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Axe gets off I-83 at the Northern Parkway exit, which leads to a road whose lane markings disappear in the minds of drivers, and the traffic rolls into a sea of cars moving left to right to left like atoms drunk with entropy and tempting accidents. The silver streetlamps tower above the median and shine inside the car every few seconds, momentarily chasing the shadows away. Melrose picks at her cuticles in the passenger seat, creating a bloody mess that wasn't there before.

She hasn't slept more than eight hours in the past week combined, which is why Axe volunteered to drive to the theater. You don't know what insomnia is, until you know what insomnia is. The whole day Melrose contemplated cancelling the plans entirely, but she figured sitting in plush seats for two-plus hours listening to the spoken word and a live jazz band wouldn't require much energy, though she's still undecided.

"Have you been here before?" asks Axe, interrupting the mystique of silence. *Axe* is some variation of *Xavier* one of his ex-girlfriends gave him in high school that stuck.

"My third time. Tonight's theme is secrets. I heard some of the stories are so juicy the storytellers have to hide behind a curtain." Melrose's closet has skeletons too.

Axe slows suddenly to avoid the flash of a speed camera propped up in turpitude behind a tree. "Fucking speed cameras."

"Did you hear about the one near my apartment someone dragged down the street with a chain after setting it on fire?"

"Ha-ha, someone took that speed camera personally."

"A selfless deed for the common good." They grow silent again as Melrose recalls what's been causing the undercurrent of anxiety she's experienced for days. "I'm going to my mother's tomorrow."

"You've got a long drive. You need to get your rest tonight."

"I wish I could." Melrose closes her eyes and settles back despite the potholes; it feels so good to rest her eyes. "The roads are flooded at my mom's because of the heavy rain they had, and she has this annoying dog that barks nonstop—bark, bark, bark, bark—and bites too."

"Does it leave marks?"

"I still have a bruise from the last time I was there." She rolls up a pant leg to show him the black spot blemishing her calf. It's tiny. Axe can only look for a moment while he's driving.

"Shame it's not trained," he says. "Can she put it in another room?"

"She does, and it still barks—bark, bark, bark—but at least it can't bite. It's a stupid little dog, but it reminds me of the one we had when I was growing up that would bite us if we got too close to my mom. I can't remember her ever disciplining it. It's like she loved the dog more than us."

They pass a couple arguing on a street corner. One keeps walking away then turning to add a final point. He's wearing a round, gray coat, and the woman looks on deflated like her life's essence seeps out every time he makes to leave.

"Single life is the way to go," says Melrose.

Melrose and Axe tried dating, but for so many reasons, big and small, it seemed impossible. Ultimately, neither would've gotten what they wanted if they dated; they'd both be settling because of loneliness and hopelessness and laziness and—

"Yup," says Axe, "no drama."

“Get to do whatever you want. If I want to play videogames and eat popcorn in my underwear without showering all day, there’s nothing stopping me.”

“That’s right.”

“But there are good things too,” she says. “Like having that one person to confide in, knowing there’ll be someone at home to listen to your problems, whether they like it or not because they *have* to.” Melrose prides herself on finding the intricacies lost on Axe. “My problem is trust—that’s why I can’t have a relationship. I have these emotional scars from the way I was brought up.”

“What you and I missed as kids was the kind of loving home where everyone sat around a table for a meal without throwing things.”

“Your parents threw things?”

“Yeah.”

“Mine too.” Melrose remembers the numerous Thanksgivings and Christmases spent with friends’ families like a painful holiday montage and how she’d never felt welcomed by her own.

“I never learned what love is. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt love for anyone.” Melrose however imagines it’s something you put in a cardboard box and hand over as a means of declaration. “Sometimes I think I love my mom, sometimes I feel nothing, like how I feel for a piece of furniture I’ve seen a million times. Do you love your parents?”

Axe doesn’t answer right away to avoid misspeaking. He tends to tell the truth and not one word more. Melrose wishes he’d just say the first thing that popped into his head, like her, Whac-A-Mole-style.

After several missed breaths, he says, “I do *now*.”

They reach the trying portion of their journey—parking. It’s here that Melrose itches to commandeer the wheel because she’s more decisive than Axe who circles blocks and hesitates and passes up spaces and doubles the lights to wait behind and huffs annoyingly. Melrose tries not inserting herself but inevitably does, or else they’d end up parking too far away and her face would pale from motion sickness.

“Why don’t we go back to the first spot we saw around the corner?” she says.

“Can we park there?”

“There were meters.”

Axe pulls onto the broad lot of an office-goods store to reverse directions and return to the meter he dismissed fifteen minutes ago. A quarter of a block away from the open meter is a bus stop and queue of passengers waiting in the December cold. One commuter, parka zippered to his chin, is leaning against the meter; he peers disapprovingly into the car, never mind the tinted windows, because he’ll have to wait somewhere else now. Admittedly, a strange logic.

Melrose has a degree of patience for Axe’s parking indecisiveness, but it’s not an endless well, and fortunately for this, they not only arrive in time for the show, but twenty minutes early. Besides, the band plays first to warm up the crowd and encourage patronage of the makeshift bar hidden by a long line of women squirming for the bathroom. Melrose comes for the stories, so they wait in the car for the band to get a few songs deep.

“My mom’s not doing well,” she says. “She doesn’t work, hasn’t had a job since I was a kid.”

“Really?”

“She had a waitressing job for a while when I was eleven or twelve. One day she just stopped going. Her uniform was stretched out on the washer. She was gone. Maybe she’s had

one or two other jobs for a couple months here and there since waitressing. On top of that, her washing machine broke down along with her car. The water from the flooding rots the house's foundation. The cats and dogs tear up what's left."

