

Laura Durnell

Regina Leigh

Slivers of cut grass stick to my calves and hands. Sweat soaks my bra. I am sweating. Not glowing, as Mom calls it. Sweating. I want the dirt, the remains of our lawn, off me. It hasn't been mowed in months and is taking over what little landscaping we have. No one asked me to cut it. They probably won't even notice I did it. I taste salt as sweat trickles down my temples and slides into the corners of my lips. Sweat or tears. I'm not sure which.

Usually at this time I hide in my room. My stereo blares and I practice my turns, work on arching my back the way Martha Graham arches hers in the poster above my bed. Today, Dad's screams overtook the howls of Siouxsie Sioux.

"Christ, Ellen," he said. "This strike fund only goes so far. Don't you ever fucking think? All we have left after this is the kids' college fund, and that's hardly anything. What the fuck is the matter with you?"

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Mom said, never learning. Apologies mean nothing to Dad, especially after several Jack Daniels. When he called her a fucking idiot, I tore off my jazz shoes and slipped on the Keds I wear for pom-poms. I bolted past them and into the heat. Mom stood with her back against the sink, closing her eyes each time he shouted, "fuck." As I mow, I glare at our neighbours' houses, the trimmed and fertilized yards vacant of the usual Saturday activities of kids playing and adults chatting. Today they savour their air conditioning. Unlike us.

Inside our house the temperature rises. Humidity strangles my lungs. My younger brother, Andre, beats me to the shower. Steam escapes between the long, thick cracks in the bathroom door.

"When are you getting out?" I ask above the spray of water.

"When I want to."

"C'mon. I've been mowing the lawn. I'm dripping sweat. I smell. I'll be late."

"You always smell," he says.

If I miss a half-time performance I get a demerit, and a demerit means I wash the advisor's Mercedes during the next practice. This really isn't the punishment designated by the pom pom constitution, but Mrs. Malone has amended the rules. The squad is spoiled and undisciplined, she says. We must learn. I don't want to learn anymore. Her rules suck. She sucks.

"Quit being a dick," I say. "Pre-game starts in less than an hour." It's a fifteen-minute drive from my home in Wonder Lake to Woodstock High School. My uniform hasn't even been cleaned, the underarms to my blue polyester vest still crusted in white deodorant.

"Andre!" I lower my voice, remembering Dad is home. Remembering what happened the last time Andre and I bickered.

"Fuck off!" he shouts, his voice teetering between childhood and manhood. "Use the bathroom upstairs."

Andre belongs to the chess-and-tactical games club. He wears long white socks that almost reach his knees. No reason for him to hog the shower. All he has planned tonight is cataloguing his X-Men and Spider-Man comics. I have no doubt he stays in the shower only to upset me. He wants me mad. He wants me late. He likes irritating me as much as I like irritating him. An ongoing competition since we've been toddlers.

"I know what you're really doing in there," I say, banging my fist on the door, in the same depression Dad created two years ago. "Don't let your hand get tired."

"You're a real wit, Gina," he says. "A nit wit."

"Asshole," I mutter. I should hope soap stings his eyes, but I don't have time for hope. Pre-game begins in less than an hour.

The clock chimes quarter after. Next to it hangs a needlepoint of the "Serenity Prayer" framed behind a pane of glass. Mom made it the first time Dad quit drinking ten years ago. I should burn it. Last year when I told her we should sell it in our garage sale, she wiggled out, screaming at me, "Whatever for? Whatever for?" But, I mean, what's the point of having it on the wall when no one here believes in it?

Two fans revolve in the front room and a window is open in the kitchen, yet it's still like living in an armpit. Even before the strike, my parents hardly used the AC. Only when we couldn't breathe did they flip it on. Since the strike, no air-conditioning no matter what. Too expensive. When Andre flipped it on a few weeks ago, Dad nearly beat the shit out of him, shouting with each blow, "Our electric bill is high enough already!" When no one is looking, I sometimes open our freezer and push my face inside for a few seconds.

"Goddamn Reagan!" Dad rants at the kitchen table. "Always blaming labour when the corporation fucks up. Four more years? Christ, we're all fucked."

Mom scrubs the sink with Ajax while Dad pours some more Jack Daniels. He hasn't shaved for three days and his olive complexion carries a yellowish tinge, like a bad tan. When I got home from school the day negotiations broke down, I saw his strike sign leaning against the coffee table. He was passed out on the couch, a bottle of Jack on top of his chest, an expression of peace smoothing his face. I only see that expression in fading, Scotch-Taped photos.

