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Escape

by Bonnie Sedgemore

Charlene could feel Mama's eyes on her from that window as she picked her way across the hardened dirt that was their yard. To heck with Mama, to hell with Mama, to final, effing hell with this whole place. That was awful of her. She did love Mama. She didn't normally curse except in her head and Mama was helpless, after all.

Jeezus, what did they expect of her? That she would just stay forever, be their maid, and wait on them, clean their house, feed them, wash dishes, bring home money to pay her own way? Did Mama expect her to always be there to move her from bed to couch, from couch to potty? She couldn't just stay and help Mama forever, always wipe Mama's butt. Mama could live in her own ruddy mess, but she had to do this to save herself even if Mama would be frantic.

"Sorry, Mama," she said aloud but under her breath as she kept moving. This was an opportunity, that's all, a chance to have a normal life in a normal home with normal people and not in this dump of a shack with her grasping parents. Oh God, she was so tense all her nerves were firing away in her body. She was like a brightly lit electrical bulb without the light. When she'd left for work this morning she hadn't expected life would change so fast. True she'd been thinking of doing this for a long time, but only thinking never really believing she had the nerve to act. She hadn't done any actual planning. It took her breath away, what she was doing; it just did.

She looked down watching her feet, careful not to slip on the loose rock. The yard was etched in her brain, it's ugliness keeping her from bringing anyone home, if she'd had anyone to bring home. It was barren and ugly, scarred by trenches made by torrents of rain, gushing water tan with dirt toward the middle of the drive and escaping down the hill. A batch of broken cardboard boxes filled with greasy auto stuff and a car motor sat near the edge of the steps. One flower, a rhododendron, grew at the northern corner of the crooked porch and lots of tall weeds and grasses grew everywhere Da's truck hadn't packed the dirt. Charlene hated that yard. She was done with it, wasn't to ever see that yard again. It was history.

She stepped over the deepest crevice, and still wondered if Mama was watching. A point on her back positively burned from Mama's scorching eyes. The promise of Mr. Roland waiting for her at the end of the drive pulled her forward.

She'd always secretly liked Roland. She'd even day dreamed about what life with him might be like, not that she hadn't done that with many or even almost all the men she'd ever met, tried them on to see if they'd fit, tried to feel how kissing them, letting them stick their tongues into her mouth would feel. That was usually enough to do the trick. The other men, macho and vulgar tough guys, who smoked and chewed and drank hadn't made the mark. Mr. Roland had with his neat trim body and soft look. He always asked for her, left her big tips, smiled softly when she came to his table. The crew had even teased her saying Mr. Roland had a thing for her. She had always smiled back at them because it was all right if Mr. Roland had a

thing for her.

“He’s old,” they teased and she would just smile. So what was age?

She’d have a bright kitchen with a large window, yellow gingham curtains and a matching yellow gingham tablecloth. It would be hers, fixed the way she wanted it. A table would be placed beneath the window where he’d sit at one end, happy to be with her, waiting for her to pour their morning coffee, and join him at the table, the two of them belonging together, and he would be very concerned about her feelings.

She purposely did not look back as she picked her way carefully over the fifty feet of tricky uneven ground and loose rock. She could not go fast or she might fall. She’d done that before, landed once on her wrist and thought she’d broken it, but hadn’t. She’d lain in the yard and cried a bit, but of course, no one had come. While she was crying, she’d known that the crying was useless. Da was off drinking and Mama couldn’t walk. Mama hadn’t been out of the house in years, which was friggin’ stupid by Charlene’s standards. What was life if you just spent it inside doing nothing but watching television and reading magazines about people who actually did things?

Mama had really done it yesterday, throwing her fit, screaming at her in her shrill voice. “You think of no one but yourself. You’re a selfish, thoughtless girl. You’ll never amount to anything.” And she had been standing right there ready to help Mama dress instead of drinking her own coffee which was cold by the time she got to it. How effing hell did that get to be thoughtless? Mama was just being a bitch.

