

Stuff

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## Stuff

“Is this really the way you think I want to remember my mother?” he asked, shaking out the endless little bits of things stuck at the bottom of the pocketbook – unwrapped sticky sucking things, loose capsules, a split and dirty pill, receipts and then more receipts – for what? he couldn’t tell – and did he need to check through every piece of paper and see what the hell crazy products his mother bought at yet another rip-off store? Dropping a metal hair clip on the bed, he said, “This is quite a way for you to meet her.”

The girlfriend looked up from where she was sitting close to him and said, “Do you not want me here? Tell me. Just say so if you want to do this by yourself.”

“Just tell me if you want this?” he snipped, pinching open the metal hair clip between his thumb and forefinger. “If you don’t, I’ll chuck it.” He wanted to chuck the whole thing out, toss all these lost days of being back in this clutter. Fuck the piles for Goodwill. Let alone her rooms of papers and closets to sort through. He’d throw the house out if he could. But here, now, first, was the shit in her pocketbook. Cards. And plastic.

“Why exactly did a woman like her actually need this much plastic?” he sneered at the girlfriend who was up now, leaning in close to the mirror, pinning her bangs into a spit curl. He looked at the planked stretch of the girlfriend’s back, and her serious face in his mother’s mirror, and he thought he better not start thinking about how damn good she looked in his mother’s room. He needed to just get to it. Might as well get on the phone – wasn’t that

how it was done? – and say his mother wouldn't be needing these cards and he would have to listen while women with every kind of cheerful accent said, "You're the son? Oh, I'm so sorry."

He'd heard nothing but sorry women on phones for days and nights. Last night, just as he'd drifted off, an old neighbor called teary, saying how could it all happen so quickly after such a life as the life she'd seen. When he'd accused, his eyes sharpening in the dark room, "So you tell me. What did she see?" the neighbor's voiced stiffened, "This and that. You know her. Nothing you need to think about."

If he was lucky enough to get a woman on the phone.

Women could do things for him, he knew. No, no, he needn't start sending proof of anything, they would send him the last statement, make a note and that would take care of everything. "My God," the women would say, "this is the last thing a son should have to deal with." They understood. They could hear it in his voice what kind of son he was and they wanted to help out – even in as little a way as they had to offer.

The girlfriend wanted to do things too. So was it so wrong the way he'd let her take care of things when all his mother's friends came back to the house? He stood in the doorway then, watching her move, lithe among his mother's arthritic friends. The girlfriend carrying platters of sliced meats into the dining room, stopped to lean close to him, whispering, "I'll talk to them. I'll take care of it. You go in and rest."

"This one's a keeper and a looker," the women called to him, loudly, with chewed bits of pumpernickel in the corners of their mouths. "Did she meet your mother?" He imagined how he would have suffered, moody and silent, watching her make eager talk with his mother. And the girlfriend – what could she have eaten of his mother's burnt roasts and goulash, everything thick and gelled with gravy? This girlfriend, he loved the way she ate, seaweeds, and long radishes that she steamed for her dinner. Even watching the way food rested on her fork as if the fork was a sort of prayer. But seeing her in the living room, talking with the old women, her hands steadying the wobbly saucers of his mother's glued china, he thought, actually she looked a little like them, a skinny new world

version, a thickness lurking about her nose, even her boyish hips looked like something on the verge of swelling large.

The girlfriend had found him later, fitting herself against him on his boy-sized bed.

“Hey, you never even fell asleep. I finally got the last of them out of here. I thought they were going to lick the plates clean and then eat them up,” she whispered, reaching around to stroke him. She cupped him in her hands. “Would this maybe make you feel a little better?”

All the nights he'd spent conjuring girl-hands in this house!

He hunched closer to the wall, as if refusing her were the best comfort he could manage.

