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The Other Face

Joel makes the sandwiches with tomato ketchup, because there's nothing else in the cupboard. The bread feels rough, too; it's been left on the side overnight, next to the pots and the crusted cutlery. He should toast it, really, to hide the staleness—but there's no time, not now. The clock tuts at him from the kitchen wall, sliding closer to eight.

He runs upstairs, feet thumping. When he knocks on his mother's door, there's only silence, so he nudges it open with his fingers.

"Mum," he says. She faces away from him, curled in a hump under the duvet. "Mum, I'm going."

She doesn't stir, so he rounds the bed to look at her. That's when he notices it. Something different about her face—an unfamiliar jut to her cheekbones, a strange thinness to her lips. Unease grips his stomach.

"Mum," he repeats, giving her shoulder a little shake. "I'm going to school now. I'll be back about six, because of rehearsals."

She mumbles something, but doesn't open her eyes. Joel fights the urge to shake her harder, to peel her eyelids back, to squint and check the colour of them. The alarm clock blinks on her bedside table—he can still make the bus, if he leaves now.

He brushes her hair with his fingers, briefly, gingerly, and finds the texture not quite as he remembers it. When he leaves the house, guitar case slung over his back, he sets off at a run. The case bumps in time with his heart.

Joel makes it home on the dot of six, and the door is locked. He has to cut around to the back of the house and wrench the kitchen window open, straining on the tips of his toes. It sticks halfway, but the gap is wide enough for him to push his guitar case through first—it knocks against the taps several times, with a tuneless hum that makes him grit his teeth.

After, he struggles through himself, sweating, legs kicking. The house is heavy with silence, but he checks all the rooms anyway. He calls his mother's name once, then presses his hands over his lips. His voice sounds too thin, too high.

An hour passes. He rings her mobile twice, before he finds it on the floor by her bed, buzzing silently against the carpet. When he checks the coat rack, a few things are missing—her green jacket, her pumps, her handbag. She took money, then. He tries to feel reassured.

Evening closes in, dragging long shadows over the carpet. He makes a second ketchup sandwich, with toasted bread this time, but it doesn't taste much better. The bread rolls over his tongue and clogs his throat, and when he forces himself to swallow it, his eyes water and water and water, even when he pinches his arm to distract himself.

He switches the television on, rests his head on the arm of the sofa. Cycles through channels until he finds a film. With the volume down low and his eyes lulled shut, he can almost imagine there's someone in the room with him, talking so softly he can barely hear.

When he opens his eyes again, the film has changed. Shadows grasp towards him from the corners of the room, and the acidic taste of the ketchup still clings to his throat. He wonders if that's what woke him, if he's going to be sick.

But then he listens: a key, scrabbling in a lock.

He wants to run to the corridor, but his legs have seized up. He knows what's coming. His eyes find the television, blurring on the characters' faces, their hands, the way their mouths close around soundless words. If he looks hard enough, perhaps the screen will swallow him.

A shadow falls across the floor from the doorway. Joel makes himself look up.

It's worse than this morning. His mother's face has changed entirely now—the cheekbones high and sharp, her lips colourless. She has a small mole on her jaw that wasn't there yesterday, and the bridge of her nose is thicker, flatter, like clay pushed out of shape.

"Mum," he says.

She looks at him, after a beat. Her brown eyes have lightened to a watery grey.

"Why're you up?" she says. There's a new timbre to her voice, and the words run together like watercolours. "You shouldn't... you should be asleep."

Her hair is still blonde, the same sandy shade as Joel's, but he can see it deepening to brown at the roots. It's like watching water seeping into fabric, like the dip-dyeing they did in textiles at school. Every time he blinks, the colour grows a little stronger.

"I was waiting for you," he says, swallowing hard. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"No," she mumbles, pressing her face to her hands. "Just... you go. Go up to bed. You shouldn't be up."

