

Jason graduated from high school with honors. Not high honors, but honors. At the graduation ceremony his mother sat on a white folding chair next to an empty white folding chair and waved vigorously when they made eye contact. Her wide smile revealed a patchwork of teeth in varying shades of beige. The evening sun deepened her crow's feet.

Later that night, on the bus going home, the mother gave Jason's arm a pinch and whispered into his ear, "I am so proud of you." When they reached their third floor apartment on Hart Street in Brooklyn, she stepped through the door, turned, and hugged Jason. Then she sobbed. She patted his head and whispered, "My baby, my baby."

This did not feel right to Jason. His mother, Patty Rausch, was not the proud, crying, patting type. She was the work two jobs and hate all men type. Each morning before dawn she subdued her head of bursting dark brown curls into a tight bun, the scalp brushed smooth, the combing so tight it pulled her eyebrows up into arches. Every morning, Monday through Friday, including most Federal holidays, she would walk from the apartment on Hart Street to the Myrtle Avenue subway station and ride into Manhattan to sit in a chair answering phones for eight hours. And three nights each week, after working all day in Manhattan, she walked to Brooklyn Hospital where she sat in a chair at the reception desk in the Department of Radiology until ten o'clock at night.

For many years, Patty Rausch had a boyfriend named John Bercia who, after consuming a six-pack, would complain about Patty's fat ass. Patty would whine that there was nothing she could do about her ass because she sat in chairs all day. Then one day, much to Jason's surprise, Patty told Johnny to go to hell. This is exactly how Patty Rausch came to lose one incisor, one canine, one pre-molar and one lousy boyfriend while gaining a partial dental appliance that she soaked in a glass set on the fake granite surrounding the bathroom sink.

The Monday following Jason's graduation, Patty Rausch hired a man named Anderson Andrews to teach Jason to drive a car. This, to Jason, was even stranger than the proud crying and patting routine as they did not own a car and from what Jason could understand, would never own one. When he questioned the sanity of such an extravagant gesture, Patty simply replied "You're a man now Jason. You should know how to drive."

Anderson Andrews picked Jason up on Tuesdays and Thursdays at exactly nine o'clock in the morning. Jason would climb into the passenger side of the gray Ford Taurus and ignore the steering wheel and brake pedal in front of him. Anderson would drive them to Edison High School in New Jersey. While Anderson drove he would give Jason pointers on how to change lanes, how many car lengths to keep in front of the vehicle, and what to do if the car should drift onto the shoulder of the road.

"Never turn the wheel abruptly," Anderson Andrews warned, "because the car could veer across the road into oncoming traffic."

The thought of driving into oncoming traffic brought a thin film of perspiration to Jason's chest that made his skin itch.

Once they reached the high school, Jason and Anderson would switch seats and Jason would drive the Taurus, first in circles around the empty parking lot, then to the left and to the right, weaving up and down the parking lot lanes. While Jason drove, Anderson would talk about his daughter, Amanda Andrews, a high school junior who frequently snuck out of the house late at night to meet boys. Jason, a virgin, and not by choice, secretly wished he knew a girl like Amanda. While the Taurus wheels rolled smoothly over the black asphalt pavement of the high school parking lot, Jason imagined that Amanda thought his white bony chest was actually quite nice and his kinky hair sexy. She would run her hands over his shoulders and press her hips

against his corduroy pants and rub her strawberry lips against his chin begging for him until Jason would veer too close to a curb and Anderson would punch the brake on his side of the car simultaneously turning the wheel. The resistance created in Jason's wheel would propel him awake and take his breath away.

Jason found it very difficult not to think about Amanda Andrews.

"He comes to the house with these big rings in his ear lobes, Jason," Anderson complained about one of Amanda's dates. "Have you ever seen such a thing?"

Jason had indeed seen such a thing.

The second week, Anderson taught Jason how to park the car, how to know how far into the parking space to pull in, how to curb park, and then they spent an entire morning pretending they were merging into traffic.

"I wish Amanda would meet a nice young man like you, Jason," Anderson said one morning. "I can tell that you are the sort of boy who would treat my daughter with respect."

