

A photograph of a woman's face as seen through a car's rearview mirror. The woman has dark hair and is looking slightly to the left. The mirror is mounted on a dark dashboard, and the car's interior lights are visible above it. The overall tone is somewhat somber and reflective.

It's All Claire's Fault

A Place to Think Series · Short Story

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Inn on a Whim is Claire McGowan's story. The novel opens with Claire moving into the bed and breakfast she bought during a wild weekend on Cape Cod with her sister, Reagan. That purchase set off a cascade of events that culminated in Claire being diagnosed with a mental illness. Claire is now struggling to discern who she is if she is not the reckless woman her family called Crazy Claire. Inn on a Whim traces her journey to make the bed and breakfast a success and get to know herself again.

One of the pivotal scenes at the center of Inn on a Whim is when Claire and her sister, Reagan, see each other for the first time in many months. The following narrative is what I imagine Reagan was thinking as she drove the two hours from her house in Connecticut to Claire's bed and breakfast on Cape Cod. It ends where their confrontation begins in the novel.

I hope you enjoy meeting Claire and Reagan.

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My life is imploding and it's all Claire's fault. Not that I've seen my sister in nine months. She could have grown a tiny human in that much time, but she chose to wreak havoc on our lives. Typical Claire. We don't call her Crazy Claire for nothing. If she hadn't gone and gotten herself diagnosed as a bona fide psycho, I could be home playing with my boys. But no, she had to put it in my husband's head that I need to be on medication too because I'm too "unstable" to be left alone with the kids. As if I would ever do anything to hurt my beautiful boys.

I'm fine. Spirited. Driven even. Sure, I get a little overly enthusiastic and break a bone here and there, but I'm nothing like Claire. I'm not the one who bought a bed and breakfast just because I thought it had potential. That was all Claire. It's not my fault, and I intend to tell her just that!

I take the on ramp to the Mass Pike a little too fast and my iced latte tips into my lap. Super.

This whole thing started with Aiden peeing in his pants. Again. I'd spent the night organizing the closets by color and was carrying down a box of donations when the sickening ammonia smell of little boy urine stopped me in my tracks. My chest immediately felt like it was going to explode. Deep breaths and counting to ten didn't help. My lungs wouldn't expand; I was already too angry. It was the third time in two days that he'd had an accident. When we first started potty training, he would cry until I cleaned him up. That stopped after a few months. Then, he got sneaky. He tried throwing his wet clothes in the garbage until he eventually ran out of pants. He'd moved on to hiding them. My house was beginning to smell like a gas station bathroom.

I couldn't take it anymore. I hadn't slept in days. I'd put my head down a few times, but that didn't really count. As soon as I closed my eyes, my head filled with a high squeal. It got louder and louder if I didn't fill my brain with a perpetual list of tasks. Doing chores like scrubbing the mildew

from the grout in the boy's shower helped quiet the noise inside my head.

I dropped the box in the middle of the hallway and shouted, "Where are they?"

The sound of little running feet in the kitchen preceded the pantry door slamming. "I'm sorry, Mommy. I tried to make it to the potty," Aiden said through the door.

I clenched my fists until my fingernails nearly pierced my palms to keep from screaming. "Where are your underpants?" I whispered.

"Under my bed."

Blood rushed up my neck and pounded at the back of my throat. I stifled a scream and took a few deep breaths. I'd run out of ideas for how to make him stop having accidents. I tried making a game of it, singing a little running to the bathroom song, even giving him candy every time he made it on time. I was at the end of my rope. I needed to punch something before I punched someone. Thankfully, I knew what to do. This wasn't the first time one of the boys irritated me.

"Stay in there and play with your dinosaurs for a while," I said through gritted teeth. I'd put the little chair in the pantry not so much as a timeout spot for the boys as much as a timeout spot for me. There was a box of toys and plenty of snacks to keep them occupied while I cooled off. Claire and I had a similar quiet place for when our mother was in a mood.