Joel gets to his feet, his legs wobbling. When he steps into her space, a fog of alcohol rolls off her, so strong he can almost taste it. He takes a shallow breath before taking her by the wrists.

"Come on," he says quietly. "We can both go up."

She resists for a moment, snatching her hands back, but then goes limp. He puts an arm around her side, which feels more fragile than it should, the bones pressing closer to the surface. They struggle up the stairs, along the landing, into the darkness of her bedroom. When she slumps back on the mattress, Joel's hands move to her coat buttons. He can solve this, he thinks. If he looks after her, if he helps her sleep, if he brings her the tea just how she always has it, then she'll wake up tomorrow and everything will be normal—

"Stop it," she grits out, batting at his hands. "Can bloody do it myself. Leave off."

"I'm just trying to—"

"Get *off!*" She slaps his hands again, hard enough to sting, and Joel jumps back a step. "Should be in fucking bed. Get out."

In the streaked half-light, his mother's face is an alien thing, creased with fury. Her pale eyes sear into him. He holds his stinging

hands to his chest and leaves the room, bumping his shoulder on the door frame as he goes.

Joel wakes long before dawn, a headache clenched behind his eyes. A single pigeon calls outside his window, rhythmic, lulling, maddening. He tumbles out of his bed to bang on the glass, and the noise stops.

He holds his head in his hands, coming more awake. The events of yesterday return to him—snatches of memories, catching the light like splintered glass. Mum. His mother, with her unknown face, those grey eyes, that new mole on her jaw. She wouldn't let him make her tea.

He steps into the corridor and opens his mother's bedroom door by inches. A slice of the room emerges through the gap; she's asleep, wheezing softly, sprawled on top of the duvet. She still wears her green coat.

Joel creeps through the gap, taking slow, heel-to-toe steps. A slat of sunlight falls through the gap in the curtains. His mother doesn't look as unfamiliar as yesterday, as though the sleep has softened her. Her hair has returned to its usual blonde, like the shore drying after the tide goes out. But the contours of her cheeks are still strange, and that little mole sits stubbornly on her jaw.

She never looks the same, whenever it happens. The first time was soon after Auntie Rachel died. She turned slow and quiet, too exhausted to dress, and one morning she came down to breakfast with a different face. Older, green-eyed, with the same reddish hair that her sister once had.

There were ways to manage it, Joel had learnt. He had to talk to her, to play the old albums on her CD player, to read out chapters from her favourite books when she couldn't get out of bed. He had to make the tea just how she liked it, with two sugars and a lot of milk. It was a breadcrumb trail back to herself, and she would always follow it eventually, if he were quiet and patient enough. The other face usually shrank out of sight for weeks at a time. Sometimes even months.

His mother shifts under the covers, mumbling something. Joel backs away, but he can't reach the door in time—her eyelids flutter open.

“Joel,” she mumbles.

Her pupils are grey, but her voice, beneath the roughness of the drink, sounds closer to his memory.

“I’m sorry,” Joel says. “I just wanted to check on you.”

“Don’t... come here, love.” Her voice shakes slightly, and she holds out one hand. “Come on.”

Joel slopes towards her, sinking onto the bed. This close, the dissimilarities are starker—her flesh smells of sweat and wine, not the warm, cheap-perfume scent he knows best. Her fingers are thin and hard when they comb through his hair, but he forces himself to stay still, to let her touch him. He interlinks his left hand with hers and squeezes the unfamiliar bones.

“I don’t remember,” she whispers, biting her lip. “When did I come back, yesterday? Did I leave you alone?”

“Not really,” he lies. “You came back in the evening.”

“I’m sorry.” Her hand tightens in his hair, almost painfully. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

He shuffles around to lie next to her, and they drowse, sliding in and out of sleep. Whenever he opens his eyes, she looks a little more familiar than before. Blink—her nose is narrower. Blink—her cheeks rounder. Blink. Blink.

As the light strengthens through the curtains, Joel disentangles himself and sits up. His mother looks up at him.

