

**Better Left Unsaid**

by Jae Nolan

I'm working on my boundaries.

I have limits.

I refuse to be trapped.

*So why are you flying across the country right now?*

I'm also working on this voice.

'Because she asked,' I reply. 'Because that's what family does,' I reason.

'Because,' I falter, 'What other choice does she have?'

*Trapped,* the voice sneers.

Like anyone in their seventies, my mother's health isn't what it used to be. Her hearing was the first to go. The hearing aids help, but they don't stop her from tuning out the parts of our conversation she'd rather ignore. Next were her teeth. She's finally able to eat more than soup, although she did brag that the lack of solid food reduced her down to a size two. Now it's her eyes. Nothing too serious, just the natural consequences of aging.

Unfortunately, all these predictable ailments don't correspond with an equally predictable way to pay for them. In a humane world, each setback should be manageable. But in the world my family knows, poverty is the thief of humanity.

It took me a long time to accept the truth of what we were. Even now, I slip up. It turns out getting your first lesson in debt from the school lunch lady who takes away your food or using the public library as free daycare weren't universal experiences and are terrible jokes at parties. I blame my lapses on the fact that words like 'poor' or 'poverty' didn't exist in our household. Instead, the curse followed us like shadows, creating a superstition that simply forming our lips around the words would breathe them into existence.

When I turned eighteen, I let the curse fall from my mouth and left. I thought I was alleviating some of the pressure. I thought I was helping. In my mother's eyes my departure was the ultimate betrayal. But how could I stay when I uncovered the first lie about poverty? It didn't matter how hard my mother worked, how fiercely she loved her kids, or how desperately she believed her bad luck was temporary. Grit, love, and faith aren't currencies that banks recognize. Now, every necessary, short-term decision she made over the past thirty years is calling in its debts, culminating in a morbid game of chicken. What goes first, my mother or the roof over her head?

'That's why I'm sitting on this plane,' I explain.

"The total today is \$3,350," says the receptionist.

"I thought the surgery was covered by Medicare?" I ask aghast.

"This specific procedure isn't. If you want to switch to the partially covered Medicare procedure, we'll have to reschedule." She types quickly into the computer. "The next opening would be in six months."

Another six months while my mother can't see. Another cross-country plane ticket so I can take care of her.

*What other choice do you have?* The voice asks. I sigh and hand over my credit card.

"Thank you, sweetie," my mother says, squeezing my arm.

"Don't worry about it," I assure her. "I'll see you in a few hours, okay?"

She waves to me as she follows the nurse into the waiting room.

In the car, I call my wife.

"I'll pay for it," I promise through my sobs. Even though I've been unemployed for the past year, I still have some savings left.

"She isn't your responsibility," I scream, "She knew Medicare wouldn't cover it, and she knew I couldn't refuse. The whole thing was a setup!" I slam my palms onto the steering wheel. The car shudders with the force. Dammit, I can't afford to replace this too.

"It's okay," my wife soothes. She's heard a version of this rant before. "We'll get through this together. What other choice do we have?"

*Why should she pick up the tab for a mother-in-law who thinks she ‘turned her daughter gay?’* The voice interjects. *Why do you let your mother shun her brown daughter-in-law until she needs her money?* And finally, *are you really enough for your wife to keep putting up with your family?* I swallow hard, pushing down the guilt. The voice says everything my wife never would.

The next morning, I find my mother typing quickly on her laptop without magnifying the text to a comically large size. Modern medicine is amazing.

“What are you working on?” I ask. The computer is used almost exclusively for Facebook and addictive games targeting Boomers, so I expect her to proudly show me her high score on Candy Crush. It’s one of the only safe topics of conversation between us.

“My unemployment was denied again,” she mumbles. “This is the fourth week in a row. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Here, let me see if I can figure it out.”

