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Cabbage Head

They called my mother cabbage head. The first time I’d heard it I was six years old, playing in the yard between my trailer and the next one with a few neighbor kids. One of the older girls, Isabella Callaghan, said it with heated eyes and a taunting tone, as if she gained something from hurting my feelings. The nickname was so unusual, and I tried to think where it came from; maybe because my mother had that one bad hair job that left it green instead of blonde, or the fact that she almost always ate vegetables only when she was on a health kick. The confusion must have shown in my face, because she spoke again, saying, “It means she’s a druggie, dipshit. Your mother is a druggie. Everyone says so.”

The idea of drug addicts wasn’t foreign to me; my neighborhood was far from good, and each cul-de-sac had its share of users and dealers. But the idea of my mother being one of those people didn’t make sense. The druggies I’d known were loud and violent and dirty, always slurring their words and walking with a limp. My mother did none of those things. But she kept saying over and over, “Punzel’s mom’s a druggie, Punzel’s mom’s a druggie!” until I silenced her with a fist in the nose before running back to my own home. The door was open like it always was because it didn’t quite fit the frame, and the screen door fell into place since the latch never closed.

“Mama, mama! Izzy said you’re a—.” I stopped short of seeing her hunched over a long glass pipe and a bottle of pills, blank smoke curling out of her mouth, coloring the whites of her eyes with rouge of her lipstick it pulled. I fought my way through tendrils of what smelled like burning plastic and stale bits of chalk to my room, shutting the door and ducking under the covers so I didn’t have to see the smoke worm its way into my room.

I didn’t wake up until late the next day, a weak throbbing in my head and my too-long blonde hair plastered to my face with dried tears. While the house still had a strong odor permeating through it, the living room was clean as it had been the day before, all of the pills and glass objects out of sight. Still, something seemed different, but I couldn’t tell what it was.

My mother walked into the living room, stirring a small spoon around a cup of steaming coffee. “Good afternoon dear,” she said, walking over and placing a kiss on the crown of my head. “I take it you slept well.”
I wasn’t sure what was going on, but if my mother was willing to forget, so was I. It was then that I looked around again, and saw what was different. For the first time in my life, the front door was shut. Not only shut, but locked and sealed up.

“Why don’t we stay in today dear?” mother said. “You spend too much time around those Callaghan girls anyways. They don’t need to know our business, do they?” When she saw the worry in my face, she kissed my head again, reiterating “it’s just for today.”

But that day went by, and another one after that, and those days became weeks and months that spun in never ending circles like the sun that would crawl in through the blinds and along the walls. The routine created itself, where neither one of us really went anywhere outside of the trailer park, me only leaving for school some days and her venturing out to gossip with the old woman down the street or buy more smack or speed or pain killers or whatever it was that she was getting her high off of that week.

There were those few, rare times that she would sober up; when she was too sick to use, she’d clean herself up and realize that the lights had been shut off or I hadn’t eaten for three days or maybe she was out of something that wasn’t drug-centric. She’d leave me here, telling me to stay inside and away from the windows and to not open the door for anyone then be gone for hours at a time. When she came back, it was either in a chipper mood where she’d sing and dance around the house to disco music for hours on end, making dinner or brushing my hair or even giving me gifts to make up for whatever happened in the time before. But most times, she would return bitter and angry, picking away at her skin until whoever was dealing that week would come back from their day job and bitching that she wouldn’t have enough money to buy anything. There was never an in-between, and after a while, the angry and bitter woman was the only one who’d come home. I knew that deep down, she really loved me, and that was why she went to great pains to keep our secret; because if someone ever did find out, I would be taken away.

But as I got older and bigger, I realized that she had no real power to keep me in this house, and every time she was away, I’d slip out the door and go somewhere, anywhere, with Isabella, just so we could both get away for a while. This didn’t happen very often, but the times they did were so relieving, all I had to do was wait until they came.

