

Belongings by Marley Stuart

There's this rock at the base of the Magnolia out back. I can see it from the kitchen windows, and I find it a little odd – rocks are not a normal thing around here. Pea gravel, sure. Oyster shell, you bet. But *rocks*? It's right where I'll dig the flowerbeds, once I get around to it, where the sun first touches the ground in the morning. Right in the way.

It's hard for me to get something out of my mind, once it finds a way in.

I take one of Daisy's pills as soon as I get back to the house. Brown, chalky triangles that taste like dirt. Okay, I take two. But she weighs a lot less than I do – I'll have to up the dosage to feel anything at all. I'm not drinking anymore and I think I deserve a little fun. Daisy looks at me as if to say, Do whatever you want. It's your life.

Then I think about how much she's hurting, and I want to cry. So I stuff a pill into a piece of Velveeta and toss it to her. There. That will help out the taste. See, I'm not so bad.

My friends tell me Daisy is a ridiculous name. "She's black, Lauren," they say. "Why name a black dog Daisy?"

"What, and call her Shadow instead? Or Midnight? Too predictable." And besides, I think, who asked you?

My friends tell me a lot of things I can't stand. But I don't let them stop me. They say the house is too big for just *me*. Well, it's not. An old wooden two-story with a fenced in back yard. Nice slat shutters on the front windows and a small porch. I like the feeling of waking up in a house that's *mine*, no one else's. I can walk down the creaking stairs in the morning, make

coffee, and look out the kitchen windows into the yard, at this little section of the world that's mine. Mine alone.

And besides, that's why I got Daisy. To keep me company. I wanted a big, dumb, goofy Lab who'd run up and down the stairs, jump in bed, slobber on the linen sheets, and dart out again, barking. We'd go to the river and I'd watch her crash through the brown water. And since I rescued her from the damp cages of the shelter, she would love me forever. But once I saw Daisy – a total mutt – sort of small and compact and all back except for a white diamond on her triangular forehead, that was it.

She's old, sure, with a bad hip to boot. The vet said her arthritis was too bad for me to walk her, but the pills would help with the pain. So we just take short trips out back, and that's enough.

We're going to spruce this place up, starting with the back yard. Periwinkle and Blue Daze where the sun is good, and maybe a checkerboard pattern of Begonias and Touch-me-nots in the shade of the Magnolia. I've been reading up on this for a while. I'll plant bulbs, too, so they'll keep coming back each year. Spider lilies with their delicate eyelashes and some nice big Louisiana irises. In the winter, when the plant above has died, the bulb simply goes dormant and waits for the time to grow again.

I used to love summer, before I had the restaurant. The calm, buzzing mornings and stifling days, loud nights. The heat never bothered me – sweating is good for your skin, right? But now summer means the college kids leave town and business slows. The place basically runs itself with the help I've got and there's less for me to do over there. But now I've got the house and can focus all my attention on making it comfortable. I'm going to get to where I love summer again.

As soon as the Magnolia blooms, I'll pluck the first flower and float it in a bowl of water on the kitchen table. It should have bloomed already – I've seen other trees around town full of the large, white blossoms. That's okay; it will. My place will be full of life by the time June rolls around. God, how nice it is to say that. *My place.*

Well, Daisy, want to watch a movie with Mama? She wags her tail and stares at me when I lie down on the couch. Go on, I say, get in your bed. She hangs her head and limps over there. God, how sad. I hope the pills help her. They're certainly not doing much for me. Yeah, it's a little sad taking the dog's pain medicine, but at least I'm not driving to a gas station for a plastic bottle of vodka and finishing half of it on the way home, right?

Daisy, across the room on her bed, looks at me. Good job, she says. Every day without a drink is a victory. Small victories or huge defeats make up the day of a recovering alcoholic, she says. Not that you're an alcoholic.

Okay, baby, come here. I whistle and she limps over and climbs up with me, whapping her tail on the cushions. Good dog. We watch pay-per-view together all night, my arms around her like she's a big teddy bear.

I lived in a tiny apartment for four years while the restaurant was getting started. But I did it – I paid off the startup loans, I bought this house. Once it was mine, I walked through every room and opened every closet and drawer. All this space, I thought, all mine. Even the small things were dire: floral shelf paper in the kitchen cabinets, white paint on the upstairs bathroom mirror, flimsy curtain rods left above all the windows.