But now the girlfriend, all pretty and leggy draped in only his open shirt, was up at the mirror, fingering enough pots of cremes for every minute of day and night and holding one after another stubby lipstick up to her lips. His mother's lipsticks. His mother's smeared mirror, where how many times had he come into the room and found his mother staring at herself, or calling him over to help her get to the high place on her zipper where her hands couldn't get to? He couldn't count how many times he'd zipped her up, but he could count the one, maybe two times he had, hooking the clasp into the eye, said, “You're looking nice, Mom.” And seeing himself in the mirror, napping next to his mother's dumped out pocket-book, he was ashamed at all her stuff and ashamed at all the one word answers he ever gave her.

“Do you want to do the drawers?” the girlfriend asked, twisting an orange lipstick into its silver holder.

“Do you think I do?” he sneered, looking down at the sunken shape of the emptied pocketbook.

“I don't have to be here if you don't want,” the girlfriend said. “It's fine. I can head back.”

He remembered the sound of this house, days he'd rush home from school to have – what? – maybe an hour at the most alone. In his room or playing records in the living room or coming in and searching through the bureau for something new he'd never found in his parents' drawers. He'd reached in both their drawers,

scrounging around, unpairing socks, mad there wasn't any secret. There was always such ordinary stuff – socks and coins. Even his mother's silky things felt plain. Those years, he'd worn his mother's lipstick more than once and liked it mostly for the waxy taste when he chewed it off.

"I guess we better do it," he said forcing his eyes back up to see her in the mirror and, seeing himself there, pale, unwashed, he saw what the girlfriend could not recognize in him, his mother's long face, her slack and heavy jaw. He tried to make his face shorter. His girlfriend in his cotton button-down shirt looked like something that might blow away, looked like all the silky things he had wanted to find in his parents' drawers.

"But first let's take a break," he said, falling back on the pile he'd dumped out from the pocketbook. Then, waving his hands like a drowning man, he said, "If you come lie on top of me and do every dirty thing you can think of, I'll let you take all the lipsticks you want."

"They said things," the girlfriend said. She was relaxed on top of him, her knuckles working at pressure points in his face.

"Who," he said.

"Your mother's ladies," she said.

"Oh, really. Must have been fascinating," he said.

"Actually, it was. But I shouldn't say anything," she said.

"What? Say what?" he said.

"Nothing. Just what women say, you know," she said.

"I don't know. Do I look like I know what women say?" he said.

"Nothing. I mean nothing that's really going to change anything," she said.

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"Then why'd you bring it up? Why'd you say anything?" he said, rolling out from under her. "My father used to sleep on this side. He said it was the only way he'd ever sleep because she was up and down half the night."

"Why?" asked his girlfriend. "Why was your mom up?"

He looked at her smooth legs stretched up and scissoring the air. She looked like something that had never waked in the wrong hours of night, something that could fall asleep in any corner and

stay dreamless and asleep until morning.

What did she think she was trying to do – massaging out knots, relaxing him?

“I guess she couldn’t sleep. But for all I know maybe she wanted to do more housework,” he said and wanted to roll right the fuck over, pull his pants on and get back to work. What did he think he was doing losing most of the morning with the girlfriend doing some woolo-woolo thing above him? It was time to stop doodling around and call the customer service women or at least just get the girlfriend up and off his parents’ bed. Though, really, what was the big deal? It was just a bed in a fucking room. Hadn’t his mother even offered – and, more than once – that if he came out for a visit, she’d give up her room for him? For him and a lady friend. That was how his mother said it – lady friend – so that he was always teasing into the phone, “I don’t even know women who qualify as ladies, Mother.”

“Was she always unhappy or something back then?” the girlfriend asked, her tan legs still scissoring. She pointed and flexed her painted red toes. She was always in motion, the girlfriend, always in a constant flush of aerobic activity. She was elastic. It seemed there wasn’t any way he couldn’t bend her legs. She was skinny and skinny chested too, and he remembered that when he’d thought about it, he’d thought his father must have fallen for his mother’s large breasts.

“What’s this?” the girlfriend said, pulling up in some yoga sit-up position, twisting her torso impossibly to reach around her back. “Man, I’m getting stabbed by your mother’s keys.”

