

## Occupational Therapy

It's Tuesday.  
And now that Mom's gone,

it's my job

to take Ginny to the clinic  
on First Street for  
occupational therapy.

Ginny never wants to go.  
She doesn't like  
interacting with people.

So even though it's just  
two blocks away  
it's a long walk  
because Ginny

S T O P S

moving her feet  
along the way.

And I have to tug on her jacket  
to make her move again.

When we arrive,  
Meredith, Ginny's therapist,  
is waiting.

I do my homework  
while I sit in the waiting room.

By the sound of the screeching  
in the other room

you'd think Ginny was being

tortured,

but Meredith is only making  
Ginny play catch.

## Speaking of Torture

Sunny-Day Retirement Home  
Is anything but sunny.

But Ginny just finished OT so me and her  
stroll up to that home,

r e a l l y   s l o w.

carrying a fresh bag of homemade cookies.

I'm dreading that place the whole way.  
Most of those old people are grumpier  
than a cornered skunk,  
and they smell just as bad.

Ginny's happy to be going though,  
because she sits in their craft room  
and sorts through their quilting blocks.

More than anything,  
Ginny loves sorting things.  
So when it's time to go,  
if she's not done,  
she's going to throw  
a major hissy fit.  
And those old people  
never understand Ginny  
and her fits.

They tsk and whisper,  
"All that young lady needs  
is a good strapping."

It doesn't matter how many times  
I tell them  
Ginny isn't wired like everyone else.

They don't listen.

And still they think they can fix her  
by giving her a good whack.

And they tell me about how  
when they were young

if one of their relatives was  
like Ginny and never  
straightened up,  
they'd shut them away into  
special homes  
or mental hospitals.

Secrets  
—embarrassments—

need to be hidden  
from the outside world.

Ginny is not crazy.

Even if she is embarrassing sometimes.

So I don't like being around  
those people.  
But Mom used take her  
so I need to.

## **I'm NOT Lizzy**

Today, after I leave Ginny to  
her sorting, I go to Mrs. Weatherall's room.  
She's nice enough.

If she's not in one of her moods.

She taught Mom as a child. And  
she can tell a good story. As long as  
she remembers who I am,  
visiting her won't be so bad.

When I get to her room,  
Mrs. Weatherall is slouched  
in a chair beside her bed, knitting  
a multicolored scarf  
that would wrap around a giraffe's neck.

She looks at me,  
blinks a few times,  
and smiles.

“Why, Lizzy,  
so nice of you to visit.  
Come sit down.”

I shift my feet  
and stare at the floor.

“I'm not Lizzy. I'm Casey,”  
I try to explain,  
but she's staring at me  
like I'm an idiot  
who forgot my own name.

“Lizzy was my mom,  
remember, Mrs. Weatherall?  
I'm Casey.”

She stares at nothing for a bit  
and gets the same distant look  
Ginny gets when she's off  
in her own world.

“Oh right, Casey...”

Her voice is quiet  
like she doesn't remember  
but is pretending that she does,  
and the smile fades off her face.

"How is your Mom?"

"Mom died last month,  
Mrs. Weatherall."

Mrs. Weatherall stands,  
faster than I thought  
an old lady could.  
She smacks her cane against the tile floor,  
making me drop the cookies  
and jump back.

"Don't you come in here  
lying to me, Lizzy!"  
She takes a step toward me.  
And smacks her cane on the floor again.

"Always getting yourself  
into some kind of trouble, you are.  
Thinking you deserve better  
than everyone else."

She slams the cane down again.

"You're a troublemaker,  
Lizzy McCall, a troublemaker  
through and through."

I back away.  
Trying to get into the hallway,  
I keep my eyes on  
that waving cane the whole time.  
She keeps flipping out at me  
saying some bad things  
about Mom.

She gets so worked up and so loud  
the nurses come flying into the room  
to calm her down.

But not before she can turn to me and say,  
“Don’t you *ever* come back here,

don’t you *ever*  
come back!”

I brush the tears off my face  
and run, shaking, back to the craft room.

I pick up Ginny  
before she has a chance  
to finish the blocks that need sorting.

“Quilt blocks!”  
She yells, reaching for them.

I tug her by the hand, out the door,  
and down the steps, walking  
toward home so quick  
she has to run to keep up.

“Quilt blocks?  
Quilt blocks?”  
She sobs.

“Forget about the quilt blocks, Ginny.  
Just forget about them,” I say.  
“We’re not going back.  
That lady doesn’t know  
what she’s talking about.  
She’s just a crazy old hag.”  
I sniff and tug on Ginny’s hand again.

“QUILT BLOCKS!”

“WE ARE NOT GOING BACK!”

No matter what Mom wanted,  
we’re not going back, Ginny.  
Not ever.”

## **Bad Birthdays**

Ginny turned seven today.  
And I feel terrible  
that no one but me remembered  
her birthday. So I bake a cake.

