

JUHEA KIM

Cockroach

MY NAME IS DEDe and I'm eleven years old. D-e, capital D-e. It's not short for anything. My dad's name is Bobby and that's not short for anything either. Our names are similar, both made of two of the same consonant sounds. BO-Bby. DE-De. If I had a mom or a sister or a brother, they'd be named like GiGi or Kay or Jay, names so simple they are basically just letters in the alphabet.

But I don't have any brother or sister, and my mom left when I was five. I don't really remember much about her except she smelled powdery and soft. She sends me cards twice a year, once on my birthday and once at Christmas, with a five-dollar bill folded inside. I put her cards in a shoebox under the bed and hide the money in my diary with a little lock and a key. I keep the diary in my underwear drawer and the key in a secret place—as if I'd tell you.

So it's been just me and Bobby pretty much this whole time. I've been calling him Bobby since I was like eight. He doesn't mind, he thinks it's funny. There was only one time when I called him Dad and it was when I found a cockroach in my room. I was about to fall asleep when I saw a cockroach the size of my big toe right there on the wall above my head. It was my first time seeing one so I didn't even know what to call it. I jumped out of bed and yelled out loud, "Bobby! There is a huge bug in my room!" I was totally freaked out, but Bobby stayed in the living room and was like, "So what? Just kill it." And I was like, "No! This one is freaking huge! I can't kill it!" And for some reason, Bobby said, "Only if you say please." So I said, "Please, come kill this bug." And he said, "Say, please Dad." This whole time the cockroach was spinning around in circles on the wall above my pillow, and I thought for sure it would let go of the wall and drop onto my bed. I screamed, "PLEASE DAD, COME KILL THIS BUG!" And at that point, Bobby lazily walked into the room with a rolled catalog, took a few seconds swinging it lightly back and forth in the air, and then smashed it down on the cockroach just when it stopped spinning. Half of it fell on my pillow and the other half exploded onto the wall, smearing it with crazy blue blood. I've never seen anything

so sick as a cockroach with blue blood and I hope you never have to.

The cockroach was a new thing since moving to Sir Charles Court, which is not an English castle or anything, but an apartment complex on the west side of the town next to the car dealerships. We are like, two blocks and a train track behind Honda. There is a Denny's next to Honda that Bobby takes me to sometimes. We always order chocolate chip pancakes and the appetizer sampler (onion rings, those fries that look like tic-tac-toe, mozzarella sticks, and chicken strips), and split both of them. But that's only like every other Friday when Bobby gets paid, and some of those Fridays he doesn't come home until really late at night. When he does come home, he reeks. "Reek" means stinking really bad, and I've found that it's the best word to describe Bobby's smell on those nights. I would be lying in bed with the lights all turned off, eyes closed but only pretending to be asleep. Bobby would open my door and say something like, "DeDe, my little baby weasel—Daddy's home," and kneel by my bed and give me dozens of wet beer-y kisses. I would keep my eyes shut and turn toward the wall, away from him.

But about two years ago, that kind of stuff stopped happening, I think because of two things. One day, all of a sudden my nipples started itching and hurting. At first I thought they were mosquito bites, although it was weird that I'd get bit on both sides at the same time. One night while we were watching TV, I scratched them over my tee for about a good thirty seconds. Bobby frowned and said, "That's disgusting DeDe, don't do that in front of me." I was like, "What, they're just mosquito bites," but I stopped scratching. I didn't really feel good, hearing Bobby say disgusting. Then two or three months after that, Bobby gave me twenty dollars and told me to go buy myself a bra.

So after school the next day, I walked over to Kmart that's halfway between school and home. I went to the lingerie section and ran my hands over the bras on their plastic hangers. Most of their straps were twisted together so that you had to pick off two or three bras at the same time and then untangle them for like five minutes. It was so super annoying. Then a counter lady with fluffy, feathery hair asked me if I needed help. She was one of those older ladies who wear chunky jewelry made of wood and stone, which don't actually make anyone look prettier but it's the thought that counts, I guess. I said no, I'm fine thanks, but she asked if I was by myself and then told me I needed a full-on A cup. I got a plain white bra that was 32A and cost \$13.99 plus tax.

I crossed the huge parking lot and got back on Valley Road, which is the long east-west road where most of the places I know are on. There is my school on the eastern end, then a strip mall with a diner, a nail salon, an Indian restaurant, and SaveLots. A little farther west, there's Kmart, then a walled neighborhood of houses called Twin Oaks. This is where most of the kids at my school live. After the stretch of houses, that long sidewalk ends where there is an overpass of some sort, and you have to walk pretty careful on that narrow strip between the weedy ditch and the car lane. About five minutes later, the sidewalk begins again and you pass by Toyota, Hyundai, Ford, Chrysler, and then Denny's. When I reach Honda, I take a left and walk a few more blocks, and that's our apartment. When I got back, I put the rest of the money in my diary.

