

Lies on the Lips

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I lied about the stolen car. I never lie, and I don't steal. But last night, I rolled the window down as quickly as I ran that stop sign and said, "Yes, sir, my boyfriend knows I have the car and that's the truth." I had lied twice. Jimmy left me, and the Mercedes was not mine.

The night Jimmy left me was not the night I stole the car. It was the night I started all the lying. It started with Jimmy suggesting a tattoo for me—a pair of lips like Betty Boop. According to him, the lips would remind me to open my mouth and stand up for myself more often than I change the oil in my VW. Needles scare me, but I kept that to myself, like most things.

"I'll trace it with the marker and then tomorrow you come get the tattoo in the shop."

"I have to see the drawing first."

"No, Monday. Come in on Monday. I'm too busy Saturday," he said steamrolling my response.

Maybe he was right about me speaking my mind. If I had those juicy red lips he drew with permanent marker, I would've told him I didn't like him sleeping in my new adjustable bed. I bought it during the Presidents' Day Sale. The woman

at the mattress store wanted to know which level my husband would prefer. I pretended to be married (not to Jimmy) and that my husband liked things harder, because the men I knew only appreciate softness in their women. It was none of her business anyway that I wanted a bed with two different feelings in case I needed a vacation from one side or another. Jimmy had been sleeping in my bed and telling me what I should do for two years.

“You’re thirty-two and shouldn’t have someone calling you dark cherry at work,” he said and reached for the remote to take down the firmness on what he called *his* side of *my* new bed.

“I’ll make myself sick worrying about which nickname some white man who makes more money than me decides to use.”

I pretended not to care about that old man, Scottie. I’m a lot lighter than most dark cherries, so when he first said it, I figured he was talking to someone else. Except, at the time there were three other women who could’ve been *dark cherry*. The receptionist, who never leaves that desk, my friend Ella who is lighter than me, and then there was me, the only one standing in front of him and the entire department when he said it.

“Did he apologize? Ah, never mind.” Jimmy asked the question and then answered it himself. That’s probably why we’re good together; he does all the talking.

“It’s too late now. I can’t say anything or else I’ll get labeled for being the one who causes trouble,” I said.

Jimmy smacked his lips. “You never say anything.”

That red pen was suspended right above my thousand-count sheets. I let him think my eyes grew wide because of his comment. I went overboard with both purchases, but I deserved it. Mama supported the splurge. She told me there are two places to spend your money: where you sleep and where you eat.

“You learned all this keep-it-to-yourself stuff from your mother. I keep telling you—and her—this is a different time. You gotta speak your mind at work, Nell,” Jimmy said.

“The tattoo shop has your name on it. You don’t understand what it means to work for someone else. The rules you follow aren’t ones you would’ve thought of.”

Jimmy went back with the red pen, made a little dip on the top lip, then looked up with those long eyelashes. What a waste on a man.

“I don’t believe half the stuff you tell me about your job.”

I knew Jimmy wouldn't understand and made a mental note to tell Mama tomorrow when I stopped by her house. She's worked for many more people than I have. Plus, my mother was also a writer. At the time, she was only permitted to type up the headlines for the advertisements. She told me back in her day, the men would drink so much during work hours that she changed words or sentiment and her boss couldn't remember his original thought.

Jimmy rested his head on my stomach talking to those lips like they were real. He had all kinds of appointments at the shop tomorrow: a pair of angel wings, which would take him most of the day, the Star of David for our old high school friend, and then he would be in the chair getting a touch-up on the memorial to his mother on his wrist.

He admired his work in progress and held the pen between his teeth, one of them gold. Jimmy liked to think his gold tooth passed for a grill. That was what he told his co-workers at the tattoo shop, but he was not fooling anyone. Everyone on this side of Cleveland knew that when his mama died, he was so depressed he pulled out his own tooth and replaced it with her melted-down gold ring. He did it right after the hospital gave him a white plastic bag of her things. Next thing I knew, he was at my door big-lipped from the Novocain, and wet up my pillowcases with all those tears. He got off lucky. I would probably pull out my heart if Mama died.

"Maybe I should draw the lips somewhere you can see them, not on your hip bone. I don't need you talking to me crazy."

"Oh, please," I said and bit my real lip as he lowered the firmness on the vacation side, again. Luckily, that saleswoman wrote the settings down for me.