"You gonna make it?" he says and drinks his whisky.

"Yes," I say, focusing on the half-empty bottle. "I'm gonna make it."

Vaguely, he looks like the father in those photos. Same blue eyes and gaunt cheeks. In one photo, taken when I was four, he sits in a rocking chair cradling me, asleep with his hands in my hair. Another shows us at the park across the street, broad smiles lighting up our faces as he pushes me on a duck-shaped swing painted in bright, Walt Disney colours. No one's been in that park for years, not even to maintain it. Newspapers, hamburger wrappers, and empty beer bottles surround the teeter totter and slide. Rain and sun have stripped the swings' paint, and now they hang from the chains as metal blobs instead of cartoon animals.

Our kitchen reeks, mostly because of him. He sweats alcohol, and I try not to look at him, but it's hard. Like a car wreck, Mom would say. Before I can look away, he meets my glance, his eyes a light shade of blue, the shade that makes a person appear blind.

"You finished, Gina? You better have finished what you started. Not left it half-assed."

"Yes," I say. "I'm finished."

Mom keeps her head down and back to us. Her elbows pump endlessly. She scrubs as if she's scrubbing out blood. All she really knows how to do is scrub. Scrub the sink. Scrub the tub. Scrub the floor. Scrub our clothes. Scrub, scrub, scrub.

Our tub in the upstairs bathroom has a shower head, but Mom doesn't allow anyone to use it. The water, she's afraid, will corrode the brick covering the wall. Why didn't she get tile like everyone else? When I played in this tub as a child, making my Fisher Price dolls dive beneath the bubbles, Mom would quickly grab the sponge and dab any water that had splashed onto the brick. And then she would sigh. She still sighs. "Regina Leigh," she says after each sigh. And that's it. Her sighs sting as much as when Dad calls me "bitch" and "cunt" during his tirades.

Even in the summer I love washing in hot water. My muscles relax, my sinuses decongest. I think better. For this bath, I turn on the cold water at a little more than a trickle while twisting the hot tap fully to the right. Even before the tub fills a quarter of the way, the mirrors fog. A dull, heavy ache tightens my lungs. After I step in, I quickly withdraw my foot. It takes a while before I can ease in my body. At first it hurts, but once I'm in the tub, everything I am leaves.

I should wash, but I can't help but lie back and enjoy the warmth. My baths provide a time of clarity, of contemplation, and tonight I think how I can't believe I'm a pom pom girl, worrying about demerits. After I made the squad, my English teacher, the one with the balding head of blonde hair and the earring, suggested I read Jack Kerouac.

"I'm concerned," he said and winked, handing me a copy of *Desolation Angels* that smelled like curry.

When Mrs. Malone posted the roster, my name shocked me as it did everyone else. My father wasn't a lawyer or doctor. Our house didn't reach three levels. I never had enough money for clothes at The Limited. We didn't own a pool. My mother didn't volunteer for the PTA or bake sales. All I had when I tried out was my dancing.

What was I thinking? I was thinking that if I made the squad, they'd no longer laugh at me in the halls every day, that they'd no longer mock the flowered pants Mom buys me from Hornsby's. That I'd finally wear some guy's class ring around my neck. That I'd finally attend all those parties where the linebacker pukes in the rose bushes and the new pom pom girls lose their virginity. I still don't have the class ring. I still don't go to the parties. I still have my virginity. But I'm no longer ridiculed, which is what I wanted most anyway. Though hardly anyone on the squad says hi, and I'm never invited out for cheese fries after practice, I feel immune. Ignored, but safe. They have moved onto a girl wearing corduroy pants. I watch them get in her face, the pleats of their skirts brushing the ridges of her pants, and those class rings dangling from greening gold chains, pressing against the poor girl's chest. I watch and fight back my tears as hers spill. It's not hard. I've learned.

I rub soap between my hands. The lather mixes with the grass and dirt, making the water look like a creamy, vegetable soup. Blades of grass float among the bubbles. I empty the tub and remove the green mound blocking the drain. When I run the hot tap again, lukewarm water rushes out, a result of Andre and I using both bathrooms. I kneel before the drain and stick my scalp beneath the tepid water, rinsing the rest of the shampoo out of my hair. Soon cold water pours into my ears, blocking out the pounding. Blocking out the slam of the door against the wall. The door I thought I locked. Dad's fist hits my back. My forehead smacks the spout.