But Mama was usually sweet and gentle and didn’t deserve her life. Mama would sometimes call her “my sweet little girl,” and wrap her arms about Charlene as she bent down and place her cheek against Charlene’s cheek and squeeze her as tightly as she was able. Mama only called her names when she was frustrated. She didn’t deserve to be left alone and stranded. Charlene almost stopped, her mind warring with her feet but the bright kitchen with yellow gingham curtains was too strong in her mind. She had already made her decision and she needed to stick with it. It was her chance and maybe she wouldn’t get another. She continued toward the turn in the drive where Mama, if she were watching, could no longer see her.

Then, as she began to go faster, she suddenly stopped, clutched by a fear so strong it froze her to the spot. “Jesus H Christ,” she said to the air. “Friggin’ shit.” She was leaving everything she knew. She didn’t make enough money to support herself. Without Da to pay the bills how could she live? Hell, what was she doing going from Da who supports her to another man she didn’t even know and hope he would support her as well. From one man to another. She could live here forever and Da would always support her because he was her Da. It could always be for the rest of her life. Easy. Go to work, take care of Mama, go to the same grocery store, meet the same people in town. No risk.

She clutched at her head with both hands. What in heck was she doing but walking into a big, black, smirky fog. She had no idea what was out there for her. One misstep and she’d be off some cliff into a void falling flat on her face. Leaving here was like walking into an impenetrable fog. She might be walking off a cliff or into a wall or into real trouble. How was she going to

take care of herself when she didn't even know how? She actually didn't know if he had a kitchen at all. And her dream popped open like an over ripe watermelon and spilled out to become nothing.

But he had asked her, hadn't he. The rest could be worked out later. Get past this first step and move herself down the drive. But, her feet wouldn't move. There were no tears because everything had frozen inside her.

She stood perfectly still surrounded by the thick bushes that lined the drive and feeling for the first time in her life the places of her body that just were, the cleft between her legs, the warmth of the inside of her thighs, her breasts pushing against her clothing, her armpits that rubbed along in their nest, the ends of her fingers. And what she was going to do was go out there into that world and offer this body up to some man or maybe more than one man because when you came right down to it, that's what a woman does. All those places on her body would become accessible to men.

Oh God help me. So be it. It's that way for all women and most women survive and are happy. The house is a prison and if she goes back, it will continue to be a prison. Her life will be what they want it to be, nothing at all for herself. She pushed her blond hair back. Why she didn't even know how to fix her hair the way other girls did and makeup was completely foreign to her. Daria, her age, her fellow worker, went out every night while she went home to take care of Mama and fix dinner for Da before he went off to his drinking at the bar.

She'd watched many a time while Daria ran out to meet the men who came to pick her up in their fancy cars. Not once had there been anyone to come for her. Daria flirted constantly, smiled and laughed and wiggled her hips. Charlene, who had been on one date in her life, didn't know how to go about doing what Daria did. Daria would get a family, a home and maybe a career, even if she was a tramp, but if Charlene didn't do something for herself, she would be right here in this house in twenty years.

She was a personal slave born and bred by them to be their slave, beholden because they were her parents and she owed them. Da got his dinner fixed, groceries were bought on Saturdays, the house cleaned and Mama had someone to wait on her, someone to make sure she could get to the bathroom or into her bed. And Da was free to run off to drink at the bar night after night, to sit his fat butt on the red bar stool, the plastic worn thin by that very same butt over the years, a tall one before him, his eyes glued to some sports game on the large overhead television in the darkened room. She'd had to go after him down there several times over the years and always found him in the same spot.

They weren't making evil plans against her, but then again, maybe they were. It felt like they were, like they had mapped out her life to stay right there and continue to take care of them. Other times she thought they were dead tired of her, ready for her to be gone. One afternoon Da had said, "Charlene, when are you going to get tossed by a guy and have a brat or two?"

She started again down the drive. The moon had come up, just a sliver tonight, though the sun had not completely set. An orange glow bloomed ahead of her in a clear sky, the sun sunk below the trees to the West. It was

not yet dark, but would be in minutes. She hurried on.

