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WEDNESDAY

Romeo was driving down from the Blue Ridge Mountains in the baffling twilight, going too fast, when a raccoon or possum ran in front of the car. The impact was disturbingly gentle. No thud—just a soft *unzipping*, beneath the chassis. Still, it tore at Romeo's heart. He braked and pulled over.

Shaw awoke. "What's wrong?"

"Hit something," said Romeo, and he got out and started walking back up I-77, hunting for the carcass. Shaw followed him. A tractor-trailer bore down on them with a shudder and the long plunging chord of its passing. Then the night got quiet. They could hear their own footsteps. Cicadas, and a sliver of far-off honkytonk music. "God," said Shaw. "This is it. We're really in the *South*."

But they found no trace of the animal.

They walked quite a ways. They waited for headlights so they could scan up and down the highway. They backtracked and searched along the shoulder. Nothing—not

so much as a bloodstain. Finally Romeo just stood there, watching the fireflies rise and fall.

"Hey," said Shaw, "I bet your friend got lucky."

"Uh-uh. I hit it."

"Well maybe it was like a sacrifice." Playfulness in Shaw's tone. "Maybe it just wanted us to have a propitious journey."

When they got back to the Tercel Shaw said he was wide awake and could he drive? That was fine with Romeo. He got in on the passenger side, and they descended into the North Carolina piedmont. His ears popped; the air grew humid. He tilted his seat all the way back and looked up at the moon as it shredded in the pines. Somewhere after Elkin, NC, he let his eyes slip shut for just a second—and then the highway started to curve beneath him, and he felt himself spiraling slowly downward, into a bottomless slumber.

Tara kept away from the house on Wednesday nights.

Wednesday nights were jackpot nights. Mom would start drinking early. Pour herself a g&t in a lowball glass; then fan out all her lottery tickets on the coffee table and

gaze lovingly at them, and touch them one by one and wonder which was going to be *the* one. The TV would be on but Mom would disregard it. All her thoughts on the good life to come. Yachts, spas in Arizona, blazing white villages in Greece, the unquenchable envy of her friends. She'd finish her first drink and fix herself another. Her boy Jase—Tara's little brother—would put his head in her lap while he played with his Micro. She'd tousle his hair. She'd swirl the ice in her drink. At some point the colors of the dying day, and the TV colors, and all the colors of her life, would begin to seem extra-vivid, even gorgeous, and she'd tell herself she was the blessedest woman in the world, and pick up her cell phone and text her daughter:

I know we win tonite!!

Or:

I need u!! Tara baby!! My good luck charm!! Where are u? Come home!!

They were siren calls though, Tara knew. She had to be deaf to them. Study late at the library, catch a movie, hang out with Clio at the mall—just keep clear of the

house till the jackpot was done and Dad would come home to take the brunt of Mom's drunken post-drawing tirade. By midnight Mom would have worn herself out with rage and grief, and she'd have passed out, and the coast would be clear.

But on this particular Wednesday, Tara had made a blunder. She'd left her botany textbook, with all the handouts, in her bedroom. She'd done this in the morning but she didn't realize it till 7:00 p.m., after her organic chemistry class, when she checked her locker and saw that the book wasn't there.

She had a quiz tomorrow. She hadn't even *looked* at that stuff.

She thought of calling Dad. Maybe he could sneak the book out to her. But no, it was too late. He'd be on his way to church by now, his Lions of Judah meeting. Maybe Jase? No, Jase would tip Mom off; Jase was in Mom's pocket.

No. What I have to do, Tara thought, is just go back there and be really docile and *don't* let Mom draw me into a fight, whatever she says don't fight back—and first chance I get I'll slip away to my room before the drawing, before she blows up.

Tara went to the parking lot and got in her battered Geo, and left the campus of the Coastal Georgia Community

College. Fourth Street to Robin Road to Redwood Road: streets she despised. She hated their dull names and their blank lawns and their rows of squat brick ranch houses. Hers was the squattest and brickest of all, on a street called Oriole Road. When she got there, she slowed the car to a crawl, and looked in through the living room window. Mom, the TV. The painting of Don Quixote tilting at windmills. The wooden shelf of Dad's # 3 Chevy models, and Mom's Hummels. Jase's feet stuck out at the end of the couch. Everything that Tara despised about her home was glowing and warm-looking like an advertisement for low mortgage rates or pest control, and such a depressing show she had to call Clio and tell her about it.

"I'm spying on my own house."

Said Clio, "*That's* kind of perverted."

"It's a really ugly house."

"I know."

"I can see my brother's little marinated pigs' feet."

"OK."

"But I have to see how drunk Mom is."

"How drunk is she?"

"That's the problem, I can't tell. I can't see her hands. I have to see how she's holding her glass. If she's swirling her glass with her pinky out, then I'm already in deep shit."

"Are you going in there?"

"I have to."

"But isn't this your Mom's freak-out night?"

"Uh-huh."

"So what are you *doing* there? Come over to Headquarters. You know who's coming? That Kings of Unsnap guy. Jonah. The one who wants to do you."

"You told me that, Clio."

"So come let him do you."

"I got a botany quiz in the morning."

"Oh God. You're such a boring geek."

"Why don't *you* do him?"

"OK," said Clio. "You talked me into it."

"You're such a whoring slut."

"I know. Hey I gotta go. If your Mom does something interesting, like touching your little brother's weewee or something, let me know."

"I'll send you the pics," said Tara. "You can post them." She hung up, and sighed, and pulled into the carport.