Soon after that, Bobby brought Diamond home. At first she just came over sometimes at night, and the three of us would have breakfast in the morning and then she would leave. It was honestly a little weird at first, but she whipped up these amazing biscuits and pancakes from Bisquick. And she could make those on school mornings because she didn't have to go to work until late. Diamond smelled like cigarettes, hair spray, and this perfume in a metallic bottle called Curve. She said her best quality was that she was self-made, her mom and dad were also a bunch of hicks but look how well she turned out in spite of. When she wrapped her wet hair in a tight turban and rubbed deodorant hard into her armpits, she looked like she was challenging the day to come at her.

Diamond was the first person who ever told me I was pretty. She also said that I'll have a great body when I grow up. I don't remember exactly what words she used, but that was the gist. I liked her for that and Bobby liked her a lot, too. He seemed more relaxed around her and smiled more. He also drank less. Eventually she moved in with us, and of course Bobby never came over to my bed and gave me boozy kisses after that. That was probably for the best, but sometimes I miss being kissed and held. To be honest, I don't really remember what it feels like anymore.

Like I said though, it was overall nice having Diamond around. Before, I ate ramen noodles or bread and jam for dinner if I was home alone. If Bobby was around, we'd have McDonald's or Taco Bell. Bobby didn't know how to make anything except cereal. Diamond was a mean cook, though. She made us things like lasagna, hamburger casserole,

tuna casserole, chicken-cheese-broccoli casserole, mac'n' cheese, sloppy joes, and chili with cheese over rice when it was cold out. She made sure we had milk and paper towels at home, and forced us to eat at a table instead of on the couch. On the table, next to a casserole of some sort, Diamond would put a gallon jug of milk and a roll of paper towels, and yell at Bobby and me if we didn't take a piece from it periodically to wipe our mouths.

With Diamond around, fifth grade turned out to be a good year. School was just okay because I had Mr. Hopkins, and he was pretty weird. He wore rimless glasses and shirts that fit a little too tight to look right on a teacher. Also, I heard that he's a pervert, which I'm pretty sure means someone who looks at things he's not supposed to. Tamara swore he stared at her boobs all through fifth grade, though I couldn't tell and he wasn't really creepy to me. He didn't pay much attention to me, to be honest, and none of the other kids really did, either. There were only about twenty girls in the entire grade, and they were all in groups according to what they did. There was the volleyball team, like Tamara, Becky, and Heather. The girls who did ballet, like Claire, Josie, and Samantha. Rich girls like Tiffany, whose dad owned a car dealership, and Leah, whose dad was a dentist. Smart girls like Nora and Sun-Young. I didn't belong to any of those cliques, but that was okay because I didn't really care about school anyway.

Between fifth and sixth grade, I grew three inches and gained ten pounds. In July I turned eleven, and my bones ached when I lay down in my bed at night. I told Bobby how much it hurt, and he said it was called growing pains and that I should stop complaining. That summer Bobby was pretty irritable and antsy, and he and Diamond started bickering a lot. Then in August, he got laid off from his construction job. I didn't like being with him in the apartment all day in the dead of summer. He was always either trying really hard not to be a downer or being a downer, and sometimes he started drinking in the middle of the day. Diamond stopped making casseroles and she often said things like, "I can't live like this anymore." I was glad to be going back to school just to get out of the apartment.

Sixth grade was the first year of junior high, though pretty much everyone from fifth grade came over together so it wasn't that different, just slightly bigger. Now that there were more kids, I felt even more like a loner. But I really liked my homeroom teacher, Miss Bird. She wore pastel print dresses and crocheted sweaters, and she smelled

like what I imagine a field of flowers to smell like.

During the second week of school, I went up to her after class and said, “Miss Bird, you have the nicest smell of anyone I’ve ever known.” I don’t know why I said that except I thought she should know.

“Thank you, DeDe, that is so sweet. I think it’s my perfume,” she said, smiling.

“What perfume is it?” I asked.

“It’s Elizabeth Arden Sunflowers—you want to try it?” I nodded, and she opened her desk drawer and took out a clear perfume bottle filled with light golden liquid. She spritzed the inside of my right wrist, and I thanked her and ran out of there so I wouldn’t have to keep making conversation.