Her latest dealer was the old woman down the street with a fierce gambling habit that somewhere along the way, she picked up as well. Other than her usual ventures outside, this was the only time she left me by myself, every Friday from eleven until four. I pretended to be zoned out in front of the couch, eyes moving along with the thrashing teen girls or controlling husbands on the Maury Povich show as she came into the living room better dressed than normal, her long, dark hair brushed into an up-do.
“I’m going out with Miss Rosa for a little bit,” she said. She hadn’t outright told me that Miss Rosa was giving her what appeared to be ecstasy, but years of experience filled in the blanks for me. “You know the rules. Also, if the cable guy comes by, ignore him.”

“Aren’t I supposed to ignore everyone that comes to the door?”

She pulled a set of ones out of her wallet and slipped them into the little fanny pack on her waist. “Yes, but he’s persistent. Besides, they got their money this month.”

I seriously doubted that the bill was paid, and knew for a fact that she was avoiding them because she was scared they would make good on their promise that this was indeed the “final notice.”

She came and smoothed my hair out of my face, kissing me on the forehead. “I love you,” she said, powdery breath tickling my nostrils as she exhaled then stood up, walking away and shutting the door. I sat still on the couch until I heard Miss Rosa’s smoker’s cough come up our porch, then back down again, and the revving of her GTO as it pulled out of her driveway and onto the main road. I stood up, slipping my feet into my red converse and unlatching the intricate locks, savoring the instant when the door parted from its frame, bits of dust giving way to the soft winds of summer. I stepped into the sunlight, stretching my arms over my head before looking across the yard to Isabella’s place, where her seven year old sister, Riley, was sitting in a lawn chair, playing with a demented looking Barbie doll that was missing its hair.

“Hey there,” I said as I walked over to their trailer. “How are you?”

She shrugged, not looking up from her toy. “Mom and Isa are fighting.”

Just after that I heard something slam, followed by a hard slapping sound. Neither one of us flinched at the noise; the fighting between Isabella and her mother became incessant. Like me, she was the product of an overbearing mother, and too old and too big to just fall into line, blindly accepting her circumstances. Unlike me, she fought back, even when it got physical, because she couldn’t just deal with it anymore. I was always afraid something bad was going to happen, and the moment of silence between hit and door slam always worried me, because I was scared that she was hurt, or worse, dead. But she appeared in the doorway moments later, teeth gritted, hand pressed against the swell of her cheek. She looked surprised to see me, but glossed over her shock and hurt with that stone wall that made her eyes look browner than normal. “Come on,” she said, gesturing towards the dirt road. “I need to get out of here.”

I followed along as she shoved her hands in her pockets, and Riley dropped her doll into the dirt, shuffling her feet behind us. Once we were out of the trailer park, we walked along the empty street for a
while, all three of us falling into a line along the rocks and pavement. Every time a car passed, Isabella’s dark red hair would dart straight up, but she paid it no mind. I held my much longer hair in my own hands to keep the same from happening, and Riley came along by my side, reaching for the broken tip since it grew well past my hips.

“Your hair’s so pretty,” she said, running a strand between her fingers. “I wish mine were this long.”

I smiled. “Well, then, don’t get a haircut for eight years and I’m sure it’ll happen to you too.” The words came out much harsher than I wanted them too, but any commentary on my hair put me on edge. It was abnormally long and bleach blonde, even though it was my natural color. One day, when my mom stopped taking her Xanax, she was hallucinating so bad that she was convinced my hair possessed some kind of magical power, and said I was never allowed to cut it again. She now denies she ever said it, but still must believe it to some extent, because she’s made me grow it out ever since.

“Remember that one time I tried to climb it?” Isabella said, grinning at us over her shoulder.

“You stood outside my window and yelled Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair for an hour. I finally did it to shut you up.”

