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## *Tell Me If It Hurts*

It happens again. But this time I am not busy dying, so I get to see what happens after. Dad is getting the car refueled, and I am sitting in the back seat while he stands a couple of feet away, talking to Mom on a payphone. I can hear what he is saying because now I can hear everything. He is gesticulating and smoking a cigarette and sweet talking, basically just being Dad.

“Do you want me to stop at the liquor store to get something for the party, or not?” he asks Mom.

I notice the guy at the pump waving at my father.

“Dad!” I shout through the window, even though I know he can’t hear me. But Dad looks back, lets the receiver hang, takes his wallet out of his pocket and hands the man a different credit card.

My mother keeps talking, I can hear her voice from the dangling phone because, like I said, now I can hear everything. “What about the dry cleaning? Did you remember to get my dress?” I know she’s anxious, because now I also can feel everything.

Dad grabs the receiver again and lifts it to his ear.

“What? I told you, I had to pass by the office. What? Yes, I got your dress.”

I see Dad check his watch, and from his face, I can tell he just realized that the dry cleaner is already closed.

The guy at the pump calls him again.

“This one isn’t working either!” he says, waving the card.

With an impatient gesture, Dad hands him another credit card, which goes through. Then Dad gets into the car, and we speed away. I am getting impatient too. I want to be home

and see Mom and Dad together as they get ready for the annual Christmas party with our neighbors, just like they did last year, when I was still around.

I thought Dad would swing by the dry cleaner on the way home, hoping it might still be open, but instead he takes the expressway and drives downtown.

It begins to rain. Dad puts the wipers on. The wide arcs of Christmas lights that hang above the Sainte-Catherine street look sad, like Mom's mouth before she begins to cry.

Dad slows down and squints his eyes as he looks for a parking spot. He still refuses to wear his glasses. Or he has forgotten them, I can't tell for sure.

"Look Dad, right here." I know, he can't hear me, but I used to be the one who always found his parking spots. But then he does see the spot I just saw, and I think, damn, does he hear me? Spooky.

He parks the car right in front of Sears, looks at his watch, hesitating. It's almost six. The store is just about to close. In a flash, he gets out of the car and runs inside.

He takes the escalators to the lady's clothing section, on the sixth floor, where I am already, waiting for him.

The store is busy still, filled with people doing last minute Christmas shopping. As he wanders through the racks of dresses, Dad looks so lost I can't imagine he will ever be able to pick a dress, but he does, narrowing his choice to three dresses, then one, which looks a lot like the one he forgot to pick up at the dry cleaner, but nicer. He looks at the price. He frowns, but walks to the cashier resolutely.

I stand by him as he pays. He is feeling like a fraud. But that doesn't stop him. The first credit card is declined. He has to fish out another card again, which goes through, and this time I see the name on the card, mom's name.

He asks for the box to be gift-wrapped.

On the drive home Dad turns the radio to a different channel and whistles to some Christmas songs. He drinks a beer from the can, smokes a cigarette, basically just being Dad, back to not feeling much of anything. But the rain has turned to ice, and very suddenly, he loses control of the car. It skids off the street and for a second we are heading straight for a fire hydrant, then a mailbox. At the last second Dad manages to steer the car back on the street without hitting anything.

“Shit” he says, grabbing the beer from the cup holder. He continues to drink but drives really slowly. At the red light, there are three people from the Salvation Army, ringing bells. It is going to be a wet Christmas, the guy on the radio keeps saying. Dad sighs. I see the sweat forming on his forehead, his curved hairline shining like a halo. His heart is pinched into a knot. He has no idea how much it’s hurting.

As we approach the old neighborhood, Dad makes a turn and takes a side street. That’s when the kid appears out of nowhere, jumping right in front of the car. Even I don’t really see him until Dad hits the breaks, so abruptly the car stalls and stops.

“Jesus,” he says. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

This time, Dad manages to not kill anyone. This time he stops, or the car stops, and no one is hurt. But the kid is so surprised he falls slowly backward, like in slow motion, and ends up on his bottom. For a moment he just sits down in the middle of the street, all small and compact, like a little puddle of slush.

Dad’s entire body is shaking. He turns the ignition back on and shifts gear to reverse but stops himself, turns off the ignition, and sits there breathing in a way that makes me think he might die, and for a moment I have to disappear again, because I am just not ready for this. But Dad doesn’t die. He gets off the car and slowly walks to the kid, who is still sitting in the middle of the street. I watch from a distance. I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

“Are you okay?” he asks the kid.

I know the kid is fine, but I can tell Dad isn’t sure because he is still shaking inside. He helps the kid stand up, bends down in front of him and looks at him in the eyes.

“Nothing is hurting?” He asks again.

The kid doesn’t speak but shakes his head slowly. He looks more scared of Dad than anything.

“Where do you live?”

The kid still doesn’t speak but points towards the bottom door of a duplex apartment.

Dad lifts the kid and carries him in his arms to the door. He holds him while he waits for someone to answer the door. Why he holding the kid in his arms that way? The kid is fine! The kid is smaller than I had been but not that small, maybe eight, and he appeared out of nowhere, literally leaping in front of the car. He wasn’t even hit. Not like I was.

The woman who opens the door wears a frayed housedress and a small wooden cross around her neck and I can tell right away that she is poor. She puts one hand to her mouth when she sees Dad, and I guess she thinks for a second that her kid is dead, and some stranger—my father—is bringing him back home, and with the rain and my father being tall and skinny and pale, I can see what she sees and I really want to tell him, drop the kid! Which he does, again as if he could hear me. He lets the kid down to his feet immediately, to show her that he is totally fine. The kid goes to his mother and stands next to her, as my father begins to talk and explain quickly to the mother what happened. He uses big words, reassuring words, mentioning in passing that he is a lawyer. My father the lawyer, which makes me the lawyer's daughter, which I know is a good title, and I stand by him, silent but feeling proud, as if everyone could actually see me.

The mother doesn't talk to Dad at all, she just keeps asking her kid how he feels, touching different parts of his body, asking him, *does it hurt? Tell me if it hurts*. The child keeps shaking his head no. But he still isn't saying anything.

"Ma'am, we are so lucky. Believe me, we are."

Dad's lower lip is quivering but I don't think the lady notices. I can tell that she is impressed with my father being a lawyer. She isn't very educated, being one of those religious type of people who still wears a cross around their neck. It's like she is almost grateful that my dad is the one who's hit, or almost hit, her child. My father stands there looking very serious. I worry that she might smell the alcohol on his breath. I can smell it myself, but that's because I've had a whole life, ten full years, to become really good at smelling alcohol on people's breath, especially my father's.

My father smacks his lips, and pulls out a card from his wallet.

"If ever you need anything," he says.

Way to go, dad. I mean, that's the right thing to do. I am impressed.

Back in the car Dad grips the wheel with both hands, and drives slowly, not taking his eyes off the road, not even for half a second. He is very pale, paler than I have ever seen him.

I feel him unravel inside, but he has no idea.

When we finally arrive home, Mom is in her bathrobe and standing in front of the kitchen table, wrapping gifts for the neighbors. It's just like it used to be, but without me. She

looks a million years old, even though she is only forty-eight, just one year older than when I saw her last.

“Where in hell were you?” she says, not looking up. “We’re going to be late.”

Dad hands her the box.

“What’s that?” She takes the box and stares at Dad “Jerry! Where’s my dress?”

I go to Mom and wrap my arms around her legs, but I know she won’t be able to feel me. She is still too angry. I watch Dad as he stands there, immobile, staring at his empty hands.

“I had another car accident,” he finally says. He collapses on a chair, and begins sobbing.