

Truck!

Let's make a deal.

Let's make a deal that you, you and I, us, we, together—to get lost.

But don't leave my side.

Lemon-flavored light filters in through the hopper windows, meeting the lone SunDrop sitting on the counter. The night is over. The rain has stopped. You're sure by now they've filled the trench. Later, you're sure they hadn't. Your mother wipes what she thinks is a tear away from the bags that have blossomed under her eyes. There's nothing there. She's run dry.

2/8/20

9:03 PM

A 76-year-old male ran his red truck into a ditch off the side of I-49 in Mount Pleasant, NC. He was on his way to a boy scout camping trip, hosted at a private campsite nearby. His truck was moored about six yards away from a gravel drive, the first indication of his farm, which was the first indication of the private campsite. He was outside of the vehicle, standing near its right rear and straining to liberate the 4,000-pound pickup with his bare hands. After an hour of fruitless exertion, the man abandoned his nugatory haul and phoned a nearby friend. But the truck's driver-side door was swung wide and the tailgate was popped, and that needed to be fixed.

It was an otherwise peaceful night, every waxy myrtle pulsing with the dynamic chorus of cicadas and crickets. As the tailgate closed with a metallic click and the driver's-side door slammed shut, silence hung low and thick like slow-spun butter. It had started to rain.

At Pawpaw's house, there's a red 1995 Ford pickup truck parked under a rusted, kudzu-infested carport. The truck's length is clawed with shallow white grooves, and angular marks run the bridge of its nose. The whole thing is embossed in a fuzzy layer of red North Carolina clay. There's something ripe about the truck. Something visceral. Maybe it's the craterous dent in the back right side, if you're looking at it from the front. If you're not, you wonder if you usually look at trucks like that? From the back? You aren't sure. You think that being sure about something is knowing that before you go to bed at night, when you swing down dog-legged stairs to kiss your parents, that he's there. No rabid shrieking, no green faces, no ghostly mirage coating the night white. No angry rabbit-shit rain pelting your windshield, *rap-tap-tap-tap*, no thinking about how he felt this same rain when the truck flipped on him.

2/8/20

9:36 PM

An 83-year-old, legally blind male came barreling down the road in another truck. It had started to rain, a sharp, quick rain, the type that requires full wiper initiation and at least 20/15 vision. Condensation began to form on the window of the second truck, thick and foreboding. It rained harder. The man drove faster. Seventy-five miles per hour is the speed he was going down the dark, wet road when he hit the red truck and flipped it backwards. An odd thud from the right. A shriek. What a dreadful noise, the man thought, the kind a dying pig makes. He hoped it wasn't his engine. He got out to identify the owner and discuss reparations, only to find no sign of any individual associated with the red truck. He did not notice the leg, or the arm, or the blood.

You wish you weren't yet lucky enough to have another guardian angel. Stand next to the truck, not near the dent, you'll cry. If you can cry. No, to the left, and look right. The handsy branches of an old walnut tree stretch towards you, laden with those fat green orbs that you collected in bowls and baskets and the back of your four-wheeler when you were little. The

knobbed trunk is ringed with memories of so much. How many times had that truck driven around the horseshoe driveway just to end up in a trench on the side of I-49? Do you remember the time you flipped that child-sized four-wheeler on top of an 8-year-old Carson and she was fine? Do you still think about yearly family reunion barbecues and backyard camping with fishing nets and chase-me-find-me-catch-me games and dead ornamental koi fish and that creaky metal swing shooting pain up your thighs when it banged against your knees and how they still never got a dog with all of that space, did they? You realize the rings on your fingers mean nothing. You wonder what your insides look like. You melt into yourself, flesh upon flesh, no bone, condensing everything that's you into the smallest Tupperware you can find.