As we came up to the Family Dollar, she stopped in a parking spot, facing us. I tried not to stare at the purple spot branding her freckled cheek. “And I would have made it too, if I wasn’t such a fat ass back then.”

I hadn’t thought about that in years, probably because it wasn’t as light hearted as she made it seem. It was two years after my mother’s self-imposed exile, a year before Riley was even born. It was the middle of the summer, and I was watching from my window as Isabella and a few other boys were playing on a trampoline that someone had bought for her. I wanted nothing more than to play with them, but knew my mother would never allow it. At some point, Isabella must have seen me, because she came over and asked why I was staring. I told her that I wanted to come because it looked like fun. By this time, everyone in the neighborhood knew, more or less, what was going on with my mother, and most of them looked the other way or pretended not to notice how miserable I was. Then she told me that she was going to climb my hair, which in the couple years, had grown a considerable length. I thought she was crazy, but agreed to give it a go out of desperation. It was all fun and good until we realized it didn’t quite reach the ground, and until her mother screamed at her to get back in their yard. Since then, we’d start talking through the crack in my window, and when we both got older, she helped me get outside more often. We’d often joke about getting away for real, and not just out of our back yards. But neither of us
had a way out, or any money, so it remained a wild fantasy that we let ourselves go wild with, because we knew it would never be a reality.

“‘Yes,’” I said, “your pathetic attempt to rescue me from the trailer tower was a total and epic failure.”

“But at least I tried.”


She laughed and turned around, walking into the store. Carrie ran in behind her, but I opted to stay outside, leaning against the brick wall by the dumpster in case I ran into someone who knew my mom. A few minutes later, they returned with a bag full of food and drinks, and we started down the road again and didn’t stop until we hit the empty patch of dirt where Burger King used to be, right outside the city’s Gun Shop. We sat in a circle as Isabella handed each of us a candy bar, a Coke, and a bag of chips.

Riley looked confused. “I thought this was for the r—.”

Isabella silenced her by putting a chip in her mouth. “Shut up, runt. I’ve got it covered.”

“But—.”

“Shut up,” Isabella said, and Riley pouted, opening her own chip bag and cramming some into her mouth.

I looked between them for a second, trying to think why they would need anything.

After a moment, Riley looked back at her again, swallowing her food before speaking. “But isn’t she coming with us? You said she was.”

“Shut up Riley,” Isabella said, way too calm, focusing on taking the wrapper off her coke bottle.

“But we’re going soon!”

“Shut up!” Isabella snapped, flinging her bottle over the younger girl’s head and into a pile of red dirt in the distance. “Son of a bitch,” she said, rising to her feet.

“I’ll get it,” Riley said, running in the other direction before she could feel her sister’s wrath.

“What is she talking about?” I said.

I expected some fight back, but she gathered up her food, putting it back into the bag. “I got a car.”
“Congratulations,” I said, thinking it was a joke.

“No,” she said. “I mean I have a car, and don’t ask me how but I got some money, and I decided that…”

“That what?”

Isabella didn’t answer until Riley sat back down, prodding her shoulder. “Just tell her. She can’t come if she doesn’t know.”

She wiped her hair away from her face, as if she hoped that all of her problems would flutter away in the wind along with the dead strands. “I’m leaving here tonight. Me and Riles are all packed up and waiting for mom to go to bed.”

I stared at her for a minute, trying to process what she said. “You’re not joking. You’re serious.”

She nodded. “I, uh, took the money from my mother’s boyfriend. Apparently he’s some hot shot lawyer with a wife and kid…but he keeps hundred dollar bills on him. Bad for him, good for us.”

Riley looked between us with an intensity I’d never seen on her face before, and I was surprised when she was the one who broke the silence. “You’re coming with us, aren’t you?”

Isabella was staring at me, her chest rising and fall. “Come on, you know I can’t.”

“We always talked about it, Punz.”