As soon as she stepped into the living room, Mom was at her: "Where were *you*?" Tara consulted the lowball glass and saw that the swirling was quick and syncopated, with the pinky fully extended, which presaged a grim night.

"I was in class."

"You should call me when you're gonna be this late."

Not late, Tara thought, but drop it.

Mom kept pressing. "Which class was it?"

"Um. Organic chemistry."

"Why you taking *that*?"

Leave it alone. The only goal is freedom. "I don't know, I guess it's some kind of a requirement."

"But if you're only gonna be a goddamn *whatever*—why do they make you take organic chemistry?"

Tara shrugged.

Said Mom, "They want all our money and what they teach you is worthless."

Hard to let that pass. Inasmuch as Mom contributed not a cent to her tuition—inasmuch as every penny came from Tara's job at the bank plus help from her grandmother Nell plus a small scholarship, and all she got from her parents was room and board for which she paid $450 a month so that wasn't a gift either—it was a struggle not to snap back at her. But what good would that do? Remember, all you want is to get to your room. Remember, this woman is the same birdnecked alien you were just watching through the living room window a moment ago. Pretend there's no family connection, that you're invisible and you can slip away unnoticed at any time—

"Wait. Sit for a minute. The drawing's coming up."

"Got a quiz tomorrow, Mom. So I should probably—"

"You know what it's worth this time?"

Tara shook her head.

"You're kidding me," said Mom. "You really don't know?"

"I really don't."

"Three hundred and eighteen million dollars."

"Wow."

The sum touched Tara's life in no meaningful way, but she thought if she showed sufficient awe maybe Mom would release her.

"Though if you take the lump sum," said Mom, "then after you pay your taxes, you'd only have a hundred some million."

"Oh."

"Like a hundred twenty-odd. Hardly worth bothering, right? You mind freshening this for me? So I won't disturb the Little Prince here?"

Mom swirled her glass.

On the TV was *Nip/Tuck*, which wasn't appropriate for ten-year-old Jase but then he wasn't watching it anyway. He was playing *Revenant* on his Micro. Oblivious as ever—and Tara was happy to ignore him back. She carried Mom's glass to the kitchen, filled it

with ice and Bombay and tonic, cut a thin half-wheel of lime and placed it festively. Be solicitous, servile. Try to soften her. Don't resist in any way.

But when she returned, Mom was holding up a thin windowed envelope, a bill from some credit card company, and demanding: "Know how I got this? Came right to the office. *Angela* gave it to me. I didn't even know this bill existed. It's for seven hundred dollars. Your father never *mentioned* it."

What would be the least resistant reply possible? Tara tried, "That's awful, Mom."

"Awful? It's the most humiliating thing that can ever happen to *anyone*. *Anyone. Ever*. Of course your father isn't worried. Your father thinks we'll be fine."

"Well, won't we?"

Oh, that was dumb. That was way too cheerful. Mom pounced. "You don't get it *at all*, do you? They're gonna *foreclose*. They're gonna take our *house*. They're gonna take it out from under our feet and take the damn Liberty with it. You're gonna have to leave school. I'm sorry, cupcake. You're gonna have to start producing some *income*."

"Mom, I'm a little tired. Would you mind if I—"

"Do you think I'm *not* tired? I am so *damn* tired of being this poor and your father in total denial and you

kids thinking this is some kind of bad dream we're gonna wake up from! We're gonna lose *everything*, do you not get it? This boat is *sinking*. Nobody's gonna bail *us* out. The boat is going down! I mean, baby, sugarcake, you're gonna have to start *swimming*. You're gonna—"

But then came a fanfare on the TV, and instantly Mom left off. She gave Jase a little swat and he hustled out of her way, and she leaned forward to check her flotilla of tickets.

"And now," said a somber announcer, "here's tonight's drawing for the Max-a-Million jackpot. Tonight's jackpot is worth . . . three hundred and eighteen *milly-on* dollars."

No one onscreen. Just the voice of that undertaker. And a hopper in the shape of a funeral urn, full of lightly waltzing plastic balls. One of them flew up suddenly on a puff of air and rolled down a serpentine ramp and posed itself before the camera.

"The first number is . . . tuh-*wenty*-seven."

Mom murmured, "Uh-huh. Got that here." Trying for indifference. But her eyes were full of eagerness.

Tara quietly cheated a few steps toward the hall.

"The next number is forty-two."

"Well I do have *that*," said Mom.

And Tara made her move. Melted silkily away while Mom was too dazzled by the numbers to notice.

In her room, Tara shut the door and sat at the laptop on her desk. Clio had just posted:

> u still "studying" bitch? do u think jonah wrights sperm has beneficial properties of healing? wil it help u lose pounds from hips waist and thighs? he wasn't at headquarters tho just creepy seth from jax. I h8 the wick. die if I dont getout of the wick.

Tara wrote back:

> Havent started yet. Caught by Mom. She's watching the drawing. In 20 seconds she'l lose and go skitzo.

And right on time: Mom's hell-on-the-loose shriek from the living room. Worse even than usual. Then: "TARA! TA-*RA*!"

Tara typed brb and opened the door. "Yes?"

"TARA!"

Particularly anguished tonight. Tara returned to the living room to find her on her knees before the TV, with Jase cowering in the corner. Mom had utterly lost it. Her mouth was open and she was holding up one of her

tickets and tears were pouring down her cheeks, and this wasn't just another drunken display of self-pity: there was true fear. "GRACE OF GOD!" she cried. As though she were beholding His face at that very moment. She clutched the ticket in her fist and rocked back and forth. "GRACE OF GOD! GRACE OF GOD! GRACE OF GOD!"