

## Tina's Island by Laurel Saville

I'm watching an old Gilligan's Island rerun when Mom yells at me from the kitchen, "Tina, I'm making a G&T. Would you like one?"

My mom has this idea that as long as she drinks with someone else, she's not an alcoholic. She told me that once. Alcoholics are only people who drink before 5:00 in the evening or drink alone. I don't drink much, but she only needs someone to share the first one of the day with her. She pretty much handles the rest of the night's drinking on her own.

I've been through Batman & Robin, Lost in Space, the Adams Family, some public television show on fishing, "Catching the Big One." And now, Gilligan's getting into trouble. But that's what it's always like on this show. Gilligan gets everyone into trouble, and then gets everyone out of trouble, too.

Mom's standing in the doorway. No drinks in her hand, just standing there, pulling at her fingers.

"What?" I say.

"There's no tonic up here. Could you go check the downstairs fridge?" She looks at her hands. "Please? For me?"

She hates going down there. Ever since that time she went down and found my brother banging his girlfriend on the pool table. There's still a stain, still looks wet, right where you're supposed to cue up the white ball.

"Next commercial," I say.

She bends around the door frame and looks at the television. "It's a commercial now," she says.

"I know. That's why it's gotta be the next commercial. It might start anytime."

She stands there for a minute. Then the show comes back on, and she goes away. The Captain and the Skipper are trying to comfort Maryann. She's got no clue that they're really just jonesing to untie her little red and white top and pull down her pigtails. Sometimes, I wonder what it'd be like to be her. All wide-eyed and innocent. Dumb and soft like a rabbit. There are girls like that at school. They always have some jock hanging all over them, a big, meaty arm laying over their shoulders when they walk down the hall. They pretend to push the guy away when he leans over them outside class, nearly cramming them into their lockers, trying to get a kiss, cop a feel. They wander into class, all red and blushing, not looking at anyone, pretending to be embarrassed. I've never been like that. I'll never be like that. Silly and simple and sweet. Way too late for that.

Mom's standing there again. No drinks.

"Tina. Would you please come downstairs with me?"

"Next commercial."

"I got the tonic," she says. "It's something else."

I look at her. Her mouth is two thin, red lines of lipstick, like always. I'm wondering why. Like who's going to see? She rubs her forehead. Her nails are red too. All of a sudden, I'm wondering when she got so skinny, when her skin got so hammered. All the cigarettes.

The TV volume jumps up loud with someone talking and laughing. We both look. It's just a commercial. I get up, turn it off, and follow her into the kitchen, down the stairs by the pantry. I haven't been in the basement in a long time. I hate it down here too. Ugly wood panelling, little shitty windows

at the top of the walls all covered with dirt and cobwebs from the outside. Pool table, old furniture, yellow bean bag chair covered with black cigarette burns. Mom goes over to the little fridge in the corner. We used to store drugs there in film containers. For awhile she tried to encourage my interest in "photography." She even bought me a decent camera and a book, "How to Take Better Pictures." My brother pawned the camera, but I've still got the book somewhere. She opens the fridge and pulls something out, some kind of plain brown box. She sits down in an old wicker chair and looks at me. Just looks. I pull over the bean bag, curl up at her feet. She turns the box towards me and pulls the top open.

Three layers of jewelry. No cheap stuff, no pooka shell necklaces or fake turquoise and silver. All real, all gold and stones. She knows who brought it here, but me, I can see it all, just how it must have happened. My brother's at some party - some kid's parents are in Bermuda or something, "Now don't have a party while we're gone honey, we're counting on you, we're trusting you," but word gets out and everyone at school comes over anyway - and he starts coming on to some chick, takes her into the parent's room, bangs her on their big, cushy, king-size bed, and then while she's in the bathroom fixing her mascara, he sees the box on the dresser and takes it. Wraps it up in his jacket. Just fucking takes it. Probably left the girl in the bathroom without even saying good-bye. She probably cried her eyes out later on, wondering why he just split like that, thinking its because she didn't give him a blow job or something.

I put my hand in the box. Everything is cold. Cold and heavy. Mom used to have some stuff like this. Not much of it, but I remember a few Christmases when Dad would give her things like this. I wonder where it is, if she's still got any of it, locked away somewhere. All I ever see her wear is pearl studs and a matching, short necklace. She's got them on now. I want to rub my teeth against them, see if they're real. Someone told me that once. If they're rough, then they're real. She's staring past me, over my shoulder.

