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UGLY BROWN CAR

Bobby came home from work and told his sister, Beatrice, he'd like her to pitch in.

"Pitch in how?" she asked, sitting at the kitchen table and shucking onions from their peels.

Bobby told her she could get a job too, maybe at Jack's Hot House. She could work days, he said. Then they could pool their pennies and buy a car that wasn't the ugly brown car. They'd had ugly brown car for what felt like forever and lately, forever had been feeling not so great to Bobby.

"We need more than pennies for that," Beatrice said, wrenching the top off an onion.

"You know what I mean," Bobby said. "We need to save money for a better car. We need a car that can go more than straight. If you drive up a hill, ugly brown car dies. If you turn left, ugly brown car dies. If you turn right—"

"Ugly brown car dies," Beatrice finished. "We'll see. I can hardly drive."

"You'll learn." Bobby frowned. "What are you making with all these onions?"

"Oh nothing," Beatrice said. "I just felt like peeling them."

Onion tears brimmed in Bobby's eyes. He knew he shouldn't push Beatrice any further, that she only changed her mind once every few forevers, so he pinched the bridge of his nose and went out the backdoor. Here his garden waited. The garden was a brown space fenced in by gray, well-splintered wood, dotted over by tangles and gnarls of green.

Hello little lettuce that will be, he thought. Hello tomatoes of fad-

ing summer.

Bobby gathered five of the reddest tomatoes then sat on the plastic folding chair arranged to face the sunset. Bobby speared a cherry tomato on each finger and ate them that way, slowly, chewing each one and working the stems forward in his mouth to spit them out.

Bobby was tired. From his calendar, he knew he had worked two years and one month without a vacation. He had to pay for things for Beatrice and himself. They needed food and clothing and this car, so Bobby could get to work. His paychecks were not much bigger than small and, it seemed, the needs of the brother and sister loomed large sometimes.

Suddenly an onion flew out the open kitchen window. Bobby watched a few more white bulbs follow. He heard his sister singing a song from their childhood. It began, Left, left, left right, left. The rest was about ants but Bobby could never remember it. Bobby counted five more naked onions flying into the garden before the kitchen window shuddered on its sliders and finally, became still.

Beatrice was gone before Bobby woke up for work. He ate microwaved onions dipped into sour cream for breakfast, gathered the leftovers for lunch, and got in the ugly brown car. Jack's Hot House was on his way to work and when he passed it, Bobby worried his hopeful brain had created a cruel, puppet version of his sister. But there she was: wading through the dirt parking lot in apron strings.

At work Bobby groomed his accounts and stacked his numbers. He tinkered with some client lists. He ate his onions and sour cream lunch inside the ugly brown car, the scent prickling the edges of his eyeballs.

After work Bobby drove the ugly brown car in a straight line to Jack's Hot House. He jabbed the flasher button, left the keys in the ignition, and got out of the car. Jack sat on the swinging bench near the restaurant door. He was drying a stack of salad bowls and told Bobby his sister was not there any more.

"Did she work today?" Bobby asked.

Jack nodded. He told him how she'd filled up water glasses, put Caesar salad on tables, and rolled up silverware in napkins.

Bobby asked if Beatrice made any mistakes.

Jack said, "Yes, yes she did."

Beatrice had stepped on the foot of a crouched six-year-old child searching for a fallen chicken nugget. She cut in line for the bathroom, for the men's bathroom, forcing a businessman, a lunchtime regular, to wait an extra minute. She rolled up spoons into the silverware even though only forks and knives belonged there.

Bobby asked if Beatrice would come back to work.

Jack said, "Yes, yes she will. Tomorrow."

Bobby nodded and got back into the ugly brown car. He was so happy he forgot to turn the flashers off until he parked in the driveway of the yellow house. Beatrice came outside holding three tomatoes dangling from a vine like a mobile.

"What's the emergency, bro?" she said.

"I heard you went to work today," he said. "Jack said you did a great job. No mistakes."

Beatrice looked away. She had always been a little stealthy. "All I did today was trim your tomato plants. Some of them are looking grim!"

"A really stellar first day," Bobby said. "He's excited for you to come back tomorrow."

Beatrice stared down the road, in the opposite direction of Bobby's work and Jack's Hot House. Earlier the sun had collapsed into squat yellow and orange and now, a graying darkness hung.

"How do you think they make ketchup?" she said finally.

