

Excerpt of Little Big Show

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The footpath gallops ahead like a dumb dog, disappears around bends in the forest. This has been Alexander's first real hike, a hard scramble -- scuttling along in a crouch at times as if he might find grips on the flat rocks. His assistant at work would have *loved* some photos.

Now that he's made it -- almost made it -- this easy wide dirt path where he and his sister Marietta started hours ago, where families had pushed all-terrain strollers, seems embarrassing somehow. A bird chirps sweet, trilling notes. The watery quality of the sunlight suggests cocktail hour. Through gaps in the trees, the gravel lot materializes, but there's no blotch of red. Marietta's car should be visible. Shouldn't it?

"Hold on," he calls ahead to her. He spins around. "Is this where we started?" He knows it is, even with the trail deserted, other trekkers probably at home now firing up their grills for the Fourth of July like normal people.

"You did it, big guy!" she says, brings fluttery hands to her cheeks as if someone has proposed. He resents her surprise. His wife, his *ex-wife*, began to talk to him like that after they had stillborn twins last year. Like he was a little bit of an idiot.

Yet he hopes Marietta's sunny affection is sincere, the desire a hum in his chest. Since Alexander's divorce, his sister has stopped visiting him up in Baltimore.

Surely in another minute, that stupid Dodge Omni will flicker into existence between the trunks. Pulling ahead of Marietta, he breaks into a trot.

"You're *running!*" she calls after him, and picks up her pace to a jog.

When he bursts from the forest, he stops short at the edge of the gravel clearing as if it's a cliff. Empty. A gray sea of rocks. A spray of broken glass.

Marietta emerges beside him. Her smile drains away.

"Gone," he says. He points to where the car had been, to the parking space she managed to grab hours earlier, when the lot had been full. The trees block the waning afternoon light like a leafy gang of thugs. "My briefcase," he whimpers.

The proposal for the Jamieson account, a proposal he insisted on creating himself instead of letting his staff handle it, was on his laptop. Worked on it for three straight days and didn't get around to backing it up. He's been doing bone-headed things like that ever since this new woman, Nichole, materialized – she shares his table sometimes at Common Ground, an over-crowded coffee shop. It seems impossible that such a thing can happen after he drove his wife away with his drinking and insults, drove her right into the arms of Jimmy Yang, a hotshot systems specialist at a competing agency.

He walks the perimeter, as if he might find the car hiding behind a stump. His chest expands with air. Alexander blinks away the doctor's thick fingers, the way they worked tubes up the twins' noses. He thinks about the dangers of breath. What if his lungs bulge through the gaps between his ribs, press until the bones snap?

Marietta stands at the edge of the clearing, staring blankly up and down the road. "Maybe someone borrowed it," she says.

It must have been ten miles to Charlottesville. "Even you don't believe that."

She shrugs, shades her eyes, and scans the distance, as if she's deliberating whether she believes it or not.

He studies the pile of glass shards on the gravel where the Omni had been. He slaps his forehead. He throws his arms like he's pitching baseballs. "I'm ruined," he rasps, and he wishes he would stop stomping. But the pain in his feet, although he knows it's there, feels faraway right now, like the possibility that anything will be all right, ever.

Marietta puts a hand on his shoulder. "My yoga teacher says that what we see depends on what we look for."

"Someone jacked your car. I don't think that's subjective."

"You really think so?" She bends over a little at the waist, as if this news is a physical thing, something that has struck her. When she straightens up, day-glo color flushes her cheeks. "My prayers are answered!" she says, a hand on her chest like she's won something. "I've been wed to the wrong car for years."

She's right about that one – the Dodge Omni was a crappy car even during the Reagan administration, when their father bought it new. But old cars are easy to hotwire, and trail heads are quiet places. Good thieves probably aren't connoisseurs.

She pulls the neon wallet from her shorts pocket, and she takes out her driver's license. She studies her own picture like she's seeing herself for the first time. "I've always thought I was meant to be in a classic VW bug," she says. "And see, the universe is making it easy for me."

He nods. But then he can't help himself. "Well, actually, the insurance policy that Mom and Dad bought you – *that's* what will make it easy." Their parents have subsidized her for years: a life that consists of expensive massage seminars and a part-time job at the Mystic Sunflower Healing Hands Co-op. What bothers him the most about the way they dote on her is that he suspects she really does deserve it – she's so damn likeable

that his friends smile at the mention of her name. Like she's Michael J. Fox or Chewbacca. Except in the body of a statuesque woman.

She doesn't take the bait, the way he wants her to, the way Sherry would have. He misses the security of that, of being locked in a struggle with someone. Instead, Marietta says, in a dreamy voice, "Mom and Dad are *so* awesome."

Alexander grabs his own hair with both hands. It's coarse and overly suggestible, will stand up in two horns now for the rest of the day. There was a time when Sherry would have smoothed it with her palms, kissed his cheek. "What am I going to do?"

"Gotta start walking, big guy." Marietta heads down the road.

"Stop calling me that," he says, not loud enough for her to hear. He's too stunned by the truth of what she's saying – they have to embark on foot.