The familiar creaks of Ms. Pat's footsteps walking from the living room to the kitchen, the weatherman's voice blaring from the TV, promising another hot day, and the gurgling of the coffee pot caused Raine to pause. She lifted her head and waited for Ms. Pat to shout down the steps and complain about the baby being too loud. But the yells never came. She turned her attention back to the text message.

Jordan never came home last night. He sent a text shortly after Amanda's message arrived. It said he drank too much and stayed with a friend. Raine had thrown the phone, which landed in a mildewed corner behind the water heater. When she calmed down enough to retrieve it, she knocked her hip into the crib and nearly woke the baby. His whimpers had further pissed her off.

Raine knew Amanda waited. The desire to start over, make a new life with her son, filled her up in a way she hadn't expected. Made her recognize how empty she felt.

Her thumb hovered over the screen.

Say you will come, the text said.

“You all gonna sleep all day down there?” Ms. Pat yelled from above. The baby’s eyes flew open. He wiggled out of Raine’s arms and climbed down her body like a prisoner escaping.

Ok, Raine typed.

She inhaled and hit send at the same time. Then she stifled her laugh with her hand. The baby looked up, arms outstretched, bottle hanging between his teeth and bouncing off his chin. She pulled off his ash-covered bib and lifted him into the air. She gave him a sea of kisses across his chubby cheeks.

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Raine always tiptoed when she walked on the main floor of the house. She carried her son, not allowing him to waddle through the nice furniture and precious knickknacks on display. Jordan’s mom loved her knickknacks. She said people with class liked things of beauty around them. Raine once asked why the basement didn’t have nice things on display. Ms. Pat replied, “No one looks down there.”

The baby fidgeted and fussed as Raine strapped him in his stroller by the front door.

“Where you two going?” Ms. Pat asked. She sat at the kitchen table. Her lit cigarette dangled precariously over her coffee cup. The baby stared at the fiery end.

“J.J. loves the library,” Raine said. “It’s the only place he doesn’t fuss as much.”

“Grandma’s baby loves books. Just like his daddy used to.” Ms. Pat smiled at her grandson, then dropped her ash into her coffee mug. Raine grabbed her diaper bag and headed through the front door. Ms. Pat followed her and stood at the threshold.

“Jordan come home last night?”

“No,” said Raine.

“Hard to keep a man home once you have a baby.”

“I guess.”

“He needs you, Raine. You can help keep him straight.”

Raine offered his mother a half-smile and walked down the street. The sun shone bright as it hovered directly above her head, like a spotlight. The air

felt humid and sticky, but Raine marched forward down the block despite the pressure in her chest.

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The library was one block away. As soon as the boy saw the building, he began to bounce up and down in his seat. Raine smiled. She didn't know which he loved more—the books or the space to run around in the sea of stories and images. She noticed his dimples grew deeper when they walked through the doors. She thought he looked like his daddy used to when she walked into class each day. Before her breasts sagged and the stretchmarks grew.

The children's department was tucked away in an alcove behind the travel section. Raine grabbed a picture book about fish for J.J. and books about Florida for herself. They both sat on the beanbag chairs under the Lego structures and skimmed through the glossy pages. They held up pictures and showed each other what they found. He pointed to rainbow flounders and she showed him a beach scene.

“Should mommy and J.J. live here?” she asked, pointing to a family lounging on beach chairs under a palm tree.

“Fish,” he said. His chubby finger pointed to the water.

“Yes, baby,” Raine said. “You are so smart.”

Before she got pregnant, Raine wondered if she and Jordan would have smart children together. She always had good grades. School came easy. Books were an escape from the chaos of her own home.

The day her father left home for good was the same day she got accepted into an honors class. Raine found her mother in the bathroom, tending to a black eye and vowing to call the cops the next time she let that man touch her again. Raine had followed her routine and brought in fresh ice packs to stop the swelling. She then handed her mother the letter with news about class.

“Keep doing this,” her mother said through tears. “Keep up the good grades. And stay away from the god-damned boys.”

But Raine didn't stay away. She met Jordan the next day. He had received the same letter. He said he hated the class, but would keep showing up if Raine was going to be there. Eventually, their study dates took a turn. He didn't have a dad either. He understood. He promised he would never leave

her—that loving someone meant sticking around. He had known about the empty hole and he tried to fill it.

Raine checked out several books for J.J. and a few for herself. She hid the Florida books inside the diaper bag.

She took the long way home and welcomed the sun shining on her face. The humidity from the early morning lifted, and a warm breeze took its place. J.J. sang a song to himself, and Raine imagined them walking along a street in Miami. Amanda responded to Raine’s reply with the address for her new apartment and a picture of the courtyard within the complex. There were large palm trees surrounding a playground—a bright red plastic slide, seesaw and swings. Raine zoomed in on the photo of the swings before putting her phone back in her pocket.

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Raine could hear the screaming before she entered the house. She hesitated before turning the doorknob, girding herself for the blows. She heard Jordan’s voice—a tired, pleading lilt in his words. She pushed herself and the stroller inside. She stood back in the corner.

“You think I’m nothing. Just a no-good-son-of-a-bitch,” Jordan yelled. He sat in the living room. Head in his hands. Elbows resting on the knees of his stained black jeans. His Krueger’s Grocery shirt hung open, revealing his thin heaving chest.

“You’re acting like your son-of-a-bitch father,” his mother said. “I kicked him out too.” Ms. Pat sat across from him, smoking a cigarette. She kept crossing and uncrossing her legs as if she couldn’t decide to sit or jump up.

“Dad wasn’t good enough for you, so you trashed him. I’m not good enough so you want to trash me too.”