Miss Bird was also special because when someone answered something correctly in class, she looked at that kid straight in the eyes and gave a big thumbs-up, even while moving on to the next point without breaking the flow. And *flow* was another one of her things. She said any one of us could be amazing at anything if we just focused and let things flow out from us, without distracting ourselves. She was full of things like that, stuff that I’d never heard about or thought about. To be honest I didn’t really understand half of them, but the half that I did understand made me want to do more, like go for a run or something. I tried to do my best in my classes, especially her subject, which was math. I started with mostly Bs in September and by October, I was getting mostly As. Miss Bird noticed too, and she gave me lots of silent but meaningful thumbs-ups in the middle of class, in front of all the other kids.

So it was strange that just when school started getting better for me, things at home went downhill. I want to say that this is ironic but my English teacher, Mrs. Danielson, would say that it’s not. Anyway, Bobby hadn’t found another job, and every time I saw him and Diamond together, they were yelling at each other. Mostly it was Diamond yelling at him that he should get off his ass and go find a job, and him just repeating, shut up, shut up. Diamond wasn’t going to live like this, and she deserved better, she said. Bobby was mostly silent. I just tried to make myself small and invisible in my room.

Then it was the week of Thanksgiving. I had no idea what we were going to do. The year before, Diamond, Bobby, and I had gone to SaveLots together and picked out a frozen turkey that was the exact size and hardness of a soccer ball. Diamond had also made this killer

green bean casserole that was doused in cream of mushroom soup and topped with crispy onion things. But this time around, no one said anything about going grocery shopping, and the fridge was totally empty the night before Thanksgiving. Diamond was not around, Bobby was asleep on the couch, and I ate some bread with jam for dinner.

The next morning, I was relieved to hear Diamond taking a shower in the bathroom. I realized that a part of me had been worried that she'd left for good. I went to the living room where Bobby was stuck to the sofa, reeking of beer. I shook his shoulders and said, "Bobby, wake up! It's Thanksgiving. Let's go to SaveLots and pick up a turkey before they close."

He groaned a little, releasing clouds of reek into the air. "Leave me alone," he said. The sound of water in the bathroom stopped, and then there was the *derrrk* sound of the shower curtain being drawn back.

"Come on, it'd be a surprise for Diamond," I said, still shaking his shoulders. He burrowed his head into the couch and swatted at my hands.

Just then there was a piercing scream from the bathroom. I jumped and Bobby sat up, too. Diamond came out of the bathroom in a towel and slammed the door behind her. She shrieked at Bobby, "There's a fucking cockroach in the bathroom!"

Bobby just sort of looked back at her, still a little sluggish.

"Go kill that fucking cockroach!" Diamond shouted.

"All right," Bobby said calmly, "but only if you say please."

I wanted to smack Bobby and tell him to knock it off, because I knew it wouldn't go over well.

Diamond was turning bright red, almost shaking from her wet head to her toes. "What the fuck did you say?"

"If you say please, I'll go kill the cockroach."

In a flash, Diamond picked up the thing nearest to her, which was the cordless phone, and hurled it at Bobby. It hit him hard in the head and he yelled, "MotherFUCKER!"

"I'm so sick of you. I'm not going to stick around cleaning up, cooking, taking care of you while you drink yourself to death. Taking care of you and your grown-ass daughter who don't do SHIT around. I mean look at this place, it's a fucking shithole!"

"Leave DeDe out of it, you stupid bitch," said Bobby.

"She's fucking eleven—I was basically grown at that point."

"Grown, as in a little prostitute? Get out, you whore!"

“Fuck you. I wouldn’t stay in this cockroach-infested shithole even if you begged me on your knees.” She stormed out of the living room and into their bedroom. Ten minutes later she came out with two suitcases. She didn’t look at me. She just went straight to her car and drove off.

Bobby got up from the couch, went to the bedroom, and closed the door. I really wanted to pee, but I was too scared to go inside the bathroom. When I couldn’t hold it anymore, I rolled up one of Diamond’s magazines, quickly opened the bathroom door, and slipped in. The cockroach was on the floor next to the toilet, lying super still like it was playing dead. I aimed for a second and then slammed the magazine down, but I missed, only sending the cockroach into a frenzied run. I whacked at it frantically, then after four or five tries, finally smashed it against the floor and it broke into a few pieces. I knew it was dead because one long antenna had come off and bounced to the other side of the toilet. I balled up a paper towel and picked up all the separate pieces, one by one, without looking at any of them very closely. I kept trying to flush the crushed cockroach down the toilet, but for some reason it still floated back up with the rush of new water like it was haunted. It finally went down after the third time and I quickly lowered my pants. Once my butt was on the toilet seat and I could let go of the pee, I also started crying like I couldn’t let loose one liquid without the other.