"Goddammit!" he screams, and I fling my head back. Water flies off the ends of my hair and splatter against the brick. "Goddammit, you used up all the hot water, you stupid cunt!" He struggles for breath, sucking in spittle at the edge of his bottom lip. I touch the area of my forehead that hit the spout. It's tender. I am wet, free of dirt, and naked.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he says. "Now we have no hot water left. How is your mother going to run the dishwasher? Clean the dishes? How are we supposed to do laundry? Don't you know how high our water bill is already? Use your goddamn brains! Don't you have them?"

He apes my quivering bottom lip, distorting his face, making it a caricature of mine that I tighten to keep from crying.

Out in the hallway, Mom stares. Andre's beside her with a towel wrapped around his waist. Many people say he and Mom resemble each other and at this moment they do, especially around the eyes. Round and slightly wrinkled in the corners, like the ends of a butterscotch wrapper. Often I've been told I look nothing like my mother, but I sure look like my dad. I tell these assholes I don't. That the colour of my eyes, the blue, is darker.

Mom says, "What?" Just what. She tries to finish her question, but nothing comes.

"Dumb ass," Dad says and leaves. He nearly knocks over Andre, who immediately turns from us and closes his bedroom door. Time slips. I am late for the brief rehearsal, the pre-game entrance, but I stay in the bathtub, clutching my legs to my chest, resting my head against the wall, rubbing it into the brick, thinking about what to do next. Where I can go. There must be somewhere. There has to be. Mom stays in the hall looking at me.

"What's she doing in there?" Dad says. I hear him clearly over the television. "She crying? Pouting?" "No," Mom says, handing me a bath towel from the laundry basket in front of her. It's warm. Just out of the dryer. I press the towel against my face. When I remove it she is standing over me, dabbing the wall with a sponge. "She's just sitting there."

As I tie my grass-stained Keds, Mom walks into my room wearing pink rubber gloves. She sits beside me on my bed. I quickly tighten the knot and stand up, adjusting the pleats in my skirt that don't require adjusting. I smell her perfume. Even though she stays in the house all day, only heading out to grocery shop on Fridays, a day doesn't go by without perfume. Usually, White Shoulders. Before I leave for school she'll spritz some on me. She'll also do it before a game, but not tonight. Tonight there is no time for perfume. There is only time for a talk.

"Your father is trying his best," she says. I stare at my poster of Martha Graham, her hair pulled and fastened into a tight knot, her body free and limber. "Please understand. This strike... he's under so much stress. You... we need to be gentle. Careful with him. You know, he doesn't need any more on him. He tries too hard."

"He's an asshole." I can't believe the word exits my mouth. It warms instead of shocks me.

Mom grabs my shoulders.

"How dare you say that. Your father is doing his best. You are just too self-centred to see it. Don't you know... don't you know how hard this is for all of us?" She grits her teeth and opens her hand as if she's ready to slap me. Instead she pulls off one of her gloves and throws it over her shoulder where a dish towel also rests. My irritation toward her builds as she rubs a finger over my dresser, obviously dissatisfied with my dusting job. "Regina Leigh," she says. I grab my car keys off my dresser and turn away from her. Before I even take two steps toward my door she hugs me. Her T-shirt is moist. I want to return her hug. She smells so good. She smells of good. I do know. But I want her to know too. I want her, for once, on my side. Not that she will actually stand up to him. But for once I want confirmation that, yes, he is an asshole. I want to hug her so badly, but I can't. I don't allow it. When I pull away, she grabs me again and cries.

"Don't do this," she says. "Please. I'm just saying understand." She wipes her eyes. They are brown, but under the dim light, they look black.

Andre opens his door and peeks out when my footsteps draw closer. He is dressed. With his wet hair slicked back, I can see a few blackheads speckling his forehead.

"You look good," he says. "I like your hair pulled back like that."

He appears uneasy saying these words, making eye contact with his pile of comics instead of with me. We are siblings. We tease, we insult. We don't compliment. But I say thank you, even though it's uneasy.

Dad's back in the kitchen with an empty bottle of Jack Daniels. The bottle of Crown Royal he said was only for special occasions, for company, is open, the velvet bag a blue-and-gold blob. My father is not a drunk who staggers. No matter how much he drinks, he maintains his balance. If there is anything I can admire in him, it's that. That perfect poise, that steadiness despite his intake.