Just the idea of owning a house that other people used to own excites me. Somehow I belong to them, like family.

Inside a drawer in the kitchen, I found a photograph. Its glossy front was stuck to the back of the drawer and part of the image ripped off when I pulled it free. Must have glued itself there when the temperature rose into triple digits, some summer past. I looked at the photo a long time, and now I keep it in the drawer of my bedside table. It shows a woman, my age or younger, standing in front of this house. She is pregnant and she rests her hands on her hips, as if to show off her round, bulging belly and large breasts. Her hair is black and short, cut right at the jaw. Other than the hair, she looks a little like me – sharp cheekbones and a slender neck. Creamy skin. I can't tell the color of her eyes, but I imagine they are walnut, like mine. She's smiling, a little crooked smile that tells me she's got everything she could ever want.

The house behind her, cut in half by the white tear going down the front of the photo, is painted robin's egg blue. Now it is faded white. The bare wood shows through in patches. So who knows how old the photo is?

I take it out before I sleep, or when I wake sometimes. What was this woman's name? Who took the picture? Where did they go?

Daisy stays right by my side when I take her out back. Limping along and looking up at me every now and then. It's good having a dog. Someone to talk to, to hang out with. We go around the back yard and I ask her where the flowerbeds ought to go. I feel as if we've always had each other, even though it's only been a week or so.

The back yard is three fourths of an acre with a nice, tall fence. The wooden planks reach a good two feet above my head. There's a gate with a black latch off to the left that opens onto the sidewalk, but I've got no need for that. I just go from the house to the yard, and back again. Daisy limps around the perimeter of the fence, her nose to the ground.

You better not pee on my flowers once I put them in, I tell her. I'll have to get rid of you.

She looks at me as if to say, Yeah right. You wouldn't.

Yep. Throw you right in the river.

She goes on sniffing the fence. Just watch, lady, she says, and I'll get rid of *you*. Don't you know I've lived a while now?

I imagine her voice as an old, sassy black woman's. But sometimes the voice changes and she's soft and sweet and needs me. We go back and forth. And I need her – she makes me feel like I have someone, even after I ruined every relationship I was ever in.

You want another pill, Daisy? You hurting? It's about time, right?

Right at my feet is the rock. The roots of the Magnolia, like two legs, spread off to either side. There's no grass here in the shade of the tree, just smooth gray clay and bright green moss. A thin layer of moss covers the rock, too. I crouch down and lean close. This rock has got to go.

What do you think, Daisy? Her sharp face is right up by mine, but she's got nothing to say, so we go back inside and take more pills.

My friends say I'm exhausting. I think that's a poor choice of words. I'm *not* exhausting.

They're just peeved that I don't consult them on every decision I make. You've got to fill us in, they say. Well, I didn't tell them before I bought the old bakery and turned it into *Phillies*, and now look – it's a hit.

*Phillies* is an old school street-front diner on a corner downtown. Fourteen stools are bolted to the sidewalk in front of the L-shaped wooden counter, and people can just wander off the street and sit down. No dining room at all, just those stools and the wide counter under a red and gold awning. College kids love the immediacy of the place, a quick stop for late night meals

or early morning coffee. In the first couple years it was open, we closed on summer nights, pulled metal screens down from the ceiling and locked them to hasps set into the counter. But now that business is picking up, we stay open all the time.

I didn't tell my friends before I bought this house because they'd only purse their lips and shake their heads slowly, like they all know what is best for me and this is definitely *not it*. And I haven't said anything, yet, about Daisy.

When I said I wasn't drinking anymore, God. You should have heard the racket. Oh, sure Lauren. How long will that last? And what are *we* supposed to do?

Just be my friends, I wanted to say. *You* don't have to quit. But they took it as an insult, like I think I'm better than they are for holding out against the familiar urge.

Not exhausting, I want to tell them. Impulsive, sure. But, more so, I'm persistent. I follow through. *Phillies*, case in point. And when my yard is beautiful, I'll point at the bushes, creeping vines, and ferns and tell them, Look. This is what I can do.

They'd probably say I spend too much time with a dog, that I need to get out more. But how do you go out and not drink? There's probably a happy medium somewhere between stone cold sober and what I used to be before, but I haven't found it yet. Sobriety is what I've found, and it is consistent, so I'll stick to it as long as I can. My friends don't know the comfort in that, let alone the company of a good dog. But they're all married and complain about their husbands, grumble over the price of tuition. They tell me I was lucky to get out while I still could, before I had children. You can have as many boyfriends that you want, they say. But what if I don't want boyfriends?