"Okay, Mommy," Aiden said. "Can I use the tablet?"

"Sure," I said, tossing him the tablet charging on the kitchen counter before roaring out to the garage. I keep a treadmill, a rowing machine, and a punching bag where people normally park their car. Having a place to stamp out the fire in my chest is more important than protecting the paint job on my car.

I got in a few good punches and kicks before I registered my knuckles were bleeding. In my fury, I'd neglected to change into workout clothes and wrap my hands. Panting, I left the punching bag alone. It is good for taking the edge off my anger, but the treadmill is where I regain my composure. I stripped down to my bra and panties, pushed my feet into some running shoes, and ran hard until I no longer wanted to scream. I cooled down for a mile or so before going inside.

In the time I was working out, Aiden had moved from the pantry to his bedroom. I knocked on his door and asked, "You okay in there, sweetie?"

"Yup, I put all my dirty clothes in the laundry room. I'm playing my game now."

"I'm going to take a shower, then we'll have some lunch."

"Use lots of soap," he said through the door. He's so sweet. That's what I always say to the boys when I send them up to wash their hands before meals and he had started to say it back to me.

Before I made it to the master bedroom, Aiden's door flew open and my husband stood in the

doorway glowering at me.

Startled, I asked, “You’re home in the middle of the day! What’s wrong?”

Grant took me by the elbow and hustled me into the master bedroom. “I came home and found Aiden playing in the pantry,” he said through clenched teeth. “What’s the deal? He said you were angry because he had an accident, so he was hiding in there until you cooled down.”

“He wasn’t hiding. I knew where he was.” I yanked my sweaty arm from his grasp and moved toward the shower. “I keep coloring books and a tub of toys in there for him. And he has plenty of snacks.”

“What goes on around here when I’m at work? He didn’t even seem upset that he was being punished.” Grant loosened his tie and threw it on the bed.

“Don’t be so dramatic. I just needed to blow off some steam, so I went a few rounds with the punching bag.”

Grant grabbed my hand and held my bloody knuckles in front of my face. “What the hell, Reagan? This is more than blowing off steam.”

“I was pretty mad. He peed in his pants and hid them under his bed.”

Grant blinked at me incredulously. “So you locked him in the pantry?”

“The door wasn’t locked. He could come out anytime he wanted.”

“How often do you make him sit in the pantry?”

“I don’t make him. It’s like when Claire and I used to play cards in the little bathroom when Mom was on a tear. He knows to give me some space when I’m at the end of my rope.”

Grant laughed cynically. “That sounds like a page straight out of your mother’s playbook. That apple didn’t fall from the tree.”

I flinched. That was a low blow. I’m nothing like my mother. She was as cuckoo as Claire is, unless she was drinking. Then, she was a real handful.

“That’s not fair.” I turned on the shower and stepped in. “I didn’t have the screaming meemies and smash all the dishes; I just went out to the garage to workout for a while.”

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That wasn’t the end of our conversation about Aiden and the pantry. Grant was obsessed.

Later that evening, he grilled Connor about he and Aiden spending time in the pantry. The less phased Connor and Aiden were, the angrier Grant became. I could hear Connor from the kitchen trying to explain to his father that it wasn’t a big deal. Sometimes, Mommy got really mad, so they spent some quiet time in the pantry until she felt better. He reasoned with his father that they had timeouts when they were having trouble handling their emotions; Mommy did too. Grant couldn’t

convince Connor that adults aren't supposed to throw tantrums.

"Maybe you need a timeout, Daddy." Connor said. He patted his father on the shoulder. "Why don't you watch ESPN for a while and we can talk about it later?"

After he put the boys to bed, Grant joined me in the kitchen. He put his empty beer bottle beside the sink and watched me attack a yellow depression glass sundae dish with a soft toothbrush. They were manufactured in the 1930s and couldn't be subjected to the harsh temperatures of the dishwasher. "Do you need to do that tonight? The dishes can wait until the morning."