I'm careful to follow the recipe  
and watch it baking,  
like Mom taught me.

And even though I know  
taking time to bake,  
instead of doing the laundry,  
is going to give me  
more work tomorrow.

I do it.

Because I know,  
if I don't,  
no one else will.  
And that would be  
a bad day for Ginny.  
Even if she doesn't remember  
it's her birthday.

## Calling Dad

It would have taken less time  
to walk to the restaurant  
and ask Dad to come home  
than to call him.

It takes him ten minutes to  
come to the phone.

“Is everything okay, Casey?”

“Yes, fine. It’s just  
I made supper.  
Can you—?”

“Don’t let those plates go out  
looking like that! Lulu,  
help him fix these plates up!”

“Dad?”

“Sorry, Case,  
we’re right in the middle  
of the supper rush.  
What did you need?”

“It’s Ginny’s birthday.  
I made a cake.  
Are you coming to sing  
‘Happy Birthday’?”

Dad doesn’t answer.

“Dad? Are you still there?”

“Lulu, I have to leave for a few.  
Keep an eye on the new guy.  
Make sure he doesn’t mess up,”  
Dad yells over tingling utensils.  
“Be home—”  
A huge crash of dishes interrupts him.  
He sighs. “Be home  
as soon as I can, Case.”

“Okay.”

“And Case.”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Thanks  
for making a cake.”

## Ginny's Fits

I wait for an hour

but Dad doesn't show,

so I set the cake in front of Ginny.  
And strike a match to

light the candles

poked into the top so she can  
blow them out

and make a wish,  
like a little kid should.

But Mom and Dad not here  
changes everything

and throws Ginny into  
tantrum mode.

Ginny doesn't  
like

Change

She flips the cake  
across the table. It  
my juice glass.

crashes against

turns as purple  
as the juice  
splotch

Ginny

c r e e p i n g

into the white  
tablecloth.

I try to dab  
the splotch

quickly

before it spreads.

But Ginny's being  
a pain.

She's throwing food all

through  
the kitchen.  
She's screaming  
like

her world  
is ending.

I want to leave.

Run away.

But if I go  
I'd be

tearing Ginny  
apart.

## Trying to Calm Her

I cradle her.  
“It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Rock with her.  
Whisper.  
Rub her back  
through her shirt.

But her tears continue.

I reach to clean up a bit.

She pushes me away.  
And throws everything  
she can reach. Until  
I pull her away from the table  
and drag her to her bed.

I run to my room,  
curl up in the corner  
behind my bed. And  
cover my ears  
trying to muffle the sound of

Ginny’s sobbing.

## **Smothering Fits**

If Mom were here,  
none of this would have happened.

Dad would have come home  
and Ginny wouldn't have thrown a fit.

But now everything is  
messed up for Ginny

And Mom isn't here to make it  
right again.

I have to be the one to do it,  
and I can't calm Ginny  
like Mom could  
no matter how  
hard  
I try.

I can't smother  
those fits.

## Hiding

Later, Dad stumbles into my room,  
waking me up.

“Casey!  
You better get into that kitchen  
and clean up that mess.”

I can’t move,  
my legs have fallen asleep.

He flicks on my light  
and steps farther into my room,  
kicking one of my stuffies  
across the floor.

“Casey? I don’t have time  
for your games.”

I can smell his anger.  
It smells like the wine  
he’s been dipping into.  
And it’s telling me  
to stay hidden.

My heart speeds up,  
as he steps closer.  
I could reach out and trip him,  
but that would get me into more trouble,  
so I stay frozen,  
a mouse  
hunted by a snake.

Dad turns to walk away,  
stops and bends.

He reaches behind the bed  
and yanks me out  
by my arms.

“Now.”

“I’m going!  
I’m going.”

## Burning Mad

I scramble off the floor  
and get to the kitchen  
as fast as I can.

“If I see a mess  
like that in my kitchen again  
you’ll be grounded for a month.”  
Dad says as he heads for the couch.  
“With Mom gone, you’re going to have to  
help around the house.  
I can’t do everything.”

“I know. I know.  
I have to do it.  
I’m sorry.  
I was going to clean it,  
but I fell asleep.”

The cake is smooshed  
into the tablecloth  
and I doubt it’ll ever come out  
but I clear off the table  
and put the cloth in the hamper anyway.

Dad’s sitting  
on the couch drinking his wine,  
not lifting a finger to help.

And because he’s not helping  
I’m banging things in the kitchen  
louder than I should.

But it doesn’t matter,  
because he’s not  
paying attention  
to me.

He just sits,

and drinks,

sits

and drinks.

When I'm done cleaning,  
I curl into the covers on my bed  
knowing Mom is up in heaven  
looking down at me  
and shaking her head,

ashamed.

