Safe Harbor by Morgan Talty

**I’M SITTING** at the weathered picnic table under the gazebo in back of the crisis stabilization unit, and it smells like rain. My mother’s walking to the back door of the unit to get two cups of coffee. I don’t watch her leave, don’t watch her go inside, don’t hear the door slam shut. I’m too busy watching the short, skinny exterminator walk along the grass against the building’s foundation. He’s dressed in a white coverall, and he’s checking the black boxes filled with poison. Rodent bait boxes. I don’t think he looks at me, but he knows I’m here. He has to know. I wonder if he thinks I belong here.

The crisis stabilization unit is twenty minutes from my apartment, thirty minutes away from the reservation where Mom lives, where I grew up. I pass McDonald’s and a thrift store before I take the highway for most of the drive. Exit ramp. Red light. Always a red light. I have to turn left, so I always have to wait. Then I turn. Drive straight. School zone, drive slow. I cross a black and blue tagged bridge before cutting through a brick city. One-way roads. Then some trees. More trees. The unit is coming up. Right turn. The unit is down a bumpy and cracked side road, away from the busy part of town. Pine trees are all over the place, cardinals and finches fluttering and jetting from tree to tree.

The unit isn’t large, isn’t big. Inside, there’s the staff desk. To the right of it a long hallway filled with bedrooms. Simple rooms. Rooms that say relax. A bed with clean linen. A nightstand and a lamp and a dresser. Thin white curtains. To the left of the staff desk is the living room and kitchen and TV room with maroon chairs and a quiet room where people can paint and draw or sit and read. A white board is screwed to the wall in the living room and in blue marker a quote is written: “A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.” Like human being are ships, as if they are crafted things. Things that rock and bang or cruise smooth in an unpredictable ocean of salt and froth and depth. Out there is natural extermination.

The back door creaks open, then bangs shut. My mother’s shoes crunch the grass. The exterminator is gone, gone around the building.

“Here,” Mom says. She hands me the coffee. It’s too hot to sip so I blow and blow on it, but it doesn’t cool.

“Thanks for the cigarettes,” Mom says.

That’s why I’m here. That’s why I’m always here. To bring her cigarettes. I never don’t bring her cigarettes.

I blow on my coffee again. It’s still too hot to sip.

Mom asks me what’s new.

Nothing, I tell her.

And then she goes into it, why she’s here again. The twelfth time in the past three months.

“I didn’t want to be alone,” she tells me. “The walls in my bedroom started to look black and grimy.”

I ask her if she’s out of her meds. Clonazepam. Benzos. She says she gets them filled tomorrow. She only sometimes takes her meds. She runs out because she needs money. Always needs cigarettes.

“But I have Valium,” she says. “It still won’t help me sleep. I can’t sleep.”

She tells me she’s been awake for three days. She doesn’t look it, though. Her short gray hair is spiked. She’s wearing little gold earrings. She’s dressed nice. Casual. A white T-shirt and black yoga pants and white sneakers. She doesn’t do yoga. All the white on her makes her look more Native, more Indian (she hates that word—Indian). But nothing makes her look young. She’s Native, and she has trauma. So do I, but she thinks she has more. She doesn’t say that, but she thinks it. Maybe she’s right. Maybe older Natives have more trauma than younger ones.

It takes a bit for me to warm up to her. Mom wanted cigarettes, but that morning on the phone she also asked me to buy a pack for this woman here I don’t know. Mom said the woman had cash, that she’d pay me. But then Mom slipped up, said the woman didn’t have the money yet, that she was waiting for her friend to show up who owed her. I wasn’t playing that game, I told my mother. This all happened hours ago, before I left my place. I’m still a bit uneasy, because I’ll bump into that woman here, and I didn’t get her any cigarettes.

But I start to warm up.

“I’m so tired,” my mother says. “I just want to sleep, but I can’t.”

“I’m not even here,” I say.

Mom looks at me, then smiles. “Shut up,” she says.

“You’re so tired I’m just a hallucination,” I say. I smile a little.

She’s laughing now. She lost all her teeth years ago, but she has dentures. Top only. She lost the bottom at a Dysart’s Restaurant last year, asked me to call them, which I did, and I asked if they found a pair at the back table. That was where she’d been sitting, she told me, next to an oil painting of green olives in a brown bowl. They didn’t find any teeth.

I point at the two packs I brought her. “You’re going to reach for those cigarettes later,” I tell her, “thinking they’re there, but they’re not. I never even brought them.”

I’m laughing now.