Grant didn't understand. Even though I hadn't slept more than two hours in days, I wouldn't be able to rest knowing there were dirty dishes in the sink. It took too long to explain the intricacies of caring for antique dishes, so I simply said, "Ice cream would attract ants."

Grant dried a sundae dish with a linen dish towel and opened the far left cabinet. "Where do these go again?"

"Top shelf. Beside the parfait dishes."

He slid the dish into place. "And how are these yellow ones different from the green ones?"

"They're completely different. Look at the angle of the sides and the height."

"I doubt the boys care which dish they get as long as there is ice cream and hot fudge in it," Grant said as he allowed the cabinet door to close noiselessly on its soft-close hinges.

"I care." I itched my nose with the back of my rubber glove. I cared entirely too much. Dishes are my thing. Claire would say I have a dysfunctional relationship with my dishes. As much as I appreciate using the right dish for the right function, our mother liked to break every dish in the house if even one was chipped. Eventually, our father stopped replacing them and we ate off paper plates. Claire would say my quest for a complete set of Wedgwood's Peter Rabbit plates was like a little girl searching for her lost teddy bear.

That is, if we were still speaking.

Grant took the dishcloth from my hand and put his arms around me. "I wanted to talk to you about the pantry thing, but you look like you could sleep standing up. Why don't you read a boring book until you nod off?"

I leaned into his warm chest and blinked back exhausted tears. "I'm too tired to read. The words start to swim and I end up reading the same page over and over. It's the opposite of soothing."

"How about some boring television?" He rubbed my back in small circles. "How about a war documentary? CSPAN? Or golf?"

I pulled away and smiled at him. "I tried that last night... or maybe the night before. It didn't work. I just got annoyed at how the announcers whisper all the time. We all know they're in a studio

miles away from the course.” I got so irritated I ended up scrubbing the guest bathroom’s shower until I was able to close my eyes for a half hour around dawn.

“Did you try taking a sleeping pill?” Grant brushed a strand of hair off my forehead. “You need to sleep. I don’t want you falling asleep behind the wheel or falling down the stairs because you’re overtired.”

I nodded and promised to find my bottle of Ativan. I was too tired to argue with him.

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The sleeping pill didn't work. I tried lying on the couch, but sleep wouldn't come. I tried everything: counting sheep, counting backwards from 1000, thinking about waves, listening to the sound of waves, anything and everything I could think of.

Around 3 AM, I tiptoed into the master bathroom and took a few more pills. I doubted they would help, but I’d promised Grant I would try. At that point, I was willing to try just about anything. I’d hang off the ceiling like a bat if I thought it would help me fall asleep.

I didn’t get into bed beside Grant. He snores when he is congested, and I didn’t want to risk him disturbing me. Aiden, on the other hand, makes the cutest little sighing noises when he sleeps, so I crawled in next to him. His room was cozy and the star machine made staring at the ceiling fun.

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The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital room feeling like I’d gargled with lye. As soon as my eyes fluttered open, Grant snapped to attention. His dress shirt was rumpled and he needed a shave. His momentary expression of relief was quickly replaced by fury, like when Connor tries a stupid stunt on his bicycle. Once Grant knows Connor is still all in one piece, he explodes.

I wanted to get up, but I was tethered to an IV and some monitors. "What happened?"

“You could have killed yourself!” Grant tugged the hair above his left ear. “You nearly OD’d on your sleeping pills.”

I croaked a few times before I could speak intelligibly. “I told you I don’t do well on tranquilizers.”

“Don’t try to make this my fault.” Grant rubbed his knuckles into his eyes. “I told you to take a sleeping pill to help you calm down. Not the whole bottle!”

As much as my throat burned and my stomach ached, the high-pitched squeal inside my skull was gone. At least I’d gotten some rest. Sleeping—being unconscious. Potato—Potata.

I attempted to roll into a more comfortable position. “How did I get here?”

