

Short Story by Stephanie Williams – Make Hell Your Home

In our empty house, I sit with a cup of hot chocolate that dad hides in the highest cabinet in the kitchen. I added only two teaspoons because I am scared he'd notice I took some without his permission. Winter hasn't given way for spring, so I curl up in bed with Jodi Picoult's *The Tenth Circle*. The illusion of hell fascinates me. The protagonist's mother, Laura Stone, is a college lecturer who teaches Dante's *Inferno*, in which the ultimate punishment is not fire but eternal ice; the inability to move; frozen forever.

I am frozen here in this house. Mom left one night while I was sleeping, and although it's been five whole years without her, I still feel frozen in time. I am still that seven-year-old girl waiting for mom to get back from the grocery store. I sometimes wonder if she had kissed me on my forehead while I slept, lingered in my room, before she took off. Dad doesn't talk much, he just sighs a lot and hands out orders like he thinks a father's supposed to do. And I grab it like a needy child.

An old note that reads 'We're out of milk' still pasted on the fridge in mom's messy handwriting. Dad doesn't bother to take it off.

The first night dad didn't come home, I had just turned eight. The rain fell like stones on the roof and against the windows. I sat in front of the telephone waiting for it to ring. I imagined someone from the hospital calling to tell me that dad was in a terrible accident. But when the phone didn't ring and *Top Billing* finished playing on the TV, I prepare myself for the worst. I imagined that he had left me, too.

I went into the kitchen and opened the cupboards. Dad never cooks for us, but things will be different now, I told myself. I remember my friend Stacey's house and how it always smelled like baked goods when I went around to visit. Her mom had a job, but she would still come home and bake. I wanted our house to smell like baked goods, too.

We had flour and sugar and... I checked in the fridge... no milk. Mom's old note was right even if she wrote it five years ago. I bet the smell of baked goods doesn't come from milk, I told myself. It's all in the sugar. I didn't want to mess it up, I knew if I was going to raise myself, without a mom and dad, I would need to save up on food. I searched the drawers in the kitchen for mom's old cookbook. I found it under the sink. It smelled musty. The pages were torn in half and mom's favourite pasta recipe had pen scratches all over it. I couldn't make out any of the words.

I found a sponge cake recipe. I didn't understand the measurements, but I guessed half of everything wouldn't be too bad. In a bowl of flour, I added butter and sugar. Cracking the egg was harder than I had thought it would be. Pieces of the shell fell inside the bowl. I got tired of picking out the pieces and decided it would be better if I just mixed it with the ingredients. I stood on a chair and stirred as fast as I could. And then I got tired of stirring. The big mixing spoons were for grownups. I ended up using my hands.

The instructions said, 'the mixture should be of a dropping consistency, if it is not, add a little milk.' I added a little water. I poured the mixture into a baking pan, placed it in the oven and turned it on. I was happy with my cake. I wished mom was home to see me. But then I was glad she had left because I got to do it all on my own.

I was sitting on the chair in front of the oven, staring at my creation. I was waiting for it to rise. I kept looking at the picture in the cookbook and then at the cake in the oven. Mine didn't look anything like it. But I had bet it would soon.

I heard a car pull up in the driveway. My heart started pounding. If it is a stranger, I will tell them my dad is asleep, I told myself. But it was dad. I heard him drop the keys. He groaned and sighed while picking it up. He unlocked the front

door. When he entered the house, he saw me sitting in the open plan kitchen with mom's old cookbook in my hand.

'Dad, I made a cake. Look.' I pointed to the oven.

He walked over and stared down at me. 'Do you want to burn down the house?' He switched off the oven and opened the oven door. He didn't even look at the cake. He wrapped a dishcloth round his hand and tossed my cake into the sink.

I cried, but not because I was sad. I was upset that he had come home. I didn't mind taking care of myself.

I still don't know why he came home late that day. Tonight, is no different. I know when he gets home, he'll go straight to his bedroom and sleep. I am older now. I have learnt to make other dishes from mom's old cookbook. I hide most of it from dad. By the time he gets home the food are already wrapped in foil and tucked into mom's old Tupperware like little children at bedtime. Everything that pertains to mom is now old. Mom's old cookbook; mom's old stove; mom's old note on the fridge; mom's old Tupperware; mom's old wedding ring. She is an old story. But people never get tired of asking old questions: 'Do you miss her?' and 'Do you know why she left?'

Stacey's mom doesn't ask any of these questions. She just asks, 'are you hungry, dear?'

At first, I would lie. My dad cooked for us, I would say.

‘My dad cooks, too’ Stacey would say.

‘That’s nice. What did he make?’ Here I would struggle to answer. It is hard to picture my dad cooking, let alone to think of what kind of dish he’d be good at. It took me a while to realise that Stacey’s mom only asks this question to see whether I’m telling the truth.

‘No worries, dear. Stacey doesn’t always know what she’s eating either. I made dessert. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it even if you already had a nice meal with your dad.’

If it was warmer outside, I would have gone over to Stacey’s.

After I finish drinking the hot chocolate, I rinse the cup and leave it on the sink. I check to see if all the windows are shut and if the door is locked. In my room I stare at the cover of *The Tenth Circle*. I have been reading it since the age of seven. At that age I couldn’t grasp the story—though I tried every year until I was old enough to understand.

I understand it now. Trixie’s relationship with her dad is so different from my relationship with my dad. Trixie’s dad saves her from hell. My dad has left me in hell. Not knowing why mom left is a hell on its own. I wish I was Trixie instead. Sometimes I picture myself in Trixie’s life; I wonder if it would be better to have been raped and have my parents care for me,

than to be safe in a home with no parents to care for me. Dad gave me this book one afternoon during our June holidays.

‘What are you staring at me for? Don’t you have anything to do? Dolls to play with?’

‘I’m too old for dolls. The girls at school have smartphones.’

He got up from the chair in the living room, walked to his room, and returned with a book in his hand.

‘Here’ he held it out. ‘When I was your age, I read books for fun.’ I don’t exactly enjoy the book. I read it because mom’s handwriting is on the inside. It’s addressed to dad.

To Charles,

I read the blurb.

It seems promising.

Love, Lisa

I think about that note a lot, but I would never ask dad what she meant by it. *It seems promising.* Why does it seem promising? Maybe if she had read the book, she would have stayed. Trixie’s parent tried to fix their marriage. Maybe mom didn’t try hard enough.

Picoult’s language is complex. I know that after every rereading of the book, I learn something new. I discover something I had missed before. I have only read the blurb once

since dad gave the book to me. I turn it around and attempt a second reading. I try to find a link between mom's note to dad and the blurb.

Fourteen-year-old Trixie is the light of her father, Daniel's life.

I pause. I read that line over and over again. Tossing it around in my head.

Daniel, a seemingly mild-mannered comic book artist with a secret tumultuous past he has hidden even from his family, venture to hell and back to protect his daughter.

The tears started to well up in my eyes like a weak bladder.

I never wait up for dad to get home. But tonight, I decided to sit on the small chair in the kitchen. The exact position I sat four years ago. I am taller now. The chair is too small to hold my weight, but I am determined to relive this moment. Reliving it also means that I can do it differently.

Half an hour has gone by when I finally hear his car pull up in the driveway. I hear his keys. He unlocks the door and I stand up. He seems surprised to see me standing in the open plan kitchen with *The Tenth Circle* in my hand.

'Dad,' I say, my voice ringing in the big, empty house. 'Am I the light of your life? Is that why mom left me with you?'