Happimess

by Sarah Bradley

**1**

She goes to hear him sing. She likes his voice because it’s beautiful. She likes his songs because they’re sad. She thinks he looks like the paintings of beautiful brown saints her mother hung up in the kitchen. She wanted to call him angelic, but she didn’t believe in angels anymore.

She ditches the boy she brought with her and waits after the show. They talk about Bowie and Hendrix. They talk about the uselessness of politics. They talk about the types of men and women. Marcel lights her cigarette and asks, “Are you supposed to be drinking like this?”

“Is anyone supposed to drink, Marcel?”

Marcel’s laughter is a sharp dagger of a laugh. She likes it. She likes the way it cuts through space.

**2**

They are on her bed, and she smells like salty skin and honeysuckle. She is feeling his chest, putting her legs around him. She kisses him like she needs this, and he fumbles in his jeans pocket for a condom.

“Hold on,” she says. “Let me go freshen up.”

She goes into the bathroom. He spends a few minutes waiting, then he gets bored and turns on the lights in her room. He notices a high school girls’ soccer team jersey and an SAT study guide. Marcel hangs his head.

“F\*\*\*.”

“Marcel,” she calls from the bathroom.

He walks over and sees her standing in the shower, seeing how the water surfs over the curves in her flesh. She touches herself, and thinks about all manner of things, but does nothing. He puts his pants on, and then his shirt.

Mack turns off the water.

“What’s wrong?” she says, still naked, stepping out of the shower.

“Goodbye, Mackenzie Martinez. I hope you have a good night.”

**3**

“Why didn’t you?” she asks.

“Don’t know,” says Marcel. “It just didn’t seem right.”

“Well,” she sighs. “I guess we’re going to have to be friends.”

They pull up next to Mackenzie’s house. She begins to get out of the car, and then she chuckles to herself.

“What’s so funny?”

She looks him up and down and smiles.

“No. We’re not gonna be friends.”

**4**

A few weeks later she tries to kiss him, but Marcel doesn’t kiss girls who smell like overpriced perfume, and vodka and coke. You don’t kiss the girl who picks fights with strangers. You don’t kiss a girl who runs around like an open flame, trying to burn the world down.

“Goddamn it, Mackenzie,” he says softly, not looking at her because if he looked at her he might start crying. If you have ever loved someone who was reckless, maybe you understand that feeling. He breathes out a puff of smoke.

“You know what your problem is? You are absolutely out of control.”

**5**

They don’t speak for a while. Mackenzie loses a lot of sleep. Marcel spends his evenings trying to forget all the things he loved about her. Her beauty, her temper, her warmth, the way she rolled her eyes, the way she smiled.

**6**

The standoff doesn’t last. Mackenzie shows up at his door on Thanksgiving. She doesn’t want to look at him.

“Can I—can I at least say that I’m sorry?”

He doesn’t say anything, he just stands in his doorway. Looks at her for a moment. She thinks he looks like he just had a question answered. He steps out and points to the shabby rocking chair on his porch.

“Have a seat.”

He takes a smoke out of the rolled cuff of his t-shirt and lights it.

“I know that you probably hate me, but—”

“I’ve never hated you,” he says. Mack couldn’t stop staring at the way the sunlight made a perfect Rembrandt triangle under his right cheekbone.

“It’s just that you scare the shit out of me sometimes.”

She looked down and picked underneath her fingernails. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“The strange thing is,” he says, running a hand across the back of his neck. “It’s what I like about you.”

He scoots towards her. He’s close enough she can see each one of his long black lashes.

“That you scare me.”

They kiss and the inevitable happens: Mackenzie and Marcel fall in love. Later, when they’re in bed, Marcel pushes a lock of hair out of her face, rests his hand on her cheek. She’s all dark eyes, and gentleness.

She grabs his hand and kisses it.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“Then I’m sorry I’m a mess, too.”

