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MOZAMBIQUE, THE MOON

ONCE, WHEN OUR DAD was still well, he drove to our school and told the principal that a make-believe relative had died. We were escorted from our classrooms and delivered to the office, where our dad stood in his work clothes, frowning. He explained about the tragedy, but winked so that the principal couldn't see. He upheld the charade all the way to the parking lot, when he finally broke into laughter, wrapping us up into a squished pile he could barely get his arms around.

Lucy said he shouldn't joke about things like death and our dad agreed. "We won't tell your mother about this, will we?" We wouldn't, said James and I, but Lucy folded her arms under her new breasts and scowled.

We drove an hour out of the city to where the forests and farmers' fields began. Our dad bought us french fries from a chip truck and ate a whole poutine himself even though he was supposed to be on a diet. After the poutine he said he was tired and would one of us like to drive? Lucy was the oldest, but she was still upset about the dead-relative thing so James took the wheel. He drove twenty kilometers below the speed limit. My job was to look out the back window for police cruisers, and Lucy's was to monitor the road ahead.

Our dad instructed James to pull over at a picnic area. We all got out of the station wagon and walked into the forest to search for a particular kind of wildflower our mom loved. It was June and they were just coming into bloom, yellow glimmers in the underbrush. Our dad had us do the harvesting while he plodded along, a little out of breath, a bouquet gathering in his hand as we scurried back to him with our pickings. It excited us to think of our mom wondering where we were, angry that no one had called to explain our lateness from school. She and our dad had been up late the night before yelling about money. We pictured the shock in her face when our dad pulled the flowers out from behind his back like a magic trick.

By the time we made it home, it was dark and the flowers had started to wilt. Our mom accepted the gift without joy, her mouth a flat line. She

told us to go upstairs and get ready for bed so that she and our dad could have another talk.

A few months later our dad did not return from work. Lucy and James and I wondered if he was up to the same thing, since the fighting between our parents hadn't ended. Our mom phoned the ink and paper company where he worked, but no one picked up. "I wonder where your father is," she said. "Mozambique? The moon?" James and I sat in the living room playing Nintendo. Lucy was upstairs combing her hair. Our mom leaned against the wall by the television and regarded us as though we might be responsible for our dad's absence. Our mom was thin and pretty, with hair the colour of caramel. Sometimes people mistook her for our older sister.

"I hope you're learning something from this," she said.

We thought she meant the video game. It dinged and beeped. "We are."

Later, hours into sleep, our mom woke us up and shepherded us into the taxi that hovered like a yellow sleigh out front of our house. She had fallen asleep in her dress. "There's been an accident," she said to the taxi driver. "Hurry."

In the hospital, our dad was plugged into so many machines it was as if his body had multiplied and expanded. His eyes were halved by exhaustion. The doctor explained about high blood pressure, cholesterol—a mild stroke, he said.

We stood back from the bed while our mom pressed her face into our dad's chest. She maneuvered her lips around the plastic tubing to kiss him. "My pumpkin," she said. When we approached him, he turned to James and me. He nudged his left cheek up to his eye in a wobbly wink, as though the whole ordeal—the doctors and machinery and the hour of the night—ought to mean less to us than our mom was making out.

We ate differently after that. Our mom stopped cooking hamburgers and grilled cheese. Salad took up most of our plates; tofu found its way into everything. For breakfast, while Lucy and James and I ate scrambled eggs, our dad was allowed half a grapefruit and toast without butter. Our dad's friend Daryl delivered a running machine he'd lost interest in, and it sat by the couch in the living room facing the TV. Our dad said to Daryl, who was tall and rangy, "Pretty soon I'll be faster than you, bub."

After dinner, while James and I played Nintendo and Lucy talked on the phone upstairs, our dad would change into a t-shirt and jog. He'd comment on our game, saying, "Good one," or "Too bad," until the heat swelled in his face and he couldn't talk any more.

After fifteen minutes, he would join us on the couch, sweaty and purple, the beach ball of his stomach bouncing under his shirt with each breath. "What do you think would make your mother more happy?" he asked once. "Flowers or another five minutes on the treadmill?" He grabbed the backs of our necks where our hair met our skin. "Can we agree to pretend that tofu is delicious? Can we do that for her?"

One night we woke to the sound of something falling to the floor. The noise had come from downstairs. "What was that?" I asked James, who stirred in his bed on the other side of our room.

"Jesus Christ," said our mom. "You have got to be kidding me."

