

Olivia Johnson

## Guilt

The wooden door slams behind the two women as they walk into the kitchen, letting their keys jingle onto the old ceramic dish positioned by the front door. Their exhaustion is evident, one woman slumps onto the lumpy couch in the nearby living room, not even bothering to kick off her mud-caked boots. The other woman just leans against the aged tiled countertop, staring down at her own dirty shoes.

Nola, the woman leaning on the countertop, locks her eyes on a spec of dirt a few inches from her shoes. She's a statue, keeping vigil over the pile of plates piling up in the sink beside her. Piper, her partner on the couch, slowly rightens herself in order to remove her boots, trying to keep some semblance of normalcy. The mud flakes off in jagged pieces as Piper moves them by the door, not wanting to upset Nola. She moves to the countertop

Both women stay motionless, the previous events playing out in their minds like a distorted horror movie

"Nola," Piper looks at her. "It wasn't your fault."

"Yes it was," whispers Nola, only her eyes moving to focus on Piper. Her hands clutch the side of the countertop, a superhero trying to stop a moving train.

"I can't keep talking about it anymore, that's all I've talked about for the past five hours," Piper places her head on top of her crossed arms. "If I think about it any more, I'm gonna explode."

There's a silence.

"I can't stop seeing her," Nola's eyes return down to the spec of dirt, not wanting to meet Piper's gaze. She has to fill the emptiness in the house that she'd created.

“Then talk to a therapist about it, I’m not in the headspace right now to deal with your trauma too.” Piper lifts her head, pointedly. “She’s my daughter after all.”

Nola straightens her back, furrowing her eyebrows as she looks at Piper. She takes a step forward, leaning against the kitchen island. “Oh, don’t pull that bullshit with me. I’ve been in her life for three years now. She calls me ‘Mumma,’ that seems like she would qualify as my daughter too!”

Piper stands up off of the stool, meeting Nola’s eyes. Even though she is shorter than Nola, she takes up the entire kitchen with her rage, forcing Nola to shrink back from her. Piper shakes her head. “A real mother would’ve cared that her daughter almost died today.”

There’s a theme song to some kids show playing when they make the turn. Nola is driving, and Piper has just made a joke from the backseat about how kids aren’t afraid of sharks nowadays.

“Just wait until we show Eloise *Jaws*! She’s never gonna want to listen to this song again!” Nola laughs as she makes the left turn. The flashing red light is the last thing Nola sees before a car slams into their rear right side door, where Eloise’s car seat is. No noise and yet every noise is resounding in Nola’s ears as the car flips over the hill.

The next thing that Nola remembers is blue, the brightest kind of blue that makes you think the world is actually one big simulation. Nothing natural could be that vibrant.

She looks back and sees Piper’s black mane trailing behind her like a comet. The calmest sense of panic overcomes Nola, as she unbuckles her seatbelt and climbs her way over the front seat to Piper, careful to avoid the mosaic of sharp glass that litters the car.

“Piper, love, wake up!” Nola pleads, shaking her shoulder gently. There’s a gash on her forehead, deep enough to look like the entrance to a black hole. If Nola looked close enough, she thought she could see right inside of Piper’s brain. She always said she wondered what Piper was thinking, she didn’t mean like this.

“Hmm,” a disgruntled Piper moans, orienting herself to her new world view. “What ... ?”

“We were in a crash, are you okay?” Nola panics, checking her over for any serious injuries.

“Yeah ... Wait, what about Eloise?!” Piper yells, struggling to unbuckle her own seatbelt. There are large pieces of glass in her way, slowing her down.

“I ... I don’t know, I hadn’t gotten to her yet,” Nola whispers, balancing her shifting body weight on the backseat. The car rocks dangerously as Piper scrambles her way over to the little girl, her car seat angled dangerously close to the broken window.

Piper weaves her way among the glass shards, finally reaching Eloise. The little body is held up by the seatbelt straps, crisscrossing over her like she’s a bungee jumper. Her small arms hang above her limply, as though she was mimicking a zombie.

“Baby, baby wake up!” Piper begs, taking Eloise’s small face in her hands, identical to her own, searching it, trying to sense any amount of movement. The little girl doesn’t react to her mother’s touch.

