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Valarie Smith
Driver's Seat

"We'll see," Jess told Wendy, their 12-year-old daughter. "It'll be a surprise."

Wendy had been suggesting ways they could reward her for scoring the winning goal in that morning's soccer match, but Jess didn't have the energy to make a decision. Besides, it would give her and Paul something to talk about while they waited.

Reassured, Wendy slid out from the passenger seat, opened the back door, and pulled out the guitar case her father handed to her. Jess watched, amused by Wendy's feigned casualness: as she looked for cars before crossing the street, Wendy turned further to her left than she needed to, getting another look at her mom and dad in one of their rare moments of sharing the same space.

"How long do they usually take, the lessons?" Paul asked from the back seat, directly behind Jess, as they watched Wendy run up the steps of her teacher's house.

"About an hour," Jess said. "Feel free to take a walk if you want."

"No, I'm good, thanks," he said. Wendy's teacher waved to them and shut the door behind her. "Unless you wanted to. I can stay with the car."

"No, I'm okay."

Paul had called that morning, asking for a ride to Wendy's game while his car spent the day in the shop. He joined them for lunch, where Wendy and some of her teammates, flush from victory, did most of the talking. Now here they were. It was the most time Jess and Paul spent together in a decade.

"You know, I love that you got Wendy started in music so early. I'm really grateful for that," Paul said. Wendy had had piano lessons since she was six, but she'd grown more curious about the guitar, her father's instrument, the more she spent time with him. "I mean, I could see you trying to keep her a thousand miles away from it, considering."

There was a lot she could say to that -- in fact, so much, she couldn't decide on one strand to extract and expand upon. Instead, she nodded.

She heard him sniff, shift his weight.

Jess took a deep breath. "How's the job going?" She asked, eyes flicking up to the rearview mirror, where she could see the top half of his face as he gazed out his passenger window. He was a house painter again, with the same crew he worked with when he left Portland for L.A. 10 years ago.

"Yeah, good," Paul said. "Nice to be working with David again."

"Good," she said, her eyes returning to the intersection ahead of them. "And you like your new place?"

"Yeah, for now," he said with enthusiasm. "But the apartment is temporary, just until I can decide where I want to live. I still plan on finding a house."

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"Where? Do you know?" She asked. He lived in outer southeast Portland, not far from them, but they both were miles from the inner southeast of their youth. They'd spent all of their 10 years together there, renting various huge Victorian homes with members of Undiscovered Country, the post-punk band David and Paul had founded. Thanks to the basements these homes offered, they had lived, practiced, recorded and held shows, all in one place.

"I want to stay near you and Wendy, obviously, but we'll have to see what I can afford," he said. "You're lucky you bought when you did."

"Yeah, totally," she said, nodding vigorously to make sure he could see it from the back seat. She privately thanked David and his wife, Jenny, who sounded the alarms early on about gentrification. It had seemed laughable at the time - the whole point of Portland was that they could live on the cheap. That meant with only part-time jobs, they could rent a room in a beautiful home and spend their free time working on songs, as Paul did, or promoting the band, as Jess did. Unthinkable now, all of it. A whole generation blindsided and pushed out of the city that their art and lifestyle helped to create.

"Well, I'm glad you're settling in," she said, looking up at the rearview mirror again. He leaned back, so she could see most of his face. His skin was still youthful, despite all he'd been through. "I wondered if Portland would seem too Podunk after L.A."

His prominent cheekbones seemed to jut forward as he gave a little laugh. "It's L.A. that seems small to me now, to be honest," he said. "No, it feels good to be back. Really good."

They were silent. She looked back up at the mirror and studied his profile. Jess could still see him as she first met him: bleached blond hair, cross earring in his right ear, tattoos at a time when they were considerably less common. These days, his hair was its natural black, and worn long, covering his ears. He still wore a t-shirt, jeans, and motorcycle boots, but he'd added a rumpled button-down, worn untucked and open. Even now, at 42, he looked like he just walked off stage.

He turned and met her eyes in the mirror, surprising her. She looked away.

"I'm playing again. Did Wendy tell you?" he asked in the overly optimistic tone he'd been using with her since he returned. He was like an eager candidate, interviewing for a job she didn't have open. "David, Jim, Steve and me. Nothing big, you know, just jamming in David's garage, but he's got a nice set-up in there."