Grant sat down beside the bed and massaged the back of his neck. “Connor couldn’t find his shoes when Livie came to pick him up for carpool, so she came inside.”

An icy lump formed in my chest. People are not allowed in my house uninvited. That is a solid rule. The boys know that.

“Don't freak out,” Grant said in that annoying appeasing tone that he uses on me. “I'd made the boys breakfast and gotten them dressed before I left for the office.”

That was a relief. I'd hate for Livie to find the boys still in their pajamas and hungry. “When she asked the boys where you were, Aiden told her you wouldn't wake up and, like a reasonable person, she was alarmed. When she found you unresponsive in Aiden's bed, she called an ambulance. Then, she called me.”

I shielded my eyes from the harsh overhead light. “Why couldn't everyone just leave me alone? All I wanted to do was get some sleep.”

Grant's ears turned red. “I did.” He put his head down on the edge of the bed. In the fog I was in, it took me a second to register that he was crying. “When I found you curled up in Aiden's bed, I was so glad to see you'd settled down enough to get some z's that... I never even thought to check if you were breathing.” He wiped his cheeks with the corner of the sheet. “What if you'd taken more of those pills? Instead of Aiden finding you conked out beside him, he could have found you dead?”

A shiver rolled through my body. The idea of my baby finding a corpse in his bed was unthinkable. Well, maybe not. I could easily have happened if I had washed the Ativans down with a martini. My mother used to do that; but, I wouldn't. I'm not anything like my mother. I have safeguards and rules.

“I'm so sorry, Grant. I should have been more careful. I just wanted to sleep.” I reached for his hand. “I won't do it again.”

Grant pulled his hand away. “No, you won't.”

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Livie Palmer showed up the day after I was released from the hospital. Livie and I became close during a Mommy and Me class because infants are terrible conversationalists and two-year-olds are tyrants. We are nothing alike, but I like her. She always has a fresh pot of coffee on and bakes fabulous cookies, even if they are gluten free and nut free. She also makes me feel like I have it easy in relation to her. Her three-year-old, Estelle, was born with some kind of gastrointestinal issue that made her unable to digest most things. Livie was constantly fussing over what she'd eaten in a given day and scribbling in food logs. The kid was still nursing until she got pregnant with her second. It's

amazing her body could cope with the strain. Still, she always has a smile on her face and a song in her heart. That's the only thing I find annoying about Livie. She actually likes the Wiggles.

I was tempted to pretend I'd left the house in the thirty minutes since morning carpool; however, she could hear the television from the driveway. Grant had let Aiden watch as much TV as he wanted for the last few days and he was fully taking advantage of the opportunity. I looked away from Livie lumbering out of her van (she is pregnant with her third child) and studied my baby sitting on the couch with his stuffed elephant. He was such a good boy. Both boys had rolled with the punches while I was in the hospital. That worried me. In fact, that worried me more than the fact that I almost overdosed on sleeping pills or that they'd kept me on a seventy-two hour hold because I had allegedly tried to kill myself.

"Hey lady," Livie said when I opened the breezeway door. "What does a girl have to do to get a cup of coffee around here?"

"Where's Estelle and the baby?"

"My mom has them. I wanted us to have a chance to talk without her climbing all over me." We chitchatted about things going on at our kids' school and some neighborhood gossip for a few minutes before Livie put down her coffee mug deliberately. "So, are we going to talk about Tuesday or not?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Do we have to?"

"Kinda. It's not every day I have to call 911 because my friend is unconscious in her son's bed." Livie blinked rapidly. "When Aiden said you wouldn't wake up no matter how many kisses he gave you, I was sure you were dead. I thought you had a stroke or something."

I took a sip of coffee to dislodge the lump in my throat. "I'm so sorry, Livie. I hate that you were scared."

