

Strawberry Memories

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The carpet on the staircase was the color red that reminded her of strawberries.

Sweet and round berries danced through her memory, tucked beneath the vibrant green leaves that glowed with the hymns of summer sunlight glowing around them. Then there were the memories of a closed door, her fingers on the doorknob, turning it and forgetting how to breathe when she saw the reality on the other side.

"Maye?" Mommy had whispered.
"Mommy."

Her knuckles drained of color as they clasped themselves to the railing, ashen and clammy in contrast to the vivid scene painted in her head.

His voice broke through her skull in an attempt to tear down the memory forming beneath her clenched eyelids, "God damn it, Amanda! I can't take this anymore!"

He had taken her to strawberry fields while Mommy was in the hospital after the Bad Night.

"You're silly, Daddy, she doesn't even have a cough." The child had giggled, filling a dirty cardboard crate up with the tiny rubies.

"Not that kind of sick." He took the crate from her fingers as he knelt beside her, his eyes sent fear down her spine, a fear that would stay with her for an infinity.

"Sick up here." Daddy tapped on her head.

"How do you think that this is affecting Maye?" Her father asked. "She lives in this pit! Amanda, listen to me, look at me! I can't do this alone anymore, working two jobs to try and support a family and pay off the medical bills, and raising a daughter alone. Look at me!"

"I'm sorry! What do you want me to say? What do you want me to do? I can't make it all disappear and take back what she saw--"

"What did you expect?"

"Will she be okay?" Maye stepped back, the heel of her white sneaker stamped on a berry. It burst out of the skin, crimson juice running across the side of her shoe. Scarlet liquid leaking from under a white door. Strawberry juice covering the bathroom floor, Mommy slumped on the floor. The Bad Night.

"Amanda, the child is not okay. You're home now, it's time for you to help out, to show her that you are back and that the world is still a safe place."

Her mother put her hands up in a surrendering motion, "You can't just expect either of us to bounce back. The world is not a safe or hap-

py place, do you want me to lie to her?"

"Why did she cover herself in strawberry juice?" Maye picked up a stomped on strawberry skin, holding it up for Daddy to see, mushy red droplets falling onto her hands, staining her skin.

"Maye," Daddy hugged her, destroyed strawberry in her hands and all. It was pressed up against her nose. It didn't smell like *The Bad Night*. It smelled sweet and light, mixing with the warm scent of Daddy's shirt.

He begged her mother, his voice breaking, "No, I just want you to talk to her."

"Don't cry, Dad-

dy," Maye whispered to herself, her eyes burning from the stress of remaining closed for too long.

The Bad Night smelled of fear and salty tears. It smelled of things that should be kept tucked away and not outside of our bodies and the taste of metal. It reeked with confusion and sadness. Someone had screamed; it might have been Maye. Did the strawberry hurt when it exploded?

"I don't know what to say," her mother choked, and Maye blinked, her eyes rejecting the sudden input of light. Her father was holding her mother in the living room, sun-

light cascading in rays through the dusty doorway, illuminating their embrace. Her mother's eyes were closed and her face was speckled from tearstains.

"Why don't you start with 'I'm sorry' or 'I love you'? You haven't hugged her."

Her mother shook her head, tucking it into her father's shoulder, "I don't think she wants my love, my daughter hates me." She bit her lip.

Her father leaned back, taking her mother by her shoulders, looking into her eyes the way he had

"Why did she cover herself in strawberry juice?"

looked into Maye's that day, like he was the moon pulling the discontented tides back into a constant rhythm.

"No, she just doesn't know what to think and wants her mother back. It hasn't been easy for us, either."

"I know it hasn't been, I'm so selfish—"

"Quit the pity party, you can do that later, now you need to talk to Maye." He glanced up at Maye's small figure, trying to disappear into the banister and the carpet. Transfixed, Maye met his gaze, a fly stuck in silken strings, found by the long legs of a spider.

Mommy's eyes were open only in little moon slivers, making little lines like scars on a strawberry. The vermillion liquid had dribbled down her arm; an opening had been carved

deep within Mommy's skin, a strawberry with a nibble missing.

This was the Mommy who danced with her and Daddy in the kitchen to Daddy's vinyl music, who let her ride on the back of the shopping cart in the grocery store, who had taught her how to be strong. Mommy was the one who held her when she scraped her knee when she fell off her bike. She made all the bad things go away.

Did the bad things get her? Were they all just squished strawberries in the end?

"It's been hard, but it is time to start making things right, Amanda,

he looked back into her mother's eyes, bright and innocent, they seemed vulnerable, a baby bird who had fallen from its nest and was trying to climb back in.

Her mother looked at her and whispered, "How?"

He took her mother and turned her around so that she was now facing Maye. "By becoming a family again."

Her mother now met her eyes, those open gates inviting her in, "Maye?"

"Mommy." ♦



Explosive Jelly, Eli Vidano, Acrylic