“Need to get ready for school,” he says. “Marcy wants to do extra rehearsals before lessons.”

A notch appears between his mother’s brows. “Ah. Yes. Your concert, right?”

Joel nods. “It’s tomorrow. You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Yes. Yeah, of course,” she says, with a brief kiss to his hand. Her lips touch the exact spot she slapped yesterday, and his skin tingles at the contact. He tries to ignore it.

Half an hour later, Joel is dressed, another ketchup sandwich packed in his schoolbag. When he comes upstairs to say goodbye, his mother is sitting up in bed, staring out of the window. Her eyes are still grey.

Joel tunes his guitar for the third time, even though it's too loud in the wings to hear the notes. It's just for the motion of it; the press of the nylon strings on his fingertips, the way the tuning pegs give and stiffen as he adjusts them. A few metres away, Marcy squints at herself in her phone camera, dabbing concealer onto her nose.

"Stop fiddling with that guitar," she says, glancing at him. "You're making me jumpy."

Joel stops, clenching his hands into fists instead. He hasn't looked out at the audience yet, arranged in rows around the amphitheatre—only heard their chatter, the volley of their footsteps as they took their seats. He imagines his mother amongst them. She'll be sitting apart from the rest, hands in her lap.

A smattering of applause marks the end of the first act. It's a long, long wait before Joel and Marcy's turn—they're on right at the end, because Marcy is so good, almost like a proper singer already. After the ukulele troupe straggles off, Marcy walks out a little ahead of him, with a sway to her steps.

A chorus of whistles follows—cheers from Marcy's mum and dad, sitting right at the front. Joel follows her, gripping hard at the neck of his guitar. It's just the school stage, where they sit every week for assemblies, yawning and fidgeting, but it seems to have swollen to twice its usual size. The spotlights are hot, so bright he can barely see past them to the audience.

Still, he looks. For sandy hair, a green coat, and brown eyes watching him.

He looks and looks.

"Joel," Marcy hisses, her hand cupped over the microphone. "Come on."

He nods distantly, moving closer. Marcy counts in, and Joel's fingers move through the first chord. The guitar is slightly out of tune.

It's raining by the time Joel makes it home. A warm rain, carding gently through his hair, touching fingers to the back of his neck.

He sets his guitar case down in the hall, against the coat rack. His mother's green jacket hangs from the nearest peg. From the living room comes the quiet buzz of the telly.

His mother is asleep on the sofa, in the same spot he occupied two nights ago. A lamp shines on the coffee table next to her, pooling in her long hair, which has darkened almost to the colour of ink. On the floor by her bare foot is an empty bottle of something; he's not sure if they already had it in the house, or if she went out to buy it.

Joel moves to stand over her. She doesn't stir, her breath rasping in the quiet. He kicks the bottle so that it knocks onto the floor.

She twitches awake, jerking her head.

"Oh," she breathes. Slurred, again. Her eyes open a crack, then fall shut once more. "You're back. Where were you?"

"How much have you had?"

She says nothing, pushing her face into her arm. Something sparks in Joel's stomach. He takes hold of her jaw, one hand on either side, jerking it up to the light.

She's worse than before. Her flesh feels like wax beneath his fingers, spongy and unreal. He imagines how it would feel to dig his nails in deeper, to tighten his grip and pull. Maybe that's all it would take. One hard tug, and the face would come away like wallpaper, and he'd find the right eyes and nose and mouth underneath.

"Get off," she mumbles. "You're hurting."

"How much did you have?"

She doesn't answer, but her eyes finally open to fix on him, glassy and wet. In the muted glare of the lamp, they almost look brown.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

Joel stops. The strength drains out of him at once, and his hands drip away from her face, to hang heavily at his sides.

He sinks down beside her on the sofa, not close enough to touch. For a few seconds, there is only the hum of the television, the patter of the rain outside.

"Do you want a tea?" Joel says.

Next to him, his mother nods silently. He gets to his feet to go to the kitchen.