Bobby said, "It's not like I'm not going to see you there. It's not like I'm not going to notice!"

Beatrice turned so her stare went the other direction.

When Beatrice went inside, Bobby followed. The bowls spread over the kitchen table looked like the ones from Jack's porch, white with a thin stripe of blue around the rim. One of them held pulpy

remains of tomatoes.

“What do we have here?” Bobby said. He felt tired. An ache bit behind his knees.

“Smashing seems like the first step,” Beatrice said. “Ketchup-wise.”

Bobby sighed. He told his sister he thought vinegar was involved. And perhaps salt.

Beatrice kept going to work. She left early and came back late. She worked all three meals Jack’s Hot House offered: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Bobby knew she stayed all day because he used his lunch break to drive the ugly brown car past Jack’s Hot House. Each day it died mid-turn on the way back to the office, blocking the road, and a trucker would stop to help Bobby turn it all the way around. Usually the trucker noticed what a real bitch a car like that was and recommended a check up. Oh immediately, Bobby agreed. Of course.

You never know when something like this might start to happen more than once, the trucker would caution.

Then Bobby nodded solemnly, agreeing that a car dying all the time was a terrible prospect, and drove the ugly brown car in a straight line back to work. During meetings he doodled on a yellow legal pad. One meeting he used the edge of a folder to draw the straightest columns, between which he created six different versions of a dollar sign, two versions of ketchup, and a single undersized tomato.

During the meeting’s five minute break, a coworker shifted so his chin was in his elbow and his gaze flicked toward Bobby’s legal pad. Bobby glared at him. The coworker shrugged and said,

“Think about food a lot?” The coworker patted his belly. “Lord knows I do. Thinking of stopping in at a restaurant for dinner.”

“Me too,” Bobby said. “My sister works at one.”

“You get a discount?” the coworker wanted to know. “Man, if I knew someone at a restaurant, I’d go all the time. Seems dumb to waste such a good connection.”

Bobby stiffened. “Of course. I go often.”

The coworker nodded.

"I'm going tonight, in fact," Bobby added. He thought it was about time. Two people who cared so much about one another, who needed each other so essentially, should uncover all their secret stones. Beatrice's job was a big secret stone and Bobby knew he was strong enough to lift it.

Even from across the restaurant, Bobby saw how Beatrice's hair crinkled around her face. How her cheeks had gone pink. She served alongside some older ladies who wore white, pillow-like shoes and bonnets. Beatrice's crinkle-headed hair looked wild alongside the older ladies' smooth bonnets. Bobby smiled at one of them. The older lady did not smile back. She wrinkled up her nose and re-tied her bonnet strings tighter around her chin.

A different older lady walked up to Bobby and said, "Just you then? All alone?"

Bobby pointed to his sister. He told the older lady, this one with a rounder, not so crinkly nose, that he was waiting for that server. He said that server would be ideal.

"Suit yourself," the older lady said. "But I can tell you, that server is new and already, very popular among the men. So it might be a while."

Bobby said, "Fine then."

Bobby followed the older lady past the Hot House bar, the Nut House. The older lady pulled a rolled up menu from her apron strings and handed it to Bobby. He opened it at the tiny circular table. Without reading it, he asked about the soup of the day. The older lady wrinkled her nose and said he didn't want that. Bobby stiffened and said, well what if he did.

"Suit yourself," the older lady said over her shoulder, her butt already shifting like balloons in the wind as she walked away.

Beatrice's face colored when she saw who the customer seated alone at a bar table was. She did not look at Bobby while explaining that Jack's

Hot House Hot Wings were two dollars a basket during Happy Hour. She nodded when he asked for the Caesar salad please. Bobby winked at her, like oh, I get it, you'd like to remain professional. That was okay. He would play along. A secret stone could be a nuanced stone.

An older lady in a bonnet brought his Caesar salad. Bobby saw Beatrice talking to Jack at the opposite side of the restaurant from the Nut House, the section with plush round booths, where the high chairs were stacked and servers were always restocking sugar packets. Children liked to make lemonade with the lemons from their parents' iced tea. Beatrice pointed toward Bobby and he waved. She did not wave back but Jack did.