As I drive among the cornfields of Route 47, I wonder how long I can live in Chicago on my college savings. I have close to a thousand dollars in the bank plus the ten in my wallet. I can keep driving down 47, through Woodstock, through Huntley, and eventually I will arrive at the I-90 exit. Chicago is an hour and a half away with plenty of cheap hotels. Maybe I can become a teenage prostitute and lose my virginity and get paid for it. And I can wear this uniform and fulfill certain men's fantasies and get paid for it. And I can let them beat me while I'm naked and yell at me while I'm naked and leave me bruised while I'm naked and get paid for it. As long as the money's there, everything-anything-becomes bearable.

I tell Mrs. Malone there was a terrible, a horrible lawnmower accident. My father, I explain, was taken to the emergency room to get his pinkie finger sewn back on.

"I hope he's all right," she says. Tonight she wears frosted coral lipstick. Everything about Mrs. Malone is frosted-her blush, her eyeshadow, her nail polish, her hair, her beads. She glistens even when she doesn't sweat. Sweat drenches my whole body. The damp polyester itches. "Gina, honey, why did you even bother coming?"

"He told me to go," I say. "He said he would be all right. That I'd been through enough."

"You took him there?"

I nod. She touches my cheek and lowers her frosted lids, pouts her frosted mouth.

"I hope your father recovers soon."

The squad practices the kickline as I run onto the track. Nineteen sweaty faces greet me, the pleats of their skirts open and collapse like an accordion's bellows. I watch them finish the formation and join up as they stretch their limbs and discuss the post-game parties. I missed pre-game. Missed placing my hand over my heart for the Star-Spangled Banner. Missed the school song, missed the warm ups we do with the cheerleaders. Missed us dancing in a circle and singing, "How funky is your chicken?/How loose is your goose?/So come on everybody/And shake your caboose."

Two girls ask me where I was and if I'm all right. Their concern surprises me. I was in the hospital, I tell them. Why, they ask. My father was sick, I say. Is he all right, they ask. It's touch and go, I say.

We run out onto the field after the band finishes performing, "Let's Hear It for the Boy." I hate to admit it, but what I like best about pom poms, besides the dancing, is the skirt. I like my

legs. They're toned and long. Mom once remarked they reminded her of Cyd Charisse's. Dad agrees. Sometimes he mentions it when I wear the uniform. "You are a pretty girl," he whispers into my ear every now and then because I don't believe it. "You are a pretty girl, and I love you."

Once I had suggested the squad do a routine to The Smiths, Yaz. Instead we gyrate to Rick Springfield. I hate Rick Springfield. Hate this routine. Hate this squad. Hate this school. Hate this town. Hate my father. Hate me. I make the formation, sway my hips, punch my poms forward then up to the night sky, do all the moves as rehearsed. As we form a single line and begin our fan kicks, I imagine all the guys in the stands sneaking out onto the field for an intimate glimpse of our briefs. They do this during pep rallies in the school gym where the view is better.

I kick too soon, kicking on the line "I wish that I had Jesse's girl" rather than after it, and gouge out a divot in the field. Three swearing girls tumble to the ground with me, even though the pom pom constitution does not allow profanity.

Grass sticks to me.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" says the blonde on my left when we leave the field. Two other girls surround me, but it's the blonde I must deal with.

"It was an accident," I say. "A fucking accident."

"You ruined the whole routine," she says and sighs. Her breath blows up her wispy bangs.

"It was a stupid routine, anyway," I say. "And a stupid song."

"Look. We don't want you here." She leans into me and her boyfriend's class ring presses against my chest. The two other girls stand on either side of her and lean into me as well. Mrs. Malone reapplies her lipstick by the water fountain. The rest of the squad towels off.

"You don't want me here?" I say.

"If I had been on that judging panel last year I would have made damn sure you never got on the squad."

"Do I annoy you? Do I just piss the hell out of you?"

"Yes."

I grab the class ring and pull her into me, picking up the chain's slack. It digs into her neck, cinching her skin. The two other girls back off and the blonde's bottom lip drops before it folds beneath her upper teeth. I want to say something cutting. To have the last word. I pull her necklace tighter. Tighter and tighter until her hapless expression drains my strength.

Then I release the chain. The blonde backs off with a jagged pink line around her neck. Mrs. Malone runs onto the track, still clutching her tube of lipstick.

"Girls!" she says.