**7**

“Go ahead,” her father says, standing in her doorway, watching her fill up a suitcase with everything she owns. “Throw your life away on this man.”

She doesn’t say anything; she’s not going to take the bait. She walks down the stairs, and out to Marcel’s car.

“Fine. Go then,” he screams across the yard at her. “You vicious, little brat. Won’t see a penny from us!”

Mack takes the bait. She slams the trunk and screams, “Well, we don’t f\*\*\*ing need you!”

**8**

She puts the scrub brush back in the sink. She’s exhausted, but takes a moment to gush over their clean house. It isn’t much, but it’s theirs. Her sturdy linoleum floors, the extra closet-sized room that was their office, their bedroom. Their bedroom which was only a mattress on the ground. The living room where they would have friends over.

**9**

They get married in a courthouse. She wears one of her mother’s white cocktail dresses and he rents a suit that looks terribly dated. Afterwards, they drive to California.

**10**

The time after they open the records store is their best time. It’s kept out of the red by the skin of their teeth, but they laugh a lot. They’re always two steps ahead of being broke, and what’s left over they share with friends. They couldn’t afford a T.V. so they spent nights listening to radio, dancing around their apartment. When the finally buys a used T.V. for Christmas, they feel like kings and there are nights when everyone comes over. She like those nights, they’re warm. Everything she loves is close enough to touch.

**11**

They get a little more money. They acquire more business. With the nosiness comes problems. She doesn’t want to leave the little apartment. She doesn’t care that they can afford a better one, this one is hers.

“I told you I don’t want a house. You know what I want.”

“Mack, we’re not talking about—”

“I’m talking about it. you know what I want, you know we can afford it if we stay in the place we have, but you want to blow it all on what—the same thing we have now, but on another side of town. Is anything ever going to be enough?”

There is a fight, a bad one. He walks out. She throws things. She destroys his favorite shoes, because she hates it when he walks away. She smashes things because she’s tired of screaming. She had worked so hard for them, she had given him everything—and he wouldn’t even give her a baby.

**12**

He was weak, they were weak and that’s when these things happen. He told her about it the morning after. To Mack, it feels like falling upwards, like their world doesn’t have rules anymore. She runs away and spends a year fighting and crying. She mulls over papers she doesn’t sign. She cuts all her hair off into the sick. The black silk locks fall through her fingers like tears.

Marcel jumped back and falls down the last few steps, the bags of groceries he is holding split open. Mackenzie glares at him, turning off the stun gun and puts it back in her pocket.

“Goddamn it, Marcel. I almost f\*\*\*ing tased you.”

Marcel thought a rib might be broken, but he’d pushed through a lot worse for much less before. “I just wanted to surprise you,” he says through gritted teeth, pointing at the scattered food. “Dinner.”

Mack rolls her eyes and helps him up. They pick up the groceries and go inside. Her apartment is aggressively girly, with pink and green wallpaper and faux fur rugs. It looks like men aren’t welcome, which isn’t completely inaccurate.

“The place looks nice,” he says.

She doesn’t offer him a seat, but he takes one anyway. She shoves a cup of tea in front of him, spilling half of it on the counter, but he doesn’t complain. He looks at her while she turns the stove on and starts to wash the vegetables.

“Your hair—”

“What about my hair?”

“Nothing. It just—it looks pretty.”

Mack snorts, but it softens a little.

They make dinner, they talk. About the past, about having a future. When it is almost morning she kneels, and wipes his face with her palms, making him look at her.

“Okay, I’ll come home. But I have a few stipulations. The first being we go to therapy, we read dumb self-help books, we do whatever needs to be done to fix us.”

“Okay.”

“The second: I’m keeping this apartment because I need somewhere to go when I can’t stand you. And the third thing is this—” she kisses him on the mouth. Tentatively, like it was their first time.

“Don’t ever hurt me like that again, okay?” she says.

“And in the morning, you will buy me breakfast.”

He laughs that tomahawk laugh.

“Okay.”