Jimmy is talented. Those lips were perfectly drawn. I loved the cartoonish glamour they gave my otherwise unremarkable hips. He even included a little shading. Those lips had the nerve to look shiny! When I was a little girl and the youngest of five, I didn't talk much either. My mama thought I would be a mute. I didn't think what I had to say mattered much. These lips made me feel different, like I was a woman with a story to tell and a life to live.

He went on and on talking to those lips. Jimmy is easy to listen to. He's got one of those radio voices that weaves in words like "baby" and "feel me," instead of punctuation. I wished he were as easy on the eyes. He talked a big game for a skinny guy, told me I should quit my job and run numbers for him at the shop. I tuned him out. He was just talking and talking to those lips. He should've drawn a pair of ears.

That man didn't even return the settings on the *vacation* bed when he stormed out on me that night. Those lips were something curious. A weird feeling came over me, those lips started itching, and before I knew it I said to Jimmy, "You better quit telling me what to do" since he wasn't the only man talking to my hips.

His skinny self, beat feet and my *vacation* side was empty and on the wrong setting. I don't really have another man, but he was getting on my nerves. The lips were doing what they were supposed to do—make me have a say in my own life.

The lips were still there even after my shower and a good tug-up on my jeans. I whispered to that drawing because I thought it would listen and said, "Don't you make me act a fool in front of Mama." That puckered kisser drawn so sweet seemed like it made a smirk. I don't lie; and I don't try to hurt people's feelings. That ink must have poisoned a part of me.

I spend Saturdays with my mama. After my daddy passed, it was the only tradition I continued to cherish. Christmas morning was never as joyful. Thanksgiving never seemed right, but one unremarkable day we realized our Saturdays had recovered.

My mama lived in the same house where I was raised on Reidham. The house structured the same as every other one in Shaker Heights: a brick colonial, two windows that look like eyes, a skinny white door, and two wooden posts in the driveway to show the snow plow the width. Our checkered mailbox made us stand out on the street and a good target for unwelcome guests.

I turned up my mama's driveway like any other Saturday. Except this time I parked behind a low-riding navy-blue Mercedes Benz, and those devil lips started itching.

I knew it was Fred's car. He worked with my daddy at the aluminum factory in the eighties. He claimed to be my daddy's best friend, but I don't know what kind of friends start looking at their friend's wife that way and showing up unannounced. I don't care if Daddy was six feet under, he still had a soulmate alive doing the duty of making him proud.

I didn't have to knock on the door or ring the bell, but with Fred there I chose to.

"Nellie Bell," Mama said with a dish towel over her shoulder. "Now, you know you don't have to ring. Come on in. Fred is here."

She held onto me long enough to relax my mind and make those lips stop itching. I knew they were going to embarrass me; all I could do now was hope

Mama wouldn't be within earshot. She pointed to Fred sitting in my daddy's old recliner. Mama refused to move it into storage. She liked pretending they could still unwind together at night. Well, if it was a reminder of Daddy, his friend looked too comfortable in that worn leather chair with his shoes off and his hand around a hot cup of coffee.

"You want a cup, baby?" Mama said, following my eyes to the cup in Fred's hand.

"Yes, Mama. Thank you."

"I'll be right back. Tell Fred about work. He loves hearing about the advertising life."

Fred smiled at me while my mother went just a few steps away to the kitchen. The house was small but had enough walls to let those lips say what was really on my mind without her hearing.

I left my shoes by the door and hung up my coat next to his denim jacket. His car key fell to the floor when I slid my coat next to his. I mumbled an apology and placed them on the entry table. Fred had some nerve. Did he really think he had a chance with my mama now? I sat down across from him on the sofa.

"Mr. Sams, what brings you around my mama's house?"

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd pay my best friend's girl a visit."

"Oh, so you haven't forgotten."

"Excuse me, Eleanor?"

No one used my full name any longer. Those lips were really starting in again, but Fred didn't deserve that.

"I just meant you hadn't forgotten the address. That's good."

Mama returned with a cup of coffee for me and refilled her own. My mama was beautiful. Everybody probably thinks their mother is, but mine was awarded for her beauty back in the day. She won Miss Ohio as a preteen. Now her hair was short and her figure still slight, but she never lost that grace that went along with people who really knew what beauty was all about.

"Mr. Sams was just telling me that he was in the neighborhood. I forgot that fast what you were doing around here?"