“No!” I threw my drink down, causing the bottle to shake and leak brown suds all over the ground. “It was different when it was just talk. But I can’t leave my mother. I think she would actually die without me around.”

“Well that’s her problem!” Isabella said. “I’m sure our mom will go ape shit without us to beat the living crap out of, but we have to think of ourselves.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t.”

Isabella closed the space between us, resting inches from my face. “Look, I know how badly you want to get out of here. I’m sick of it, and I know you are too.” She grabbed a long lock of my hair, giving it a hard tug. “I cannot stay in Chuluota anymore. But if you want to carry this”—which was punctuated with another pull—, “around cabbage head for the rest of your life, then by all means. Go for it.” She stood up, and Riley started gathering their snacks. “We’ll be down at the park tonight. If you want to come, be there by ten.” She shoved her hands into her pockets. “And if you don’t, well, then…bye, I guess.”
She walked away without looking back. Riley looked at me with tears in her eyes, giving me a smile before catching up to her sister.

I sat there for a while before I got back up, beginning the journey home. I ignored the cars passing by, even when it whipped my hair across my face, blocking my vision. Isabella was right; I wanted to go. I wanted nothing more than to get in that car and leave my mother to deal with her messes on her own. While I’m sure there were no stable plans once we got to wherever we’re going, anything had to be better than this. Still, I couldn’t just leave my mother. She’d gone to such pains to keep us together all these years. I couldn’t just leave her, it would break her heart.

I got back to the trailer park just before sundown. I went straight for my own home, not knowing what time it is but still wanting to beat mom back. The lights in the Callaghan house were all out, but the few in mine were on, and the front door was wide open. I took a few deep breaths before taking the last few steps to the stoop and into the doorway. My mother was sitting on the couch, furious.

“Rapunzel! Where in hell have you been?”

I couldn’t say anything and just stood there, focusing on breathing because I was so scared I might have forgotten to do it. “I…I just went for a walk.”

“I told you to stay in this house. Do you have any idea what it was like to come home and see you weren’t here!”

*What, like when I walked in on you smoking crack when I was six?*

The thought had crossed my mind plenty of times, but this was the first time I’d actually let myself think it without guilt. It wasn’t until I saw the hesitation of her breath that I realized I’d said it out loud.

“Rapunzel, dear, that was a long time ago and you’re still upset about it now?”

My eyes started to burn and my nostrils constricted, and the tears were falling down my face before I could stop them. “Of course I am, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because, it’s all in the past,” she said. “And I haven’t used around you since, have I?”

I stood there just staring at her for a minute, not believing she’d said that to me. I then looked down at the coffee table, which was now littered with off-colored pill bottles and empty baggies, thinking back on all of those times that she swore *things would change*. How once in a while, all of the drugs would be thrown out and she’d buy me new clothes and a lunchbox so I could go back to school every
day, and she’d go to the salon and fix herself up, talking about applying for a job tomorrow for sure. And I knew that deep down, she really wished she could make this happen, because in spite of everything, she did care about me. I also knew from many years of AA meetings and therapists and pastors who just wanted to help us out that while she couldn’t help her addicted, she was the only one with the power to change it. They all repeated to take it one day at a time, and for her that may have been good enough. But for me, it wasn’t. It never had been. I always knew that it would come down to her having to choose: be my mother or be the neighborhood cabbage head. But her choice was made long ago, and for the first time, I had the choice to get away from it.

I walked across the living room and kissed her on the forehead, and I could see that she was already out of it. “You’re right, mother, I’m sorry.”

This seemed to please her, and she sat back against the couch, sucking down a beer and turning on the television. “I love you dear.”

I fought the breaking of my voice when I replied, “I love you too.” And before I could talk myself out of it, I went into my room and packed as much as I could fit in my little drawstring backpack. Knowing Isabella, she would be there early, and while my resolve was wavering, I knew I had to be there before the smoke came to life, attaching itself to the ends of my hair, pulling me back into my place.