

drawkcaB

7

Gavin jets out her house and hits the gas in his car.

He never looks back.

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6

Before time expires on his ex-girlfriend's microwave, Gavin sneaks toward the front of her house.

The display hits zero.

The milk bottle overflows.

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5

While a baby cries down the hall, Gavin eyes the electronic numbers dropping on the microwave—then creeps out of the kitchen.

Waiting behind the front security door, he twists the lock and takes the latch. Outside, the neighborhood kids argue over tetherball, a boy screaming, "Ropies!" a girl yelling, "Nuh-uh, nuh-uh."

Meanwhile, further down the block, an ice cream truck tinkles into the distance.

"I need that bottle!" Tonya shouts from her room.

The microwave beeps, Gavin pushes the latch.

It'll be a boy, he reminds himself. He'll be all right.

Gavin enters her neighborhood blaring with car alarms.

The microwaved milk bubbles.

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4

Inside the den, Gavin and Tonya sit at opposite ends of a couch.

Done with the small talk, Gavin hands her photocopies and says, “I went back to that agency place. I’m thinking the Samuelson’s look like us the most. Them or the Johnson’s.”

The first time Gavin went to the adoption office, he completed a background check. Half of the questions he checked *Unknown*: Did his father’s side have a history of high blood pressure? Schizophrenia? Chemical dependency?

The house is quiet as Tonya shuffles the papers.

“Gavin,” she says, “I know you’ve thought about this as much as I have but—”

“Let me guess,” he says. “You want it adopted by the Donovans. Because of that big house and all those trips they take. But did you see the family nose? I mean, can you imagine their Christmas cards? It would need to wear those funny glasses, plastic nose and all, just to blend in.”

She brings the copies to her face, breathes in. She drops them on the yellow folder.

“I’ve been thinking tons lately. And there’s no easy way to say this...but-uhh, yeah, I’m keeping the baby.”

“What!”

Tonya palms her belly. “He’s been freakin’ growing inside me. Seven months already, hello!”

“Now you’re telling me this?”

“I wanted you to know in person.”

“Your parents know?”

Her arms cross. “Yeah, yesterday.”

“What’d they say?”

“They supported me. God heard their prayers, they said.”

“Retarded.”

Even though Tonya’s seventeen, her headshake is determined. A grown woman’s headshake.

“That’s the thing, Gavin. I can’t imagine my entire life knowing my child is with someone else. What if they’re mean to him?”

Gavin checks the wall clock. He pictures her parents, two older brothers and little sister kneeling at church. Before their minivan returns, he wants to jump off the couch and run from the house yet his body feels heavy, pregnant, due in five weeks. A boneless blob, he sinks into the giving fabric.

His hands wrestle as he looks through the sliding glass door. The backyard is a mechanic’s backyard: oil spotted grass, filters in the dirt, broken cars on the driveway. Gavin’s eyesight stalls on the rusty parts strewn on the patio floor. He moves the zipper to his sweatshirt while viewing the crusted length of a corroded drive shaft. He imagines himself standing at a freeway callbox holding a sweaty baby he never wanted.

Tonya breaks his zone: “So like...yeah. I need to know if you’ll be around.”

Her mouth makes other sounds while Gavin goes into deep thought. He realizes that during this first year after high school, he hasn’t shifted out of low gear—dropping harder

classes at City, still working at a party supply warehouse. But now, Tonya's decision yanks his entire life into reverse. His attention snaps back to her when he hears the words *child support*.

"I want that test-thing," he grumbles, "to make sure I'm the—"

Loud cries drown him out.

"Hold on," Tonya says. She manages herself off the couch and goes to check on her friend's baby.

Left alone in the back den, Gavin leans his head against the wall. His new sunglasses drop behind the couch.

Tonya yells between each scream, "I'm changing Eric's diaper...Pam left formula in the fridge...Nuke it forty-five seconds."

"Got you," Gavin says, but his clenched throat is no match against the compact lungs up the hall. Disoriented, his juking eyes land on the photocopies. What a waste of time.

"Gavin?"

"Dude!"

He stands slowly. He could retrieve his new sunglasses but the piercing cry insists otherwise. Gavin passes Tonya's room then retraces his steps. He watches her dip at the knees, patting Eric's back to no avail.

"Shhh, s'okay," she coos. "Momma's picking you up after the lunch rush."

Outside the barred windows, the neighborhood kids play tetherball—a string of burned out Christmas lights tied from a *No Parking* sign to a plastic milk carton. Gavin looks above Tonya's shoulder where Eric's head flings wildly. The parted mouth reveals white slits in bright gums but when the two make eye contact, the crying shuts off. Shaking silently, the baby stops

breathing and the soon-to-be dad decides his presence stopped the wailing until the mighty vocal chords blast that thought from his mind.