## Let Me Disappear

Just thinking about  
the mess  
I made out of the day  
makes me squeeze my pillow tight,  
and close my eyes,  
hoping to disappear into  
the fire left

*Burning*  
inside my head.

## Things I Need to tell Mom

I'm sorry I'm such a failure.

I'm trying my hardest.

I'm sorry I'm letting you down.

I need you, Mom.

So does Ginny and Dad.

Why? Why? Why?  
Did you have to die?

Why couldn't it have been  
someone else's MOM?

I can't do this by myself.

## More Smoke

When I hear Dad snoring  
in the next room,  
I roll out of bed,  
and sneak outside.

I head for the alley  
behind Old Pete's restaurant  
where the garbage cans are full  
of the grease-smear'd newspaper  
he wraps his fish and chips in.

And I light a match.

my fire reaches  
for the skies and  
sends my note flying  
T O W A R D M O M.  
T  
H E  
S M O K E O F

## The Fire

It's beautiful,

blue, orange, and yellow.

Small at first,  
it gets bigger,

as I feed it, until

it rages,

and I feel its power,

rushing through my blood

giving me hope

by sending my  
note higher

until the sirens scream  
and I know the fire  
will be put out

before my note  
reaches Mom.

## Ashes Ashes

I turn to run,  
but smack right into Ginny,  
almost knocking her off her feet.  
She just stands there in the alley,  
staring at the fire behind me with  
empty eyes.

“Ashes, ashes we all fall down,” she says.

“Come on, Ginny.”

I grab her in my arms,  
to carry her home,  
but she kicks my shins  
and pushes me, screaming  
at the top of her lungs,

“ASHES, ASHES  
we all fall down!”

She throws herself backward  
toward the ground.

I lose my grip.  
And Ginny falls  
and runs  
back to the alley to  
watch the fire.

The sirens are getting closer  
and I try to drag her away,  
but she’s fighting.

The sirens are even closer  
and I can’t be found by a fire  
I set,  
because if I am,  
that’ll only make things  
harder for Dad.

I pull her hand to come,  
but she won’t listen  
because I’m not Mom.

And Ginny keeps screaming,  
“Ashes ashes!”

That’s when I remember  
what I told her at the funeral  
and why she keeps looking  
into fireplaces.

Ginny is trying to reach Mom, too.

## Leaving Ginny

The sirens come up the street.

I HAVE to go,  
because I can't be

caught,

so I leave her behind,

staring  
at the flames  
looking for Mom and  
whispering,

“Ashes, ashes  
we all fall down.”

## Sorry Mom

I watch them.  
Hiding from the alleyway  
across the street,

I watch, as the firemen find Ginny  
mesmerized by the fire.

Mesmerized  
by whatever she sees in her  
own world.

Mesmerized  
by nothing—like always.

They find Ginny.  
The one Mom told me care for,  
the one I promised to care for,  
the one I left behind.

They find her,  
and she won't tell any of them  
the truth,

and neither will I.

## Trouble

By the time I get home,  
there's a fireman  
standing in the kitchen,  
talking to Dad.

I sneak in the basement window,  
change into the pjs I had in the laundry,  
spray my head with air-freshener,  
and climb upstairs  
pretending  
I fell asleep  
in the spare bedroom  
when I couldn't sleep

in the heat

of my own room.

## The Biggest Lie

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“Casey?” Dad gives me  
a strange look as I come  
from the basement.

I see the fireman is Dad’s  
old friend.  
“Why is Dave here  
in uniform?  
Did something happen  
in the restaurant?”

“They found Ginny  
standing by a fire behind Old Pete’s.  
They don’t think she set it,  
but she was out there,  
wandering around alone.”

I look at Ginny  
rocking on the couch,  
“How’d she get out there?  
Was she sleepwalking?  
She’s done that before,  
remember, Dad?  
When Mom first got sick.”

Dad nods,  
“That’s what we think,  
but she was awake  
when they found her.”

“Probably confused,” Dave says.  
“I’m just glad I was there.”

“I’ll keep a closer eye on her, Dave,” Dad says.  
“I just never expected...  
Thank God you were on duty,  
and she didn’t end up with someone else.”

“I’m glad it was me too.  
Had it been someone else  
she might have ended up

at the police station  
and a full report been filed.”

Dad stares through me  
like he knows  
what really happened.

I look away from his eyes,  
and go to Ginny. Wrapping  
her in my arms to make her stop rocking,  
but she pushes me away.

I try again,  
and she screams,

so I just sit beside her, touching her hair,  
wishing more than anything,  
she'd just look at into my eyes, to see

I'm sorry

but Ginny avoids people's eyes.

And I can't get enough air  
into my lungs,  
knowing that because  
I left her  
behind,

I could have lost her.

## **Locks**

As soon as I wake up  
I screw a lock  
on Ginny's bedroom door  
so she doesn't follow me  
outside at night again,  
and she'll stay with us

forever.