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One Last Thing Before I Go

Written by Jonathan Tropper

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ONE LAST THING BEFORE I GO

JONATHAN TROPPER



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CHAPTER 1

This is Tuesday, just under three weeks before his wife will be getting married, and a few days before Silver will tentatively decide that life isn't necessarily worth living when you've been doing it as poorly as he has. It is seven years and four months or so since Denise divorced him for a host of valid reasons, and roughly eight years since his band, the Bent Daisies, released its only album and became rock stars overnight on the strength of their solitary hit, "Rest in Pieces." For one blessed summer it seemed as if the entire world was singing that song. And then they weren't, and then he couldn't get arrested—although, actually, Silver did get arrested twice; one DUI and once for solicitation, and he would tell you about it if he could, but he was, at best, fuzzy about the details back then, and now it's like an oral history long forgotten. Then, with a little back-channel manipulation from the record label, Pat McReedy, their lead singer, quit the band to launch his now epic solo career, dropping Danny (bass), Ray (lead guitar), and Silver (drums) back home in Elmsbrook to stare down the barrel of the rest of their painfully

unglamorous lives. With nowhere else to go, Silver went back home to discover that Denise had already changed the locks and retained counsel.

But that was then, and this is Tuesday, eight years and countless mistakes later. Silver is forty-four years old, if you can believe it, out of shape, and depressed—although he doesn't know if you call it depression when you have good reason to be; maybe then you're simply sad, or lonely, or just painfully aware, on a daily basis, of all the things you can never get back.

And, this being Tuesday, Silver and Jack are on their way to jerk off.

"Is that a wedding ring?"

They are speeding down the highway in Jack's ten-year-old BMW convertible when Jack notices the band on Silver's finger. Jack is blasting hip-hop music and pretending to know the words, while Silver absently taps along on his knees to the automated beat. They are the same age, seasoned veterans of epically bad decisions and poor follow-through.

He forgot to take off the ring. God only knows how long he's been wearing it. Hours? Days, maybe. His finger still bears the groove from when he was married, and whenever he slips it on, it slides into place like a machined part, and he forgets about it. Chagrined, he pulls it off his finger and sticks it into his pocket, to jingle around with his other loose change.

"What the fuck, Silver?" Jack says. He has to shout to be heard above the din of the interstate, the hip-hop, and the incessant ringing in Silver's ears. Silver suffers from a moderate to severe case of tinnitus. There is no cure and, as far as he knows, no one is

running any triathlons to raise awareness or fund research. He suffers alone.

"I was just playing with it."

"Is that your actual wedding band?"

"As opposed to what?"

"I don't know, I thought maybe you went out and bought one."

"Why the hell would I buy a wedding ring?"

"Why would you wear your old one, ten years after your divorce?"

"Seven years."

"Sorry. Seven years. I stand corrected."

Jack flashes him a sly little smile, the one that says *I know you better than you know yourself*, the one that generally makes Silver want to plunge his index finger through Jack's eye socket, around the back of his nose, and out the other eye, creating an effective handle with which to rip his face off.

"Something wrong there, Silver?"

"What could be wrong? I'm a forty-four-year-old man on my way to masturbate into a cup for seventy-five dollars. Living the dream."

Jack grins. "Easiest money you'll ever make."

A good amount of his time with Jack is spent wondering whether Jack actually believes his own particular brand of bullshit. They are two middle-aged divorced men, their friendship born of mutual inconvenience, because they happened to live on the same floor of the Versailles. Jack thinks Silver is depressed and Silver thinks Jack is an idiot and, at any given moment, both of them are generally right.

They are on their way to a satellite office of the Blecher-Royal Medical Research Facility, where they will check in, submit to the prick of a blood test, then submit their own pricks to a quick, sterile flurry of self-abuse and gracelessly come into specimen jars. They will accomplish this without the aid of any chemical lubricants, in the name of science, and for the weekly seventy-five-dollar stipend.

The drug trial in which they are enrolled—Jack found it online—is purported to be a new nonhormonal treatment for low sperm motility. Possible side effects include mood swings; dizziness; and, strangely, decreased libido, a fact the test administrator told them during the twenty-minute orientation without the slightest hint of irony.

You don't want to hear about his deposit, about the small room overwhelmed by the liberal spraying of industrial-strength disinfectant, about the weathered porn magazines he won't touch because of all the sticky hands that have already handled them. About the depressing little television on its teetering IKEA stand, and the small stack of DVDs, each case marked with either an *H(etero)* or a *G(ay)*. Or about how he doesn't sit in the chair or watch the discs, but just kind of stands in the center of the room with his pants around his ankles, calling up the images of girls he slept with back when he was young enough to be wholly consumed by a deep, passionate kiss, the sight of a freshly unsheathed breast, the smoky half-closed eyes of a girl in heat, looking up at you as she hungrily takes you in below.