Gavin enters the kitchen and sets the bottle inside the microwave. He taps the button preset for two-minutes; he'll stop the microwave when forty-five seconds pass.

...1:59...1:58...

Gavin's mom thinks he broke up with Tonya a long time ago and she knows nothing about the pregnancy. While they had been dating, she gave her son condoms and said, "Don't depend on these little girls from not making you a daddy." His mom works at the Indian casino past Riverside and will be home tonight.

...1:47...1:46...

How will he work more hours *and* finish school?

...1:35...1:34...

"Ready yet?" Tonya asks.

"Hold up!"

Waiting with his thumb on the open-bar, he hears an ice cream truck pass. Mechanical clapping disrupts the tempo of "It's A Small World." Each note plays sluggish, broken sounding, a jack-in-the-box with a bad turn handle. The distorted melody makes the time on the microwave drop slower.

And to think, Tonya had an appointment lined up months ago but canceled it last minute. Gavin hates her for doing this to him. The anger builds and he feels his life perforating—eighteen years of youth flipped like an hourglass into eighteen years of responsibility. Gavin needs another cigarette before his chest rips down the middle.

But the jingle of the ice cream truck is pounded away by the booming speakers of a car. The thumping bass line rattles the kitchen windows and sets off car alarms down the block. Gavin had just heard this song on the radio and he mouths each word, head nodding.

...1:03...1:02...

The bottle twirls while he guesses the size of the subwoofers pumping through the neighborhood. For his next ride, Gavin needs a glove-mounted equalizer and limousine tint. His vanity plates will say “GZ RIDE”.

0:31...0:30...0:29...0:28...

His reflection disappears from the microwave.

For a moment, while waiting in the entryway to the house, he senses from the wall the generations of pictures staring at him.

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3

Gavin finishes the first cigarette from the fresh pack. Sitting in his car before Tonya’s house, he doesn’t see her parents’ minivan in the driveway. Thankful for such luck, he swaggers in Nikes to their front door. His sweatshirt frames a t-shirt—four sizes too big, skirting his thighs—of Benjamin Franklin sporting a doo rag and pinching a lit blunt between his lips.

Gavin takes off his new sunglasses, clasps them onto the back of his neck. Even though he will never see Tonya after today, his heart beats similar to the time he met her parents here. The only differences are the wires sticking out of the broken doorbell and the yellow folder now in his sweaty hand.

When the security door opens, Tonya holds an infant to her chest.

“Whose is that?” Gavin says.

She brushes the head of the sleeping baby. She blocks the small face from the sun.

“Pam’s,” she whispers. “You haven’t seen Eric in awhile. He’s big, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Twenty-five pounds of pudg. Long for eight months, too. Big guy hasn’t learned how to walk but now he eats pieces of melon!”

He can care less what this baby eats because in the future he will drive new cars every year and he will have enough money to buy summer condos. And while his retirement plan accumulates extra zeros, he’ll learn all that parenting stuff then. Yet for now, he follows Tonya inside the house where the entryway displays generations of her family. When they began dating at the start of the year, she pointed at the ones in color she knew.

They walk down the hallway that leads to the back den and as they pass the sunlit kitchen, Gavin takes the opportunity to slide his eyes from her ponytail down to her rear pockets, both fuller than ever.

“I’ll rest him in here,” she says. “Poor thing is teething.”

She turns into her room and lays the baby on blankets. Above her single bed, netting sags from the weight of stuffed dolls including a unicorn Gavin had won for her at a church fair.

He completes the length of the hallway and sits on the backroom couch. He tosses the folder marked “Potential Caregivers” onto the coffee table in exchange for her dad’s *Car and Driver*. He flips through the pages, ogling the European luxury sedans and recalls when Pam gave birth at Community Hospital. He had remained quiet as Tonya visited her best friend from the restaurant. Pam’s slit eyes and splotched cheeks, her recap of that morning’s events—eyelids sealed at times—reminded him of his co-worker who had been jumped at the park for headphones.

After congratulating her with flowers, Gavin and Tonya went to the nursery. Instead of paying attention to the babies in the incubators, whose wrinkled faces all looked the same, Gavin side-eyed a young dad crying at the viewing window.

Sorry.

