

Natalie Bridgmon

Skinny Love

It was all very surreal, being with Mark as his daughter played in the grass not three feet away while the sound of his family and friends enjoying themselves could be heard coming from the backyard. I kept looking around for *her* though, just waiting for her to come out and stake her claim. But she really wasn't here.

I finally decided to sit down on the front step of his house. I wasn't going to get beat up, so I figured I could sit down. He discarded his cigarette in the trash can nearby and sat next to me. It was the fourth one he had lit, but I had yet to see him finish one. Every time he started to talk to me, he threw it away.

“So,” he began, “how are you doing?”

I should've known how to answer this. I came there with every intention of closing the door on all of *this*; with every intention of finally killing the ambiguity that had loomed over our friendship since we were twelve. But I couldn't answer because I kept thinking about how I was actually sitting on Mark's front step, talking to him.

When I arrived, he had wrapped me up in his arms. His mother, Judy, followed. I took a minute to look him over. Somehow, he managed to look exactly the same and completely different—his black hair was cut the same way it was always cut, short and to the point, and he hadn't gotten any taller, but he had this air about him that I couldn't quite figure out. It could have been pride or it could have been exhaustion. Then I met his daughter, Beth, for the first time. His wife, whom I had yet to formally meet, was oddly not present. I came late because my mother and I had gotten lost. I don't know why we didn't allot time *for* getting lost because, no matter how many times Mark or his mother had given us directions, it still happened. In our defense, the subdivision was organized like a labyrinth on a hill and all of the houses looked the same.

My mom left and I tried so hard to fight the awkward feeling creeping up my spine. This was Mark. We had known each other since sixth grade. He

had been my best friend. There had been a time in my life where I would have done anything to spend an hour with him, let alone an afternoon at one of his family functions. I jammed my hands into my jean pockets and tried not to look as awkward as I felt. Mark seemed to sense this because he immediately tried to get me in on a game of washers going on in the front yard that a few of his old high school friends had started. He smiled at me and I realized, despite how awkward I felt, I missed that smile. So I played washers. I sucked.

Fortunately, the game ended quickly, and Mark led me into his house. His mother grabbed my attention and offered me something to eat. I declined because I realized my nerves had already eaten my stomach. Aunts and uncles cluttered the small suburban home, and Judy proceeded to introduce me to all of them.

“This is Natalie,” she said, “She and Mark have been friends for, gosh, since we moved here. It was like from the moment Mark met her, it had been nothing but Natalie this and Natalie that!”

She seemed so proud to introduce me, as if I were the wife Mark was supposed to have brought home to meet the family for the first time. The various family members simply looked confused because they knew I wasn’t. It didn’t help anything when Judy got a little too excited telling one relative, “Yes, and I think he even spent the night at her house a few times!”

I had to correct that. No, Mark had never spent the night at my house. During freshman year, he and another girl came over to hang out, and they *both* did not want to leave, but they did not get to stay. Of course, regardless of how much I explained, the damage was already done. My status as “Mark’s Old Friend” was now under suspicion. But was I really just an old friend? I thought I was. I told myself I was, *even if* we both recognized that there was potential for something more than that, and even if growing up everyone we knew thought we were going to get married once we got our act together. We were kids, and we made mistakes, and we missed opportunities—it was the past. Besides, Mark had a wife and a child now; everything else was irrelevant. I mean, his *daughter* was right in front of me on the living room floor playing, and his wife—

Admittedly, his wife’s failure to attend her own husband’s “Welcome Home/Congratulations on Finishing Basic Training Party” *was* slightly unexpected. I had spent the previous week preparing myself for that moment when

I would be confronted with Mrs. Mark Evans. I had all these stock responses ready to go if I was forced into idle chitchat. However, for some reason, she did not get on the plane with the rest of the family. In stark contrast, I, who had not spoken to Mark in roughly two years, had found it within myself to let the past be the past and support him. But really, it was simply nice to see him again. So when I finally figured out how to answer as we sat on the front step two hours or so later, I said, “Well, I’m at a party with you, so I’m doing pretty good.”

