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Momma,

I stare at you.

You are wearing your work uniform, but your shift should have started hours ago. You have never missed a day of work since you were hired at the grocery store as a cashier a few years back. But you are slumped against the door, hands clenched at your temples. You don't have makeup on either.

You always brush on your mask so the black and blue is buried under piles of CoverGirl twenty-four-hour foundation. You paint on eye shadow and blush, and your face always looks like a Crayola box. Fake.

I used to be embarrassed that you were my momma.

Embarrassed by how you smiled so much, lied so much with foundation and liner crinkling and smudging by your eyes. Yet, even in my embarrassment, I felt ashamed because I knew the pain hiding behind that mask.

Now here you are, face clean of makeup, eyes nearly swollen shut, the skin black and blue, not the powder. I walk closer to you and kneel down. I don't know if I imagine the cold floor or actually feel it.

I am not sure why I am taken aback, but I am. Without the makeup, without the lies, you look just like me.

Pale skin. Freckles. Chocolate eyes.

And like a quivering breath, a whisper of a vision at first, a memory shudders into place.



We have chocolate eyes.

It had been so long ago, but now I remember.

I was four, wasn't I?

I remember looking into the rearview mirror and seeing your eyes and saying, "Mommy, Mommy! We have the same color eyes!"

You beamed back at me. "Yes, we do, love. Chocolate! We have yummy chocolate eyes!" I liked that. Chocolate eyes. You had a long drawl to your voice. There was no twang to it, just a richness that made me think of sweet tea on summer days. I was still smiling when we pulled up to our house and saw an old '79 Cadillac in our driveway.

Your smile fell and you drove by our house.

“Mommy! You missed our house, silly!” I was giggling. I saw how you tensed up, the way you kept looking into the mirror, the way you drove to all the wrong places. We parked in parking lots and drove around neighborhood streets. You even stopped in front of a police station. I could hear your breathing. It was shaky. I asked you why we couldn’t go home.

You didn’t say anything at first. You just sat there staring out the window, looking like the only thing on your mind was *escape*. Then, the world came back into focus and you said, “Mommy’s just thinking, sweetheart.”

We sat in front of the police station a long time. You never got out of the car, and as the sun started to set, you pulled out of the parking spot and kept driving.

I didn’t mind. I liked our drives. I stared out the window and thought of sweet, melting chocolate.

It was dark by the time we finally pulled up behind the Cadillac.

You looked in the rearview mirror. Your eyes were wet. “Hey, my girl. No matter what happens, it’s you and me, okay? I’ll keep you safe.” Your voice shook. It didn’t sound like a promise you could keep, but I believed you anyway.

I was wrong.

You did everything so slowly. The way you let the seat belt click before you started pulling it back. The way you turned toward your open door and let your feet hang before

hopping down. The way you undid my booster seat belt and hugged me so tight. “Mommy, why are you crying?” I asked.

And you said, “Mommy just loves you so much, love.”

You tried to carry me up the driveway, but I wiggled free, announcing that I was a big girl and wanted to walk. So you let me. You held my hand. It was so small. You kissed my fingertips and we walked to the door. It opened from the inside and I stared up at the man who stood on the threshold. His hair was black with a dusting of grey around his temples, his face scruffy. I hadn’t seen him before.

“Mommy, who is that man in our house?” I asked you.

“Your father,” you said, voice breaking. “That’s your father, Ellie. And it looks like he found us.”

He. Found. Us.



That was years ago. A memory dislodged.

The recall of that moment, once in place, was a solid and vivid thing. It blotted out the present for few seconds, as if it demanded every ounce of my attention. As if it mattered.

I exhale. I wish I could’ve gotten lost in it. I wish I could go back and live in those carefree days before he showed up at our door, but it is just a memory and nothing more. But maybe, just maybe, I will remember enough to know why. Why a piece of me, of my consciousness, was left *behind*. And maybe if I know why, I will know what I have to do to be gone from this limbo. Maybe the key is to understand.

I squeeze my eyes shut, probing for another moment, but no more memories come. I grit my teeth, desperate.

Please. Please. Please. Give me something more to hold on to. But Memory is cruel and keeps her secrets.

You move and I open my eyes. I realize the knocking has stopped. August must've left. Part of me wishes he would come back just so I could look at him again. But you move, and for a split second, it seems like you can see me. You are squeezing your arms around your legs. "I'm sorry. Oh, my dove, I am sorry. It's my fault," you say so softly.

I want to shake you. Of course it was. Of course it was your fault! Then I remember how you had said "he found us."

You whisper, "I was so close, so close."

I sit back on my invisible, ghostly self and stare at you.
So close? To what?

I keep staring, waiting for you to answer. You don't. I cock my head to one side to examine you.

You are bruised, makeup-less, pale, with freckles and a split lip.

Under it all, I see the same woman who looked at me in the rearview mirror all those years ago, before we had a Cadillac parked in our driveway.

I see my momma who had chocolate eyes like mine.

You were so beautiful.

I look at my hands and think of how tightly you held on to them, how they hurt even as you planted kisses on my pudgy knuckles.

A realization hits: You died every day that you walked into this house.

Maybe you were a ghost long before I was.

A feeling that isn't anger pokes a hole in me and reaches out to you. I try to plug it up and push it down, push it away.

Because it hurts too much to know that now you are crying and it's because of me.

I reach out . . .

You jerk your head toward the door. The roar of an engine pulling in. That goddamned '76 Cadillac. You scurry to your feet and bolt up the stairs to the bathroom. Scrubbing your face with one hand, you reach with the other to pull out the bag of cheap makeup from under the cabinet. You have to paint your mask back on . . . otherwise, he will break you into little pieces until not even your fake doll face is left.

The face without freckles.

The face that looks nothing like mine.