

Everything, All At Once

a short story by AUSTIN BUNN



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"I have lichen," my mother says. "On my vagina."

What am I supposed to do? I am her daughter.

"Lichen is a woods thing," I say over the phone. "A hiking thing."

My mother lives on the tenth floor of a high-rise that overlooks New York Harbor from a New Jersey bluff. She leaves only to shop, to return half of what she has bought, and to eat lunch at the Quick Check. She has not been hiking or on lichen or lichen-adjacent since before I knew she had a vagina. Her adventures are happy hours in the penthouse bar, where she counts the freighters and container ships with Al, a retired sea captain.

"Well, the Internet says I have it inside me," she says, "and you can't tell a soul."

It is Saturday morning. I open my garage door, the phone wedged between my ear and shoulder. Inside, the mausoleum of my marriage — the shelves and stacks and piles —

greet me with a grim exhale. The papers arrived from the lawyer yesterday. Soon I will be officially divorced from Scott. I'm selling what I can.

"You have to come with me to the doctor," my mother says.

But I have buyers coming. I'm expecting to get money for my past life. The pleasures of subtraction, of seeing things go.

"This is your mother speaking," she says. "This is your mother in need."

What ever can I do?

I say, "Give me an hour."

At noon a girl drives up in a pickup with her Mexican boyfriend. They saw my ad on Craigslist and are trying to outfit their entire life in one day. Already they look numb, zombie-fied by exertion. A scrunchie cinches the girl's blond hair on top and makes her look like a pineapple. She sucks the final

drops from a Gallon Guzzler, pegging the ice with the straw for more. Her boyfriend wears a sweat-soaked red-and-yellow t-shirt that reads, "YALE." He massages her shoulders when she stands still, but he is shorter and has to reach up a little. In the bed of the truck, an old mint green refrigerator is lashed down haphazardly with straps, like an escape trick.

"How come you want to get rid of so much awesomeness?" the girl asks, her fingers tracing the scalloped rim of a Waterford crystal bowl: a wedding gift that I used for loose change. Her boyfriend picks through a basket of shells and conches, carefully spaced and layered with towels, that I displayed in a glass cabinet at our old apartment. Scott and I had a place a hundred yards from the shore, yet I thought we needed reminding. My whole marriage was a reminder to have a marriage.

"I left my husband," I say. "All this reminds me of him, of us."

The girl glances over at her boyfriend. "Don't tell him that," she says, sotto voce. "He's wicked superstitious."

I see their relationship unscroll in front of me — his fears, her fears of his fears, the double braid of accommodation and resentment — and I want to tell her: *Run*. The divorced aren't jaded; we're clairvoyant.

"Hey, that basket of shells?" I say to the boyfriend, who presses two conches against his ears, grinning. "I'll give it to you. No money. *Mi casa, tu casa.*"

He looks surprised, then honored, then seems to see the basket for what it is: a wicker container of beach trash, another weight he'll have to carry. He deposits the conches and turns to a shelf of puzzles. I had a jigsaw period.

They leave with the crystal bowl, coffee maker, nightstand, single mattress, artificial Christmas tree, and miter saw. Without asking, I carry the basket of shells to their truck. I smell the creamy coconut of suntan lotion and a funky undertone, brackish and tidal. Shards of sanded glass, like fogged irises, rumble inside a cookie tin. Scott and I lived at the beach for five years, and if you could watch just our beach episodes, we looked happy. Scott would fish in the surf or play his guitar, and I would read or just listen, jealous of his aptitudes. I'm a librarian at Highlands Elementary; what I'm good at is cataloging. After every good time we had, I gave myself an assignment to bring one shell home, something singular and beautiful. Proof that I'd felt loved, that I was experiencing what there was to experience. That display case was my own library, a library of moments.

I set the basket down in the truck bed and wonder what the girl will make of it. Will she see the bounty of the Jersey coast, or just me, a forty-one-year-old woman, alone and childless, her diseased mother for a best friend? I am her future. I want to tell her that after their marriage ends — after he cheats, or spends his days stoned, or gambling, or gets up from the table when she asks him for a child — she should pass the shells right on down to the next girl: mementos of what's next.