2/8/20

10:27 PM

When Lila called, he was already dead. Mom screamed and cried and took big, desperate gasps and asked stupid questions that no one could answer, like why? You did exactly what you were supposed to do in this situation: When she dropped to her knees and started pounding the hardwood floor, you patted her arm with shaky hands and told her that God only takes the best. You coaxed her into the car with promises of a life after death and a long-winded homily on fate. You let dad drive. But you've never been in this situation before, so how would you know? While they were on their way to Mount Pleasant, you picked up Carson from theater rehearsals. You called mom so she could tell your little sister that someone hit her grandpa with a truck.

Once again, you're occupying space. You stare at the truck and turn one of those orbs over and over in your hands, squeezing it like your father squeezes stress balls during your sister's soccer games because he doesn't want to pay for college a third time, he wants to retire. You start to remember cracked, worn, callused hands, short and stubby hands, with big thumbs and thick fingers. The hands hold a small, oak pocket knife that sheens silver. The

hands drive the knife into the flesh, skin, bones of the orb, straight to its core. Its heart. You look away. The heart doesn't beat. You think about how fragile heartbeats are. You think about how quickly calluses and big thumbs turn into oriental golden pots of thick, gray silt. While you ponder, the hands offer you a carefully cracked walnut. You accept. You eat.

2/9/20

7:10 AM

Honey-coated home Mount Pleasant. All three of you arrive early in the morning, confused, anxious orbs outfitted in sweatshirts and frown lines. Drive your white Honda Civic around the horseshoe driveway, brake and then park. It feels too sudden, too soon, too early, but you get out anyway. The house drips with fascia siding, cream or light gray or some other unassuming color that no one questioned painting it. You walk up a rotting ramp and under a white awning between the back door and the garage. You realize you've never questioned the awning. It was always a purgatory place. Now you think about how it keeps out the rain. Open the door with your right hand and your elbow, because the seal sticks a little. Give in to the smells of sweet tea and SunDrop, family-sized bags of M&M candies emptied into a gumball machine in the kitchen. You still think about that house when you smell M&Ms. The air is sadness-saturated, a sponge left at the bottom of your family's kitchen sink. You feel upended.

Stand in front of the truck. Perfect. You can't see the dent. Now look left, take five big steps. Rub your hands against the side of an old shed, hard, until they're full of splinters and you can't see your fat blue veins ebbing against the surface of your pig hands. Until they're dripping fire engine red. Until your thin, cracked lips sound off like a siren. Good. You close your eyes and open the steeled roll-up door the way you always do, with all of your toes and a good bit of hamstring strength. You're in his workshop now, a man-shed covered in thick, sandy sawdust, an oasis of screwdrivers and flat-head nails. He made your dollhouse here, the one

you painted green because you secretly hated Barbie and wanted her to live in puke. The one with the felted roof and frantic childish Crayola scribble coating the interior walls.

2/9/20

9:30 AM

Seven stages later your family learns that the state police aren't pressing charges. Dad furious, shattering an old TV with one angry slam of the SunDrop he was drinking into what he thought was a plaster wall. Nicholas keeps making halfhearted arguments with Pawpaw's collection of gnome dolls. But the legalese is impenetrable. Lila is being her favorite color of bitch, a phenomenon that expands into his absence. She carefully dismantles everything he's worked so diligently to create. Until the whole family explodes. Until it's just the five of you. But right now, you're seething with vengeance, a feeling that runs out of your eyes and down your cheek and onto your neck. A hot, nasty orb of anger and remorse. Your Pawpaw was a saint, in the truest sense of an overused word. He fixed cars, holes in the wall, blown-out light bulbs and rusted bikes like he fixed people. With a smile. You vow to learn more about screwdrivers. And nails.

You feel sick. All of your insides, or everything you've eaten today, or both, is on the floor exactly 1.25 feet away. A half-digested banana slice compliments one of those obtuse triangle-shaped wood saw castoffs. You smile towards the un-restored blue 1960s mustang convertible. You wonder what's the point of having a car you can't drive. You wonder about points. You're delirious. Look up, take a four-count nasal inhalation. Take a sip of SunDrop. Have you had this the whole time? Exhale it all away. Everything is blood and vomit and tears.

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