I want to tell them that they are the lucky ones for having working marriages and children of their own. Someone to call you Mom. Yeah, I'm sure there are plenty of headaches involved, but that's got to sound nice. Mom.

Or, do we only want what we don't have?

Some nights, I head over to *Phillies* for dinner. It's a little late tonight, but that's the beauty of a 24-7. It's never too late. If I was the sort of woman who had a thing for slogans, I might get *It's never too late* printed on the awning in huge golden letters. Thank God I'm not. This place has survived here, where so many other businesses have failed, because it's simple. Clean. No need for slogans – people know the damn place is open all night.

I see Dennis from a block away, his head down, concentrating on his work behind the counter under those bright lights. He's black, shorter than me, and fit. Got hands so wide he can make a fist around a tumbler, and dark scars on the knuckles from years of kitchen work. I used to hit on him when he first started, but he never took my bait. Pissed me off, because I'm damn good looking. Everyone's told me that, my whole life. It worked out for the best, though, because now he's a true friend. Someone I can talk to.

“Hey girl,” he says as I sit on a stool. “What brings you out and about?” He places a glass of water on a paper napkin in front of me.

“Oh, just checking on the place.”

“Well,” he says and holds his arms out to the empty counter, the empty stools, “here it is. How's it look?”

I glance around, a slight smile twitching on my lips. “Same as ever.”

“Bullshit. You know we usually pack 'em in.”

“Yeah, but it slows down this time of year. Just how it is.”

“You got that right. Can I make you something, or are you just here to chat? Either one is fine with me.”

I sip my water. A warm breeze blows the napkin across the counter, and I set my hand on it before it can fly away. “Boy that feels good. I’m ready for summer.”

“We did have a cold one, this year.”

I nod. “Do we have shrimp?”

“Yes ma’am. Watcha want?”

“Shrimp and grits, please. You make the best.”

“You got it.”

While he’s cooking, a man and woman sit down at the other end of the counter. They smile at me then look the menu up and down. The man has on a gray porkpie hat with a black band and the woman wears an orange sundress. Straps digging into her shoulders. Someone should tell her when a dress fits her, and when it doesn’t. Dennis winks at me from the stove. “Like a magnet, girl. That’s how it always is.”

“What’s good here?” the man in the hat asks Dennis.

“Oh, just about everything.” He scoops the grits onto my plate, snatches three fat shrimp from the skillet with silver tongs, and drops them onto the white mounds. Finally – and I know he loves his job by the way he does it – he pours on the drippings and brings me the plate.

“That looks great,” says the man in the hat. “We’ll have two of those, please.”

“You got it.”

Who wears a porkpie hat? I want to ask. But I just keep quiet, eat my food.

Dennis talks them up while he cooks. He's perfect for this place – makes the customer feel valued. Like they sat down at the last warm and homey place in the world. You can buy good food just about anywhere, but comfort and conversation – that's what sets us apart.

Their eyes light up when he serves them. The woman claps, she's so excited. They start eating, and Dennis turns back to the stove to bring the skillet to the sink. God, I envy him. He gets to run this place all night and feel the warm breeze pass over the counter, talk to customers and cook for them. During the day, I'm stuck in the small back office, writing checks and looking over invoices. I'd like to strap on an apron and just cook with him, sometimes.

But that's crazy. You're one crazy woman, he'd say. Wanting to come over here and cook when you don't have to. Go out and do something, girl. Spend your time doing what you want with the people you love. You're free! he'd say. Free! You don't have to punch a clock no more and don't you know that's the end goal? Free as can be, so what are you doing still coming here at all?

On an impulse, driving back from *Phillies* one day, I swing by a salon. Not the normal place I get my hair cut, but a small gray building near the railroad tracks with a blinking sign in its window. Inside, it smells like that blue stuff where the ladies soak their combs. They've got a big silver fan in the corner that lifts the covers of magazines in the waiting area. I flip through one, not really looking at the pictures, until the stylist tells me to come over and get shampooed, if I'm ready.

"I love your hair," she says with a Spanish accent as I lean back into the sink.