But as always, just before his ejaculate hits the bottom of the specimen cup with a soft plastic burp, no matter how determined

he is to avoid it, he sees Denise, frowning at him with her customary scorn, depleting the moment of whatever lingering molecular pleasure it may have retained.

A last sad grunt and squeeze, the cold damp of the baby wipe, and then the warmth of his semen against his fingertips through the thin plastic walls of the cup, more alive than anything coming out of him has any right to feel.

CHAPTER 2

Out in the lobby, Jack, already finished, is chatting up the receptionist. She isn't his type—mousy-looking with a light smattering of adult acne across the edge of her jaw—but Jack likes to stay sharp. You never know who might be in the market for a house.

Jack is a real-estate agent, always with a business card tucked between two fingers, slipping it into your hand like a reverse pick-pocket before you even realize he's done it. He carries himself with the cocky swagger of someone who is always closing, whether he's trying to talk someone into bed or a center-hall colonial. In fact, he is somewhat famous for often accomplishing both simultaneously. This went on back when he was still married, so it was only a matter of time, really. There was a Puerto Rican bartender. She showed up to his house at dinnertime, cursing at him in Spanish. His wife went after him, first with a meat tenderizer, and then with a team of lawyers from her father's white-shoe law firm.

"There he is!" Jack says, announcing Silver's presence to the entire office. "What, did you have to buy yourself dinner first? I was about to send Vicki here in to expedite things."

Vicki smiles, embarrassed, maybe even offended, but somehow flattered too. That is Jack's gift.

"I'm fine." He hands Vicki his deposit without making eye contact, she hands him his check, and just like that, he has sold his seed. The cup is opaque, but still, the act of handing your sperm to a woman is one of those things that will never stop feeling creepy.

"Good job," Jack says, slapping his back as they step out of the office into the afternoon sun.

This is my life, Silver thinks to himself, and, as always, tries like hell not to panic.

Mistakes have been made.

It's hard to know where to start. Things have been a mess for so many years that trying to pin down a starting point is like trying to figure out where your skin starts. All you can ever really know is that it's wrapped around you, sometimes a little tighter than you'd like.

But clearly there have been some mistakes. Bad ones. You can tell that just by looking at him.

For one thing, he has gotten fat. Not obese, not *People* magazine fat, but still. He has been on an extended hiatus from any kind of physical fitness. Do they even say "physical fitness" anymore? He isn't sure. He hasn't quite fallen apart yet, but the cracks are fast becoming fissures: an increasingly pronounced gut, incipient jowls, and the strategic application of baby powder in the warmer seasons to avoid chafing.

So as not to smell like baby powder, he uses excessive amounts of deodorant and generous helpings of Eternity, by Calvin Klein. He applies the cologne by spraying it into the air and then walking through the vapor, like he saw his mother do when he was a boy. So, yeah, now he's the fat guy who smells like baby powder and too much cologne, who sits alone in Manny's Famous Pizza leaving greasy fingerprints all over the book he isn't actually reading while blotting the oil off his poorly shaved chin with a napkin, keeping an eye on all the pretty girls who come in.

You could be excused for thinking he is somewhat pathetic. Or maybe a pedophile.

Which is why lately he has gotten into the habit of wearing his old wedding band. Not because he misses Denise—he doesn't at all, which is maybe a sad confirmation of what she always suspected about his overall emotional wherewithal—but because that gold band around his finger alters the whole picture, confers upon him some faint glimmer of respectability. It implies that he goes home to someone who finds redeeming qualities in him, who is ostensibly not averse to at least occasional physical contact with him, and that makes all of his obvious flaws seem more superficial, less ingrained. It could complicate things if he happens to strike up a conversation with an attractive woman, but the women he tends to engage these days are not, generally speaking, the sort who are going to blanch at a wedding band.

CHAPTER 3

His habit is to while away the depressing afterglow of his sperm deposit at The Last Page, a large independent bookstore in the quiet downtown area of Elmsbrook. He generally sits in the store's small café, reading *Rolling Stone* and drinking a large soda, replenishing his fluids while he waits.

Lily arrives at a quarter to three, her long hair haphazardly tied into a loose ponytail knot that is already coming undone, blondish wisps spilling out and trailing her like a comet's tail. Her hair has been dyed different shades of blond for so long that it has lost all genetic memory, so that her visible roots aren't so much dark as confused. Her black tights are tucked into black cowboy boots, and her lean torso swims in a loose-fitting cardigan the color of dirt. She wears her guitar on her back, neck up, in a soft black case, like a ninja sword.

