

## The Runaway Daughter

It was day three of her daughter's disappearance, and she found herself crying while driving to work. She should have known things would get worse. It was only a few months ago when she found her daughter nodding out on the back porch, as if you could pass through this dimension into a sleepier, cozier one, with the prick of a needle. She calls her daughter but there is no answer. There is nothing to do but wait.

A man honks behind her. She is stopped at a green light for a second too long.

"You get out of the way!" she shouts back at him. She's never had road rage before or been late to work before. When she pulls into the parking lot she takes time to re-apply her makeup and straighten her hair. She says a prayer to force the fear out of her mind until at least lunchtime when she can make her next round of calls. As soon as lunch break comes, she is back in her car sitting inside it.

"Any word yet?" It was the oldest daughter, the careful daughter.

"No," she replies.

"Dad wants us to go looking."

"Where? Your father knows nothing."

"He's worried."

"Now, he's worried?"

"I'm worried."

“Try if you want. I drove by their house this morning and I’ll drive by it again,” she says.

“They aren’t there.”

She does pass the boyfriend’s house on her way home, and then again later at night when she should be in bed. If she is late enough she thinks she will catch them coming home for clothing or food. The boyfriend of her daughter lives with his mother in a small brick ranch, pasted into a stream of single-story homes just like her own. She knows which house it is by the door, darker than the others, with a dim front porch light on. These are the homes of factory workers, those still left working for big auto. The boy’s mother is on disability and his father is gone. God only knows where their children are now sleeping in the shell of an abandoned house somewhere in Detroit.

She doesn’t try to speak to the boyfriend’s mother anymore. His mother does not care to know the details of their disappearance. She believes they are adults, eighteen years old and fully formed by their own decisions. She’s a mother used to losing the one you raised to the foreclosure on the self that is addiction. This mother is desperate for any information she can find, a used needle, a parked car, a missed call, even an unpaid parking ticket two weeks too late. She knows they are passing each other somewhere in the night.

She parks her car in the driveway after making her rounds.

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Her daughter was sixteen when she was caught drinking and smoking weed. She got the call and left a meeting in a hurry, driving straight to the station where she found her daughter

sitting on a bench surrounded by her friends. She had just taught her how to drive. She smelled the booze and weed and at the time she didn't think to ask the cop where the bag of marijuana had gone. There would be no charges if mom arrived within the hour to drive her back home.

"You are lucky," she said, wondering who this person could be. Her daughter was a mirror of her youth, not in behavior but in body form. Lanky and long legs, and a face of pearl colored skin and bright blonde hair. She never drank or smoked or did anything like this, and she couldn't imagine why her daughter wanted to.

"I know," she said.

"What were you doing?"

"We only had one drink."

"He said he found pot on you."

"It wasn't mine. I swear."

"You shouldn't be drinking. You can't drink and drive. Do you know what could happen? Do you know how much it could cost us?"

"It's fine."

"I can barely pay the bills. I cannot come get you out of jail."

Her daughter was tired, head leaning on the widow. Her eyes were half-closed and her words silent.

Later that night her daughter curled into a ball, all puffy eyes and scratchy throat from their fight. She remembered hugging her in the kitchen. She let her go to sit in her room alone. Then she saw her outside on the patio smoking a cigarette and telling the story of the evening to

someone over the phone. She hated that her daughter smoked cigarettes but she never stopped her. What could she ever really say to stop her?

As a mother you could stay up all hours of the night picking and prying over the past: Was she strict enough or too strict? Was it their father's addiction? Was it their divorce that undid them? Did she send them to work too early to pay bills? Is it the lower-middle class suburbia burying them behind everyone else? How does heroin find its way into your daughter's bedroom, into the soft nook of her arm? The answer you know in your blood and your bones. This is this disease you passed down to her from him.

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Day four and she wakes to a text message from her missing daughter that says she won't be home again tonight. She thinks at least she is alive, and at least alive is good news. She can't sleep and she can't eat now. Exhaustion has come for her body, weary from the weight of worry. She calls into work and listens when a friend tells her to go to a meeting. She searches online to find one at a church down the road. She paces the house, making her calls, and then dresses herself. She thinks maybe someone there will know how she can bring her daughter back.

"Welcome," a woman greets her.

She offers coffee and cookies, paper napkins and cups spread out on a folding table. She smiles at the mom. There are a dozen people in the room with her all sitting in one wide circle. She paces the circle at first before taking a seat between two people she has never seen before.

The room is cold and the chair's thin metal back pushes on her nerves. It is only a few moments of waiting before the meeting begins. The woman who greeted her sets the tone, reading out their rules in a prayer like voice. It is soothing to hear someone claim a truth in the midst of all of her daughters' silence. She is stuck to the cold metal chair, listening to the circle of people.