He might be waiting, might have parked his car along the verge just beyond the drive. But he wouldn't wait long, if he waited at all. Wouldn't want to be seen waiting, not before their dumpy place. If he even came. And what if he didn't come and she had to take her backpack and make her way in the dark back up that driveway to that house, slinking back like some drowned rat. The muscles in her abdomen were so tight they were restricting her breathing. She gave a little cry she hadn't meant to give.

She stopped and turned, stood still again, pulled back to the house. Turn around her brain ordered her and stop this foolishness. Her mouth filled with saliva and she started to choke when she swallowed it.

Da's old truck bounced up this drive every night to come to a stop precisely beside her bedroom window. She thought he parked at that exact spot for meanness, to wake her after two in the morning every single night of her life with the noise from the ragged motor and shot muffler of his Dodge.

"Da, can't you park somewhere else? In front of the house or further to the back. You wake me up every night."

He said, "Yeah, I can do that," and continued to walk right past her and through the house to the front porch to sit on the old chair he had drug out there some years earlier. He'd had a cold beer in his hand. He had never parked anywhere but that one spot near her bedroom window.

He always complained about the drive, his loud voice taking possession of everything even the air in the house, his white belly with its sparse gray hairs bursting out the bottom of his shirt, pants hanging on for dear life beneath the belly, but he never did anything about the drive. In all her nineteen years, that quarter-mile of drive had never been graded or filled. She turned back to the drive and continued walking hurrying now because she had wasted time stopping.

It was dusk, or what she considered dusk. Was dusk when the sun went completely down and before the light completely left or was it just before the sun went down, when the shadows lengthened or was it even after that, when it wasn't totally dark out but nearly so? She had thought she knew what dusk was. She had planned to leave the house when the sun dropped beneath the trees to the West. But now she wondered if this was considered dusk to him, feared she'd lost her chance and was too late. She should have asked for a specific time. Nine o'clock, say. But she had feared to say anything that might cause him to change his mind or to find out that he wasn't really serious at all. She had just nodded at him.

Mama had called just as Charlene picked up the small backpack and was slowly, carefully shutting the creaky old back door so that Mama wouldn't hear her going.

"Charlene, Charlene," her weak little call came at her and Charlene could not ignore that call.

She set down the backpack and held her hand still on the doorknob. It was time now, right now for her to be down that driveway. She might miss him because Mama was calling to her. She wouldn't answer. She'd ignore her.

After all, Mama wasn't going to have her around and was going to have to learn to do without her. Charlene stood like stone beside the door, deciding. If she had only left moments earlier, she wouldn't have heard Mama's call.

"Charlene," came Mama again, more urgent now.

"What Mama?" She asked holding in her impatience as she went through the kitchen at the back of the house toward the living room. Mama was on the couch watching television where Charlene had placed her just minutes ago, the couch Charlene was always cleaning because Mama spent so much time on it. She lived on it, got food and drink worked into the cloth, broke down the cushions. She had wheeled Mama from the kitchen table to the living room. Charlene bent toward her and Mama had closed her arms around Charlene's neck so Charlene could transfer her from wheelchair to couch, just as she did every night. Mama was settled for the night. She would fall asleep there, her head resting on her chest.

The long shadows cast by the heavy brush on either side of the drive made the road ahead almost sinister and dark though it wasn't yet night nor was it cold. She passed the pile of tires Da had unloaded there several years ago, not stacked or neat, but piled like a black mountain with weeds growing through them. "Good tires, worth a lot of money," he said if questioned about them. Something scurried from behind them and Charlene's heart jumped. It was someone after her. How ridiculous. No one was after her. A rabbit maybe? A raccoon?

She was already out of breath and sweating though she'd carefully applied extra antiperspirant. She'd also washed and combed her hair, put on her best dress and best shoes, and packed a few clothes, mostly underwear, in the small backpack she'd used for school up until last year when she'd graduated. When she had gone back into the living room Mama had noticed.

"Oh, don't you look nice. You even have some perfume on."

"Mama, we don't always have to be slobs."

She hoped that had satisfied Mama's curiosity. Probably not. Later it would surface when she realized Charlene was gone. Maybe she even guessed now but didn't want to believe it. Mama was good at choosing what to believe.