James kicked the bedding free of his body and walked to the door. I followed him into the hall. We sat at the top of the staircase and edged down, one step at a time, until we could see into the living room. Our dad sat on the floor with his back resting against the wall. His t-shirt hung wet from his body. "It's just a cramp," he said.

Our mom appeared with a glass of water and held it just out of his reach, so our dad had to strain to get it. He sipped until the glass was empty. "I'm much better now."

"You think I don't notice?" She put her hands on her hips. "We've been eating rabbit food for five months and you're still fat as a walrus."

"A walrus?" he said. "Don't tell me I haven't been trying."

"Sure I see you on the treadmill. It's what I can't see that bothers me." She squared up with him, blocking him from our view. "Tell me you haven't been eating junk food this entire time."

"I swell to God," said our dad.

"Swell?" said our mom. "It's happening again, isn't it?"

Our dad shook his head.

"Ray?" she said, but our dad didn't answer. "I'm calling an ambulance."

She moved away and we saw the balding cap of his bent head. "I swell," he said into his sweaty chest. His stomach bobbed with each breath. We used to joke that it contained a baby, our fourth sibling. He lifted his eyes to meet

our mom's, but saw past where she'd been standing, to us. We watched the colour shift in his face like undecided weather; we waited for the wink we were sure was coming.

"Go to ded!" he yelled. He pressed his back against the wall and pushed himself to standing. "Boys!" he said. He took two steps toward us before a tripwire snagged his brain and he crashed face-first to the carpet. Our mom rushed in from the kitchen. She slapped his cheek, tried to roll him onto his back. "Help me," she said to us. "Don't just sit there!"

James hurried to our mom's side. "I can drive us," he said.

I wanted to be down there holding our mom while she rocked our dad back to life, but my legs had become baseball bats. I knew he was not pretending this time, but then I thought, maybe he was. I watched as two paramedics exploded into our living room and lifted our dad onto a wheeled table, his face limp and expressionless, play-acting the face of a man who would go to such lengths to remind us how much we loved him.

After two months in the hospital, our dad returned home and laid down on the fold-out couch in the living room. He would have to live there for now, since our parents' bedroom was upstairs. Our dad had survived a stroke and a coma and had lost the ability to speak. The skin on his face slumped to the left like an up-tilted sandbox—a half-closed eye above a permanent frown. He sat or lay most of the time and, when he walked, his feet didn't lift, but slid across the carpet.

Our mom explained that our dad had lost oxygen to parts of his brain. Those parts were now dark. He would have to relearn things like reading and driving and wiping his nose. Food spilled down the napkin on his chest when he ate. The way he looked at us made us wonder if he remembered our names.

James and I invented a game where we dressed up in different clothes and hats and paraded past our dad while he sat up watching TV. "Good day," we said to him in various accents. "Good day," we said in the voices of girls. He would nod at us with a numb look and James and I would collapse on the floor, tumbling over one another with laughter. We'd sneak back upstairs to transform into different people.

"Do you think this is mean?" I asked James once. He was wrapping me in toilet paper so I'd look like a mummy.

"It's for fun."

I imagined the inside of our dad's brain, the burnt-out places like villages after a bombing, and wondered what happened when we entered. If he recognized us but couldn't say so; if we passed through like smoke.

"I just hope we're not making it worse for him."

"We can't make it any worse," said James.

Our mom started working at a restaurant to pay for the groceries, but because she was new to waitressing, she had to work nights. At first she had the neighbour come and babysit, but after a time she left us in Lucy's control. Lucy was only 13—two years older than James, four years older than me. She made us dinner with the microwave and left the dishes for our mom to do when she came home in the morning. Our mom had stopped caring about discipline, whether we cleaned our rooms or clipped our fingernails. We went back to eating the things we normally ate, because what good had tofu done anyway.

One morning I came downstairs early, just as the sun was poking in through the front windows. The house smelled of coffee. Our mom stood at the kitchen table with a glass of water and our dad sat with his head down. In front of him were the pills he was supposed to swallow. "Please don't fight me on this again," our mom was saying. She had aged since our dad's accident, the skin under her eyes bunching like the neck of a turtle. "I'm tired, Ray. I'm so tired I can barely see straight." She took his hand and guided it to the little pile of medicine. He moved the first pill to his mouth and took a sip of water. He did this seven times until the glass was empty. I watched our mom bend down and kiss him on his crooked mouth.