This made Jason particularly nervous since he was not exactly sure how to treat a girl with respect.

By the third week, Anderson allowed Jason to drive on real streets out towards Ogdensburg, where the traffic was lighter and the roads had two lanes and rolled gently through hillier countryside. By now it was early July and very hot and not unusual for Amanda to not come home at all.

"I'm throwing her out, Jason," Anderson said, his arms crossed tight on his chest. "It's not fair to me or her mother. We sit at home, not able to sleep, wondering if she's dead in an alley somewhere. It's just not fair to us. It's disrespectful, don't you think, Jason?"

Jason did not know what to think.

After six weeks of Anderson's driving lessons Jason took his driver's license exam and passed flawlessly. Anderson was excited for Jason. Patty Rausch was ecstatic and pleased. Jason, having absolutely no use for a driver's license, felt nothing except confusion. His head on his license photo didn't quite fill up the rectangle and fell off to the corner a bit giving the impression he was peering through a square hole. And his glasses looked too big for his face. Something he was not aware of before. He wondered why his mother did not tell him his glasses were too big for his face. He wondered if his mother would buy him new glasses.

A few days later, on a Saturday, Patty Rausch walked her son to the deli on Myrtle Avenue where they sat at a Formica and chrome table in front of a window with the word Shlepsky stenciled on it in big red and yellow letters. Jason sat behind the *s* and Patty sat behind the *k* and while the son chewed a pastrami on seedless rye sandwich, the mother sipped a diet coke and tapped her nails nervously.

"You're not eating?" Jason asked his mother as he dobed up sauerkraut smeared in mustard with a piece of bread crust.

"Jason," she said, her eyebrows pulled together above her nose, "I have cancer. I need an operation."

Just like that.

The doctors at Brooklyn Hospital spent five and one half hours removing all of Patty Rausch's breasts including the tissue under her arms (as a precautionary measure). They gave her a morphine pump and several days to heal. During this time, Jason slept in a chair in her room and ate bagels with cream cheese and lox in the hospital cafeteria.

But Jason missed their apartment on Hart Street and he missed his friends on the internet. He worried his World of Warcraft clan kicked him out, that they were running raids without him. He worried his gear score would suffer with his absence. He wanted to go home and sit in his room and play World of Warcraft, but he was afraid to leave his mother, afraid to be alone in the apartment. He watched his mother sleep, her teeth in a plastic cup on the stand next to the bed, a bag of fluid hanging on a hook above her.

A hospital van drove mother and son the two and half miles up Dekalb Avenue to their apartment on Hart Street. While Patty closed her eyes and breathed deep, whispering her hope she wouldn't vomit, Jason watched the August sun glitter on a sea of cars, cabs, trucks and motorcycles. The windows glistened and people moved about and Jason, too, began to feel nausea. It was all he could do to hang onto the strap above the door and keep an eye on the driver and his mother and for a second he considered the possibility he could get a job driving the hospital van. *No*, he thought. *That would not be fun at all.*

When they reached Hart Street, Jason helped his mother from the van and walked her to the door, her big plastic hospital "Patient Belongings" bag in one hand, his mother's arm in the other. The elevators were slow and clunky and most people walked the steps, but the steps were not an option for Jason and his mother. Not this day.

Together they stepped through the door into the apartment and when Patty saw her purse sitting on the half-round table under the mirror in the foyer, she broke into tears, sobbing with her lips stretched open like a toilet plunger, tears cascading down her face. Her curly hair pushed flat against the back of her head with an oily section poking straight up above her forehead. She put her hand on the purse and looked in the mirror, releasing a long, anguished guttural scream.

She picked up her purse and threw it at the mirror then fell to her knees, her back heaving up and down.

Jason walked to the drug store on Myrtle Avenue to get her prescription of pain killers filled. When he returned, his mother was in her bed and sleeping.

Several weeks after her surgery, Patty rose from her bed and walked to the kitchen where Jason waited patiently for a waffle to emerge from the toaster.