"She did tell me," Jess said. "She's always been proud of her rock star daddy."

"Rock star'," he said. "I wish I'd known you were so easy to impress when I was working up the courage to ask you out."

They both laughed gently.

But her amusement was replaced by embarrassment. She looked down at herself and felt absurd - not so much to him as to the 23-year-old self that he reminded her of. Gone were the Doc Martens, short skirts and

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ripped stockings, replaced by the uniform of any fortysomething: jeans, BOGO sneakers and a fleece jacket. The only remnant of her previous life was the ancient Sonic Youth t-shirt she wore almost every weekend. It had a tear in the armpit and the graphic was so faded as to be almost unreadable, but she didn't care. It was a part of her, and she intended to wear it until it disintegrated.

She looked up again at the mirror, only this time, she studied herself. The natural blonde had washed out of her hair long ago, and eyes that were once bright green now seemed the color of moss clinging to cement. Everything about her was duller, darker, obscured.

Her embarrassment turned to anger. It's because of you that I'm like this, she thought, staring at the traffic light ahead, fingers gripping the steering wheel. We swore we'd never buy in, that our lives would be about art and the intellect, but you had to lose your way. ("He's getting into stuff, Jess," David told her one day after they'd returned from a tour. "Hard stuff. You need to talk to him.") I had a kid to raise. I needed health insurance and a 401k and a down payment. It's because of you I had to compromise absolutely everything, while you sit there, damaged but pure.

She cleared her throat and looked back up to the mirror. "And you're ... healthy? Everything's still good?"

He sagged; she could only see his hair now. He took a deep breath. "Jess, I've been clean for five years now. You know that. I've got a support group here, and a doctor I like - I'm not messing around, and I'm not taking anything for granted. I'm good. I'm fine."

"Good. Great. I'm glad," she said, pushing away a creeping sense of shame. She focused on the traffic light ahead of them, watching the green turn to yellow.

She said, "I saw you once, you know, not too long after you left. Maybe 2009? I just sort of lost it. I handed Wendy to Jenny for a couple days and went to L.A. I found your house, the door was unlocked - in the middle of East L.A., and the door was unlocked - and I just went right in. And there you were, passed out on the sofa."

She wanted to tell him what it was like, standing above his body, which she knew better than her own, now unrecognizably thin. She wanted to explain just how long she'd stared at his long and greasy hair, hair that he had always been so fussy about, hair that she'd dyed and cut for him countless times.

She wanted to describe her shock when she saw no bookshelves anywhere. They were both English Lit majors with predilections for the classics, books of heft and seriousness and weight, yet she saw none in his apartment. Surely, she thought, there's a book here somewhere. It became a matter of urgency - she tore his bed apart, ripped open drawers, even opened the refrigerator before finally she saw a paperback on the coffee table, inches from his outstretched hand, hidden by a stack of encrusted dishes and an overflowing ashtray. She eased herself next to him on the sofa and bent over to read its spine: *Crime and Punishment*.

Paulie and his Russians, she thought, feeling reassured until the smell hit her: vomit. She couldn't see it anywhere - he was lying face up right

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next to her - but the scent was unmistakable. She backed away to the window, but bars running across its front prevented her from pushing her head out to inhale fresh air.

Her initial inclination had been to clean him up and get him home, but those good intentions drained, replaced by something cold, something hard and decisive. It was time to go. It was time to fly back, buy a more business-appropriate wardrobe from Goodwill, and focus, exclusively, on raising their daughter.

Yet she didn't know how to explain all this to the Paul of today. How could she tell him that what he didn't understand, what he could never understand, was that she didn't just turn her back on him that day, but on some part of herself?

"The smell ..." she said. It was all she could choke out before her voice cracked. She waved her hand. "The smell."

Jess took deep breaths to collect herself, watching the traffic lights make their rotation - stop, go, slow - before she risked looking up at the mirror again. She thought he'd be distraught; instead he stared straight at her.

"Why? Why did you do that?" he asked, all his bright confidence gone and replaced by an intensity of desperation, or frustration - she wasn't sure. "That was everything I tried to save you from. That's exactly what I didn't want to happen."

"I bet you didn't. But you can't control everything. You controlled enough."

He quickly bent down to unhook his seat belt, and her anger surged. Here we go, she thought, steeling herself. I've given him an inch, letting him play at being a family for a day, and now he's going to push his way up here and plead his way back into our lives.

