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THE FREEDOM

IT'S THE SECOND NIGHT I'VE HAD THIS DREAM. I'm at my desk, but it's covered with knobs, and each controls the volume of a student. Mr. Wu's volume is always turned up. Everyone else is talking, but I can only hear him. He's sitting at his tiny desk talking about his wife, who died last year. His knees jut out from under the desk. I swear he looks like a Chinese Humphrey Bogart, just longer in the legs. I have this revelation in the dream but when I wake up I realize it's true. He does look like a Chinese Bogart. Bogart when he was young, but Mr. Wu is old, probably in his seventies. Maybe it's the way he wears his hair, shiny and curved away from his face. In the dream he's calling me by my first name, which he would never do. He's saying, "She had nice legs, Karen. Like your legs. Nice hands. Like your hands." He's pointing. Mr. Wu is in the advanced class. He can make himself understood a little too well. I'm trying desperately to turn the knob marked with his name. It won't budge.

I look out into the classroom for some help. Misha is sitting in the back, talking, but I can't hear what he's saying. I look for his knob but I can't find it. It's not even there.

When I wake up, Dad is in the kitchen making noise. I lie in bed, knowing he's taken out all the pots and pans again and piled them on the counter and on the stove. Every morning he gets up, goes to the kitchen and starts looking for the omelet pan. Halfway through, he forgets what he's doing and just begins emptying the cabinets, as if that was what he

had set out to do in the first place. I lie in bed listening to the clinking, the piling, the occasional crash of a pot on the floor. Today I'm taking him to the assisted living facility, something I said I'd never do. I stay in bed for ten more minutes, trying to postpone the guilt. I drift off briefly and Mr. Wu returns, saying "It for the best. Will you have drink together?"

It's worse than I thought. The countertop is covered with plates and glasses. Pots and pans are in piles on the floor. The blender, Crock Pot and stand mixer are on the table and there's a mountain of Tupperware in the mudroom in front of the side door. The refrigerator door is open and he's standing at the sink emptying a gallon of milk down the drain.

"Morning, Dad," I say. It's hard to get frustrated today. I will miss him tomorrow. Startled by my voice, he jumps a little and turns around. He's wearing his flannel pajama pants and a gray cardigan with no shirt underneath. He smiles at me.

"Hi, sweetie. I was just going to make us some breakfast." He looks around the kitchen. "Wow," he says. "Some mess, huh?"

This is the way he's always talked at home since I was a kid. Like Ward Cleaver. I only heard him and my mother fight once. It was about whether I was able to drive the rental car when we were on vacation in Italy. I was sixteen and had gotten my license the week before. My dad wanted me to try driving in a foreign country. He always wanted adventure for me. I'm afraid I was always a disappointment in that regard. My mother won the argument that day, but I didn't want to drive anyway on those tiny curving roads on the mountainsides.

He stops pouring the milk, puts it on the counter, and sits down at the kitchen table. He suddenly looks to me like a small old man, his shoulders curved with exhaustion. It's been impossible for him to handle not being in charge of everything. I don't think he's needed help from anyone nor had to answer to anyone since he was 15 years old. And now he can't make breakfast.

"Let me cook for you today, Dad," I say, starting to put the glasses away.

"OK," he sighs. He seems to deflate further into himself, his eyes taking on a blank cast. I know I'd feel better if I cried but I can't. I can skim over the surface of this day and act like it never happened, but I've done that for so much of my life I'm afraid I'll have nothing important to forget when I'm old. I've been worrying about that a lot lately.

"Dad," I say. "Do you remember when you and mom were young? Tell

me something that happened when you were young." I want to have a moment here with my father on our last morning together in this kitchen. I want to know what it would be like to be young and married. I want to feel that I've done enough for him, that he's had a fine life, that it's my turn.

"Well, that's none of your business, is it?" he says mildly. Then he leaves the room. He'll go back to his bedroom and sleep for a few more hours, and when he wakes up I'll pour him a bowl of cereal. Then I'll go to class and pray he doesn't burn down the house.

TODAY IS THE ADVANCED CLASS. As always, Mr. Wu is in the front middle seat, where he has a good view. I've stopped turning around to write on the board. Mrs. Yip is in the seat next to him, wearing a red dress almost as bright as her lipstick. She's told me Mr. Wu would make a fine husband. At first I thought she meant he'd make a good husband for me, but her level of grooming has increased in direct proportion to the amount of class time he spends ignoring her. Last week she was dressed as if prepared to visit the queen of England. Today it's moved past formality and has become positively lurid. She has angled her desk, probably unconsciously, so that she almost faces him.