Charlene had sorted through her clothes considering what to put in the backpack. She couldn't take much, didn't want to take much. Didn't want any of it, really. In the end she took only a pair of jeans, one blouse and her underwear. It smelled. She knew it did as everything in that house smelled of rot and of Mama's sickness, even her clothes, even though she washed them over and over. The contrast of the muggy odor of her backpack against the fresh smell of the woods was strong. The smells of that house permeated everything that came into it. But she would need the underwear until she got situated. If she made it and if Mr. Roland showed up as he said he would.

It was foolish to be meeting a stranger. That could be dangerous. The only things she knew about him were his name, he had retired from the railroad, and he was probably in his early sixties. He was soft spoken and gentle and

this morning when he'd placed his hand over hers on the table, she'd seen his immaculate fingernails against her own ruddy, rough hands. He was neat to the extreme.

"Dusk," he had said, holding her entire attention, his eyes on hers, her eyes on his. "You be at the end of your road at dusk." He had not winked or smiled as the other men did when they teased about running away with her. His look had been serious. She had believed he knew something of her circumstance through gossip since he'd mentioned the end of the road. She had not told him anything about where she lived or this drive. She believed he was trying to help her escape out of a kind heart.

But people didn't do things out of kind hearts. They didn't do things for others unless it also helped them in some way. He could be a serial killer for all she knew. Men had been found to be serial killers and had been married for years without their wives even knowing. It was possible.

Maybe what he wanted was a good bang. For sure that's what he wanted. He was a man, even if he was an older man. Maybe he would want her to do some weird stuff, like ropes and handcuffs. Sex was probably going to be one of the first demands.

Well, okay she'd endure, lay on her back and let it happen her legs spread and maybe him in a feeding frenzy down below. She'd do it and get through it. Not to think about it now. That was for later.

She was down the dusty drive where it narrowed around the curve. The old blue Pontiac she used to play in had been pulled into the woods here, parked permanently. It only needed some minor repairs according to Da even though the roof was now rusted through and a tree grew between the body and the bumper. It could hardly be seen from the drive for all the brush that had grown up around it. She had had so much fun in that car, pretending to drive away forever, talking to her imaginary friends, wearing sunglasses and a flashy sundress. She had felt grown up and in control as she held the steering wheel and pushed on the gas pedal.

The drive seemed longer than it had ever been. From where she was now, Mr. Roland couldn't see her if he drove by. Maybe he would think she wasn't coming and leave. She swallowed hard, pulled her head up as tall as she could get it and hurried on.

If he didn't come.... He said he would come. Why would he say he would come if he wasn't going to be there?

All the bushes were familiar along the driveway and yet now they appeared sinister, hiding evil.

Mama might be calling for her by now. Maybe she dropped the remote. Maybe she needed more water or to go potty. She couldn't get to the bathroom. Maybe she'd have to pee herself and sit in her own warm urine the pee warm on her flesh for a bit, soaking into the cushions, not able to get up and change into clean clothing. Mama would be so helpless stuck there on that couch. She would feel awful, even desperate, maybe even cry.

Charlene believed Mama had simply decided not to walk long ago. She

could remember the day it happened when she came home from school and Mama was in bed sick. Mama and Da had had a horrible fight the night before and Mama never walked again. That was it. Da walked about the house bellowing that the doctors told him there was nothing wrong with her. His bellowing seemed to satisfy Mama, even calmed her. She simply didn't walk. The problem was that her legs had now withered to the point where she couldn't walk if she wanted to. Her legs were sticks, her body bloated with fat and these dangling appendages hung from her over which, she had hardly any control. Charlene had to lift those legs up onto the bed for her.

She understood that Mama was revolting against Da. She understood that and she didn't blame Mama, but it was stupid, just plain stupid to cripple yourself to get even and even more stupid if she let Mama pull her into the web, too.

The toes of her shoes were now cream colored from dust on the road. Dirt piled up in the center of the drive with two ruts along either side with deep puddle indents. That made it hard to walk. She tried to stay in the ruts.

