



Pete Prokesch

Through the Glass

Jules quit cigarettes months ago, but still allowed herself one spliff before bed, as long as the amount of tobacco didn't exceed the marijuana. She sat on her bedroom floor, licked the paper, pressed the joint shut and wondered if getting high was just a roundabout way to her next cigarette. Probably. Her mom had been dead for a full year now—too long to justify smoking about it.

Diff—her dad's girlfriend—snored from across the hall. Jules tip-toed down the stairs, across the kitchen, and silently slid open the patio door. The August air was cool as she sat on the cement steps in the moon's shadow. The linden leaves gathered above her like inverted hearts. She lit the joint and exhaled into the gray light.

She knew no one in her dad's town, but she'd be going to college in the fall. At least back home, in the empty ranch, she'd hear her mom's voice at night when she prayed. But eighteen is too young to be on your own, her dad said. Better to stay the summer with him and Diff. Her dad dating Diff had nothing to do with her mom's cancer, she kept telling herself. But she never heard her mom's voice here. And so she stopped praying, altogether.

Back in the kitchen, Jules poured herself a glass of water from the filter on the fridge. The lights were off, but the full moon lit the room just enough. She looked around. White couch, white cushions, white cabinets. She never really called her dad's house "home." Diff did most of the decorating.

Jules picked a framed picture off the counter and ran a finger over the plexiglass. Her dad and Diff in front of a steaming volcano in Hawaii. Diff falling in a dip, and her dad supporting her burnt body with a strained arm. Matching sunburns and bucket hats. In faint orange print, Jules could make out the date in the bottom right corner. The day before her mom died. Jules heard footsteps from the hall.

“Lucky for us, the volcano blew the next day.”

Jules swung around and knocked the picture onto the floor. She jerked forward, fumbled it, and then replaced it on the counter. Diff chuckled and plucked a glass from the cabinet. The fridge groaned as it squirted a strained stream.

Diff gulped from her glass, and Jules watched her Adam’s apple bob up and down, while the water trickled down her neck and saturated the front of her white nightgown. In the faint light, Jules traced the outline of a large nipple. Diff wiped her face with a forearm and raised her glass towards the sliding door.

“I know what yah doing out theyah,” she said.

Her intonation had changed. Diff was a doctor, but she spoke more like a plumber or a career waitress at the diner down the street. Where did her dad say she was from? The weed weaved a web of panic around her mind, and the moonlight hit Diff’s face, and her pupils were large and strange. The sharp corner of the cabinet pressed into Jules’s spine.

“Reefah makes you lazy *and* ratahded.” Diff held her palms under the water dispenser, and the machine gurgled out a single cube. She rubbed the ice across her face.

“You know that’s not true,” Jules began. She pushed herself upright off the counter. “You are a *doctor*, after all.” Why was she debating the merits of marijuana with Diff in the kitchen at one in the morning? The melted ice dripped down Diff’s neck.

“Don’t be a smaht ass like yah brothah,” she said. Jules inched backwards until she thought the corner of the counter would pierce through her. She bumped the Hawaii picture again, and it fell flat on its face.

“Just don’t tell yah fathah,” Diff said. “This is owa little secret.” She showed her small teeth as if to sink them into meat. Jules had never seen her smile—if you could call it that. Just the occasional grimace when her dad asked her how she liked the salmon.

The next morning at breakfast Diff's eyes were tired and small and Jules couldn't find the pupils amidst the gray. Without looking up from her Organic O's, she asked Jules—if it wasn't too much trouble—to do a better job with the dishes. This was the second morning in a row that she came downstairs and found a dirty glass on the counter.

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Jules was sixteen when her dad got laid off from Boston College Law school and took a job at a corporate firm in Phoenix. At dinner, her mom begged him to take his old job at Boston Public Defenders. He pushed his fish from one side of the plate to the other and shook his head. It wouldn't be the same.

To Jules, her dad wasn't the same. He was in the basement when she got home from softball, determined to finish his remaining workload in his final two weeks. His beloved compost container was empty, and Jules found potato skins and banana peels mixed in with the trash. Rabbits feasted on his tomatoes in the backyard, and he didn't bother nailing off the chicken-wire to the fence posts. He'd lay on the couch and watch the Red Sox west coast games until one in the morning. Jules would hear the murmur of the TV at night and slip downstairs for a glass of water.

“Who's winning?” she asked.

“I don't know.” His eyes were wide, and his glasses reflected the flicker of the screen. “I wasn't really paying attention.”

The next afternoon, Jules pitched a shutout and scanned the clapping crowd for her parents. When she arrived home, her mom and dad sat silently across from each other at the kitchen table, a bottle of chardonnay between them.