But this girl sees nothing in the shells but souvenirs from someone else's bad trip. She peels the money from a roll as thick as her fist. "We don't want that basket," she says.

"Good," I say, "because I don't like your look."

Doctor Stecopolous is Greek, in his midthirties, and my mother adores him. Every time we've met, he seems as if he's just come from an exam that he knows he aced. He patiently allows my mother to pry into his parents' immigration, his years of school, his new marriage. After every detail, my mother throws a look in my direction: *Thessaloniki! Isn't Thessaloniki wonderful?* He is my mother's ideal man at a time when her interactions have become transactional: He has warm hands, walks her to the reception desk. He wears patent-leather Italian shoes ("He doesn't skimp," my mother said) and tolerates her jokes, the signal flares of her personality.

She has her legs up in the stirrups, holding her breath with her hands crossed over her belly. Dr. Stecopolous probes under the paper gown while I perch on a stool by his desk. A bluish plastic model of a uterus rests next to the computer monitor and looks drained and baleful, as if it doesn't belong in the light. A little door is open in the front, like a dollhouse entrance. What's inside? A pink secret. I could crawl in and rest.

"Well, you were right," the doctor says. "This is definitely lichen sclerosis." He pokes his head up from under the gown. "Do you want to take a look?"

"Ah, no thank you," I say.

"He wasn't talking to you," my mother says. He positions a mirror for her to see. I don't want to look, not even by accident. My phone says I have a message, from Scott. He got the papers too. The end is here, and I'm sure he wants to talk. I fiddle with the uterus model. The tiny door in front will not close properly, and I want it closed, in place.

"Are you sexually active?" Dr. Stecopolous asks.

"No," I say. "She is not."

My mother remains quiet, staring up at the ceiling.

"Edith?" the doctor asks.

"Mom?" I ask.

She closes her eyes and sighs. "Yes," she says.

"What? With who?" I ask. The tiny door snaps off in my hand.

"I don't need to know that information," Dr. Stecopolous says. "But you will need to adjust your sexual activity." He delivers this line as if it were conceivable that my mother had activity to adjust. My mother is seventy-one. She is in menopause. There is no menopause. Then he tells her she'll need to apply a steroid cream to her labia — I see the zinky, frosted lips of skiers, or the flaps of an undersea coral fan — and he writes her a prescription.

"Will my labia become stronger?" my mother asks, dressing.

"Gross," I say, and hand Dr. Stecopolous the door to the uterus. It looks like the piece that covers a battery compartment on a remote — the part that inevitably breaks. "I think I messed up your model."

Dr. Stecopolous has no idea what I'm talking about.

"Your uterus," I say. "I broke it."

"Oh, that's all right," he says. "My uterus broke a long time ago."

My mother pats his hand. "You're not missing anything," she says.

In the car, my mother hunts in her purse for Coffee Nips, as though she were the person I remember her being. "I need your support right now," she says. "Not your judgingness."

"Fine," I say. "But I'm allowed to say, 'Ew.'"

She closes her eyes, leans back against the headrest, and sucks on her candy with immeasurable delight. She's wearing the clip-on sunglasses I bought for her and a white sport fleece, collar up. I notice now that she got dressed up for the doctor visit — her gold, drapery pants and sapphire blouse from Shine Daughters!, a fashion catalog she loves, even though it's for African American women — on the off chance that Dr. Stecopolous would run away with her. The poignancy of my mother's life is that she still thinks people are looking at her. On her bureau she keeps a framed photo of herself in the Atlantic City parade: a red-haired mermaid on a papier-mâché splash, gazing upon the crowd with a royal look. When I was a girl, after she divorced my father and went feminist and vegetarian — oh, my God, the lentils, the antinuke walkabouts, the woven totes of my youth — I used to stare at that photo and wish for it to come alive, for her to see me and invite me up onto the parade float. I ached to be her so badly I made her bookmarks with declarations of love. From our porch I would watch her leave to go jogging, braless and single and alive, and wait patiently with her pack of cigarettes to reward her upon her return.