When it is her turn to speak she tries to tell the story in a few short minutes, but finds she cannot stop speaking.

"How long has it been?"

"She's been gone for a few days, but using this time for months," the mother says. "I think. I'm not really sure."

"Have you contacted the police?"

"She's eighteen now. They told me there is nothing they can do."

"Have you cut her off?"

"I want her to have a way to get back home. I'm her mother. I'm the one who's supposed to protect her. I worked all of my life to get a good job and keep us in a good neighborhood. I had to do everything on my own for them, and now, this?"

"You have the color of your skin on your side, though," a man says.

His name is Mack and he's one of the older black men in the room. When he spoke the whole room turned to listen to him.

"I'm sorry?"

"I lost my only two sons to crack. One dead. One in jail for life. Back then no one did anything for me," he said. "They blamed it on us. They arrested everyone. They didn't help."

She looked at the woman leading the circle who sat nodding and letting Mack go on. Later she will learn her daughter started with pills that she could buy down the street from their house. She will learn the slow curve of one pill, two pills, to fifteen pills a day that later turn into a pack of heroin. It's cheaper and easier and stronger. Her daughter can get it in their neighborhood, but she can get it even better in the city. After she tries heroin, she starts smoking crack. She'll tell her mother that most heroin addicts in Detroit are crack addicts too.

She knows little about all of this right now. She feels only the shock of his statements. Will she lose her daughter like that?

"It will be better for you," he says. "That's all I'm saying"

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"I'm getting really worried," the other daughter said. "A friend told me that only 99% of heroin addicts ever get and stay clean."

"Fuck your friend," the mom says.

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Day five arrives and this is the day that brings real news. The boyfriend was driving a stolen car, a ride he took from a neighbor who called on him. The cops were parked for their usual traffic watch when they saw them speed by. They caught them with pipes and needles and

bags of clothes in the back. She was at work when she got the call. Her daughter was in city jail. She let her sit there for two days. She would have let it go longer if it wasn't for their father and his begging voice and his bail money.

When her daughter came home she slept for days. This was the start of her sobriety, a slope of steady sleep. She would need more pills, ones that are prescribed to help pull back her body from the place it's been stuck for so long. No one warned her that her daughter would have trouble shitting. It would come out hard as rocks. She would help her daughter scoop up the rock shit and place it into tiny plastic bags. When it was too heavy to flush it had to be picked up and tossed in the garbage bin outside.

They don't give a mom a handbook for coming off heroin. She started by cleaning out the bedroom, finding and throwing away another dozen needles hidden behind bookshelves and beneath underwear in drawers. She tried to remove it all from their life. There, at the end of the cleaning, she saw her daughter all skin and bones and a blanket clinging to her body.

Her daughter got up to shower, and her mother caught her in the hallway.

"How are you feeling today?"

"I'm still really tired."

"We have to talk about court soon."

"They told me if I stay clean, my record can be clean," she said.

"Yes, they did."

"I can't keep using anymore. I don't want to mom."

She held her daughter in her arms, feeling her tiny bony back, and petting her stringy hair. This was her daughter. She was here today. She had said she would stop using now. She had come to say this on her own and that was the greatest news of all.

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“She has to go to the meetings every day,” the other daughter says. “We’ve got to watch her and make sure she goes.”

“That’s too much pressure for her right now.”

“She has to go or she’ll relapse.”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to make sure she goes, or I will.”

“No need for that.”

“You’ll make sure she goes then?”

“Yes, I will.”

Mom keeps going to her meetings too. It takes a few more weeks for Mack to come around to her again, but he tells her everything one night over a whiskey sour at the corner bar across from the church. It is dark in the bar and the air is humid. She leans in to listen to Mack’s low voice as he tells her what happened. She can’t believe his story. Together they both shed a few tears open in the air of the bar. One son shot dead in a bad deal, the other locked and left in jail for a majority of his life.



“He was wrong, for doing it,” Mack said. “For getting into that crowd and selling crack. But they were all just kids. They didn’t know. I didn’t know how bad it was then.”

“He didn’t know how to stop.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“It’s so much. It consumes them.”

“It consumed me.”

“Do you visit?”

“Twice a week,” he says.

“Mack,” she says, leaning in. “This isn’t your fault. You did everything you could.”

His eyes show he’s listening. She hurts at his loss and feels she has won some sort of gain for her daughter who is sleeping and sober at home. She tries not to feel too much pain and happiness at the same time, for it is all too raw, distilled in a way that like a car door can slide back open at anytime for her next run, for the next day her daughter doesn’t keep clean. She shares in the pain he feels, deep down where his children have lived and died and hers survived. She stays out late with him at the bar that night, but she makes it into work on time the next morning. She has to. Her daughter is home.