It's like her mother has accepted a life of decay, letting her surroundings break and crumble around her. It's like she thinks she deserves it. It's like a boulder of guilt is crushing her. It's sad.

Axe stares ahead at the parked car in front. People who meet him describe him as collected, but really, he's just quiet. Either he doesn't have much to say, or he's trudged through so much mud, it's all packed deep down to cope; it feels like the latter. It feels like there's a lot left unsaid. It feels like—

"I want to tell you about the last time I saw my mom," says Melrose. "She lives the most south you can get on the eastern shore of Virginia, a county called Northampton."

"Three-hours away, right?"

"Exactly. The people there live really different kinds of lives, always near the water. There's a pier at the end of town. Keep driving on the main street and you'll fall off. It looks out onto an ocean panoramic. The town has a southern vibe but slightly off—maybe it's the sea salt hanging in the air. It's such a long drive you'd want to call first to confirm someone'll be home when you arrive, but I can't because my mom's phone doesn't work. Besides the fact of the bill, their cellphone tower is down.

"I usually have to pee by the time I arrive. I have to hope she's there. I bang on the door for longer than a sane amount of time, and the dogs are barking—stranger danger!—although it's my umpteenth time, and I've known them for years. Mom's inside shuffling back and forth—doing what, I don't know—and it's thirty-degrees out with a biting windchill. I just drove through four flooded roads in my tiny car, and my shoes and socks are moist from the tall grass out front. Stacked on the porch blocking the door are bags of trash, so I'm balancing each foot on a bag of trash, wondering what's taking her so long to answer. Maybe she doesn't feel well, maybe she just doesn't give a shit. It seems so selfish to me, which is how she's always been. And I've had it up to my neck now that I'm in my thirties, contemplating getting back in my car and driving away with no explanation before she opens the door. I kick myself later for not doing it.

"She finally lets me in, and the dogs are yapping in my face, and the one is biting at my feet and legs. And here's my mom in her underwear and bra shuffling around like an old man though she's only fifty-something. She gets around the partial wall that separates the living room and kitchen. At the sink, she sticks her head under the faucet and squeezes foam from her hair. 'What are you doing?' I ask. 'Washing my hair,' she says. I take a seat for a while. A movie is playing on the television, and this fucking dog is barking at my feet, then on the table, then on the couch cushion next to me like a bully, and I have to tolerate it because it's my mom's dog, and it's also not the most pressing issue at the moment.

"She finishes washing her hair and pats it with a towel. She lets her hair lie on her shoulder over the towel, too tired for blow drying. She moves around the partition again and sits on more towels on the sofa perpendicular to mine. I wonder what's with all the towels but don't ask. I look at her while she's facing the TV. I have that feeling that she's a piece of furniture, and she knows I'm watching her. Two tubes come out of her bra and circle back—they're yellowish-brown, mostly brown."

"She's had the mastectomy already?"

"And she starts chemo tomorrow."

“So, you’re taking her to the appointment? That’s good.”

“I just don’t know one-hundred percent if she’d take care of me if I were sick.”

“Or if she could.”

“Right. She wouldn’t be able to reach me.”

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“My father was very present,” says Axe. “He’s from Barbados, my mother’s from Martinique. They were both pastors and met on another island at a religious conference before getting married and moving to Maine.”

“Why Maine?” asks Melrose.

“No idea. It’s too cold for me, so I came down to Maryland. Every year we visit their islands, which are lush and beautiful, and the food is fresh. They don’t feel as safe in the U.S. as back home, so my parents were overprotective of us growing up. They didn’t let my sister and I leave our front doorframe, so I ended up reading a lot of books—mostly sci-fi and magical realism.

“My father was an angry man. Beating us was his way of teaching us. He liked the sharp sound belts made slapping skin. One year I just stopped crying when he was getting into the swing of it. I’d lie on my belly and cradle my head in my arms and let him take his time. But I can tell you from experience, violence and anger don’t work. I thought my dad weak for being unable to control his emotions. I probably would’ve listened better if he’d just talked to me. When something broke, he was less concerned with fixing it and more concerned with who to blame. Because of him, I can’t date anyone—I’m afraid of *my* anger. I can fly off the handle and stay heated for weeks.

“He beat my mom too like she was a third child he owned. I don’t know why she stayed so long. She tried to avoid confrontations. Silently, she’d cook and clean and work, like a ghost. You wouldn’t know she was there except for the scent of her perfume. But no matter how quiet and obedient she was, he found something to take offense to, to question her love over, to bang her head against a wall for, to elbow her in the face.

“One day she left. I woke up that day feeling empty. I caught her in the hallway as she was taking her bags. I fell to the floor and literally crawled to her feet. ‘Don’t leave,’ I said, bawling. ‘Please don’t leave.’ My father was still out that morning drinking. ‘It’s not safe for me,’ she said. ‘But what about me?’ I wanted to ask. She closed the door, and I didn’t hear from her again for years. My father redirected all that freed anger at us, mostly at me but also at my sister—”

Axe’s phone rings, and they both jump. She can see the time on his screen, nearly time to go in the theater.

He answers. “Hi, Mom,” he says. Her voice on the other end is excited but muffled. “I’m great, Mom. I’m with Melrose...Maybe, I don’t know.”

Melrose can hear her singing: “Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you, dear Xavier...”

“Thanks, Mom. Is Dad there?” His mom returned home after he was in his twenties because his father had quote-unquote calmed down. His mother is unable to connect him with his father through the phone tonight though. “Love you, too,” he says. “Goodnight.”

“That was sweet,” says Melrose.

“Yeah.” He turns off his phone and stares again at the parked car in front. “We should get going.”

“Are you having a good birthday so far?”

“Best one yet,” he says. “You know, you should get up on stage tonight and tell your story.”

“I’m too shy.”