Silver watches her closely from his perch in the café. Imperfections abound: her prominent forehead, her small fighter's nose, a misaligned lateral tooth. But the overall package has a pleasing

composition to it, a fractured beauty that lingers for him even after she has moved past him into the Children's Books section.

He loves her as much as any man can love a woman he's never spoken to, which is significantly more than you'd think. It's a pure love, epic in its own way. If the situation called for it, he'd step in front of a speeding bus for her. The only other person he would ever do that for is Casey, his daughter, whom he imagines might actually enjoy the spectacle. In eighteen years, he hasn't exactly proven himself in the father department. The sad truth is, dying for Casey might be his only shot at redemption, and even then he doesn't think it would help his case very much. Any idiot can die, right?

He moves furtively through the aisles of books like a shoplifter. He can already hear the soft sounds of Lily's guitar, punctuated by the occasional hiss of the espresso machine in the bookstore's café. She plays this gig twice a week, for the handful of three- and four-year-olds who sit in a small circle around her low styrene chair, sipping at their juice boxes and singing along while the assorted mix of nannies and au pairs chat softly amongst themselves in island dialects.

Silver stands in the Self-Help aisle, where he can listen without alarming anyone. *Thirty Days to a Flat Stomach, Eating Your Way to a Thinner You, The Self-Esteem Workbook*—a billion-dollar industry built on the questionable notion that people can be fixed. He pretends to browse while he watches Lily play. Her whole body moves as she strums, her light hair falling over her face like a curtain, and then she looks up at the kids and starts to sing.

The cat came back / the very next day / The cat came back / we

thought he was a goner / but the cat came back / He just wouldn't stay, away away away yeah yeah . . .

There is no way to explain this. It's an inane kids' song. And her thin voice wavers on the high notes and occasionally runs flat. But she sings with passion, like it's a raw and earnest love song, her deepest pain set to music. The ridiculous song is much too small to contain her energy, and so it spills over, filling the room, filling him. The kids sing along tunelessly with the chorus—they've been here before—but her voice rises above them and floats around the ceiling fans of this scrappy little bookstore still clinging fiercely to life in the digital age. He can feel the familiar lump forming in his throat, the paradoxical sense of having lost something he never had. By the time she hits the third verse he is undone.

The man around the corner swore he'd shoot the cat on sight / He loaded up his shotgun with nails and dynamite / He waited and he waited for the cat to come around / Ninety-seven pieces of the man was all they found . . . / But the cat came back . . .

Every so often, clarity washes over him in a wave, drenching him with realizations and reminders of what he's lost and who he has turned out to be. He lurks there, beyond help in the Self-Help section, a middle-aged mess of a man with restless legs, ringing ears, and an aching heart, fighting back the tears elicited by a woman he's never met singing her heart out about the attempted murder of a cat.

The way he sees it, he's teetering on that edge. By his estimation, he's got maybe one last shot at any kind of real and lasting love,

and that's before you take into account his warped and deeply compromised faculty for it to begin with. He has loved more women than any man should. He doesn't so much fall in love as dive-bomb it like a kamikaze pilot, fearless and at full throttle. He used to look at this propensity as a gift, then a curse, and now understands it to be just another way in which he is broken.

He's been alone for a long time now, more than seven years. At some point, loneliness becomes less a condition than a habit. In time, you stop looking at your phone wondering why you can't think of anyone to call, stop getting your hair cut, stop working out, stop thinking that tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life. Because tomorrow is today, and today is yesterday, and yesterday beat the shit out of you and brought you to your knees. The only way to stay sane is to stop hoping for something better.

But there's still something in him, a small pocket of insurgency that hasn't fully conceded. There's a part of him that still believes she's out there, the woman who will see the man behind this shifting, splitting land mass, the woman who knows exactly what to do with the hopeless paradox of a kamikaze lover like him. And he knows that's the part of him that has to finish dying if he's ever going to sleep soundly again.

The first girl he ever loved was Sofie Kinslehour. She had a pixie haircut and a pink, horn-shaped birthmark on her neck, and the first time they kissed, she let out a small moan that conveyed a world of carnality he had only vaguely intuited up to that point. They were sixteen years old, in a dark corner of the parking lot behind the high school—there was a game of some kind going on—and when she moaned, he heard himself answer in kind, like she'd woken something up in him he didn't know was there. She pressed the full length of herself against him, opening her mouth to accept his tongue. For the next few weeks, she occupied him like a conquering army. At home he tugged on himself so furiously and so often that at one point he feared real and lasting damage. When they were together they kissed themselves raw, until their lips were swollen, flaking husks, their tongues charley-horsed. And then, one day, it ended. He doesn't remember the salient points, but statistical evidence and the cold spasm of regret in his belly whenever he thinks about it assure him that it was he who blinked first, who found a random flaw in her to cling to until it swallowed him whole.