“I want you to pay some god-damned money,” his mother said jumping up. “You think you all can stay here forever and eat me out of my house and savings?”

“Oh, here we go again,” Jordan said. He groaned and Raine held her breath.

“I got bills to pay, Jordan! I got responsibilities.”

“I got responsibilities too.”

“Well, you sure as hell don’t act like it.”

“What do you want from me, mom? I’m doing the best I can.”

“You can stop coming in my house smelling like cigarettes and shit beer. Act like an adult.”

“That’s funny coming from you.”

“Yep, just like your bitch father. Blame everybody but yourself.”

Raine’s heartbeat climbed as she watched Jordan slowly rise up off the leather couch, his hands clenching into fists. She screamed as he picked up a large vase sitting on the coffee table and threw it across the room. The shattered pieces splayed across the hardwood floor. The baby balked against the stroller straps and shrieked.

Raine rushed to Jordan and stood in front of him, facing his mother. Ms. Pat’s face turned a devilish red. Her arms lifted high into the air, the smoke from her cigarette encircled her body.

“That was real crystal!” she screamed.

Raine held out her arms, palms out and said, “Everyone needs to calm down.”

“You pay for that or you’re all out of here by morning. I mean it.”

Raine felt Jordan’s breath on her shoulder. She could hear him slump onto the couch, his anger deflating instantly like the cushions beneath him. Regret hovered over him, making him smell worse than the sweat and beer.

“We’ll fix this,” Raine said.

His mother dropped her arms, but her breathing remained heavy.

“You fix this, Raine.”

“I will.”

“I love my grandbaby, but I’ve had enough of this shit.” His mother stormed out the room. Raine grabbed a broom and dust pan while J.J. and his father whimpered in their respective seats.

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Raine and Jordan skipped dinner on the main floor and settled themselves in the basement for the night. Jordan apologized for not coming home after she put the baby down to sleep. He snored softly in his crib.

They laid naked under the worn sheets. Raine rubbed the edges of the sheets between her thumb and index finger and thought of her mother. She had

grabbed the sheets from the linen closet after her mother kicked her out. They had barely fit into her duffle bag. Jordan had wanted her to hurry—grab what she needed before her mother came home from work and discovered them in the house. But Raine wanted to have one thing to remember from her mother. One thing that held her scent. She knew her mother never meant to spit out those awful words. The positive pregnancy test was a shock for all of them. Raine wanted to explain that Jordan wanted to build a life with her, that he promised to stay. But the words had failed to come out after she saw the disappointment in her mother’s eyes. Forgiveness may come one day—but she wanted to have something of hers until that day came to be. It helped soothe the hurt.

Raine let go of the sheet and placed her hand over Jordan’s heart. She knew his feelings were hurt. They always were whenever his mother compared him to his father. Raine comforted him the only way she knew how. She moved her ankles along his shin and watched him stare up at the ceiling as he twirled his chest hair in slow circles. Raine listened to the muffled sounds of the TV from the floor above. His mother was probably sipping a vodka tonic and watching people buy homes she could never afford. That’s how she soothed herself.

“My mom is going to kick us out,” Jordan whispered.

“We should move, get our own place,” she said.

“Can’t afford it.”

“What if we had a way to move?” Raine asked. “What if I found a way?” She sat up on one shaky elbow.

He scoffed, then turned to look at her. He brushed back a strand of her hair that fell against her cheek, then held her chin. A little too tight. Raine winced and he let go.

“I’m going to take care of my family,” he said looking directly into her eyes. “I’m nothing like my dad.”

The baby flipped from his back to his belly. Jordan turned his attention to his son and smiled.

“We’re going to do the right thing for him,” he said.

He wrapped his arms around Raine’s body. And for the first time in longer than she could remember, he caressed her breasts. He put his head down and whispered close into her ear, “We’re nothing like our parents. We are a family. I’ll take care of us.”

She let him hold her tight, and touch her all over in the places she thought he forgot. He moaned as he moved, his feeling of confidence and satisfaction returning through her body's acceptance. She longed to feel something other than stuck between his body and her desire to be loved. She closed her eyes and remembered Jordan smiling, holding their son for the first time. Like a family. She used Jordan's shoulder to wipe her tears as she let him enter her.

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In the morning, Raine tiptoed into the kitchen and prepped J.J.'s bottles. Ms. Pat sat at the table pretending to read her mail. She sighed heavily as she picked up each envelope, shook her head and laid them down in a neat pile. Jordan had left for an early shift at the store and from the sound of his mother's performance, Raine knew he hadn't left any money for the vase.

Raine placed two full bottles into the diaper bag and pulled out her checkbook. Amanda's money for the flight would have landed in her bank account by now. It would be enough to cover the vase. Raine planned to return the rest with an apology.

She laid the check on the table. Ms. Pat's sighing ceased. Raine grabbed J.J. from his crib and left the house before either woman found their words for each other.

The sunshine from the day before had disappeared, hidden behind pale gray clouds. Raine welcomed the cover from the heat despite feeling a slight chill on her bare arms. She walked quickly down the street, pushing the stroller with purpose. The baby began to bounce once the library came into view. Raine released him into the children's department while she returned her Florida books to the circulation bin.

J.J. took a nosedive into the beanbag chair and let out a giggle. Raine watched him roll around, struggling to get back up. She held out her arm and he grabbed it for balance. She led him to the shelves and chose several books. He found the book with the rainbow trout from the day before and shoved it against her knees. She sat him on her lap. He turned the cardboard pages and pointed to each fish. Raine tried to name them all, but the boy started to squirm.

"Shhh, baby," Raine said. "Stop fussing." He didn't listen. He kept wiggling around her thighs and pushing her arms away from his chest. Raine