Over the course of six hours, the unemployment website crashes a dozen times. Questions with simple answers lead to missing links and pages of legal jargon. Finally, I admit the ultimate Millennial defeat and call the helpline. The automated call disconnects three times before I slam the phone down. All this work for \$275 a week? The conservative monster who built this system is succeeding at his real goal: forcing people to give up.

*You mean the conservative monster she voted for twice?* The voice whispers.

“I don’t know why it’s so hard,” my mom says, panic rising at the realization that the problem is bigger than her lack of computer literacy.

“It’s intentional. The Governor publicly said he wanted to make this process difficult. He doesn’t want to help people; he wants to punish them.” Usually, I moderate my political opinions around her. She’s learned to do the same. It’s the only way we’ve been able to talk to each other for the past three presidencies. But I’ve lost my patience. She needs to know that her actions have consequences.

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” she whines.

“*To them, being poor is wrong,*” the voice and I say together.

“I’m not like those people who are just trying to take advantage!” she yells.

*“How are you different?”* we respond.

Her lips form a hard colorless line. When they finally open to respond, the small voice behind them shakes. “I’m so ashamed.”

*Now you know what it feels like.* The voice says with righteous indignation.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” I say with forced gentleness.

No one deserves to feel humiliated by a system that should be there to support them; not even someone who cheered it on.

I dreaded coming, but now I’m terrified to leave. The longer I stay the clearer I see the decay. A thousand cuts made over a lifetime. With rest and care the wounds would have healed years ago. Without it, I see the rot in the piles of boxes filled with the false promises of quick fortunes. I smell the mold in between the yellowing paper of unpaid bills. I hear the strangled breath in the ancient car when it struggles to turn over. This life is held together with haphazard stitches and hidden behind soiled bandages. It’s only a matter of time before it all comes undone.

“Thank you for everything,” my mother says, hugging me as tightly as she can, the envelope clutched in her hand.

I wish I could hug her the way I used to, but she is frail and small in my arms. Can this be the same body I ran to for comfort, the body I shrank from during her drunken tirades?

“I was worried you wouldn’t come,” she says smiling.

The tone is gentle, but the message is clear. It wouldn’t be a visit home if it didn’t include one last veiled insult. In her eyes I’m still the daughter who ran away, the one she can’t rely on. Sometimes I just want to scream and ask her what she really thinks of me. Sometimes I just want to say what I really think of her. We never have, and the more entwined our financial futures become, the more I realize we never can.

“You’ve worried enough for a lifetime; you deserve a little peace of mind.” I smile back, giving her a final reassuring squeeze.

At the airport, I call my wife.

“Did she take the money?” She asks.

“Yes. She’s proud, but not stupid,” I respond.

“Will it be enough?”

“It has to be. When I get a job, we can give more.” I pause, letting the weight of the last few days fall. “I love you; I can’t wait to get home.”

“I love you too. Don’t worry, we’ll get through this together.”

*Get through what? How do you get through something that never ends?* It’s the question I’ve asked since I left home. I told myself I was helping by becoming one less thing for my mother to worry about. Now I’ve uncovered the second lie—poverty isn’t temporary, the escape is. I didn’t leave to help her, I left to save myself.

I wanted to have boundaries.

*You ran away.*

Everyone has limits.

*There is no depth to suffering.*

I thought I could escape.

*This is who you are.*

When the only constant is chaos, how can you imagine the future? If a single mistake brings catastrophe, how do you learn to forgive? If everything can be lost in a moment, can you live without fear? What happens to your body, your mind, your love, if those are the only things holding up your fractured world? I saw the answers etched into every line of my mother’s face, the paranoid shadows gathered behind her eyes, the poison edging her words. The stress seeps into your bones, burrows into your brain, and speaks with your mouth.

*Trapped,* it hisses.

“Please,” I beg, “I don’t want to hear it.”

**Jae Nolan** is an emerging writer focused on exploring the complicated connections we hold with ourselves, each other, and the world. She is currently working on her first novel. When not writing, she works to advance social justice issues and explores the beauty of the Pacific Northwest with her wife.