“Your father took a job in Phoenix,” her mom said. Her dad examined his nails and bit a cuticle.

“I think it's best for the family if—” Jules's mom shot him a look. Jules felt the weight leave her body, and she leaned back against the wall.

“This is where I'm working,” her dad said.

“That is your *choice*,” her mom said in a hushed whisper. She wiped her mouth with her napkin, poured herself the remaining wine, and took her glass into the living room.

A month later, Jules watched from her bedroom window as her dad crammed a final duffel bag into the backseat of his Ford Focus. The packed car nearly scraped the pavement under its weight. Her mother stood in the driveway with her arm's crossed, as the white car groaned into reverse, out of the driveway, down the street, and disappeared below the horizon.

Jules peeled her face away from the window and observed her breath's fog on the glass. She pressed her palm into it, then watched its impression disappear.

Six months later, when Jules's mom started chemo, she would ask Jules not to tell her father about the cancer. She didn't want him to feel trapped.

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The next night Jules was low on weed so her spliff was two-third tobacco. Still not a cigarette, she thought. It was past midnight and still no sound of Diff's guttural snoring. Jules slid out of her bedroom, and silently shuffled across the wood floor. She grimaced with each creek of the steps and kept her weight on her heels.

Outside, it was unseasonable cold for August. Jules wrapped herself in a hug and rubbed warmth into her goose-bumped arms. She tested her breath, but only saw the inverted hearts of the rustling leaves.

She sat with her back to the house, and above her left shoulder she could glimpse the profile of the guest bedroom window—*her* bedroom window. The glass expelled white light from the overhead that Jules never used. She preferred the soft yellow from the lamp.

The moon was still full and the wispy clouds created an opaque haze in the sky. Jules squinted, lit her joint, then took a puff. The weed must have gathered towards the middle, because the first hit was pure tobacco. She leaned back into the wood shingles and the clouds parted like curtains to reveal a full moon—barely waning—the top corner eclipsed by night.

A light shone on the trunk of the tree, and Jules glanced up at her window. It now flickered between yellow and white. Jules rose to her feet and puffed again, overcome by a heavy hit of weed. The skunky taste made her cough. She muffled her mouth in her sleeve and slipped into the shadow next to the steps. When she looked up, the room was dark. The subtle flair between the shingles and foundation pressed into her spine.

Back in the house, the kitchen was empty—except for a single glass-cup next to the sink. The hardwood floor caught the light and looked waxy and wet. Jules leaned on the counter and counted her breaths. Her mind raced back to her mother’s wake—pacing in front of the casket before guests arrived. Then the door opened, and the first face she saw was Diff’s.

“He brought her to the fucking wake,” she said to the empty kitchen. The fridge gurgled and churned and replenished itself with ice.

Jules inspected the glass. Water dripped down the inside walls and it felt icy and cold. She placed it in the sink. Then she shuffled her feet upstairs, the steps creaking as the wood compressed in the August air.

She paused in front of her dad’s room and heard his soft breath. Then the gargles and snarls from Diff. In her bedroom she flicked on the surgically bright overhead-lights and scanned the bare walls. Her dad begged Jules to decorate the room—*her* room—but she insisted that she didn’t want to unpack before college. She flicked off the light, felt the smooth floor switch to rug, then climbed into bed. The blinds were shut, and Jules plugged her ears to drown out Diff’s snores.

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Two weeks before Jules drove her mom to hospice, she opened an email from her dad. He took a job at Boston Public Defenders and was moving back east, and he’d like to meet for dinner. Besides the occasional email, Jules had all but stopped speaking to him. She visited him for two weeks in the summer after junior year, and he took her to hit balls at a driving range. He golfed now. After one bucket, she was drenched in sweat. Back at his gated complex, she changed into a suit and dove into the pool only to find it lukewarm from the desert heat.

“What’s new with your mother?” he asked her, as he handed her his wet towel.

He was moving in with his new girlfriend, the email said. A doctor named Dafni.

Jules met her dad at a stuffy Fusion-Bistro restaurant in Boston. He ordered wine, and the server poured a taste of merlot. He swirled it against the glass, stuck his face in to gather aroma, and smacked his lips after the first sip. She asked for the tofu curry, and grimaced as her dad ordered the veal. Her mother never allowed red meat in the house.

“I love Diff,” he said, as his veal arrived. “In a lot of ways, we’re more compatible than your mother and I.” He struggled to work his serrated knife through the tender meat. The server hurried over to top their glasses with wine.