“Hey,” Patty said, wearing that goofy smirk she usually wore after drinking a few beers. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Jason could not be sure what exactly his Mother meant.

“Come on,” she said, grabbing at the bottom front of her tee shirt. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” She pinched at Jason’s shirt then lifted her own up to her neck. Two lines of dark stitches embedded in soft puffy pink flesh ran from the sternum to under each arm. Another line of stitches crossed down over, like plus signs marking where her breasts once were.

“Scary, huh?” she asked. “Now show me yours.”

Jason unbuttoned his cotton plaid shirt and lifted his tee shirt exposing creamy white skin stretched taut across thin ribs. Between the two racks ran a vertical pink scar about ten inches long. Dots of scar from the staples edged the pink line.

“Ha!” Patty said, pulling her tee shirt back down. “You get a nice little patch on the heart and I lose my knockers. Just goes to show how lucky you are Jason. Don’t forget it. You are damned lucky to be here. And healthy, too. Thank those doctors at Columbia, Jason. Imagine them knowing how to patch a hole on your heart. Do you know how lucky you are, Jason?”

Jason nodded silently, relieved to hear the toaster release his waffle. He pulled his shirt down and pulled the margarine tub closer across the kitchen counter, still nodding. He could feel his mother staring at him, but he didn't know what to say. He lifted his waffle to his nose to smell it.

"Is that your dinner, Jay?" Patty asked, pointing at the waffle.

"Yes," Jason answered without looking at his mother.

"It is time for hospice," the nurse said. She wore a blue sweater with brown cats embroidered on the front. They stared out at Jason, silent and still. The nurse peered through her oval glasses, her blond hair, cut just above her shoulders, curled under towards her chins, framing her round face. She tugged at the sweater and jiggled her papers, as though she expected a response.

Jason could not be sure what she meant by "hospice." What it meant to be "time for hospice," like it was time for dinner, or time for a bath. When the social worker came to the house, she said she would be "providing hospice." This confused Jason even more. Was hospice something they were supposed to do? Or something they were supposed to get. He didn't want to ask. He retreated to his room, to his World of Warcraft clan, where he is a warrior, tall and dark and menacing, fighting to preserve his faction's way of life in the wake of the Chaos War.

But he couldn't escape the sharp, stringent medicinal smell. At first, he only noticed it when he walked past his mother's bedroom door on the way to the bathroom. The smell would waft out at him demanding to be noticed. If he left the apartment, he would notice the smell in the foyer immediately upon his return. It was sweet, but not flowery. It was not a good smell, but not bad either. One day, he suddenly noticed it in the kitchen. On another day, he lifted a towel

to dry his face and realized the smell had permeated the porous terry fabric. Finally the smell was in the hallway of the building. He wondered if the neighbors had noticed the smell.

Jason would stop at his mother's bedroom door to peer in and see her sleeping. Trying to be very quiet, he would walk in and wave to her and sometimes, she would stir and wave back. One day she murmured, through dry lips, "I'm sorry, Jason," before turning her head with a grimace and falling asleep again.

After several week of this had passed, he stepped out of his bedroom one day and caught the nurse in the cat sweater carrying the hook that held Patty's bag of fluid.

"Where are you going with that?" Jason asked.

"I'm returning it to the hospital," the nurse said with a puzzled expression.

"Doesn't she need it?" Jason asked.

"No," the nurse said. "Not anymore."

"Is she getting better?"

"No," the nurse said, setting the hook down, her puzzled expression morphing into exasperation. "She's in hospice."

They stood in the dim hallway, their irises locked in confusion. Jason thought he could feel the smell settling on his skin. He rubbed his arms and blinked hard. The nurse blurted, "I thought you understood. She's terminal." The nurse started walking towards the foyer but stopped after several steps and turned around to look at Jason again. "I'm sorry," she said.

Jason walked back into his bedroom and lay on his bed and as he thought about what that word meant, "terminal," he felt tears pooling around his eyes until finally, a tear rolled down his temple and into his ear.