Misha is in the back row, balancing his chair on the two back legs, like a jock in high school. He needs a haircut. He's got about two days' growth of beard. He's wearing jeans and tan work boots, toes barely touching the floor due to the balancing act. There's no reason for him to be here. He passed the class last semester, though just barely, and should be in a conversation group, or studying for the citizenship test. He's not even on the class list, but I let him sit there anyway.

Last year Misha asked me to tutor him after class and paid me ten dollars an hour to talk to him about English grammar on Tuesday afternoons. We mostly talked about Russia, which he missed, and being Jewish in Russia, which is apparently difficult. He started teaching me the Russian alphabet. I think this was so I'd understand he wasn't stupid, that he was able to have an adult conversation in Russian, not just these insipid English discussions about the weather, about the way things look or sound. Sometimes in the middle of a conversation he'd say something in Russian instead of English and then just wait for me to reply. "I change the rules, yes?" he'd laugh. "How do you like this?" He'd complain about English: "It is flat. The words don't sing to me. Street means street. It does not mean anything else. It is not beautiful. I do not like myself in this language."

He was able to tell me that he was 35, that the town he grew up in was poor and rural, that he comes from a family of teachers, but they were poor and had to do some farming on the side to feed themselves. In Russia, he said, teachers are held in high esteem. He told me I should be proud of what I do. That I should take my job more seriously. I laughed and said Americans are probably the least serious people in the world. He told me I was probably right.

I liked the way he smiled.

It lasted one month, until he asked me to marry him. Not that it's an unusual request in a job like mine. A lot of people are here to learn English because they want to be citizens, and getting married is the easy way in. It wasn't going to be a real marriage anyway—he didn't offer me a ring. It was going to be a business arrangement. He would pay me. I'd been propositioned this way twice before. The other two times I laughed it off and forgot it had happened. But with Misha the thing was that I actually, well, wanted to. But I didn't want to be paid. I just wish he'd asked me on a date instead. So I told him no and the next day he transferred to Maureen Whitaker's class.

So when he showed up on the first day of class this year, I didn't say anything about it. He's never brought a book and hasn't done any work at all. I hardly acknowledge him in class anymore though I always feel his presence at the back of the room like a bright window. I imagine he's just sitting there day after day, waiting for me to change my mind.

The Korean brothers in front of him have their books open and are quizzing each other on verb tenses. Solange from Senegal, who walks singing down the hall like a slow duck in a fancy dress, has forgotten to bring a pencil again and is asking around for one in a loud voice. Nadine, the young French girl, is reading her novel in the corner. The first few weeks of class, Solange and Nadine tried to make sense of each other's French but some sort of disagreement erupted, the nature of which I have not discovered, and every day when Solange comes into the classroom, Nadine hides her face in the same trashy American novel she's been reading for five weeks.

We begin class by reading aloud the sentences they were assigned to correct for homework. Mrs. Yip's English is immaculate; she is clearly here to meet men.

"The weather is worsening," Mrs. Yip says. I nod, and look at Solange.

"Americans value the freedom," Solange says, holding up Mrs. Yip's spare pencil like a torch.

"Incorrect," I say. Shaking my head, I call on Nadine.

"Americans value freedom," Nadine says.

This is the time, about five minutes into class, when I start to worry about my father, to wonder if he's taking an axe to the shed in the backyard. I should have gotten a cell phone. But even if something happened, who would call? To distract myself, I call on Misha to answer the next one. I haven't called on him in over a week. He doesn't have his book with him, which he demonstrates by holding up his hands, smiling, and shaking his head. I call on him sometimes, even though I know he's never prepared, to make it seem to the rest of the class that he is a student like everyone else.

One of the Korean brothers raises his hand. "The freedom of all Americans is being threatened," he says.

"Excellent," I say.

Solange is unhappy with this, frowns, shakes her head, and raises her hand. "Sometimes, 'freedom' sometimes 'the freedom,'" she says, talking with her hands, something like disgust on her face. She's done for the day. I've insulted her, even though she should know this grammar rule by now, even though I've explained it almost every other day for two months. "I hate the English," she says, pointing to me and closing her book emphatically. Pointing to Nadine, she says, "*et je deteste votre Français.*"

She stands up regally, takes her book, walks to the front of the class and drops it in the wastebasket while looking me right in the eye. "You are too skinny and you need a husband," she says, standing in front of the class. She says it like "huz-bahnd." She strides out of the room, where she begins to sing as she makes her way down the hall.

I guess it's too much today. Solange is a crackpot. She'll be back tomorrow asking for her book, acting surprised if I tell her I didn't fish it out of the trash. I even like her craziness, which is usually entertaining. The problem is I'm standing in front of the class and there's this terrible silence in which I'm thinking about whether or not I need a husband. In that moment I realize I'm never going to say anything to Misha though he waits there every day. And even worse: I realize my life has been like this for a long time. I have to say something to clear Solange's statement

out of the room, to get past this moment, and I can't think of anything. My brain has gone smooth. I stand there for a full, mortifying ten seconds looking for all the world (I can feel what's on my face but can't change it) like a little girl about to cry, and then I do. I run out of the room, my one-inch heels clicking all the way down the hallway and into the bathroom.