Fred Sams lived in Cleveland off Detroit Avenue. It was the part of Cleveland where every street was named after a city whose namesake reflected the crime on that block. Detroit Avenue was bad—not as bad as Camden Avenue, but dangerous enough for its residents to either bar up their windows or not live long

enough to care whether their belongings were stolen. Fred lived a good thirty-minute drive to Shaker Heights. Shaker Heights was a proper suburban town; there wasn't much there. A family-owned grocery store, small downtown with a hardware store, the library, and a couple of beauty salons. For Fred to visit, he had a destination in mind. He and I both knew that was my mama's house.

"Smokey down at the hair salon asked me to stop by."

I knew by the way he wouldn't look me in the eye and the short explanation that it would be better, and more respectable, to stop prying. But those lips started itching again.

"He must've had something to give you, since advice can always reach through a phone line."

"Now, Nell. Fred was just being kind and stopping by," Mama patted my leg. "Fred, don't mind her. I'm not sure what's into her anyway."

"That's all right. I should be headed out soon anyway." Fred stood up and placed his empty mug on the oak coffee table. "I'm just going to use the bathroom before I go."

"Of course," Mama said. "It's just down the hall there."

Mama waited until she heard the door close before she grabbed my shirt sleeve and pulled me close. "Eleanor, what has gotten into you? I raised you to be nicer to company than that."

"Mr. Sams is nice, but he shouldn't be hanging around here. Certainly not when you're alone."

"Fred don't mean nothing by his surprise visits."

"For now."

I told Mama that Jimmy left.

"Sounds like you're guilty of loving the same kind of man I did."

This didn't have the same impact she thought it would because I loved my daddy. If I'm destined to end up with someone exactly like him, then I'll be better off without Jimmy and that gold tooth.

What mama should've admitted was she passed along all this talking I do to myself on the inside. See, when Daddy died, my mother didn't cry; she started talking. Daddy was the one who went to the drugstore for prescriptions and came back with a story for the ages! She told his stories over and over again, laughed to herself, even talked in her sleep. It was like she believed if she just kept talking, he would never really leave her.

Fred came back in, smiling as he offered both his hands to Mama to help her up.

“I have you blocked in. Let me move my car.”

Now, what I did next I can't blame the lips on. Jimmy drew me a pair of lips, not hands. But I grabbed my coat and his car key too. At first, I didn't know what I was going to do. When I walked to my car, I thought, let me make him nervous for a moment. Make him think twice about stopping by without anything in hand or at my mama's request. I moved my car to the street. The front door was ajar, and I could see right inside the foyer to Fred in his Texas tuxedo hugging my mama a little too tight.

My mama was a respectable woman, and she loved my daddy enough to let his memory live on as long as she did. I knew she wouldn't dare say anything to Fred about his *too tight* hug. I stopped short of the front steps, turned around and got in his car. He was too busy talking and holding her hands, he must not have noticed the ignition turn over. My mama seemed to have her eyes locked on him too. For that, neither one of them noticed me as I backed down the driveway.

I drove for a bit. I considered driving over to Jimmy's. He would have something to say about this Mama and Fred situation. I thought about going to the drugstore to buy strong alcohol to wipe off these lips. Although in this case, saying something didn't get me into trouble, but thinking before acting might. I kept driving through the weaving Shaker streets right over to the highway. This Mercedes had a nice smooth ride to it. Fred must've saved a pretty penny to get a car like this. I felt something near my hip vibrate, but this time it was my phone, not the lips. I knew it was my mama. I wasn't going to answer it.

The highway I turned onto was headed south. I wondered if those lips started fading because I was feeling small again. Too small to make a difference. All the things that were quiet were also small or empty. Mice, libraries, cemeteries. It made me feel a little better to think I was small and not empty. But then again, those empty spaces like cemeteries and libraries full of memories and stories, respectively and not mutually exclusive, seemed more like me than a little old church mouse.

I turned off the next exit but forgot to use my blinker. No one was behind me, I thought, and I ended up in Medina. There is nothing remarkable about Medina except the movie theater. A movie wouldn't be a bad idea. The red and blue sirens appeared in my mirrors. I waited on the shoulder and thought about

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how the things I kept close poisoned me more than those lips. I guess Jimmy was right. I was too old to not have a say in my own life. I remembered to go ahead and roll down my window so he wouldn't tap on Mr. Sams's car window. This time when the lips started itching, I was glad.