Just get to the end of the drive she ordered herself. She still couldn't see the opening onto the highway. She passed the entry to the Anderson drive off to the South, could hear their dog barking, a little terrier more fierce because he was so small, probably barking at her. It was not far now.

Finally she could see moonlight illuminating a spot of tarmac on the highway. The light at the end broadened and she hurried on, anxious now to see whether a gray later model car was waiting for her. She had hoped to get some relief by seeing his car parked across the road at the entry. Of course it wouldn't be across the road because that would put him the wrong way. He would park on their side, maybe to the north where there was a bit of a wide place.

She came out the end of the drive and looked either way down the familiar road. No cars, not driving or parked. The birds were chirping their evening good nights. Off to the West was a swampy area and she could hear the frogs croaking their early Spring mating calls. The heavy trees before her blocked what little sun was left, darkness on darkness erasing shadows. The sky to the East was a dark purple, dusk passing into night.

Maybe he had only said that to tease her, to gently play a game with her, pretending that they were conspiring. She tried to accept that he wasn't coming and had never meant to come. Still she couldn't give up hope. She'd wait.

Her ears were sharp for the sound of an approaching car. She walked up and down, not far, a few paces, stood sometimes for a few seconds and continued her walking. The backpack was pulling at her shoulders. She heard a car, stood quite still waiting for it to reach her, wondering if this car was Mr. Roland. The car came and passed, a silver four door, nothing at all like the car she'd seen Mr. Roland drive. It swept on down the road

Solidly dark now, the birds no longer chirped, the frogs no longer croaked and the shadows were gone. The moon was a slight sliver, and yet, she waited.

Her chest and arms hurt because of nerves. She needed to go into the

bushes, but she didn't want to take a chance if he should come a bit late. If he didn't find her on the road, he would certainly go on. Finally the pressure was too great. She dropped the backpack on the edge of the road and worked herself into the bushes just enough to squat, finish and hurry to the road to resume her backpack. Not a car had passed.

The moon had gone two inches up the sky before she gave up. How stupid she had been to believe. She could not see anything up their drive, hardly even the entrance itself. It was a black hole. The old, bent mailbox on its wooden post stood beside her. The tarmac on the road gleamed slightly reflecting the light from a home at the far end of a small rise before a curve and of the moon. She would walk down there right in the middle of the road where nothing could easily jump out from the bushes to get her though she knew nothing was in those bushes.

She reached that spot where the house was bright on a small rise above the road. She was alone in the black of the night, outside of all life around her, a solitary thing belonging nowhere. People were inside, happy and content. She continued up the rise of the road until she could see the bridge over the creek, old concrete poured a century ago. She loved that bridge. She went to it and leaned over the edge, the water making soft murmuring sounds below her, a slight gleam from the moon glistening on the ripples and calming her. The trees rustled overhead and a breeze cooled her left cheek. From the moss on the concrete came an earthy, comforting smell. She felt oddly at peace considering the circumstances and breathed easily.

She had money in her backpack as she had cashed her paycheck right out of the restaurant till, something they forbade. It didn't matter as she wasn't going back.

Town was a bit over two miles. She'd walked it before on sunny summer days. In town was a bus stop at the gas station with huge windows glowing at night from the bright lights inside that revealed everyone and what they were doing, how they stood and waited. She'd hide behind the station until time for the bus to arrive. Only one bus and only one highway out of town. And if Da came looking for her? He wouldn't. Da would think she had run off with a man. He wouldn't think she had the guts to go off on her own.

But if he did come. Nope, she wouldn't go back.

When **Bonnie Sedgemore** was not yet a teenager, she hid in her closet at night with her manual typewriter between her knees writing short stories and thinking the sound of the chunking keys would be muffled from detection. The house would settle with creaking and cracking and footsteps in the hall and flushing toilets would subside as the house and the world became hers. What opened for her as an adult was newspaper writing, a column, feature stories on individuals and finally investigative reporting. Nothing she wrote thrilled her as most of the work was not fiction and the only work that counted was fiction. Today she wonders if she should go back to writing in the closet.

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