He laughed, but I knew this wasn’t what he was looking for. He wanted to know about my *life*, school, friends—the whole nine yards. I wasn’t going to give him that because I wasn’t the one disappeared to another state, got married, had a kid and ignored their best friend through everything; that was him. I looked on to watch Beth play, and noticed him watching me watching her out of the corner of my eye. He had been doing that all day, as if he were measuring all of our interactions. I wanted to ask why, but I didn’t. I wanted to ask where his wife was. I wanted to ask how *he* was doing. But I knew that wasn’t allowed. At least, not right now—not with all of these people here. He seemed perfectly content to wait, but I wasn’t. It was Sunday; I had school the next day and a forty-five minute drive to St. Charles ahead of me. He told me not to worry about getting a ride home, that he would drive me, but I knew if I got into a car with him, it would be all over. The whole point of coming here was to close this chapter of my life, to see him happy with his wife and child, and be able to move on. Somehow, I knew that if he got me alone, that wouldn’t happen. He would say something, he would tell me something that I wouldn’t be able to ignore. I didn’t know what it was, but that’s how we worked.

It was getting cold, so we went inside. I continued to make small talk. Judy was sure to give me Mark’s address so I could mail him things to his base in South Carolina, Mark gave me his new cell number, and Beth and I got better acquainted. When the last of his family left, I texted my mom to come pick me up. Mark had left to put Beth to bed for the night in the back bedroom, so it was down to me and Judy. We had kept in contact through Facebook, so conversation came relatively easy. Then my mom texted me that she was had arrived. Mark was still tending to Beth, so I told her to drive around the block a few times to buy time.

“Who are you texting?” Judy asked

“My mom. She’s here, but Mark is busy, so—“

“Well, go to him.”

“Are you sure?”

I didn’t want to disturb Beth’s nighttime routine. My little brother had been really particular, so that if anyone bothered my mother while she was putting him down, it would set them back an hour. I didn’t want mess anything up.

“Go talk to him.”

She was direct and I did not argue. I made my way to the back bedroom. The door was closed, so I opened it as quietly as I could. The lights were off, but a television was on, giving everything a pale blue tint. Mark was sitting on the bed, rubbing Beth’s back as she lay on her side with a pacifier in her mouth. I had seen it all day, but it finally hit me in that moment. The same boy who I met in sixth grade, who taught me how to play AC/DC songs on my guitar on my back porch during so many summers, who talked to me every day on the phone for years, who ran around my house playing with Lightsabers during my birthday parties even though we were supposedly too old for that was a *father* to a little girl. He had married and enlisted to support that little girl. But somehow, he was still just a kid himself; scared out of his mind.

I sat on the edge of the bed and whispered, “Hey.”

He jumped a little and turned to look at me.

“My mom is here so...”

“What? I told you I would give you a ride.”

“I know, but...I have to go.” I reached and took Beth’s hand into my own, rubbing my thumb over it. Her eyes began to droop closed. Mark smiled. “Look at that,” he whispered.

He got up to stand and, after a moment, I did too. For just an instant, he paused to look at me before pulling me into his arms. He held me to him as he said, “I don’t want you to go.”

“I know,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around him.

“I wanted to talk to you.” His voice cracked.

“I know.”

“There is so much I need to tell you.”

“I know.” And my voiced cracked.

This wasn't how the day was supposed to go. I was supposed to end all of this. There was supposed to be a resolution. I was supposed to get in the car and tell my mother how happy he was with his family and his life. Instead, we were both choking back tears as we held each other. He wasn't happy. This wasn't over. Could it ever really be? Did we do something wrong in the beginning? Is this what happens to all best friends who should have been lovers but never were? Do they always go in circles like this, coming in and out of each other's lives, just waiting for something to jar them off the cycle? Does that something ever arrive?

"I'll talk to you soon," I whispered as I broke away from him.

"Yeah," he replied weakly.

I made my way out to the driveway, saying goodbye to Judy as I went. "Don't be a stranger!" she called after me. My mother was waiting in her car, so I quickly got in and shut the passenger door. A few minutes of silence later, she asked, "So how was it?" I took a moment before I answered.

"It's all wrong. He's not happy."

And I cried.