Instead he released the belt, sat back and exhaled. As if reading her thoughts, Paul asked, "Can I come up front with you? It's hard to talk about this when I can't even see you."

His deference caught her off guard. She shrugged, and he scrambled out of his seat.

Just after she returned from that trip to L.A., on her way to reclaim Wendy, she'd walked by a telephone pole coated with band posters, at least five or ten deep. She began ripping the posters off one by one, almost idly; it was as if she were watching a calendar go backwards, uncovering concerts from longer and longer ago. But the more she tore at them, the angrier she grew, pulling off whole layers in a fury, like an archaeologist who didn't care what truth lied underneath. Eventually she even picked out the corners that had been trapped by the staples. By the time she was done, she had splinters all over her hands, under the nails, and a mess surrounding her on the street, but the pole was bare. Clean. As she watched Paul make his way around the car, she realized that that had been her last act of recklessness before picking up her daughter and embarking on adulthood forever.

Paul eased himself in next to her (of course the seat was up too far - it

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had mostly only ever been Wendy riding next to her), then said nothing. She couldn't help but admire his emotional intelligence - he was being careful not to impose himself, not to take over or direct conversation. Clever you, she thought spitefully, but her anger dissolved anyway. Her shoulders dropped. She just felt old and tired.

They both stared at the traffic light ahead of them. She cleared her throat. "I once read that if you have two dogs, and dog #1 gets sick, it's important for dog #2 to be there when it dies, because dogs understand death, but they don't understand absence," she said. "That's why I went to L.A."

"I'm sorry. I just -" He cut himself off. "I'm so sorry."

He'd apologized to her before - he'd told her how he tried to spare her (to some degree, he did - he never touched their bank account); that he thought he had everything under control, until he suddenly didn't; that he couldn't come back, couldn't risk putting them through it all again, until he was sure he was okay.

She'd heard all of that before, but maybe now, when he wasn't saying anything at all, she could finally hear him.

"I keep thinking of David Foster Wallace," she said, an author she wouldn't mention to anyone else she knew. While Jess had kind, loyal, loving friends, most of them used their bookshelves for family photos and college texts. But Paul ... Paulie had always been different.

"Why did no one take us aside and tell us what's coming?" she quoted.

They watched the red light turn green.

"I've been reading a lot of Vallejo," He said. "Never did far away charge so close."

She nodded slowly. Now that his overly bright tone was gone, he sounded like Paul - the real Paul. Her Paul. She looked over at his knees, jammed up against the glove compartment, and thought of the time they'd been at some bar and were so desperate to fuck that they searched until they found an unlocked car door, her straddling him in the passenger seat of some stranger's pick-up truck.

She closed her eyes and, finally, turned to him, taking him in at this close distance. She'd been looking into those blue eyes (in various states of dilation, she thought wryly), for decades. What had those eyes seen? She thought of the time he brought her on stage so an audience could sing happy birthday to her, one of the happiest moments of her life, and wondered what, for that matter, had those eyes seen in her?

"Twenty years we've known each other, and yet here we are, still exchanging literary quotes," she said. "I guess some things don't change."

He nodded thoughtfully. "But some things do, you know?"

She laughed a little louder and longer than she'd meant to - she'd walked right into that one. But the laugh had freed something in her. For years now, she'd been assuming various roles - of mother, father, friend, colleague, daughter, citizen - while she single-handedly built up a market-

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ing career and raised a smart, independent child. Right now, though, she didn't feel like anything but herself. Jess thought of the poster-less telephone pole, naked but for dents and staples. Damaged but pure.

"Do you still wear an earring?" She asked, squinting at his right ear.

"No," he said, embarrassed. "The hole closed a long time ago."

They heard voices as the guitar teacher opened the door and Wendy came running down the stairs, stopping for passing cars but also taking in Jess and Paul in the front seat together. When the street was clear, she ran over and clambered in the back, her guitar case banging in after her; Paul got out and shut the door behind her.

Jess looked up at the rearview mirror again, only this time it was Wendy staring back at her. Wendy, who shared her green eyes, looked eager and breathless as Paul got back in the front seat and turned to Jess as well.

"Well?" Wendy asked. "What's next?"

With both sets of eyes upon her, waiting for her response, Jess inched the car into traffic, smiling to herself, knowing the decision was hers to make.