I sprint into the bathroom, away from the laughter, away from the crowd's cheers and moans. I lock myself in the rear stall for the rest of the game, sitting on the toilet with my knees pressed against my chest. For sure, Mrs. Malone will kick me off. If being late for a game means a demerit, near strangulation certainly means dismissal. But I almost feel relieved. I should just quit, but I can't bare defeat. Shit. I bury my face in my hands. Over and over I replay the image of me grabbing her necklace, of her peach skin overlapping the gold chain.

They're all talking about me. I know it. Saying how crazy I am, what a bitch I am. How I hate all of them with their perfect, sober families, their fathers who still have a job, their mothers who have too much time on their hands. All of this is too much. So I swallow, nearly choking because I'm swallowing nothing. I swallow again, struggling. I need a drink and a shower. Chicago waits an hour and a half away, I tell myself. An hour and a half away.

But I don't head to Chicago. I head home. I drive around the Square for a half hour, until one of Woodstock's cops follows me. A small-town cop worries about people like me, people who drive with no destination. I leave the Square and get back onto Route 47.

The motion light above our garage goes on when I pull in ten minutes past my curfew. The entire house is dark. Halfway in and halfway out the door, I wait to hear the ice clink in my father's glass. Nothing. Not even the sound of the television. Moonlight reveals the glass shards scattered across the floor. The break embedded some glass within the Serenity Prayer's tapestry and colored threads. Next to the crumpled needlepoint lies a letter from Andre to me, saying he's gone out and won't return until morning. I don't know who's responsible, but all I can say is it's about time that thing's off our wall. Andre's room is dark, but light shines beneath my parents' bedroom door.

I almost drop my poms when I spot Dad at the kitchen table. The bottle of Crown, nearly empty, rests by his hands as well as a glass that sweats as much as he does. The nightlight over the microwave draws out the shine in his wavy hair and the sweat on his face. Slivers of ice exist in his glass. With his pinkie he stirs what remains.

"How was the game?" he says.

"We lost. As usual," I say, even though I never found out the final score.

"Great team you got there. You shouldn't waste your time as a cheerleader. You're smarter than that."

"I got kicked off tonight. Messed up a routine."

He says nothing. I remain standing. I want to run to my room, but I'm afraid. Afraid of what comes next.

"You know, we have to save," he says. "Why can't I make you two understand? Why can't you and Andre ever realize how important this is? To save our money. To save."

By the tone of his voice, shaking, deepening, I recognize that it's not sweat on his face, but tears. His lips move. Nothing comes out. He tries again. Nothing. Instead of talking, he gasps for air. He clutches his glass so tightly I fear it will shatter. I am unnerved by his sobs, which are breathy and deep. His tears don't trickle. They jump out of his eyes and land on his nose where they drip like the water from the kitchen faucet he promises he will fix. The last time I saw him cry was when my grandmother died ten years ago. Mom and Dad both kneeled and held my hand. Dad said nothing. Mom told me. And then Dad sucked in a breath and those weird tears came. I was six and didn't understand death, its finality, nor the fact that my grandmother was Dad's mom. I didn't understand why he was crying. All I understood was that fathers don't cry, and if mine had to, I didn't want it done in front of me.

He holds the glass. I expect him to take a sip or fill it with what remains in the bottle. With his free hand, he rubs his face, spreading the tears around, making his skin glisten like Mrs. Malone's. The more I watch him, the more I can't tell the sweat from the tears. They are so much alike.

I want to touch him, pat his hand, hug him. But I can't. Part of me is sad for him, but a bigger part wishes I had someone else for a father. No, that's not even right. I want this father, but the father he was in those pictures. A father I often forget about, but whose tears make me think of how he and I once probably loved. I want the father in those photos, but I only have the father in front of me. The father with the tears, the sweat, the sallow complexion, and the half-empty glass of Crown Royal. I want to leave him, but I can't. I am his daughter.

Condensation trickles down his hand. The outside of a glass in unbearable heat has always bothered me. I hate the way it sweats like us, hate how the cold water creeps down our tacky wrists and arms. But I reach for it anyway. At first he resists, and I fear this will make him rage. But he doesn't rage. He relaxes his grip. His fingers touch mine as I slide the glass away. I pour the drink down the sink, the woody, antiseptic scent lingering. He taps his fingers in the ring of water left behind. I still hold the glass as my father cries. He swirls his finger in the ring and creates a few slender rivers. I watch him do this as the condensation slides along my wrist.