“Stop that,” Mom says. She’s really laughing.

“Then I’ll call you tonight,” I say, “and ask if you still need those cigarettes.”

That does it, and we’re both laughing hard. It feels good to laugh with her, feels like it scrapes the dark and grimy walls inside me.

When we’re done laughing she says I’m a shit. “Always were,” she says.

I wipe my eyes of laughing tears and then bring my coffee mug to my lips. It’s still hot, and so I blow on it and then set it back down. When I do, Mom’s getting up.

“I’m a little chilly,” she says. She hasn’t even smoked yet.

Inside, we sit across from each other at the long kitchen table. An old man in a tan sweater is sitting there too, but at the very end. He’s eating a sandwich, hands shaking, and with each bite his sleeve slides to reveal a gold watch. He doesn’t talk to us, doesn’t look at us, and for a moment—just a moment, a single tick of his watch—he becomes familiar. Do I know you, I want to ask, but I don’t. Perhaps he was here the last time I visited.

That woman who wanted cigarettes is in the living room, watching *The Maury Show,* fidgeting with her purple lighter. I wonder if she’s mad at me because I didn’t get her any cigarettes.

From my seat at the table, the white board and blue quote snag my attention. If we’re built things, I wonder, then who builds us?

Mom and I are quiet. Then she starts asking if I’ve seen this movie with Adam Sandler.

“I think it’s called *Adults,*” she says. “Yes, that’s it. It’s called *Adults.* We all watched it last night.” By all, she means the others there with her, the others in crisis.

I blow on my coffee and take a sip. It’s warm, but I wish it were warmer. I let it cool for too long. I don’t tell my mother that I know the movie, that she’s wrong, that it’s not called *Adults* but something else. I don’t tell her a lot of things, like about my girlfriend leaving me and taking her spaz cat with her. Mom hated my white girlfriend and would like it too much that she left. I don’t tell Mom that I got the job, that I’m driving truck now for UPS. My father drove truck for them before Mom and he were married. They’re divorced, have been for years. And my father’s dead. Maybe that’s why I don’t tell Mom about the job, don’t want her to tell me not to be like my father. She’s dramatic like that.

“It’s a riot,” Mom says about the movie. “You have to see it.”

I say I’ll check it out, that I bet it’s funny, but I know I won’t watch it.

When Mom talks she’s always looking for words. Something isn’t quite right with her brain. The trauma. It’s always been that way, but she’s taking longer than usual to find the word. Then she stares off and she doesn’t communicate her thought.

“Ma?” I say.

She looks at me, doesn’t say anything. She straightens the two unopened packs of cigarettes on the table in front of her and sips her coffee.

“I’m so tired,” Mom says. “I haven’t slept in four nights.”

See? First three nights and now four. She’s dramatic, has to up everything. I wonder if she has slept or if she’s lying.

The front door buzzer rings and one of the staff—a woman with wide hips and a small head—asks through the intercom how she can help the person. That woman who wanted me to bring her a pack of cigarettes is standing up now, peeking at the door. I get a good look at her. Her name’s Meryl, I think. Mom said that she looks pregnant but that she isn’t. I look at Meryl as she peeks at the door. She looks pregnant. I wonder if one of them is lying.

“It’s my friend,” Meryl says to the staff. The door buzzes and opens. A cold draft rushes over the floor and brushes my ankles like water. I wonder why her friend didn’t get Meryl cigarettes.

Mom asks if I want my coffee heated. I say yes. She heats hers too, in the microwave.

Again, when she brings the heated coffee, I blow and blow on it, watch the steam swirl and feel it dampen my upper lip and nose. It’s too hot to sip. I don’t want the coffee. I want to leave. But I wait before I say anything—she just heated my coffee up.

Mom’s talking again, and I’m listening. She’s saying she hopes she sleeps tonight. “God,” she says. “I need some sleep.”

My coffee’s still too hot to sip, but I want to leave. Want to get home. For what? No one’s there. Emptier than the litterbox. But I want to get away, and so I drink the hot coffee in four sips and burn the shit out of my mouth.

“I don’t mean to rush,” I say to Mom. The coffee mug thuds when I set it down. “But I have to get going.”

“I know you do,” Mom says. “I appreciate your bringing me some smokes.” She pats the top of her packs on the table.

Meryl’s friend is gone, and Meryl’s standing near the long kitchen table. “I have that money,” she tells me. “If you don’t mind getting me a pack.”

I don’t know if I mind, but I’ll go get the cigarettes.