“Back when?” he said sliding open the bedroom closet. Since when did she have a closet like this? Everything jammed in, blouses unbuttoned, overlapped on the same metal hanger. Who needed clothes like this? What did his mother suddenly need pant suits for? And not just one, but maybe five, and in fancy newfangled fabrics. Where could she have been going in all these clothes? There were straw beach baskets and silly hats with visors. And long batik dresses. Sarongs. They were, he figured, from her trips, the cruises she told him about to Mexico and Finland.

"I really needed that get away," his mother announced over the phone, just back from the Greek islands. "And, okay, I admit it, I adore vacationing."

"Vacationing?" he'd asked, surfing back and forth between movies.

"It's such great, great fun," his mother had said about the ships. Fun? When had his mother first started talking about fun? Why this going on trips when he could barely remember her ever wanting to leave the house? He was used to seeing his mother in the housecoats, and here, finally smushed between the new stretchy things, were one or two that he remembered, loose floral affairs with buttons missing so that he could not help but see too much flesh.

"Can I have your attention?" the girlfriend said, holding up shriveled pantyhose. "Look, you can't give this kind of thing away. I'm going to throw all these out."

"It's not fair you knowing anything I don't know. Does it seem right to you?" he said.

"Didn't she ever talk to you? What did your mom tell you when she called every week?" the girlfriend said.

He tried to pull back anything his mother had said to him when she called. She was always too much with the talking, as his father used to say. "You are talking me to death," his father had shouted, and sometimes he'd say it too to his mother, like a long distance family joke. "Okay, I've gotta hang up, Ma. You've talked me to death."

"I don't know. She said things," he said, holding up a silk wrap skirt. After his mother came back from her California trip, she'd called to say she was home.

"How was California?" he'd managed to ask her.

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"Too much on the bus," she said. "I'm too old for all that sitting."

Now he imagined her in bright skirts up on ship decks, shopping in duty free ports. Maybe there was line dancing. Casino nights. She'd told him when he'd asked why she went on the trips alone, "What do I want from the same old faces? I want to meet people."

"These are cool," the girlfriend said, fitting her fingers inside a

pair of pink suede gloves. "I definitely want these," she said, blowing a flurry of kisses. But these gloves looked like something the girlfriend already must own, would show up wearing in the parts of town where she was always arranging dinner parties. All he remembered was his mother in his father's winter gloves and his father shouting, "Go get your own gloves."

"You're really not going to tell me anything?" he said.

"Look, its nothing to get nuts about. You're making a big deal of nothing. But even your mother gets to have some privacy," the girlfriend said

"You don't know my fucking mother," he said, thinking of the afternoons he'd come into a darkened house and her still in bed. "You caught me," his mother had said to him.

"You're right," the girlfriend said, pulling off the narrow suede gloves and laying them palm to palm on the bureau top. "I'm getting out of here for a little while."

"Great," he said, "Fine. Leave if you want."

"Look! I'm just going out to get more garbage bags to help you with all this stuff."

He sat cross-legged on his parents' bed, one of the worn floral housecoats tented over his head. He had not been in the house alone since he'd come back. Instead there were always the concerned questions of his girlfriend, a few grunting widowers, but, mostly, the house wheezed with the ladies bunched on the living room sofa. "That gal, she could tell a joke," he'd heard one say. "Remember her line about marriage and a spare husband?" and he'd watched the the stray men look up and laugh right along with the ladies.

Hadn't he sat on the stoop with his mother and these same ladies?

He could think of her non-stop yakking, but could he remember his mother ever telling anything like a joke?

Here, finally in the quiet, he wondered where had he been? There had been afternoons heaped on years that he couldn't get out of being right there, in her range, close enough for his mother to yank his collar down, lick her finger to smudge dirt off his cheek.

He heard her even when he was slamming a ball against the garage wall, or, later, sneaking inside for the quick minutes it took to jerk-off. Even then, angled against the green bathroom tiles, he could hear his mother outside the window and thought he'd never get far enough away from all her talk. But it was obvious he'd missed it all. Seen nothing. Or just wrong things. But tented under her cotton housecoat, on his parents' bed, nobody could say he didn't know that smell. He'd found his mother in the house dress, buried among all the new stuff. He could breathe her right in. He was surrounded by his mother.