“She’s had a difficult life,” her dad explained. In her mind, Jules traced the blue veins on her mom’s head. Her dad worked the meat into his mouth, sipped his merlot, and swished it around into one big mess. He dabbed the corner with a napkin, staining the white cloth red. The server reappeared to pour more, but Jules’s dad waved him off with a flick of the wrist. Jules flexed her wrist back and forth beneath the table.

“I represented a girl—a lady—when I first started at the PD’s office.”

Jules slouched in her chair.

“Abused as a kid—sexually, I mean—*awful* stuff.” He fished a long string-bean out of his mashed potatoes.

“Classic case—happened over a long period of time—someone she knew—a neighbor—friend of the family.”

Jules paused and noticed a string-bean that had slipped into her tofu curry.

“Anyway, they picked her up, for possession—unconscious in front of Boston University Medical School. A student. Could probably explain dope better than you or me.”

Jules lifted a finger towards the server, now leaning his elbows on the bar. He nodded and retrieved a new bottle of Merlot off the top shelf. She worked on the tofu cubes—neatly cut and seared with a thin, sesame crust.

“I got her off. A small case, but my first win.”

Jules picked a sesame seed out of her teeth.

“She wrote to me years later. She was a Chief Oncologist. One of the best in Boston.”

During dessert, Jules prodded her lava cake while her dad powdered the froth of his cappuccino. After he paid, the hostess helped him into his long, black pea coat. Outside, the wind whipped around the vacant lot.

In the car, the roads were empty and dark and the dim headlights lit mere feet in front of them. Jules’s dad flicked on his high beams. The next day she’d be driving her mom to hospice.

“I think our house can feel like home,” he said, as he lowered the volume on NPR. They were asking for donations. Jules climbed out of the car in front of the red ranch.

“Give your mother my best.” She waited for the familiar groan of the Ford, but the Tesla purred in silence, and vanished like a cat down a dark road.

Jules looked at the house and saw the light was on in her mom’s room. She lit a cigarette and looked up at the sky. It’s cruel that stars still flicker, she thought, long after they’re dead.

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The next night Jules was out of weed and pulled her pack of cigarettes off the top shelf of her closet. Dim light spilled in from her dad’s room in the gap between the door and floor.

Tonight was colder than the last, and she found a hooded softball sweatshirt with her fall clothes, still boxed up for college. The rain patted down on the roof—a few isolated slaps—barely noticeable. Then the drops erupted into a full onslaught, like heaps of rice spilled over the roof. Jules eyed the loose cigarette sitting on her bed and frowned.

She walked over to her window and raised the blind. Then, she flicked off the lamp. The light left the room like a vacuum. The storm clouds were thick, but the moon managed a gray haze that draped over the yard like a blanket. Through the rain, Jules could see the hint of the moon concealed in the stormy sky.

The wind tore through the linden and ripped broken-hearted leaves and sucked them up and over the house. Jules lifted the screen and opened her lighter, but the wind bent and killed the flame. She lit inside, then flung her head out the window and into the storm, exhaling smoke. The wind whipped the rain under the roof’s eaves in sharp slaps that ricocheted off her face, amidst the tobacco’s sweet relief.

She looked down to shield her eyes and noticed a white figure sitting on the cement steps, knees bent, hands firmly pressed on her knees. It was a woman—neck straight—eyes fixed firmly ahead as the rain poured down. Perplexed, she sucked the cigarette and peered closer. Jules’s body hung out the window, past the roof’s eaves, hair drenched in rain.

The person—the woman—wore a dress—a gown—so soaked that she looked naked—drenched in milk. Her head slowly rose towards Jules, as if pulled by a string. She flashed her marble eyes.

Jules recoiled and slammed the window sash and heard the sharp crack of glass. She sat, her back to the wall beneath the window, and panted. Mucus and rain coalesced on her lip. She flicked on the yellow lamp and then yanked the plug from the outlet. A spark flew from where the water came in. She pressed her hand down on the floor and felt a sharp sting and then heard the wet sizzle from her crushed cigarette.

The wind raked water over the windows that washed the glass in waves. The rain persisted. Jules turned and knelt, peering over the sill. She glanced down at the patio. A mess of broken branches and leaves where Diff was perched moments before. Had she dreamt it? Jules glanced at the wet tobacco smeared on the floor. She wasn't high—she knew what she saw. She thought of the ice and the glass and the marble eyes and began to shake.

Then she thought of the wake when the priest opened the casket. A waxy face and a wig of hair. *This is not my mother.* Then moments later, Diff crossing herself and peering in.

The pelting rain slowed then ceased. The wind let up, the clouds thinned, and the moonlight cast the sky a darkish purple. Thunder rumbled in the distance and then was gone.