“Thank you.” Everyone has always told me that. The water is warm and washes over my hair, making it heavy. The woman’s strong hands massage my scalp with coconut-scented shampoo. I close my eyes. I’ve always loved getting my hair washed at a salon.

“What were you thinking?” she asks once I’m sitting in the barber chair, facing the mirror. She’s tall and has the body of a mother many times over – full and curvy. I think she’s gorgeous.

“Much shorter. Around here.” I hold a hand to my jaw line. “I brought a picture. Something like this.” I give her the photo I found in the drawer.

“Okay, a classic cut.” She hands back the photo and selects a pair of scissors from the counter. “She is so pretty.”

“My mom,” I say, staring at my own eyes in the mirror.

“Really?” A smile spreads across her face. She starts cutting away, the scissors clicking right behind my ears. “Well, she will be proud to see you looking sharp with this new cut. Looking just like her.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Daisy and I start going on walks. Forget the vet, I say, we’ve got to get out. I lift the latch of the fence gate and we head on down the sidewalk. And she loves it. She trots ahead of me, pulling the new leash tight. Maybe all she needed was to get out of that horrible shelter and find someone who loves her. She sniffs at grass growing in the sidewalk cracks and lets her tongue hang out, smiling the whole time. Sure, a dog can smile.

It’s nice being in the south part of town. Quiet during the day, and at night I can hear music from the bars a few blocks away. It’s nice at this distance, the music, faint and sweet. Oak

trees bend low towards the street from every front yard, reaching out their arms. Most of the houses are like mine – old, wooden, pushed close to the sidewalk. Plenty have nice flowers. This one place on the corner a few blocks from home has the prettiest Azaleas I’ve ever seen. The bushes are chest high, bookending the front porch, and bursting with hundreds of pink blossoms.

What about Azaleas, I ask Daisy, should we try them out?

Fine by me, she says, her head down, walking fast and limping only slightly.

They take a while to get started, though, I say. A lot of work.

It’s up to you, she says. Whatever makes you happy.

The calm breeze feels great on my neck. I should have cut all my hair off a long time ago. I feel lighter, like I could jump on up into the sky, if I wanted.

The smell of wet dirt makes me close my eyes and breathe deep. I let my fingers play along the fronds of ferns and imagine I’m not at the Feed and Seed in the center of town, but a jungle. Some tropical place far from here, with rich soil and booming greenery. Birds call above the screened roof and I imagine they’re parrots, yellow, red and green, flashing cartoon beaks and chomping giant grasshoppers that leap into the air.

I go in the side door and walk the aisles to the front of the store. They never seem to sweep here – hay and dried mud from people’s boots fill the bare concrete aisles. I love it.

The woman behind the counter smiles at me. “Need any help, just let me know.”

“Yes ma’am.”

But I know exactly what I need: A shovel, garden soil, Cypress mulch. A wheelbarrow and balanced fertilizer. Some nice gloves and a trowel. Of course, the plants themselves. I’ll pick up some sprouted bulbs and seedlings from the screened plant room, my favorite place here.

They've got so much to choose from – Dahlias, Irises, and Zinnias. Big Boston ferns in hanging pots, throwing spiked shadows. A whole slew of vegetables. But I just want flowers, to make the place look nice, to bring butterflies.

On the drive home, I try not to look at the gas stations with beer signs in their windows. Try not to think of ice cold vodka. The way it danced on my tongue and down my throat. It gets a little easier, every day.

Daisy's happy to see what I've got. Her tail's going like a damn ceiling fan as I set the tray of seedlings on the counter beside her pill bottle.

Just wait till you see what Mama does to the back yard. You won't recognize it.

When I go back to the car for the wheelbarrow, which I shoved upside-down in the back seat, she stays in the doorway like a child told not to venture into the front yard.

How's your hip, baby? I open the fridge and get the block of Velveeta. Her tail swishes on the floor as I cut off a chunk and stuff a pill into it. I pop one, too, and chew it up. Poor Daisy. Probably thinks this is some magic cheese that makes her pain go away. I know those walks are good for her, though. If she'd be in pain anyway, why not at least enjoy the fresh air, too? I pull on my gloves, stuff the trowel into the back pocket of my jeans, and watch her gobble the orange cheese off the linoleum.