I stay in there for a good 15 minutes, sitting on the counter next to the sink watching my feet swing above the bathroom floor. It's an interesting tile pattern and I try for a while to find the repeat. I've locked the door, which must be against some regulation. I don't want to step outside. I want my class to go home but I know they'll stay. They're the only students in America who wouldn't take off at a time like this. They want so badly to learn, which is why I've kept the job for so long. But I can't get myself to step out of the bathroom. I contemplate escape. I can claim sudden illness, or get another job. But I can't leave the building without walking past that door.

There's a knock at the door. It's Mrs. Yip. She comes in. "Miss Roderick, are you coming back?" she says. She looks at me with concern, which makes things much worse for me, in terms of my emotional state. Like falling down when you're a kid and you don't cry until your mother starts rubbing your back and asking if you're OK.

"I don't think so," I tell her. "I feel kind of sick."

"You can make it go if you want to," she says. "You can make it go away. It's just this." She taps her temple. "In here."

"I don't seem to be able to do that so well right now," I say. I ask her to tell everyone to go home, that I am ill. That I will be back tomorrow. She does, and I hear the shuffling rustle in the hall as they leave.

I'M HOME BY 10:30. Dad's in his bathrobe. He's sitting on the living room sofa making a puzzle of the Tower Bridge.

"Hi there, kiddo," he says cheerfully as I sit down in his old recliner. I haven't changed much of the furniture since I moved in. Maybe some people think it's weird to live as an adult in your parent's house with all the same furniture, but I can't imagine the house any other way. The only time I haven't lived here was when I went to college. Dad put the house in my name when my mother died, the year before I graduated. He moved to a condo close to the office and bought all new furniture. So I'm used to it, I guess.

"Where's your mother?" he asks.

"Don't you remember?" I say. "She's down in Florida visiting Carol."

"Of course," he says. He looks confused for a minute. "She's dead," he says.

"Yes, Dad, she's dead."

For about six months, I knew something was wrong with my father but I didn't want to admit it. Then one day his partner called me and told me he had started acting strange and disorganized. He had lost important paperwork, had cost them an important account. Then the police started picking him up late at night in strange parts of town. When I was 28 I took him home to live with me. That was two years ago. At first locking the doors at night was enough. The anxiety medication helped him sleep. He liked doing puzzles during the day. He thought it was a nice vacation. He didn't notice when they took his name off the sign at the accounting office.

Last year it started to get dangerous. He'd leave the stove on. I'd find him out in the yard with an axe, about to cut a hole in the shed. He said he was making kindling for the woodstove. We didn't have a woodstove. That was when I started making phone calls.

And today. Today was the day. Since I came home early, I wouldn't be able to rush to get him there before five. I'd be able to take my time and get really upset about it. Great.

"How come you never had another kid?" I say. "How come it's just me? I have to do it all myself, Dad. It's not quite fair."

"What do you have to do, sweetie?" He's looking at his puzzle, which he's doing incorrectly, jamming random pieces together where they don't fit.

"Everything. I have to do everything. It's difficult you know."

"You've always been a complainer," he says. "Nothing is difficult unless your mind tells you it is. Now go get your mother and we'll go out to lunch." He gets up, goes down the hall and into his bedroom. A minute later he comes back out with that crease between his eyebrows, the worried expression he never used to let anyone see. His left hand plays with the stitching on his robe.

"Come on," I say. "You have to put on some clothes."

IT'S NOT AS BAD AS I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE. The place is only a half-hour drive from the house. It's clean and the nurses are cheerful. My dad thinks he's there because he's sick. The intake nurse's name is Antoinette and she has an accent almost exactly like Solange's.

"Just a bit of the flu," he tells her. "I won't be here long. Those bills pile up when you start staying overnight."

"Of course, Mr. Roderick," she says. When she shows us the room I wonder about its previous occupants and why they aren't in it anymore. Whenever I have thoughts of death I have to immediately turn my thoughts to the natural world. It really does work. No one here's going to get eaten by a cheetah. That Hass poem about the gazelle: his entrails are being eaten and he is watching. Or something like that.

The window in his room overlooks the parking lot, but there is something of a view. The building is near the top of a hill, beyond that you can see an old mill they've turned into an office building, and the glassy blue river behind it that used to power the machines.

It's not so bad. In America, you can go anywhere and the biggest difference is the weather. The more people I meet, the more alike they seem. You can find people you know everywhere. The view changes, but your life stays the same. Solange reminds me of Melissa Southwick, who I was in grammar school with. Maybe another version of my mother is here, or another version of me.