She flicked a tear off her transparent lashes. "It wasn't such a weird thought. You hear about athletes dropping dead during football practice or out on their morning run. The way you pound away on that treadmill, you could've given yourself an embolism or something. It seemed a lot more plausible than you overdosing on sleeping pills." Livie whispered, "Were you mixing them with alcohol like Marilyn Monroe?"

"I don't drink. You know that."

I never touch alcohol. I may not be the best mother in the world, but I'm not repeating my mother's mistakes. She drank socially - a couple of glasses of wine at dinner or a highball with our father - but she mostly drank vodka out of a juice glass, alone in the kitchen.

"I know you don't drink in front of other people," Livie said, looking away. "That doesn't mean

you don't drink."

I scrunched up my nose. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Lots of moms drink on the sly. Do you know Mary Elena from PTO?"

"Dark hair? Wears giant white sunglasses all the time?"

Livie took a sip of coffee and smiled over the rim of her mug. "That's the one. That giant travel cup she's always carrying isn't filled with water. Wine."

"How tacky?"

"You'd be surprised how many of the moms have wine in their water bottles. I think that's what's driving the metal bottle trend. You can't see what's inside so you can drink red or white."

"Well, not me. There is water in my Swell. I promise."

Livie swirled her coffee. "Then what happened? Were you trying to hurt yourself?" She cleared her throat. "I got the impression from the boys that this wasn't the first time they've had trouble waking you up in the morning. Do you take sleeping pills on a regular basis?"

"I go through bouts of insomnia. I get so overtired, I can't think straight so my doctor gave me a prescription for Ativan."

"Reagan, honey. You were barely breathing and I couldn't shake you awake. That's not okay. What if the house was on fire? What if something happened to one of the boys?"

"The boys could cope. My sister and I handled all sorts of emergencies when we were kids. Like one time, our mother..." The memory of Claire and I arguing whether or not we should call an ambulance when we found our mother passed out at the base of the stairs made me sick to my stomach. Claire was around ten at the time and wanted to just go to school after we established that Mom wasn't injured. Claire just stepped over her body and made scrambled eggs. Wasn't that basically what Connor did the other day? He parked Aiden in front of the TV until it was carpool time. Connor was Aiden's Claire.

That was a terrible thought.

I squared my shoulders and said, "I'll flush the rest of the pills today."

"Don't do that. It's bad for the fish. And, that's not what I'm talking about." Livie pursed her lips and parsed her words. "I talked to the boys while we were waiting for the ambulance and Aiden said something about hiding in the closet yesterday because you were mad at him."

I slammed my coffee cup down and glared at Livie. "You're making it sound like I'm an unfit mother. I'd never do anything to hurt my boys."

"Reagan, honey. Something is terribly wrong if your children are scared of you." Livie put her hand on my arm and leaned in. For a second, I thought she might cry. "Happy kids don't hide in the

closet when their mother is angry. That's not okay; you are not okay."

"You sound like Grant."

"That man loves you to pieces." Livie leaned back and cocked her head. "You should listen to him."

A knot formed in my stomach. Grant had been a mess while I was in the hospital and had barely let me out of his sight since I'd been released. I was relieved when he went to work that morning, but I suspected he knew Livie was coming over and took the chance to go into the office.

"He wants me to go to a spa to get some rest."

"That could be good." Livie took a dramatic sip of coffee and looked away. "Or why don't you go see your sister? Grant tells me she has a B&B somewhere?"

My stomach dropped. If Grant told Livie that Claire had bought the B&B, he probably told her the whole story — Claire's diagnosis, her divorce, our estrangement, his ultimatum.

Great.

When they were holding me for observation, a psychiatrist told Grant I might have bipolar disorder, but a different type than Claire. I don't buy it. Just because my mother was an alcoholic that flew into rages and did things like yank all the carpeting off the stairs because I tracked mud in and my sister does stupid things like buying a bed and breakfast, it doesn't mean I'm bonkers too. I'm fine. I am disciplined. I have rules. Sure, there are times when I have trouble sleeping, but that doesn't mean anything. I'm not like my lazy-bones sister who doesn't get out of bed for weeks at a time. She is unreliable and weak where I am a functioning member of society every day. I'm not hearing voices or raving in the street. I keep it together.