"Mom." I say. "Mom."

"Get my purse," she says.

"What?"

"Go get me my purse."

She's in the garage, in the car, when I get back. The motor's running, the garage door is open. I hop in. The box is on the seat between us. She backs out fast. Forgets to hit the electric door closer thing. I reach over and press the button, hold it for a minute, but we're already out the drive and into the street, heading down the road.

She starts smoking. Menthols. God, I hate menthols. I check the glove box. A mostly empty, squashed, soft pack of Merit Lights. I hate those, too. But I light up anyway, pull hard, hold onto the smoke, try to make it last, make it potent, like it's a joint.

She just smokes and drives. Looking ahead like she's going some place important, a wedding or a funeral, hands in one spot on the wheel, eyes forward, the only change is when she pushes in the lighter, shakes another cigarette up, out of the pack, tugs at it with her lips, like she's a truck driver. I keep looking over at her. She doesn't notice.

I'm wondering if she's going to the police station. She's going in that direction. I'm wondering if she's going to turn him in. Cops have been stopping by the house for years, but they never tag him for anything. And she's no help. Never knows anything about where he is, where he's been. Nice lady, I bet

the cops think. Nice house on the hill, but bad kids inside. She takes the quickest route through our neighborhood, down Main Street, past the school, and then past the police station.

We're not stopping. Just stop, I think. Pull over, I'll run out, take the box in, drop it off. Then it's their problem. Then he's their problem. We'll go back home, have that G&T, watch a little more tv. But she keeps going, out of town, past the industrial park, the warehouses, the suburbs, into the country. Boyfriends, or guys who thought they were my boyfriend, have taken me out here. They park the car, climb over, suck face and dry hump. They never unbutton their pants. Too scared I'll say no. Sometimes I wish they would, just because I don't know what I would say and I kind of want to find out, hear the words that might come out of my mouth.

I'm wondering if she knows where she's going, what she's doing, if she drives around like this, if this is part of what she does all day. Sits at the kitchen table in the morning, smokes cigarettes, drinks coffee, then gets up and does some household stuff, spreads out her little chores, makes them last, until the mail comes, sifts through the junk, looks for a check from Dad down in Florida, gets in the car, goes to the bank and then drives around. All afternoon. Cruises, looking into people's windows. I'm wondering how she met Dad, if he drove her out here when they were young and parked the car, put his tongue in her mouth, rubbed his hands over her chest. All this stuff that might have happened to her, all this stuff that happens when I'm not around, all this stuff that happened before me. I find another cigarette smashed into the corner of the pack, light it up and smoke hard.

It's dark. No street lights, just a few houses, no curtains on the windows of the ones we do drive by. The green glow of a television set comes through one window. I see a woman sitting at a table, her head bent down, like maybe she's praying or something. Or just paying bills. I see someone watching TV, a couple having an argument, an old lady washing dishes, someone opening the door for the cat. I'm looking, looking for something. Like maybe I'll see a naked couple doing it against the kitchen counter and I'll know it's not her husband. I want to see something ugly.

Mom rolls down the window. Cold air whips in, around the back seat and hits me in the side of the face. I'm about to tell her to shut the window, but she's got the box open, her hand in it. She pulls up a fist full of stuff, gold chains dangling through her fingers like worms in some kid's hand. She looks at them, then chucks them out the window. Just like that. One of the chains gets caught and she swats at it, shoves it over the edge. She takes a couple of hits on her cigarette. Then she reaches into the box again, feeling around with her fingers, picks up a ring, tosses it out. Then another ring. Then the cigarette. A perfect flick, middle finger against thumb.

I'm thinking: This is someone's stuff.

We whip by a house, a woman standing at the window staring out. I'm picturing her in the morning, walking her dirty little dog, seeing something shiny along the road, stopping to pick it up. Then seeing something more a little further down. Would she keep it? When would she ever wear this stuff? I can see her putting it in a little cardboard box, stuffing it in the back of her underwear drawer, fishing it out once in a blue moon from the big white cotton undies and the industrial strength bras and just looking at the stuff, running her fingers over it, until her husband or her kids yell from the kitchen, wanting something from her.

I'm thinking: I never want to be that woman.