That's what Gavin labeled guys like him. Plain and simply *sorry*. He held no pity for them. They had to be stupid to have kids so young. At the indoor swapmeet, he'd spot these sorry guys a mile away by their typical sorry get-up: scuffed tennis shoes, gray sweatpants and a t-shirt brand no one wears anymore. And the only time they'd click the wheel lock on their ratty strollers was to buy pampers or to consider a pack of tank tops.

Gavin thought he had no worries with Tonya since she slept with a glass of water on the bed stand and her pills in the drawer. Days later from that visit with Pam, Tonya went to the doctor for a bladder infection but was provided with results of a different sort. She now enters the back den thirty pounds heavier. She shifts on the sofa.

"I had that stuff last night," she says, circling her chest. She grabs a pillow, repositions herself. Then tries a different way. "All night, anytime I put my head down, that acid-stuff came up. I rested in here and watched reruns."

"Why's Eric here? Thought she had a sitter."

"She picked up a shift and needed help on the fly."

If it were up to Gavin, he'd skip the small talk, present his selections, and bounce back to his own life. Instead, he flips through the car magazine and plays along.

"How's everything been at the doc's?"

"Doctor says we're good! Ultrasound A-okay." She rubs her belly, searching for where the probe had landed. "Only bad thing is I had to stop serving tables: my back. I wish I could

have worked those sympathy tips until the end.” Dark hairs fall from her scrunchie and she blows them to the side. “Can you believe I’m almost thirty-weeks?”

As she settles the strand behind her ear, Gavin studies her broad, pale face. The lavender shadows beneath her eyes appear murky as if she’s middle-aged.

“Naw,” Gavin answers.

Tonya rests her swollen feet on the table.

“But good God, I’m always tired.”

She pushes into her abdomen and Gavin starts to feel anxious. He drops the magazine and reaches for the folder.

“Let’s start talking about all this.”

“Feel this!” she says, and redirects Gavin’s hand underneath the bib of her overalls.

“Sometimes he hiccups, too.”

Small taps touch Gavin’s fingertips. The bill to his cap blocks his eyes from her so he spies the rounded ears of her Mickey Mouse t-shirt. His hand pulls back.

“So it’s a boy?”

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2

Inside his bathroom, Gavin throws tinfoil into the trash and brushes his teeth. He’s leaving his apartment in a moment for Tonya’s. Before he strolls out of the apartment where he’s paid half the rent since he was fourteen, Gavin slams on his head a birthday gift from his mom: a baseball cap custom stitched *G* on the crown. He paid for the Lebrons on his feet as he walks outside.

Gavin breaks. His front tire is flat, again. Refilling it has become a daily chore so between that, the dripping oil, the iodized paint resembling dried sweat and countless other issues, Gavin wants to return the old car to his mom. But he doesn't want to hurt her feelings either, plus it is better than catching the bus.

The car door creaks open and because the front seats had been stolen, he sits on an orange paint bucket. He places the folder on a carpetless floor and loops the seatbelt onto the safety break. Cautiously, he drives toward the gas station while motorists and pedestrians alike glance at the rotating thud of flattened rubber. The throbbing sound reminds Gavin of head rushes at work when he sucks on the helium tank at *Party Warehouse*.

He makes a left onto a major cross street, and from the taped-on side view mirror, a bright wink catches his eye. The silver disc slicing through traffic is his hubcap. When it clinks against a storm drain, a group of men outside a barbershop point and laugh. This isn't the first time they've heckled Gavin but since he can't make a U-turn, he flips them off and keeps on going.

Three long blocks later, he makes a wide turn into the gas station. Inside its convenience store, Gavin buys a pack of Parliaments and a token for the air machine but before he exits, a pair of brown sunglasses grabs his attention. He checks the dangling price tag and tries them on. They're knock-offs from a pair he'd just seen in a video but he replaces them back on the stand. Saving up for a used tire is more important now.

Outside, the air machine drones as Gavin tests the pump. While squatting beside a missing fender, he looks through the traffic. Across the street is a rim shop and above the corner office stands a giant circle, a larger-than-life donut now painted black. To recreate treads, the sprinkles are zigzagged together and for rims, silver planks span the open hole. A young couple below inspects their green Mustang where new rims are staged on individual stands beside each tire. The girl holds

onto her man's arm with an excited jitter but the clanking Metro Line blocks Gavin's view across the boulevard. He looks at his own grimy hub, his jealous breaths whiffing gasoline vapors.

But then he slips into his long running daydream about his next ride. Gavin will own a black truck with a sound system that will play knock-knock with passing buildings. The huge speakers will vibrate other cars into bitty pieces. Shake bus stops benches into traffic. Fling skaters off their boards. Gavin imagines himself cruising through Hollywood while wearing the designer version of the sunglasses he had tried on, and with twin models riding shotgun, he can smell the burning rubber as they peel off to the next club amidst a spray of blinding paparazzi flash.

