

Short Story by Nina Gaby



Fran Forman
Alone in a Southwest Motel, after Hopper, 2020
Archival pigment print
image: 17 x 25"; paper: 19 x 27"
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On the day that the Department of Children’s Services came to terminate parental rights, she did not join in the keening, the crying, the threatening. Her roommate at the rehab center leaned over and patted her hand.

“If it weren’t for how big your hands are, no one would ever know,” she said. It was a compliment, or meant to be.

“Thank you,” she took it as a compliment.

“When your kids are eighteen they can come find you, you know. It happens all the time,” said the roommate although doubting it the moment the words came out of her mouth.

“What would I even say to them?” Louisa looked at the clock.

“Whatever. You know, you are very beautiful. You know that, right? And I’m sorry I didn’t want to be your roommate when I first found out. But now, it doesn’t matter.”

Louisa shook her head. “I know. I understood.” The photo of her two children was turned upside down on her thigh; the paperwork already signed was piled next to her on the bed. Her suitcase, the big old one that her father had given to her, him actually, when she, he actually, left El Paso, the one with her father’s name, Louis, monogrammed in gold and mostly worn off, was packed, on the floor, and too heavy for a woman to carry. She often thought about getting something lighter, more feminine, but instead added an “a” after the Louis in black Sharpie and felt fortunate that she could carry it without a problem.

There was nothing else of her father now, except the heavy black hair, inherited, and a cause for great gratitude, long enough now to braid down her back and remind her of her grandmother. Her parents had never met their grandchildren, as Louisa, still “Junior,” had married right out of the service and fathered these two boys without mentioning the other

urges that underpinned everything, and that would soon upend this already fragile marriage before any visits back to Texas could be arranged.

In treatment group, Louisa spoke of desperation, of shame. “We know, we know,” said the other women in a circle around her. “God grant me, God grant me,” they repeated. The alcohol has soothed them, the oxy’s altered, the meth offered motivation where there was only inertia. Cocaine broke the isolation. By the time Junior’s wife had found him in her green silk skirt, ridiculous on a cocktail of chemicals, she had already moved the children into her parent’s guest room, not even knowing the full extent of what she considered a betrayal of all she had held dear, at least briefly. High on cocaine and calmed on alcohol, Junior felt the clarity to understand the level of betrayal the crapshoot of gender had leveled at him.

Negotiations ensued. By this time, for Louisa, there was no turning back. But she could get clean; they could still be a family. “Maybe,” said the wife, and Louisa was dropped at the rehab, already sick from withdrawal but relieved that they at least had a plan. The wife did not want the skirt back. The rehab offered a large wardrobe closet with garments left from others who had either succeeded or not. Louisa carefully washed a dark green bra from Victoria’s Secret and hung it to dry in the shared bathroom. After a bit, a few of the other women in the rehab donated pieces here and there, no longer worried that what was once a man was in their midst as Louisa expressed deep and sympathetic understanding for the trauma these other women had gone through at the hands of men, “I’ve seen things,” Louisa said of her time in a far off war.

They settled into the routine of early recovery. In the evening Louisa's friends gave her make up tips and sometimes they even laughed. They all talked about their children, the ones waiting and the ones gone. They talked about the resiliency of kids, that love always wins. "Keeping it real one day at a time," they reminded each other.

The wife's lawyer made hasty work of the proposed annulment and threatened charges and appropriated benefits and the wife's parents were thrilled with the new arrangement, having the children under their roof, so there were a few phone calls in Louisa's counselor's office and Louisa, still rocky with anxiety and overwhelmed by brain fog, agreed. "Whatever." The counselor suggested that this was all pretty quick, she may have used the term "bum's rush," but before they knew it, the papers were served, and Louisa's discharge date was scheduled. The motel room across from the Intensive Outpatient Program office was secured under a state grant and Louisa hugged her new friends who all called out "Make it work, it works if you work it," with promises of phone calls once they all got settled and 12-step meetings and for a moment Louisa felt anything was possible.