When I leave him, we hug and I promise to visit tomorrow. He tells me not to worry, he'll be fine. We're in the community room, where several elderly ladies watch Oprah from wheelchairs. He looks like he knows what he's saying, that it's OK.

In the parking lot standing by my car I have to remind myself. No one gets eaten by a cheetah in a supervised living facility.

THE CHINESE PLACE in the middle of town delivers and I eat lo mein while watching a program in which contestants are made to eat disgusting things in order to win a lot of money. Life often feels like that, I think. Day after day, eating disgusting things. Which probably accounts for the popularity of the show. I have made a little agreement with myself. I have built a concrete block wall in my mind. My father and tomorrow's class are on the other side.

IN THE MORNING there is no banging of pots and pans. I sit up in bed and think: My father is waking up scared this morning, not knowing where he is. For some reason, I can't throw the thought over the wall. It keeps bouncing off, missing. I dress quickly and go to my car. My hair is sticking up wildly. I stop in the driveway. I talk to myself.

"Don't do this," I say. "Don't don't."

I get in the car and put the key in the ignition. I hit the steering wheel with my fist.

"I mean, what is the point?" I say. He's going to be scared and confused every morning. If I visit every morning I'll be late to school. I'll lose my job. It cannot be done. It would be easier to bring him home. I consider it for a second. I think about him in his bathrobe, holding the axe in the back yard.

I hit the steering wheel harder and the horn sounds. I lay on the horn with my elbow for a good minute, a minute and a half. I don't think I can stand this. I get out of the car and go inside, shower, eat breakfast, and drive to school listening to the talk radio station. They're talking about how Democrats are ruining America. They're saying things about the Ten Commandments. I get to school an hour and a half before my first class. Imelda lets me use the office phone to call him. He sounds OK, not happy. He tells me the doctors might want to keep him for more tests. He tells me to hang in there, that he'll be home soon. He thinks I'm ten years old.

In class, nothing happens. Misha isn't there but Solange is. She doesn't raise her hand so I don't call on her. It's a silent arrangement we've come to. She's quiet and repentant, studiously following along in her book. Someone must have taken it out of the trash yesterday. Probably Mrs. Yip. She's become the mother of the class, taking care of everyone, even, I guess, taking care of me. The thought of Mrs. Yip's kindness stays with me for a second too long, and a terrible warm wave of gratefulness rises from my neck to the back of my eyes, which get hot and start to fill. But today I can handle it. I look down and flip through the textbook on my desk, pretending to look for a page, and imagine squiggly acacias blackening before the sunset. In the distance, a herd swarms across the plain. It works. I turn around and I'm fine, I'm fine. I look out at the class. We're all fine.

Especially Mrs. Yip, who has finally won some attention from Mr. Wu. She has "forgotten" her book, and Mr. Wu has offered to share his. With absolute entitlement, Mrs. Yip has moved her desk into the middle of the

aisle, effectively blocking his escape. He'll need her permission to use the bathroom, to sharpen his pencil. At one point during class she interrupts his attempt to answer my question and gives the correct answer herself. Mr. Wu doesn't seem to notice she's taking liberties. Perhaps he's too polite to react. Or perhaps he enjoys it.

Misha knocks before he comes in. He's an hour late. He smiles weakly at me, walks to the back of the room and sits behind the Korean brothers. I pay no attention to him. The remnants of some inarticulate feeling linger in the room, but I have nothing to say. The lesson continues. I imagine we'll continue like this until the day he gives up. He'll stop coming to class and then it'll be over. We take turns reading passages from the book, and we identify coordinating conjunctions. I give a quiz. I write the homework on the board and collect the quizzes.

At the end of class I like to stand by the door as they file past, the way I imagine my dad's grammar school teachers might have done. They always thank me as they leave the room. Nadine's smile is shy and quick. The Korean brothers each tilt their heads in a way to suggest a bow. Solange squeezes my hand, looks at me knowingly and laughs as if we share a private joke. Her abundant spirit spills over and I laugh too, though I'm not sure why.

Misha is the last one to leave. He tips an imaginary cowboy hat in my direction and adopts a John Wayne swagger for a few steps. My throat feels constricted, as if dozens of stifled words were all trying to come out at once.

I manage to make a noise that sounds like "Hey."

He turns around.

"Why don't you take the test already?"

"I did," he says. "I passed." He lifts up his imaginary hat again, pretends to drop it on the floor, picks it up, dusts it off and puts it on his head. My nervous giggling sounds loud and foolish. Girly. But he's already out the door and doesn't hear. I'm glad of it. He was going to pay someone he didn't love to marry him. What kind of woman would have a man like that?

I gather my books together in the room full of empty desks, thinking, I would. I would.