

Elopement

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When I was fifteen, my father nailed my bedroom window shut to keep me from running off in the night. Almost forty years later, my sisters and I had to put him in a home with door alarms and special window locks to keep him in. Like me, he took off anyway.

"Your father has been assessed," the letter from the assisted-living home advised, "as at risk for elopement."

Elopement? At eighty-two, my father was failing fast; the love of his life, his wife of fifty-eight years, had slipped away two years before. When he'd first arrived at the home, a silver-haired woman named Madeleine might have been happy to do more than flirt with him. But elope? He was hardly up to it. Still, "elopement" is what the administrators named it, this inescapable urge.

Webster's Seventh New Collegiate defines *elope* as, first: to run away from one's husband with a lover or, alternately, to run away secretly with the intention of getting married; and second: to slip away, escape. I always liked the *lope* part, the sound of which embodies its meaning — I can see the word itself at a run. As it turns out, though, the root actually comes from Old Norse for *leap*, which strikes me as right, too.

Elopement runs in the family, it seems. My parents began dating when my mother was fifteen and my father sixteen. From the start, my mother's mother disapproved. When she finally forbade contact altogether, my mother moved out of the house, taking a room downtown and a job at the county courthouse. By then, my father was in flight school half a nation away: World War II had begun, and he wanted in on it. The men at the courthouse eventually took up a collection to pay my mother's bus fare to California, and she, who'd rarely traveled outside the state, packed her bags and rode west to her future, escaping her mother's house for good. It was a romantic beginning to their life together, although I was a full-grown woman with children of my own before I could view my parents, especially my father, as romantic.

"You." **He pounded** the first nail in at a slant, so it penetrated the bottom of the window frame as well as the sill. *"Will."* The second nail, going in, rattled the glass. *"Stay. Put."* Between hammer blows, my father turned his furious face to mine, eyes glinting, hard and shiny-dark.

I'd been on restriction for about a month by then, grounded

for having cut school with a group of friends to go to the state fair. Six months of restriction was the sentence: no activities outside of school, no phone calls, no leaving the house unaccompanied by him or my mother.

But I'd had just about enough. The teen-club dance was starting at eight, and I didn't know how much longer my boyfriend — blond, popular, a junior — would wait for my release. So after supper, I yawned, rubbed my eyes, and headed for the bedroom. I arranged my stuffed animals into a long lump under the covers, left my radio playing, lifted the window, and stepped out, resplendent in a miniskirt and clunky platform shoes. Hot stuff I was at fifteen, slipping my shadow-self from house to house, heart pumping blood to my ears.

Walking on the wooded path to the teen club, I saw my father's little brown Corvair go by, the set of his shoulders unmistakable even from a distance. I stood at the edge of the woods and watched him go into the building. He emerged moments later and looked left, then right, then across the street. I shrank into the trees; he climbed into the car and took off in the direction of home.

I couldn't go to the dance after that — he'd surely left word with the chaperones to call him. And I couldn't stand there in the woods, either, because the fine mist that had begun to fall the minute I'd caught sight of him was now turning into an all-out deluge. I had nowhere to go but home.

My window, I found, was locked. I tapped on my younger sister's, but she either slept through my tapping or pretended to. The rain pelted me, ran in rivulets down my face and into my blouse; my shoes were so sodden with water they'd hardly stay on my feet. Clomping around to the front door, I rang the bell.

My father let me in and then let me have it: first with words, then with his belt, then with words again. *Just get it over with* was all I could think. But he kept on and on until words flew out of my mouth: "You can't cage me like an animal." That stopped him, and his mouth grew grim. He walked out and returned a moment later with a hammer and three long, thick nails. I followed him into my room, where he set to driving them in, one by one, nailing my window shut.

Finished, he turned to face me, hammer in hand. The backs of my legs stung, but my eyes were dry and as fierce as I could make them. I did not look away.

(end of excerpt)