Nola can’t move. Her brain is shutting down, trying to restart, anything to stop her from witnessing this. This isn’t how the day was supposed to go, Eloise was supposed to see the ocean for the first time, they were going to have a picnic, Nola had even brought the ring, just in case the time was going to be right. Now ...

“Nola! What are you doing? Call 911, do something!”

Nola looks up to see a tiger instead of Piper, the woman's formerly beautiful face suddenly replaced with barred teeth and an animalistic desire to defend her cub.

Something triggers Eloise, and the girl's tiny body starts convulsing, twisting around amongst the straps, threatening to suffocate her. Piper now transforms into a vulture, screeching in horror as she perches helplessly beside the little girl. Her screams chill Nola, fixing her to her own perch.

"Eloise, please honey, please wake up!" silent tears stream down Piper's face, melting the tiger stripes.

The little girl's tiny eyes slowly glide open, but they aren't conscious. They loll about back toward her brain as she continues to convulse.

Piper keeps screaming, but Nola is still numb. *Oh my god*, Nola thinks. *I've just killed the world's best little human.*

Nola takes a step back from Piper, letting out a soft sigh. "How could you say that?" she says, half-whispering as she retraces her steps back to her countertop corner.

"You didn't even think about Eloise after the crash. You should've gone straight for her, not me," Piper shakes her head again, turning her back on Nola. She stands in the center of the room for a minute, as though she is weighing her options.

"Piper, love, I did think about her."

Piper sharply turns around. "Then how come I was the only one that checked on her?"

The silence settles on the house again, neither woman daring to look away.

“She should’ve been your first priority if you really thought of her as your daughter,” Piper says. “I should’ve known you didn’t have a motherly bone in your body. When it really came down to it, you didn’t think of her first.” She turns around, starting down the hallway.

“Wait,” Nola runs around the kitchen island, gaining ground on Piper and stopping her before she goes into Eloise’s room. She grabs Nola’s arm, careful to avoid the bandage around her bicep. “It wasn’t like that. I didn’t forget Eloise. I just had to check to see if you were okay. I don’t think I could live without you.”

This stops Piper in her tracks. Half turning around, Piper brushes off Nola’s hand. “I can’t live without her.”

In three weeks, Eloise is released from the hospital. A bright yellow neckbrace cradles her little head as she wobbles through the chipped front door. Piper tosses her keys onto the kitchen countertop, carrying a massive duffle bag full of pain medication, stuffed animals from various family and friends, and instructions on how to keep her daughter alive. She trails her muddy boots through the living room, plodding her way down the hallway to Eloise’s room.

*I never thought we would get to be back here, together,* Piper thinks later that night, as she tucks her little girl into bed. When she turns out the lights and retreats down the hallway, Piper catches sight of a picture she forgot to take down. Two women are hugging a little girl in a ninja costume, both dressed up as witches. After a moment, she takes it off the wall.

The house quiets as Piper sits down in the living room on a loveseat, still holding the picture. She seems to be hesitating as she fiddles with her cell phone. The dull drone of a tv show plays in the background, trying in vain to distract the woman across from it. Piper abruptly places the picture facedown on the side table, turns off the tv, and walks down to her room.

The world seems to have released a huge sigh of relief, shaking the small house with a sudden gust of wind. The same emptiness she felt after the accident is back.

The next few weeks pass in a blur, filled with doctor's appointments, visits from family, and hourly doses of various medicines to keep the little girl from feeling any pain. Eloise has taken to her new routine well, reveling in her practical early Christmas with the number of toys she has surrounding her. Piper just sits on the loveseat, trying to avoid all the questions about Nola she gets from her friends and family. And from Eloise.

"Why hasn't Mumma come home?" the little girl asks constantly.

The answer is always the same: "She had to go away. But your Mommy is here, and I'll never leave you."

There's a bag of objects that the police delivered after Nola left, but Piper hasn't unpacked it. It's the ghost that haunts her dreams, peeking out from her closet, reminding her of a different life, a life where beach trips and picnics existed. If she could ever work herself up to look in the duffle bag, she would even have glimpsed a life where engagement rings existed. But that world doesn't exist.