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Jules sat alone at breakfast the next morning and dribbled sriracha over her hard-boiled egg. The sun had climbed above the trees and poured light across the kitchen table. She cut through the egg with a serrated knife, and frowned when she found that the yolk was green. From upstairs, she heard a rhythmic snore. The recessed lights vibrated and shook. Heavy footsteps danced back and forth across the ceiling. The sriracha was hot and sweet, but the dry yolk made her gag.

The shaking ceiling stopped and Jules cautiously sipped her coffee as she inspected the white plaster. She heard slow, methodical steps down the stairs—each one followed by a heavy thump. Then a single creak from the floorboards in the hall. Jules rose out of her chair and walked to see.

Diff lay crumpled in a corner next to the front door, barricaded by her large bags. She turned and looked up at Jules with sad, pleading eyes, as she cowered towards the wall. Her mouth quivered in a muted sob.

“Enough!” she yelled at Jules. Her face was scrunched and contorted and her eyes were small and the whites were red. “I’ll tell my brothers. Please!”

Jules stepped back, one hand over her heart and one extended out towards Diff. Her dad stood on the stairs—eyes wide and glassy—and he crossed his arms and stared. Then Diff leapt to her feet, abandoned her bags, and swung open the front door. She fished her keys from her pockets as she stumbled down the steps. Jules watched her open the passenger door and dive across the center console to the driver's side. Her dad, broken from his trance, spilled down the stairs and out the door as the Lexus engine whined and sputtered to a low growl. Jules stood in the doorway and watched. There was no wind in the air, and the sky was bright and blue.

Her dad made it to the far side of the car, and Jules watched them both through the tinted glass. He leaned in through the lowered window, holding a sobbing Diff in a half hug while his other hand gripped the wood-grained wheel. From across the driveway Jules heard a rustle in the bush.

A large tabby cat emerged from a hydrangea with a white bird in its mouth—teeth gripping the soft breast—stained red with blood. The cat looked up at Jules as the wings flapped in spastic spirts. Then they stiffened and fell—sudden and still. The cat lay the still bird on the grass by its paws and looked up at Jules.

Suddenly the bird was shocked to life and convulsed and jumped and flapped and the cat screamed and Jules ran across the driveway to shoo the cat away. Her father's yells were muffled by the engine's sudden roar. Jules turned around, and the sunlight shot through the windshield and glistened off of Diff's large, black eyes. Her thin lips showed no emotion. Jules dove to the ground and the pavement felt hot on her bare arms.

The roar of the exhaust was deafening as Jules lay on her back and looked up as the heat from the car's metal undercarriage kissed her face. The moment slowed as Jules traced the tail pipe's path like a hissing snake. The sun was bright when it found her, but it didn't hurt her eyes. In a neat circle, it flickered between white, black, purple, yellow, and then white again. Tires shrieked in the distance.

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Jules had driven two hours on the Mass Pike towards Syracuse when she shivered in the cold air and rolled up the window. She remembered her box of fall clothes in the corner of the bedroom. She turned off at the next exit, and headed east towards Boston.

The night before she left for school Jules's dad made her a seafood dinner. Jules reminded him that she was a vegetarian, but at least it wasn't meat. They sucked down fresh oysters, and drank champagne from flutes, while sword fish steaks smoked on the charcoal grill.

At the table, after her third glass of champagne, Jules looked up at her father. He smiled back at her as he chewed the charred scales of the fish. Jules decided she wouldn't press charges if Diff received proper care. And her dad would never see Diff again.

Back in the driveway, Jules could still make out the skid marks from Diff's burnt tires. She traced the scab on her arm. The linden tree towered over the house, and its top leaves yellowed with the first hint of fall. Jules tried the knob on the front door, but it was locked. She tried again, and heard a parade of scampering feet. Then she rang the bell.

Jules's dad opened the door and she followed him as he back-pedaled down the hall and into the kitchen, bumping into walls. She took a glass from the cabinet and poured water from the fridge. It groaned and spat out a single cube.

"Needs servicing," he said. He shuffled his feet over a wet spot on the floor. Jules approached the sink and filled up a glass. Then she heard a shatter from above. She looked up at the plaster ceiling, then at her father. He examined his wet socks on the floor.

Jules opened the door to the garage and observed the white Lexus nested between the concrete walls—head light smashed and the front bumper dented in. Then she walked back to the kitchen.

"I think that if you called before you came—" he said.

Jules considered her box of autumn clothes before walking out the front door and into the driveway. Her pounding temples muted her dad's calls. She shifted into reverse and recalled her father's old Ford, groaning out of the driveway, watching him leave through her breath's fog on the glass. In her rearview she saw him standing in the driveway, white shirt neatly tucked into khaki pants, arms folded over his chest. She looked over her shoulder and saw him clear as day.