We go around the back yard with the shovel and wheelbarrow. Want to plan it out, to see where to start. I realize this will be a lot of work, turning this empty back yard into a teeming paradise. God. Need to do something, though, even if it does break my back. Daisy sniffs my ankle as I walk along the fence, imagining wide, red rows with healthy flowers in a zigzag down the center. Years from now thick bushes will bloom every spring. Then maybe I'll paint the house. Robin's egg blue, or something.

Soon I'm standing over the rock. The sun hits this spot first in the morning and the tree gives shade halfway through the day. Perfect spot for shade plants. Birds titter in the tree above me as I start to work. The clay is hard but I'm able to dig around the rock, wedge the shovel's blade under, and pry it up. A truck revs its engine a block away. Crouching my knees and keeping my back straight, I grab the rock and stand up, wrenching it out of the ground, and drop it into the wheelbarrow with a bang. I'm not really sure what to do with it, so I wheel it over to the house and dump it out, then go back to start digging.

I fill the wheelbarrow with the clay that I dig up. Daisy waits a few feet back, watching me. It feels good to be working, to start to change this place. I'll dig a nice long trench about a foot down, mix up that clay with compost and garden soil, and lay this first bed. I can see it now – a long mound, humped a bit above the ground and covered in that nice red Cypress mulch.

The shovel strikes something hard. A sharp scrape. I kneel to scoop away the clay with my hands and find bricks laid carefully down at the bottom of the hole. I rub them slowly, feeling the rough texture through the gloves. Why would someone put bricks in the ground? Maybe there's a time capsule buried underneath, a sealed Ball jar with a hundred-year-old note inside. I imagine reading exquisite cursive on yellow paper. Sweat tickles my neck. Maybe there are more photos, too.

Each brick comes free with a firm tug. Beneath them is only more clay. Maybe it's down a ways. Using the trowel, I carefully dig a bit deeper. Don't want to break the jar. My heart flutters when I hit something hard, but it's only a finger-thick root lying in my way. I hack through it, toss it aside, and dig deeper. The clay is lighter now. Down on my knees, I feel around with my hands. Then – a dark triangle. There's something here. Some kind of fabric,

maybe old leather. I scoop away clay from the surface. A blanket, brownish black, bundled up. Thick and rough. I stop for a second, hear only my breathing.

Daisy looks on. Waiting. You've gone this far, she says, might as well keep going.

I work my arms around the bundled blanket and lift it out. It weighs no more than an armful of leaves and the material falls apart in my hands. My forearms are streaked with black when I set it on the ground. Blood beats in my ears. I fold aside the blanket.

The gray curve of bones smile up at me. Black eye sockets, hanging jawbone. The skull is large, disproportionate. My throat goes dry and my tongue feels too big for my mouth. Tiny ribs, some broken. A delicate spine. I turn and heave into the grass. Nothing comes up and my body shakes with convulsions. Daisy is licking my face, trying to comfort me. I can feel my heart beating in each hand that lies flat on the ground, as if the earth itself is thrumming.

Finally I am able to breathe and I rock back on my heels. Glowing motes pulse in my vision. I can hear the bugs buzzing above me. I can hear everything – cars far off on the highway, Daisy's quick breath, my heartbeat. She sniffs the bones. God.

If I had flowers, I'd cut them all down. I'd gather them in armfuls and spread them in the hole, a beautiful bed for the child. But I have nothing.

My legs are numb as I walk back to the house. Daisy follows, always by my side. I touch the cap of her pill bottle, then remove my gloves and leave them on the counter. We go up the stairs to my room, and back down. The rock is by the backdoor where I dumped it, and I shiver as I go past. What the hell do I do with that? When I reach the back of the yard, I place the old photo among the bones, then slowly fold up the stiff, dirty blanket, and lower the bundle back into the earth. Daisy watches as I shovel in loose clay and place the bricks back, one by one.

It's long after dark when I finish. Every muscle in my body cries out as I sit down in the thick grass, Daisy beside me, her head in my lap. The night bugs crash on overhead and their music is sweet relief. Tomorrow I'll put the seedlings in, but it feels good to have gotten the bed done. A long mound running across the yard in the way back, just as I imagined. The Magnolia standing tall as ever behind the row. Even now, it is getting ready to bloom. Even now, as the stars poke out in the clear sky and music from the bars drifts over to my little corner of the world, its leaves are spreading in the moonlight, opening like hands to catch the sun when it rises in the morning.