Meryl looks at Mom. “Is that okay?” Maybe Meryl doesn’t know I’m leaving, doesn’t know I said I have to get going. Maybe she thinks she’s interrupting us.

Mom doesn’t say anything, just stares at Meryl.

“There’s a gas station right at the end of the road,” Meryl tells me.

I don’t tell her I know that. “I can get them,” I say to her. “I’ll go right now.”

Meryl’s looking at Mom, though, waiting for Mom to answer her, like my going depends on my mother’s letting me. Then Meryl speaks again. “Is it okay if he runs to the store for me?”

Mom’s not saying anything. She’s tired. I think she’s looking for a word.

“Ma?” I say.

Nothing.

Mom doesn’t look at either of us. And then slowly her head turns and twists until she’s looking up at the ceiling and this noise like a screaming child comes from her mouth, and the next thing I do is say, “Mumma?” wondering what the hell she’s doing. But then she goes straighter and straighter in the chair, like she’s wood, a two-by-four leaning against it, and I rush around the table and hold her. I say, “Mumma? Mumma? What’s wrong?” She doesn’t say anything, and her arms are tightening, curling up toward her throat. She’s . . . she’s—what’s the word? Convulsing. That’s it. That’s the word. I yell to the staff, tell them to help. Meryl’s standing there, arms crossed, watching. She rolls her eyes—rolls her eyes! Fucking bitch.

The staff run over. One staff woman tells Meryl to go in the TV room. She does. Then the staff woman goes outside, tells the people under the gazebo to stay outside, that there is a problem. They all do. The staff woman with the wide hips and small head is on the other side of my mother, helping me hold her still. Hold her in place.

The other staff woman is on the phone with 911.

“She’s having a seizure,” the small-headed woman says.

My mother is shaking, frothing from the mouth, spitting. I watch the spit land on the small woman’s face. I think my mother is choking.

“How long?” the woman on the phone says.

“About a minute” the small-headed woman says. “She’s coming out now.”

My mother’s breathing is slowing, catching.

I’m still holding on. My mother is loosening, struggling to sit up as if it were the first time she ever rose, ever used her muscles. I’m rubbing her back, and I’m thinking about the cigarettes. The cigarettes she always wants. Right then I tell myself I will always bring her cigarettes; right then I tell myself I’ll watch that movie with Adam Sandler.

“Tell them she’s out of her Clonazepam,” the small-headed woman says. “That could be why. A lack of benzos. And she hasn’t slept in three days.”

I’m rubbing my mother’s back. But she has Valium, I think. She told me she has Valium. Different, but still a benzo. Why doesn’t she tell 911 about the Valium?

My mother is sitting up now, and I am still holding her, rubbing her back. She looks at me, tries to speak. But she can’t. She can’t find coherence. Her sentences are mumbled.

A puddle is under the chair.

“Who who who,” my mother is saying. It’s coming, what she wants to say. Piece by piece, she washes on shore.

She’s looking at me. “Who who you?”

“I’m your son,” I say.

She’s scared, is unsure what I tell her.

I don’t repeat to her that I’m her son. I say my name instead, and her mouth and tongue move as if I’d taught her an unpronounceable word, like *isthmus* or *Worcestershire.* But she tries to say it again and again and again, failing each time. Then she gives up and starts to whisper to herself. “I need better . . . I need to get better.” It’s her first coherent sentence.

The ambulance arrives. Seven EMTs. They ask my mother questions. She cannot answer them, and in that she’s truthful.

They put my mother in the gurney and pull her to the front door. Not one of them tells me where they’re taking her. They don’t know I’m her son; even my mother doesn’t know I’m her son. When I try to follow them out the front door, an EMT with thin lips puts his hand up, tells me to stop, says I’m not clear to leave. He thinks I belong here. By a dirty white van—doubles doors open—the exterminator cleans the black boxes. I can’t tell if he watches.

I pretend the EMT’s right, and I wait for them to leave. Through the closed front doors, the EMTs load the gurney with Mom into the ambulance, and the doors slam shut.

The woman with the small head is shaking when she asks if I’m okay. I tell her I am. Then she says they took her to St. Vincent’s.

The puddle is still on the floor. It’s flowing down and away from the table. A river. Or an ocean. Both packs of cigarettes I bought my mother are gone, and I look through the window out back at the gazebo and Meryl is outside with the others, smoking.

In the parking lot of the crisis stabilization unit, I lean on my green car for a while. Eventually she calls my cell from the ER. She says she had a seizure.