Our dad's friend Daryl came over and enlisted our help moving things out of the den to make space for Dad's bed, because it was obvious he wouldn't be making it up the stairs any time soon. Daryl's hair sat neatly to one side. We asked what his job was and he said, "I'm a consultant." He didn't sound like our dad used to sound, joking every time he spoke. When Daryl said to us, "This is how you unplug a lamp," we paid attention, knowing he was serious. He told us to carry a stack of boxes to the basement and set them in a dry place, so we tried a dozen different spots in search of the most appropriate one. When we came back upstairs he said, "Try to be a little more efficient."

We stood with our dad and watched Daryl disassemble the treadmill with a screwdriver. It came apart in thick grey pieces that we carried outside

to the sidewalk, where a garbage truck would come and collect them. We stared at the ugly plastic parts. Daryl said, “If it’s any consolation, Ray, you’ve never looked slimmer.” He patted our dad’s shrinking stomach. “Don’t you think your father looks slimmer?”

James and I shrugged.

Our mom and Lucy pulled up in the station wagon. Our mom said she was about to make dinner and asked Daryl to join us. We each took a grocery bag and carried it into the house. Our dad followed us, empty-handed. I wondered if his thoughts flowed in black-and-white or in colour, or what he felt when another man touched our mom’s wrist like Daryl did, offering to help with the chopping.

Our dad slept that night in his new room on the first floor of our house. I dreamed his brain had forgotten how to breathe and crept downstairs to check on him. I couldn’t decide what I would feel if I discovered him dead. Sadness, anger, relief. He blurted out a snore and I was relieved—it was kind of like a voice.

Our mom had left for her shift at the restaurant and Lucy was supposed to be looking after us. Instead she was shut up in her room with the telephone. James laced up his shoes and wrestled himself into a jacket.

“Where are you going?” I said.

“None of your business, bub,” said my brother.

I took my homework into the living room and joined our dad on the couch. On the TV, a hockey puck skittered across the ice like a lost housefly. Two of the players took off their gloves and started fighting. The crowd cheered. One player tied up the other player in his own jersey. He cracked his fist into the man’s skull while the referees reached in with their skinny zebra arms.

Lucy came downstairs with the phone against her ear, giggling. She walked into the kitchen and rummaged around the fridge. Without our mom to cook for us, Lucy’s idea of dinner was a yogurt cup, a bowl of popcorn. “It’s just so him,” she said to her friend.

I searched our dad’s face for clues. HEY, I wrote in my notebook, and passed it to him. He looked at the word a long time. An H and an E and Y; how hard could it be to connect them?

All I wanted was a simple response—something to prove he wasn’t a

zombie—but the pencil sat in his hand like a dried twig. I lay my hand over top of his and tried to guide it toward communication. When his fingers stiffened I pressed harder. He would learn this way, with force. We had been too easy on him.

Lucy came back through the living room on her way upstairs and regarded the two of us. I let up on the exercise. I winked at her.

Our dad got so skinny a nurse had to come and plug a needle into his veins. Our mom thought the nurse was accusing her of something and yelled at the woman to leave. She sent the three of us out of the house so she could be alone for a while. James rode off on his bike, so I followed Lucy on to the front stoop. She sat on the bottom step with her feet on the concrete walkway. “Don’t follow me,” she said, but, when I didn’t leave, neither did she.

I sat at the top of the steps studying her shoulders, how they dipped down from her neck and then rose again where her arms connected, like a tailored jacket. Lucy was in her first year of high school, and whenever I picked up the phone there would be a boy on the other end asking for her.

“Lucy,” I said.

She stared at the street. “What?”

“Do you think we can be nicer to Dad?”

She made a wet noise like a snort, or a sniffle.

“It’s just,” I said, but she told me to shut up.

“Stop talking. Will you please stop talking to me?”

I scratched a circle into the wood with my fingernail.

“I just want to be normal,” she said.

A silver convertible pulled up to the curb. It was Daryl. He got out of his car and walked up to us with a paper grocery bag in his arms, hair wet from a recent shower. “Hey, gang,” he said. He smiled at us with his big bony teeth. “Your mom and dad home?”

Lucy said yes. She stood up and stepped around me to get the door for Daryl, and I saw wet smears on her cheeks.

Later, I found our mom and dad and Daryl in the kitchen. There was a bottle on the table and a cutting board with limes. Daryl and our mom were laughing. Our dad sat with a glass in his hand. It looked funny, the three of them like that, our dad who wasn’t supposed to drink sipping a drink, our mom who was not happy, laughing. When it was time for her to go to work,

she dialed the number of the restaurant and told the manager she was sick with the flu. She pretended to cough, then laughed, and had to hold the phone away from her face. She hung up and turned to Daryl. "I'm all yours."