Tire filled, Gavin re-enters the convenience store to buy the brown pair. He pops off the price tag and feels pride with each glance in his mirror.

He does a turnaround for his hubcap.

"*Hey-yo!*" yells a guy in plaid shorts at the barbershop. "How do you have a blue car...with an orange door?"

The men cackle, hands stuffed inside pockets.

Gavin lifts the hubcap. "This ain't me forever. You'll see."

"Hey, *G Cool*," hollers another man. "Let me tell you something—that dirty mug is you now, tomorrow, and the tomorrow-ever-after. So help you God!"

The group falls over each other as Gavin snaps the cap onto the hub. The roast persists until Gavin yells, "Eat a dick," and drives away.

They laugh even harder.

The red lights run long on this street so Gavin pulls on a cigarette. His limp wrist hangs out the door as he studies the nicer cars around him. Gavin wishes his windows were as dark as his sunglasses because without tint, his broke status in this world is exposed like fissures in an X-ray. Even though

he has no A/C, Gavin wants to hide behind his dirty windowpane. He rests his cigarette in the ashtray and spins the lever at a consistent speed—replicating the steady rise of power windows. Meanwhile, to conceal this covert act, his right hand feigns the adjustment of his cap.

No sooner than the glass reaches the top of the frame, Gavin smells something burning other than nicotine. The engine gauge flashes. To drop the temperature beneath the hood, he must either drive forward or kill the ignition but neither move is possible. He's trapped so he resorts to the last option.

Gavin blows the heater at full blast and stews in the raw heat discharging through the vents. In neutral, he revs the engine, importing more heat. The seatbelt sticks to his skin and sweat trickles to his love handles yet he refuses to roll down the window. But to add to the panic, other drivers are looking over, perplexed by his foot stamping the gas pedal. Even though his car will die at any second, his flushed face remains stolid as if nothing's wrong, everything's cool in the furnace like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The light turns green. Gavin cuts off one car and hits a long stretch of road, reducing the engine's temp. A song comes on the radio, the same song as the video where he first saw the sunglasses he's wearing. He turns up the volume, bass farting through the blown out speakers, and suddenly the plastic bucket that will imprint *Home Depot* on his butt transforms into butter soft leather. He hits the gas and imagines his future shiny exhaust pipe roaring through yellow lights. Yet his fantasy needs one key detail to be ironed out. Raise the truck or drop it? Drop it or raise it? He visualizes each option, the truck rising and falling as if bouncing on hydraulics.

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Gavin munches his morning cereal to fuel up for the day. He's had the place to himself this weekend since his mom is working. She's in charge of booking dancers for entertainment at a casino. For years herself, she had danced on a cruise liner that docked at ports worldwide. When Gavin was in third grade, he was assigned a genealogical tree for homework and his mom confessed then that his father was not overseas in the army. In fact, she did not know who his real father was so question marks weighed down the limbs on one side of Gavin's tree.

Before he leaves for Tonya's, he kills time by watching videos from his laptop. On the computer screen, a blasé rapper scowling toward the camera sits on a throne constructed of rubber-banded bankrolls. His head lolls while women dance in neon stilettos and thongs. Beneath his brown sunglasses, the sparkly grill he wears—matched by the costly watch, dangling neck chain, obese diamond earrings—screams the success of a true baller.

In the next video, a rapper spins donuts in a Ferrari for three-minutes straight. Every few seconds, his passenger changes: a model kissing his neck, a barber touching up his sideburns, the President overflowing his flute with champagne. The highlight comes at the end when his granny, wearing a grill over her dentures, slobbers gold drool.

During these two videos, Gavin splits his attention with the contents of a yellow folder. The pictures showcase smiling couples at their weddings, toasting in restaurants, tending to their lawns. This is his first time reviewing the material. He makes his picks, closes the folder.

If Gavin's mom comes home to any mess, she'll raise all hell so while he washes his bowl in the sink, he checks the time on the microwave. A thought hits him and he pulls open a drawer filled with lunch bags and he grabs a sheet of aluminum foil. Gavin rushes into the bathroom and rips off a scrap the length of his thumb. He bites down, his tongue rubbing the foil

along the bridge of his mouth. His fingers mold the thin metal against the contours of his teeth and with his fake grill assembled, Gavin cocks his head at the mirror, sneering with the confidence of a baller racing forward through life.

Never backward.

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