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## The Daughter

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Her favorite shoes of her father's are his brown wingtip shoes, and they are the last ones she polishes every Sunday night when she polishes all of his shoes for the work week ahead. They are chestnut brown with thick soles lifted slightly at the toe, one with a hole in the middle that has been repaired. She caresses the heavy toe each time she rubs it with shoe polish and brings it to a dull shine with the brush.

One day she is home sick and stays up in her bed, listening to the sounds of the house around her. In the morning her brother slams the door on his way out to school. She hears her mother turn on the radio, then talk on the phone, followed by the faint whining of the vacuum cleaner, and so on throughout the day.

When her brother thumps into the house at the end of the school day, she knows it's almost five o'clock and that means her father will be home from work soon. Outside her window she sees the light in the sky is fading; he's on his way. She hopes he knows that she has been home sick all day as she prepares for his arrival. Feeling her cheeks and forehead, she is relieved that they are still warm to the touch. She snuggles into the blankets and waits.

The sky is pitch-dark when she hears the crunch of the car tires in the driveway. She pictures her father coming into the front hall; she hears him downstairs calling hi to everyone and Mom comes to kiss him hello and to hang up his coat. She listens hard for the sound of their voices, speaking, she imagines, in hushed and urgent tones. "How are the kids?" he would ask, and Mom would shake her head and tell him that the daughter has been sick all day and is upstairs in bed. "I'd better go see how she's doing," she imagines him saying. And, right on cue, she hears his footsteps in the hall.

He stands in the doorway, backlit by the hall light. She can see his silhouette and relishes the concern that she knows is on his face. She struggles to look sick and valiant all at the same time.

"Hi, sweetie," he says, coming into the room and looking down at her. "Mom says you aren't feeling very well." She nods at him and mumbles hi. He comes over and sits beside her on the bed; he smells of cigarettes and Wrigley's Spearmint gum. He reaches over and brushes her hair from her eyes, feeling her forehead.

"Hmmm, still a little warm," he says. "Is there anything you want?" She shakes her head. He leans over and kisses her cheek, then stands up to leave. "If you want anything you just call, we'll be right downstairs." She smiles. She had been waiting for that visit all day.

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Twenty-five years later, the daughter is driving through Friday afternoon traffic.

She is late to pick her father up from the hospital to bring him home for the weekend. He'll be worried and upset that she isn't there yet; since the accident he is impatient and becomes furious when routine is disrupted.

It's almost six o'clock when she pulls into the parking lot, more than an hour late. The wide door to the hospital sighs open when she steps on the grey mat. Inside, the smells of old food and cleanser meet her; at this hour most patients would be eating dinner in their rooms.

She turns left to the bank of elevators. Entering one, she pushes the button for the fourth floor, it deposits her directly across from the nurses' station. She sees that one of Dad's nurses is leaning against the desk, facing the elevator. The woman's dark eyes widen and flash when she sees the daughter, her round face turns a deep red. She is carrying a denim jacket. She steps up to the daughter, blocking her passage.

"You're late! You're very late! My shift is over and I have to talk to you and you are late!" The nurse spits the words at her.

The daughter stares down at the slight woman, she feels enormous. "What? What has happened?" The words are thick on her tongue.

"You!" The nurse jabs the air between them with her finger. "You must talk to your father. You must tell him to behave himself. If he doesn't behave we will have to tie him up!" The nurse puts an emphasis on the word "up" and she gestures with a finger, swooping upwards. "We will have to tie him up." She breathes heavily.

The daughter stares at her. How can she say this? This nurse doesn't even know her father. She doesn't know that he is funny or that he is wonderfully curious. She doesn't know how proud he is to be the first university graduate in his family. This nurse knows nothing about how he loves his wife or about his stubbornness.

The air around them hums and the daughter shakes her head. "No." Her words feel hot. "No. No. You will never do that." She walks around the woman and strides down the hall to her father's room.

Dad is sitting on his bed, ready to go; his black overnight bag is by the door. He's still handsome, the soft yellow of his cardigan showing the red in his cheeks and the new grey in his thick black hair. His mouth is set in a thin, sharp line. He's been staring at the doorway.

Trying to smile, the daughter enters the room, "Sorry I'm late, Dad, but the traffic was awful."

With his hand he brushes away her excuses, sweeps away her smile. He struggles to stand up, grabbing her arm for balance and pushing it away the minute he is on his feet. She notices a bruise on his right hand, at the wrist it is purpled. For the space of just a breath, she wishes she hadn't noticed it.

He heads towards the door taking steady, careful steps.

"Let's go. Now." His voice is brittle.

The daughter touches her father's arm, "Dad, wait a minute. We've got to talk." She sits on the bed and motions to the grey chair for him to sit down. "Please."

He shakes his head, "No, no, don't want to talk." He slams his mouth closed.

"I know," she says, "but I need to know what happened. How did you get that bruise? What happened, Dad? Please tell me."

He stands for the measure of three breaths. She watches him as he turns back into the room and sits down. She notices how carefully he holds his wrist close to his body, how that hand is trembling.

He starts to tell the story.

"Yesterday was a very slow day," he starts. "Very, very slow." He pauses, breathes deeply, rubs his bruised hand. He hunts for the words; they don't come so easily since the accident. "I am so goddamned tired of all the time waiting, waiting, waiting." He shakes his head. "Such a waste of time."

The daughter nods. He continues, "Two o'clock is my appointment for learning to walk. My appointment to get stronger."

"Your physiotherapy appointment, Dad." Big words elude him.

He nods. "But no one came. Almost 2:30 and no one. So, I started to walk there by myself."

"Oh, Dad," she says. He's just learning to walk again and he isn't supposed to walk alone.

He shrugs, "I had to try it. At least I had to try it."

She nods.

"I was doing okay. No one saw me. It was slow but I was almost all the way to the, the, elevator." He says the word carefully.

“What happened then, Dad?”

“One of them nurses called my name. I tried to walk faster but it made me fall.” He lifts his right arm and shows her the bruise, tries to push his sweater sleeve up. “I fell.”

“Don’t worry about it Dad. I can see it’s bad.” She helps him pull the sweater sleeve down.

He is watching her closely, trying to smile at her. “The nurses are angry at you now, eh?” she asks.

He shrugs, “Yes, I think so.” He doesn’t look a bit sorry.

The daughter nods, tries not to think of her father lying in the hallway. He leans over to squeeze her hand. His touch is warm. She smiles at him.

“I really don’t want you to get hurt, Dad. You’ve got to be careful.”

He nods.

Outside his window, the night has painted the sky a starless black. She helps him up and reaches for his overnight bag.