It was after dinnertime, but we hadn't eaten. I sat on the couch with our dad and studied the wound on his forearm where the nurse had stuck her needle. Purple squiggles reached away from the red centre like the roots of a tiny plant. I imagined those roots reaching out from his body to each of us.

James opened the front door. His eyes were red and pinched from the wind. "What are you staring at?" he said. He kicked off his shoes and walked into the kitchen. I listened to the conversation, bits of it lost through the walls. Our mom wanted to know where James had been and he said, "Out."

"Your mother was worried about you," said Daryl. "I think you owe her a solid answer."

"James," said our mom, but he stormed back into the living room. He started pulling his shoes back over his socks, but the laces were still tied. Our mom and Daryl followed.

"What's he even doing here?" said James.

"Daryl is a friend of the family."

He tugged at the knot in his Nikes. "Right."

Lucy came downstairs. "When's dinner?"

"We're drinking for dinner," said James.

Our mom crossed her arms. She had grown so thin her bones poked out in sharp points, making her hugs uncomfortable. "I resent that."

"That's no way to talk to your mother," said Daryl.

"Who are you?" James pointed at our dad. "That's our dad."

It was like they had forgotten he existed. If only he would open his mouth and remind them.

"I'm hungry," said Lucy.

"So we'll order in," said Daryl. "My treat."

James still had the shoe in his hand. I wanted him to throw it at Daryl, striking him in the chest so that the drink spilled out of his glass. Our mom and Lucy would shriek, but I would laugh. Daryl would run from the house like my laughter was a jet of fire.

"How about pizza?" said Daryl, and James let the shoe clunk to the carpet.

To save money, our mom sold the station wagon and started buying

margarine instead of butter. We were going to have to pinch the pennies, she explained. The restaurant job and the government cheques that came each month for our dad's disability just weren't enough. She called the ink and paper company and tried to get our dad his job back, but they told her that without communication skills, Ray wouldn't be much use as a salesman.

Daryl said maybe he could help, he knew a guy. He knotted a tie around our dad's neck and drove him to a lumber warehouse that needed an inventory manager. I came along for the ride. The top was down on the convertible and wind blew all around us. Daryl asked how school was going and when I said "Fine," he was silent for the rest of the drive. He turned up the radio and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. It was mean to make our dad go through with this, but at least our mom would be happy.

A thick man in overalls led us through a cavernous building filled with stacks of cut wood. "He any good with spreadsheets?" the man asked Daryl.

"Ray?" said Daryl. "He's a spreadsheet genius."

"What about the speech thing?"

"Like I said, it's temporary. Ray survived a stroke that would have sent most men to the Pearly Gates."

The man looked from Daryl to our dad, then to me. "How are your spreadsheet skills?" he said, and he and Daryl laughed.

Back in the car, Daryl apologized to our dad. "We were close."

"Were not," I said.

"You can't say we didn't try."

We pulled into a drive-thru and Daryl ordered three hamburger meals. "Don't tell your mother," he said, because our dad still wasn't supposed to eat fast food. When he got mustard on his pants Daryl let out a hoarse sigh. "What is Evelyn going to think when I bring you back needing new slacks? It doesn't look good," he said. "For either of us."

A boy kissed Lucy on our front stoop and settled his hand too low on her back. Lucy wouldn't let him inside because she didn't want people seeing our dad's face. When the boy caught me watching them from the living-room window, he whispered something into her ear.

"Stop being so creepy," she said when her date had left.

"I'm not creepy."

"You are. You're like a shadow."

In the kitchen, our mom prepared dinner for Daryl and us. He sat at the table reading the business section of the newspaper and making notes in a secretive leather book. While we ate our spaghetti, he prodded Lucy about her new boyfriend. She blushed and smiled and didn't tell him to stop. James still hadn't returned from school, but no one seemed to have noticed.

After dinner, Daryl tossed me his car keys and told me to fetch the paper bag from the back seat. He had put the top on his convertible for winter, and the tightly stretched roof made the car feel like the inside of a drum. Unlike our old station wagon, there were no wrappers in the boot wells, no dust on the dash. In the paper bag was a bottle of gin and a box of chocolates. The gold cursive writing made them look expensive.

When I handed Daryl the bag he peeked inside. "Hmm," he said. "This everything?"