“I know,” I tell her. I kick dirt and roll black earth under my foot.

“I was there.”

“What?” she says. “I thought . . . I thought you left.”

I tell her I was getting ready to leave, that Meryl wanted me to get cigarettes for her. I tell her almost everything. How it all happened. But I don’t tell her that I thought she was dying. I don’t tell her how much my legs shook, how my voice quivered when I said “mumma, mumma, mumma.” I don’t tell her how little and alone I felt. I don’t tell her how I’ll always bring her cigarettes, how I’ll watch that movie for sure.

I do tell her, though, that she didn’t know anything when she woke. That she couldn’t speak, that she couldn’t tell the EMTs what day it was or when she was born or who the president is. Maybe it’s good, I tell her, that she didn’t know who our president is, and she laughs at that. I tell her she didn’t know where she was. I tell her that she didn’t know me, didn’t recognize me. Of all the details I tell her, she clings to that one only.

“How did I not know my baby?” she says with a startling sharp breath.

“It’s okay,” I tell her, even though it’s not.

She says the doctor’s coming, that he wants to run some tests.

“I’ll be by soon,” I say.

“What?”

“The emergency room,” I say. “I’ll be by soon.” We say good-bye, hang up.

I knock on the front door of the crisis center. They buzz me in. One staff woman is cleaning the puddle off the floor, and the other is sitting behind the desk.

“I’ve lost something,” I say, and I go out back to the gazebo. Meryl isn’t there with my mother’s cigarettes. The old man who was shaking while he ate his sandwich is sitting outside smoking a long Winston 100. I bum a smoke from him and light it with the red of his lit one.

“You don’t look so good,” he says to me. “You shake like me.” He lifts both hands.

I don’t say anything. The old man picks up his cup of coffee and sips it.

“Damn cold,” he says.

“Let me heat that for you.” I set my cigarette on the picnic table, the lit end dangling off. I take his cup. I wonder if he watches me leave. Watches me go inside. I wonder if he gives a shit. I put the coffee in the microwave and set it for forty-four seconds. I walk to the front door and go out and stand in the parking lot. The exterminator is still there, eight black boxes at his feet. They’re laced by a rope, as if they were fresh meat.

“You supposed to be out front?” he asks me.

I say nothing and get in my car, start it, and reverse—I throw it in drive and peel out and the back right tire thuds over one or two black boxes that crack-crunch. In the rearview mirror the exterminator throws his arms into the air and he runs to the front door to tell the staff—forget him. Ahead, to the north, I’m drawn to the dark-blue clouds like mold, the spray of rain and wind and yellow lightning soon to come over this part of our swell.

It drizzles, and halfway to the hospital I remember my dangling cigarette and the old man’s coffee, remember that I was supposed to bring it to him, and I’m thinking and thinking and thinking at 65 mph on this smooth residential road, until an empty playground, the red swings rocking in the now heavy rain, catches my attention, my breath, and when I snap forward and exhale my car clips a brown telephone pole and spirals onto a cracked concrete lot. Glass shatters and the tumbling momentum flings me and the world upside down right side up and the car and I slide with blue skidding sparks and with the taste of rust in my mouth, and then the car rolls scrapes rolls to a stop. The car is on its side and one small wind could push it on top of me and so no wonder I want to free my leg from where it’s trapped under the side of the car and when I do there is no pain not unlike childhood and red swings and returnables of all hard glass and laughter and the good feelings there in the dark, and when I look at my leg the skin is peeled back my pulsing meat in my face and I grab the flap of skin and flip it over my exposed bone and have you ever tried to walk in such a time of great rupture?

The rain is thick, wet, and cold. The car hisses, steams. The trees and their limbs rustle like my fingers shake. I rise and take but one step, and on the ground I drag myself to the road and there is already a hand on my shoulder turning me over and I see the line of cars with people marching to me, a dozen ships of ideas aiming for this shore once again.

As they did with Mom the EMTs take me and lift me and settle me and poke me and quiet me and I recognize the man who would not let me leave and I say something something something to him but his thin lips shush me and he pokes me again and I sit up to see my skin covered with a red cloth and time lurches forward with such speed to the emergency room that I’m there in a bustling room white curtain pulled closed and blue soft masks floating about me, and it goes how it should go the pain is hitting and a woman is yelling for her baby, and I feel bad that she lost that baby, hope she finds it, and before I’m put under to the sound of her screaming behind the curtain I grab the doc by the sleeve, say to the doc, “Does my mother know I’m here?”