Grant wanted me to take the medication the doctor prescribed, but understood it was my decision. No one could force me to do anything. Nevertheless, he didn't trust me to be alone with the boys anymore.

"Did Grant tell you about his ultimatum?"

Livie nodded and bit her lip.

"He's taking the boys skiing without me. I have the choice of either going to a fancy hospital disguised as a "spa" or making peace with my sister. He somehow thinks seeing how she has seemingly gotten her shit together by taking the meds will make me want to do the same."

"That seems reasonable." Livie attempted a smile. "I thought you two were really close."

"We were." I glanced across the room to the painting of a bunch of carrots. Claire had painted it to complement my drapes. I missed Claire. She was my person. If only she hadn't flipped her car and landed in a psych ward, we would still be talking several times a day.

So here I am barreling down route 495 toward the Bourne Bridge to give my sister a piece of my mind. It's hard to believe it was less than a year ago when Claire and I spent the Fourth of July weekend on Cape Cod. We went on the trip on the spur of the moment. Grant and the boys were going on a fishing trip with his father and I didn't want to spend two days on a cramped boat, so Claire suggested we throw some clothes in a bag and go to the beach. The only place we found with a vacancy was the Carroll Inn, and I understood why. It was a dump. The sign had fallen over and was propped against a tree. Grass was growing in the small parking area behind the building, but the gardens were stunning. I think we were the only people staying there.

Claire was operating in overdrive that weekend. She bought as much as she could carry in the cute shops in the center of Falmouth and would have gone back for another round of shopping if I didn't insist we find a place to sleep. If I left it up to her, we would have been sleeping on the beach. When we found the Carroll Inn, Claire thought it was a diamond in the rough. She oohed and aahed over the stained glass windows on the stairs and kept pontificating on how she could turn the small bed and breakfast into a boutique hotel. She was in full on Crazy Claire mode, as her now ex-husband used to call it.

I sail around the rotary at the bridge, and it hits me. Claire was not in her right mind that whole weekend. The big event was her buying the dilapidated bed and breakfast after staying there only one night, but she was out of control the whole time. She couldn't sit still and enjoy the beach. She jumped from topic to topic over dinner, and she drove like a maniac. Thank God we took two cars and I wasn't still with her when she drove home. Apparently, she and her husband got into a huge fight about her writing a giant check as a down payment on the bed and breakfast without asking him first, then she totally lost it. She got in her car and just started driving. I never got the full story but she ended up in a ditch. It's a miracle she survived. When the paramedics got her to the hospital they thought she had a head injury because she was ranting and raving. It wasn't until Roger got there and told them that was typical Crazy Claire is when she was upset, that she ended up in the psych ward. From there everything went downhill. They told her she was mentally ill, Roger demanded they get divorced, and she ended up saddled with a failing business.

I quickly make it to the center of Falmouth and pull into the bed and breakfast's driveway. The building looks mostly unchanged. Claire seems to have cleaned up the plantings a bit but that's about it.

I'm suddenly freezing. I was so confident when I left Connecticut. I was going to have it out

with Claire and get her to tell Grant that I'm fine. Now, I'm not so sure. My heart skips a beat. I'm actually afraid to see my sister. What if she's changed so much that she's no longer my big sister? Or, even worse, what if she is exactly the same, just more even keeled. That would mean Grant and the doctor are right. She has an illness that can be treated.

That can't be true.

There's nothing wrong with Claire that can't be fixed with some self-discipline and lots of exercise. Otherwise...

I jump out of my SUV and storm up the front walk. We are going to resolve this once and for all. When I smash my finger into the doorbell, Claire opens the door with a big smile then stares at me slack-jawed. She looks great. Happy even.

The only thing I can think to say is, "It's all your fault."