I nodded. I had stuffed the chocolates in our neighbour's garbage bin.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

He removed the bottle from the bag and told our mom to stop doing the dishes. He told her to sit down and have a drink. And then he did something I'd never seen our dad do. He took our mom's wet dish gloves and squeezed his hands inside them. "Why don't you go and keep your dad company?" he said to me.

I joined our dad in the living room and fell asleep to a game show and when I woke up I was in my clothes, lying on my bed upstairs. I felt betrayed: Daryl must have carried me. I could feel his car keys in my pocket, sharp as little jawbones.

James was sprawled on top of his blankets like he'd landed on the bed after a long fall, jacket still on, neck bent to one side. There was a sourness to his breath, boozy and raw.

"James," I whispered.

"Fuck off."

I shook him and he surged from his bed. He grabbed me around the middle and plowed me to the floor. I freed my hand and jammed it down into his skull as many times as I could, my fist bouncing off the bone. James had grown over the last few months. He pinned me with his new muscles and buried a punch into my stomach. I tried to breathe, tried to swallow, but the air had gone cottony: "Daryl's still here."

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” said James. He loosened his grip, stood up and walked to his bed. “Go to sleep.”

“James,” I hissed.

“How dumb are you? Who do you think pays for our food?”

I sucked in a thin tube of air. “Mom,” I said.

“Grow up, bub.” He palmed the pillow and used it to smother his face.

I decided to wake up our dad. He was asleep downstairs with his body in a straight line, nose pointed up at the ceiling, trumpeting snores. I laid my hand over the bad half of his face so that for a moment he looked normal. His good eye peeled open. “Look,” I said, tinkling Daryl’s keys. “You need to do something.”

He took the keys in his hand as though testing their weight. I thought of the baseball bat we never used any more, stuffed into the mudroom closet with the boots and umbrellas. I would help him up the stairs and point him to our mom’s bedroom. I wanted blown kneecaps, for Daryl to never walk again, but our dad clutched the keys to his chest and went stiff as a mummy.

“Dad,” I said. “Dad?”

Outside was soggy and cold, a break in the rain. To see Daryl’s car parked on the street made my stomach turn. The vehicle, Daryl explained, had been a gift from his father when he graduated from university. “Treat a car well,” he’d said to James and me, “and it can outlive its driver.” I pictured him holding our mom, his hands on her torso, his breath in her face. The bat was light in my hand, as though it was held by someone else. Lucy or James or our dad. I wound up and unwound and watched the taillight of Daryl’s car burst around the slick wood. Shards of red plastic popped as they hit the pavement. The impact traveled through the bat and into my arm, my whole body thudding with the thrill of it. I sensed our neighbours watching from behind dark windows, thinking, *Finally, someone doing something.*

I wound up for another swing, but the front door opened. I wanted it to be Daryl, an all-out charge, but it was only our dad. His pajamas hung from his frame like a ghost costume. He shuffled to the sidewalk in his bare feet and grabbed me by the back of my neck with surprising strength. For once, the look on his face was serious.

Instead of returning me to my bed, he sat me down on the living-room couch. He plunked himself in the armchair and laid the bat in his lap like a pet. Daryl’s car keys glinted in his hand. My head dipped and lolled,

tugging me toward sleep. Our dad wanted to keep me from doing it again, demolishing the headlights and windshield and hood, but if I stayed awake longer than him I could go out and finish the job.

In my half-dreams I saw Daryl coming down the stairs in search of his keys, saw the fight our dad would surely lose. Daryl ducked the weak swings and attacked with clean, wide hooks. I tried to stand up from the couch to save our dad, but found I couldn't move; I yelled for the rest of our family to wake up, but no sound came out.

I woke to a pale light, the smell of bacon. My neck was stiff from sleeping upright. I shuffled into the kitchen and there was everyone—Lucy and James and our mom and dad and Daryl—seated together at the table. “Good morning, sleepyhead,” said our mom. She looked ruffled, younger somehow, like the sleep had sent her backward in time. Lucy and James smirked. I searched our dad for anger or disappointment, but his face was the same as always. He had given Daryl back his keys.

Lucy poured me a glass of orange juice. Our mom spread margarine on toast. “Come eat,” said Daryl, shoveling eggs onto a clean plate. I was angry and calm at the same time, and I buzzed from the mixture of feelings, like my body was being both expanded and condensed. I joined them at the table. Even though I wasn't hungry, I picked up my fork and ate.