Then I'm thinking about the women who have jewelry boxes like this one, filled with stuff like this. I don't want to be one of those women either. I watch Mom light another cigarette. I wonder if it's too late to not want to be her.

I put my hand into the box. It's all hard, cold. And expensive. Just gold and stones in different shapes and sizes. I pick up a pair of earrings. Gold posts with dark, reddish brown stones dangling, the color of dried blood. I pull down the mirror on the back of the sun visor, hold them up to my ears. Okay, I think, with a little black dress, at a little french restaurant, dark red lipstick, hair all pulled up with a few strands hanging down. Then I think, yeah, right. I toss the earrings in my palm a couple of times, watch them catch the light, feel their weight. Then I roll down my window.

Out they go.

Mom looks over at me. She doesn't smile, just looks; doesn't turn her head, just her eyes. Then she closes them, holds them shut a second, just long enough to make me wonder if she's ever going to open them back up at all. When she does, she's staring ahead at the road. But I know something happened. Like she said something to me that I'm not going to hear until a long time from now.

We sort of take turns. She throws a few things, I throw a few things. We wait for long stretches of road to pass in between. She just grabs at stuff and chucks it sideways out the window. I take my time, sift through, maybe try on a ring, hold a bracelet up to the light, then reach out the window and drop it alongside the car. That way, maybe someone will find it. I think of a girl coming out in the morning and finding a bracelet, the scratches making it even cooler. She'll make up stories inside her head about where it came from. Think someone left it there just so she'd find it. I hope her Mom lets her keep it, let's her hold onto it until she's old enough and it fits over her wrist without just falling off again.

There's only a few things left. It's really cold in the car now. I push my fingers into all the corners of the box, feeling around, getting every last small piece. Then I scoot over to the window, lean hard against the door, reach way out with my arms, and let it all sift through my fingers. I watch it go, everything carried for a minute by the air screaming alongside the car, but one by one it all drops out of sight, and we're gone. Then I just sit back, hands folded, dead in my lap, my hair swirling around my face.

Things start to look familiar a little too soon. I wonder if we've driven far enough away, but then I look at the clock. We've been gone for hours. We're driving towards this bridge that goes over a huge highway not too far from our house. I remember coming here with my brother one time after eating some mushrooms and watching the cars go by underneath us. I remember feeling like every car that passed under me took me with it and then brought me right back, like they were waves. I kept hoping one would take me, hold onto me, and just keep going.

I tell Mom to pull over. It's the first thing said, the first words spoken since we got into the car. She doesn't look at me, doesn't say anything, just does it. Pulls over into a little gravelly area right before the bridge. I take the box, slide over the seat, flinch when the overhead light comes on, shut the door quick behind me. The box is very light. It's so late it's almost early. I walk along the sidewalk that runs along the bridge. I wonder why the railings aren't higher, why there isn't chain link fence all around. A person could fall, or jump. I think about that for a minute. Jumping off, arms stretched out, flying a little, then smashing into the asphalt, or landing on top of someone's car, jamming the hood down onto their head. When I first learned to drive, I used to wonder what it'd be like to drive into a tree, or a concrete wall. Full speed ahead. But I don't want to die. I just want to feel something, something intense, something that'll let me know I'm alive.

I keep walking. Half way across the bridge, I stop and lean into the railing. There are only a few cars. Some very far away. White lights on one half of the road, red on the other. I remember being a little kid, driving back from some place late at night, maybe grandma's or something, my parents in the front seat, my brother slumped against the door asleep, and I was looking out the window, wondering why some of the cars had red lights and some had white. Back before I knew what it was to go in one

direction. That there was a front and a back to things, and that everything was going one way or the other. I never asked anybody, just kept wondering until I stopped.

I set the box on the railing and open it. Cheap box, I think. All that fancy jewelry in such a cheap box. You'd think her husband would have bought her a nicer box. Maybe even a safe. He'll be mad at her now. Mad at her for not taking better care of her things. All those things he bought for her. A car drives towards me, white lights as it comes, red as it goes away. I lift the box in both hands, lean into the concrete railing, hold it out, away from me. There are no cars coming. I let go. I watch it twist and turn as it falls, the brass fittings winking at me in the street lights, the drawers pulling against each other, the red cloth trying to hold it all together even as it rips apart. I turn away. I don't want to see it hit bottom.