Then Jack came over to the table and told Bobby lots of things. He told Bobby his sister was learning quickly as a server. He told Bobby his sister had a real knack for certain aspects of serving. Her tips were on the rise. The older women, practiced and poised as they were, fell often to jealous words, snide tricks. Beatrice's apron pockets had been discovered stuffed full of peanut butter. Someone had kindly left a bonnet on Beatrice's hook but that bonnet held some bees and what the bees did was not kind at all.

Beatrice was learning lots of things rather fast right now, Jack said. Perhaps she needed space to do that, time to grow.

"You're a gardener," Jack said. "How is it for your tomato vines, your basil clusters, your carrot rows?"

Bobby nodded. He thanked Jack for his input.

Then Bobby asked Jack whether his lettuce came in a bag. If the Caesar dressing originated from a packet, some water, a hasty swabbing with a fork. Jack nodded, like perhaps what Bobby said was true and he, the restaurant owner, had only to go off alone and consider the bad news.

Bobby woke up early to catch Beatrice before she left. He found her in his garden, where dead slugs floated belly-up in shallow lids of beer.

"How long do you plan on saving?" he asked. "Why work all the

meals?"

Beatrice shrugged.

"Who goes out to breakfast this season anyway?"

Beatrice shrugged again.

"How close are we to replacing the ugly brown car?"

Beatrice reminded Bobby she didn't know how to drive. Bobby reminded her she could learn. Beatrice told him she was. With Jack, from work. She was coming early and staying late and he was letting her practice circles in the parking lot.

"We go left," she said. "We go right. I wouldn't be able to do these things in the ugly brown car."

Bobby clenched his jaw. The ache bit him once, twice behind his knees. The dull pain in his lower back swelled. He asked Beatrice how much money she'd saved so far. She told him. The pain did not change but Bobby's expression did. It perked and lightened as he said,

"Oh, yes. Yes. That is enough. We can put a down payment on something quite nice."

"Then everything will be great," Bobby said.

Beatrice said she wasn't done learning. She said her money wasn't going anywhere until it could go somewhere in a place where the earnings meant something.

Bobby plucked a tomato from one of his plants. Take heart, little guys, he thought. Keep growing. Make firm skins we can scrape our teeth across and feel pride over the strength.

Beatrice put her hand on his shoulder. She said she wanted three more paychecks, a lot more driving lessons, and a plot in the garden of her own. She said Bobby wasn't growing anything she wanted to grow. Had he ever seen a picture of fennel? What about greens? One was called Rainbow Chard.

Bobby handed Beatrice the tomato with a bite taken out of it.

"You love tomatoes," he said. "You always have."

Bobby walked away to let Beatrice eat her tomato, to think over the prospect of replacing ugly brown car sooner than later. Once they

had a new car, Beatrice would finally see how burdensome the ugly brown car had been. She would be so grateful, finally, for everything he had done for him.

That afternoon Bobby said he had an emergency dentist appointment and left work early. He was going to make Beatrice a beautiful dinner. He consulted a cook book they'd gotten long ago and kept atop the fridge. He brought it down, dusted its cover, and pursed his lips over the recipes inside. He decided on homemade lasagna. He boiled tomatoes in one pot and the noodles in another. He hummed when ladling out the first pulpy layer in the blue-glass pan. Beatrice would love this. Beatrice would be ecstatic. Beatrice wasn't working dinner that night. She'd told him so. Beatrice would be hungry, tired, all worn out. Ever so grateful for a homemade meal. They could talk and decide on what kind of car would replace the ugly brown car.

He folded the edges down on the aluminum foil and slid the pan into the oven.

It was well after lunch. Bobby looked outside but didn't see Beatrice lumbering down the road. She'd been getting thinner lately. He'd noticed. A good meal, a strong one, that would be good for her figure. It would make her lady-like, calm.

Bobby checked on his plants. He dumped out a few lids full of beer and dead slugs. He refilled the lids from the case of beer he kept near the door. He weeded spots he'd been meaning to weed near the edge of the garden. He and Beatrice could make a new bed there, if they got their act together in time for the planting season. He'd give her the choice. She could plant anything she wanted there.

Beatrice still wasn't home.

Bobby turned the oven to warm.

Beatrice still wasn't home.

Bobby put the lasagna in the fridge. He ate a tomato raw for dinner. He wanted Beatrice to see the whole rectangle of dinner she'd missed, untouched.

Bobby went to bed.

Beatrice still wasn't home.