I didn’t think things could get much worse after Thanksgiving, but the joke’s on me because they did. Bobby was even more depressed since Diamond had left and he’d run out of unemployment. When I’d come home from school, he’d just be asleep on the couch. We didn’t have any food in the fridge. I was really hungry and thought a lot about Diamond’s lasagna or chicken strips at Denny’s.

On the last day of school before winter break, I took out my savings from my diary and counted it, which came out to \$41.58. After school, I walked over to Kmart. I made my way to the perfume counter and picked up the tester bottle of Elizabeth Arden Sunflowers. I spritzed my inside wrists with it and closed my eyes so I could pretend I was somewhere else. In a field of sunflowers, I suppose. I’m not really even sure what that would look or feel like, but I guess it’s like smelling this scent. Happy and relaxed. The 1.7 ounce bottle was \$29.50 plus tax, and the 3.3 ounce was \$39.50 plus tax, and there was a Christmas sale coupon for 15 percent off all perfumes. I had more than enough money to buy the big size. But I put the tester back on its glass tray

and walked out of Kmart. I went backward one block to SaveLots and bought as much groceries as I could for \$41.58. I bought potatoes, pepper jack cheese, cheddar cheese, milk, Sunny D, bread, jam, peanut butter, canned beans, frozen peas and carrots, boxes of Hamburger Helper, macaroni, spaghetti, tomato sauce, and ground beef. I put about half of it in my backpack and carried the other half divided into two plastic bags, and walked back home.

When I reached the apartment, I noticed Bobby's car wasn't in the parking lot. I went inside, but he wasn't stuck to the couch or the bed as he'd been for the past three and a half months. I put away the groceries and ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with milk. I picked up some dirty clothes from around the apartment and started cooking at six. I'd never made a casserole before, but I'd seen Diamond make them enough times to sort of understand the basic rules. I thought mac'n' cheese might be easier than lasagna, so that's what I made. It went inside the oven looking pretty decent.

I pulled it out of the oven at seven and let it rest on the counter. Bobby still wasn't home and I was getting worried. I started to read in my bed, and then fell asleep.

I woke up with a start and looked at the time. It was a little past ten. I put on my jacket and went out the front door, and stood with my elbows on the railing of the outdoor hallway connecting the second floor apartments. Some windows and parts of the railing were outlined in twinkle lights, put up by neighbors with more initiativeness. There were also hints of Christmas trees behind half-closed blinds. It got me wondering if there was someone who could see into all these yellow windows, all the apartments with or without trees, like millions of twinkle lights. Someone looking at all the people eating dinner, putting their kids' drawings on the fridge, wrapping gifts, watching TV with mugs of hot cocoa. Even if this person existed, I was sure I would be invisible. That would be my secret superpower, I guess.

The moon was already halfway across the sky when I saw a car turn into the parking lot. It was Bobby's old green Volvo, one-eyed headlight and all. I flew down the stairs and ran to the car before it was even completely parked. He stepped out of the driver's seat, not drunk, not dead. I threw my arms around his shoulders and yelled, "Bobby! Where were you! I thought you left me!" And I cried and I cried.

"DeDe, baby weasel," Bobby said, patting my back. "I'm here, it's okay, I'm here."

I couldn't stop crying, and he opened the door of the backseat and said, "Here, baby, I brought home your favorite dinner. Chicken strips and chocolate chip pancakes from Denny's."

"With what money?" I asked.

"I got a job today. A buddy of mine from the last company referred me to his new boss. And it starts next week. I had to go to a bar with that buddy to buy him drinks, after what he'd done for me. I didn't have dinner though, so we can eat together. We can celebrate tonight."

We went upstairs to our apartment. Bobby was surprised that I'd made a mac'n' cheese, and he said it was the best he'd ever had. We both knew he meant it was better than Diamond's, but we didn't say her name—and also, that just wasn't true. But it was still really good and cheesy, even cold. I worried that it was way too much food for just the two of us, but we ate everything until we couldn't eat anymore. Afterwards I collapsed on the bed, feeling too much of everything. It was just so much to take in on one day.

Sometimes I feel like I've had both too much and too little happen in my life, if that even makes sense. Maybe what I mean by that is, I've had a lot of negatory stuff happen and not enough of the happy, relaxed stuff that is like sunflowers. I wish from now on that it will be the other way around, that with every grade it just keeps getting better, and that Bobby and I stay together as a family, no matter what.

The hallway is dark now, and he shouts "Good night, DeDe!" from his bedroom. I get this strange feeling like I'm already missing his voice, except it will be years and years before I stop hearing his good-nights. "Good night!" I shout back with gusto, then mumble "Dad" into my pillow. When I close my eyes, I see among millions of twinkle lights just one yellow square with us two inside.