Now she uses a cane, tucked next to her in the passenger seat; she's used it irregularly since her foot surgery, and I know it humiliates her. Men seem almost regal with canes, but women are expected to keep their balance forever. Dime-sized freckles blot her skin, the star chart of her body gaining constellations yearly. A youth spent at the shore is catching up with my mother: the skin of her face looks like wax paper that has been crumpled, then flattened. Studying her, I want to run my fingers over my own wrinkles to stretch and smooth them.

A smile collects on her face. This doctor visit has given her a sense of drama, an urgency that cuts a path through the hours. Otherwise she could spend a day moving bills around.

"What are you looking at?" she asks.

"I'm trying to see you how your lover sees you," I say.

"Oh, please." She scratches at the corner of her mouth.

"I'm starving, and I need my prescription."

"I have to get home," I say. "I have more people coming."

"Good," she says. "There's a Quick Check near you."

As we drive, I'm bothered, I realize, by the thought that someone finds my mother attractive. I feel excluded. When my mother married my father, she was a good Catholic girl, a virgin. "Mistake number one," she told me once. "I hadn't even been down there yet." She divorced my father thirty years ago, and somewhere in her apartment is a photo cube with pictures of all her boyfriends since: Val, the therapist; Devon, my elementary-school teacher; and the ape with sideburns who worked in the anthropology department at the college.

"It's Al, isn't it?" I say. Al, the retired ship's captain, who wears blue khakis and a little anchor pin on his cardigan. Al, who plies her with highballs and Manhattans at dusk. He has furry Popeye forearms and a dimly lit Pacific back story. I pic-

ture him on top of my mother, gritting his teeth and thrusting upward, like a ship cresting a wave.

"Wasn't it funny how you broke the uterus?" my mother says.

"Just tell me if it's Al," I say.

She adjusts an air vent. "You should know that he is very gentle," she says. "And appreciative."

I shiver. My mother can't bend over and instead has to spread her legs and squat. Her skin itches constantly, a side effect of her Parkinson's medication. She keeps a back scratcher in her car and another, the telescoping kind, in her purse for emergencies. She can eat a half gallon of ice cream for dinner. People like her should not be having sex; sex is the reward for not eating a half gallon of ice cream.

"What's your problem?" she says.

"I'm just surprised," I say, "and worried about you."

She gazes out the window as if she hasn't heard me. "It's not too late for you," she says. "You've been separated for six months. It's time to meet new people."

"I'm not ready."

"What about that one man I showed you?" she says. "The guy from the Internet?" She has taken to trolling the Craigslist personals for me, trying to matchmake. She'll call and read me the postings: "He says he'll be at the Harborside having a drink for the next hour. I'll go by and check him out for you." *No!* Or: "This one says he likes Bruce Springsteen." *We live in New Jersey; that's redundant!* She is unable to understand that Craigslist is where people sell their junk, including their personalities. No genuine, non-pot-smoking, nongambling, non-fucking-a-teacher-at-your-school man will let the universe know he's having a drink at the Harborside. It's an sos from the bottom of the dating pool.

"There is no 'guy from the Internet,' and there will never be," I say, my pronouncement punctuated by the speed bump at the entrance to my parking lot. Outside my garage, a man leans against the trunk of a Mercedes convertible. His legs are crossed, and while he talks on his cellphone, he digs at his molars with a pinkie. He's dressed in the Manhattan palette: charcoal pants, a black short-sleeve dress shirt, and ribbony sandals that make his feet look bloodless. His skin is woefully untan. No wedding ring. I park, and he finishes his call. "What about him?" my mother whispers. I bound out of the car.

"You're fifteen minutes late," the man says. "I thought you were going to be a no-show."

"I'm sorry. My mother had a doctor appointment."

"That's me!" My mother waves from the passenger seat.

He peers in at her as if she were a zoo animal. "I'm just here for the baby shit," he says.

(end of excerpt)