His parents' room actually looked pretty scrimmed through the orange and red dahlia dress print. He piled together the scraps and keys and wallet from her purse in between his legs. He would look at everything, even the chipped pills, the lint and hair clumps, the dirty coins. He would slow down. There was an agenda book that velcroed shut. It might take the rest of the day, but he'd go through it carefully.

The agenda book opened over-stuffed, papers and cards jabbed out. There were ads – toasters and raincoats on final sale at the department store. In the last section an address book had names. Maybe he should, one by one, call all the names he didn't recognize. Some lived in different states. But what was he going to hear, that there was some lady in Seattle who sat a bridge fourth on the Winter Blues Cruise? Or listen while some guy young enough to be his brother piped up with, "Oh, you're her son? She was in our folk dancing group. She was quite the polka girl. A mom like that. You're lucky." Or, worse, he'd hear quiet on the other end and then, "You're sure? You found my name in her address book? I'm racking my brain. But I'm pretty sure, really. I'm sorry, really. I don't think I know her." He shook the agenda book and a wad of envelopes fell from pages. He slipped off the rubberband. There was a bill from the electric company, a bill from the podiatrist, a late notice from the phone company and a handwritten letter obviously refolded and reread more than once.

He read as far as the salutation – *Dear Full-Figured Lady* – and knew this was no saved newsy letter from one of her ladies wintering down on a boardwalk. He read further and knew the man was

not old, not a lonely widow, but a young man, with, as he put it, “a taste for the mature woman who knows what life is all about.” This discerning man thought she sounded perfect. Could they meet for dinner? Theater? He said that he could already picture them window shopping at night along the Avenues. Together they didn’t have to be lonely. She should know, he really needed her to know, that while this wasn’t the first response he had ever written, this was the one he felt would be the true one, the genuine article. *Crazy!* he wrote, *but isn’t following your heart a little crazy?*

Signed, *Hopefully yours, Brian.*

It was dated two years earlier.

Two years his mother carried the letter around in her pocket-book. Transferred it seasonally from leather shoulder bag to straw bag. From the looks of the paper creases, the folding tears, he knew he didn’t want to know how many times she’d read the letter. He could hear all the stories and it would just be that. He took his mother’s dress off from his head. He shut his eyes. He could bet on his own fucking life that his mother never called this Brian or any Brian. He knew it like he knew he was his mother’s son.

“Is this garbage or donation?” The girlfriend’s voice was suddenly close by, careful, adjusted.

“What?” he asked, his eyes still shut.

“Touristy stuff. Castanets. You know, stuff you buy because you’re there.”

“Where? Where did my mother go?” he asked, opening his eyes. The girlfriend was wearing an embroidered fez. She held up a tied, full garbage bag. The room was a wreck of his mother’s stuff.

He looked around suddenly certain he wouldn’t recognize his own mother if she walked back into her bedroom.

The girlfriend crawled onto his mother’s bed beside him. She was still holding the garbage bag. “It would easier if you could tell what you need.”

“What was she doing?” he asked.

The girlfriend placed a hand flat on his forehead “She was just living. That’s it, Baby,” she said. She pressed her palm against his skull. “It’s nice. Your mom was living it up.”

He leaned against the filled-up garbage bag. There was something hard that poked back at him. Alone without his father or him, she practically burst the seams of this house. His mother's closet, his dad's closet, even the closet in his old room was jammed to the top shelf. It might take another week, but he'd clear it out.

He felt for his girlfriend's hand, the easy stretch of her as she curled around him. This girl was a girl to meet in any part of their city at any hour. Maybe he'd look up at a corner to see her across the street waving her bright gloved fingers. He'd take a deep breath. Let her think he'd had a mother who was Living It Up. He'd cross over to her. Maybe he'd be lucky enough to let his breath be taken away.