Beatrice wasn't home when Bobby woke up. The door did not yawn open; it was primly closed. The ugly brown car was in the driveway, dank little nose pointed onward in the direction of work, Jack's Hot House, the part of road that far up enough, might just curl a little. Had Jack been taking Beatrice there to practice, he wondered. Were they there now? Jack's Hot House didn't always serve breakfast. The older ladies in bonnets spent most mornings milking cows and shining apples for school lunches. The older ladies in bonnets looked too old to have children but always seemed to have a knot of little ones in tow. Bobby had seen them clustered in the parking lot, those times he happened to drive past on his lunch break.

At work, Bobby nudged his accounts toward completion. He made some phone calls. He mispronounced some names. He closed his eyes and willed the tomatoes to cry for him. Need me, tiny tomtoms, he begged. How would you feel without your fertilizer, your waterings? He opened his eyes when someone passing by his cubicle cleared her throat.

At lunch Bobby decided to walk to Jack's Hot House. One of the older ladies' husbands passed him on the road with a horse and buggy. The man whoaed the horse, whose lip drooped in the midday heat, and offered Bobby a ride.

Bobby sat beside the man and listened to him talk about school lunches, how appalled he was at the waste accumulated. So much styrofoam and plastic packaging, he said. If the kids ate better their immune systems would rise to the occasion and adults wouldn't worry so much about the transfer of germs.

"Anxiety is the biggest germ of all," the older man said.

Jack's car wasn't in the front, graveled parking lot when the older man dropped Bobby there. Bobby walked through the the Nut House and ran his fingertips over the dusty bar. The dust felt luxurious to him

somehow, coming up the color of mink and smelling sophisticated. He crinkled a napkin and left it in the drain beneath a tap.

A trio of the older ladies gathered on milk crates on the back porch. Their hair was naked in the midday sun, which struck and shone with so much vengeance Bobby felt something well within him. He felt gracious and generous toward these women who smashed bonnets over their heads each night and pinched the soft flesh beneath their chins with thin strings.

The women, as Bobby approached, either did not hear him or did not care. They were saying unkind things and watching a car weave between traffic cones in the pot-holed lot behind Jack's Hot House.

"She smells like ketchup."

"She gets the best tables."

"She's not even a good server but makes more money than we do."

"She lives with her brother. Who does nothing to curb her way of life."

"She is young now but her path is leading her straight to an agonized older life."

"Whatever Jack's teaching her — it's a lot more than how to drive."

"I disagree. I think she is the one doing the teaching."

"You may be correct. He never tasted this flavor of sin before she arrived."

"Not that we noticed. But in her case: it takes one to know one."

"We need the money more. How many mouths have they to feed? Doesn't that brother of hers do something not-honest down the road?"

The bonnets nodded in unison.

Bobby backed away from the older ladies slowly. He didn't turn around even when he got back inside Jack's Hot House. He nudged the door shut with a gentle click, a sound this side of invisible, probably imperceptible to older ladies haunted by live ghosts: busy children, wanting customers, jealousy urgent as a toddler. He backed up the entire length of Jack's Hot House, not even stopping when a stool he nudged toppled into its tall table, and the ketchup presiding rolled

to the floor. He backed up straight like he was ugly brown car, like it was the only way across the restaurant, like he couldn't turn around without shuddering to a halt.

Outside, Bobby kicked over the garbage can. Then he picked it up and kicked it over again. Aluminum cans sprayed tomato sauce. Wadded up napkins flurried, then flopped. Some became un-wadded. Bobby waited for someone from inside to come rushing out, shouting, wondering what had just happened.

No one came.

So Bobby went home and took Beatrice's jar of savings off the top of the refrigerator. Out back, his thumbs and fingers dove into the dirt. He felt the tiny rips of his severed tomato roots. Sorry little guys. Some of you are aborted, he thought. Some of you might repair yourselves and go on living.

Right before he dropped the jar into the hole, Bobby took a handful of bills from it. There were lots of things he couldn't do but one thing he could was buy Beatrice a bonnet like the older ladies wore. That was a step in the rigwht direction, he thought.

When he stood and turned around, there was Beatrice in the doorway, her full view on the garden, the jar he held. Her hands were at her sides, mingling with her apron strings, undone. She didn't say anything or look directly at Bobby. Instead, she squinted at a space beyond him, as though she saw something there, as though a bug circled her eye, as though there was something far off she wanted but wasn't sure what it was yet. ■