The apartment he shared with his mother was the only home he had ever known, but the lease was in his mother's name and the landlord told him he could not stay. The landlord, Mr. Liebling, a tall blond German with a thick accent who showered Jason with spittle when he said the word *application*, told Jason, who did not have a job, that he did not meet the income requirements to carry the lease on his own.

"I am sorry, Jason," Mr. Liebling said.

Jason could think of nothing to say in return. He was distracted by Mr. Liebling's bicycle shorts and the tufts of blond hair poking out of his spandex top just below the Adam's apple. Jason wondered if he too would ever wear tight fitting clothes like Mr. Liebling. And if he did, would he just wear them to ride his bicycle? Or would he strut around his apartment empire conducting business with tenants in such revealing attire?

Jason's mother's life insurance policy amounted to three years of salary, barely flirting with six figures, enough to last maybe six years in a Brooklyn studio apartment. But then what?

So Anderson Andrews picked Jason up on a Sunday morning and drove him to New Jersey, then down the Garden State Parkway in search of a home to purchase.

"You should want to live near the ocean, Jason," Anderson said. "The air is better there."

It wasn't Jason's car, so he didn't argue.

They drove south until they found homes in Jason's price range, which took them all the way to Neptune City. Jason liked the name, Neptune. It reminded him of something, something big and god-like. Jason wondered if he should change his World of Warcraft name to something with Neptune in it. Or Zeus.

Anderson helped Jason find a wood frame house on an older street with narrow front yards and pebbled sidewalks. The house wore a thick coating of flat yellow paint and had three

concrete steps leading up to a covered front porch. Jason stood in the center of the kitchen and spread his arms out, stretching the fingertips until he touched a cabinet with the fingers on his left hand and the refrigerator with the fingers of his right hand. The refrigerator stood short and thick with a big chrome handle and curved corners in an odd shade of aquamarine, something like the Caribbean Sea, but with an oil sheen drifting bits of jetsam. He opened and shut the refrigerator door. It made an odd noise. When he pulled the handle it would swish first and then make a *clunk* noise, more like *CLUNK*. The refrigerator door he knew was so quiet, he could sneak up on it in the middle of the night and eat leftovers, or old pizza, or drink milk out of the carton. Things he couldn't do in the light of day.

He walked every day from his Mother's apartment on Hart Street to the grocer on Myrtle Avenue and collected boxes. The young produce girl told him that apple boxes were especially good for packing because they had lids. Jason decided he would start packing things in the foyer and work his way through the kitchen, then back to the bedrooms, and stack the packed boxes in the living room. He began in the foyer, at the half round table where his mother's purse still sat. Next to the purse rested her ashes in a metal vase with a screw lid. Jason suddenly had a new appreciation for lids. He put his mother in a box then opened her purse and lightly touched her wallet with his fingertips. The inside of his mother's purse smelled like peppermint chewing gum.

By the time the task of packing had progressed to the kitchen area, Jason considered the dumpster behind the apartment building as good a place as any for many of his mother's things. Directions from Mr. Liebling were specific in regards to the kitchen; clean refrigerator, wiped cabinets and floor. So Jason began with the refrigerator. He threw Lean Cuisine's and Smart

One's into a black plastic garbage bag clearly big enough to hold Jason. Vitamins, old granola bars and apple sauce met the same fate. So too did ketchup, mustard, chili sauce, and the A1 steak sauce his mother bought that time she fixed Johnny Bercia steak for dinner. By the time Jason had cleared out the refrigerator, the bag was too heavy to lift. He was standing in the kitchen, the twisted top of the bag held firmly in his hand, when the phone rang.

He rested the bag on his foot as he walked the two steps to the wall phone. "Hello," Jason said into the phone, still holding the bag.

"Hello Jason," Anderson said. "How are you?"

*I'm weak and lazy and a little confused,* Jason thought. "I'm fine, thanks" he said. "How are you?"

"I'm worried about you, Jason," Anderson said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning out the apartment," Jason said.

"Amanda and I will come help you."

*Yes,* Jason thought. *Amanda.*

Jason never contemplated exactly what he should do with his mother's things. She had many things. She had dresses, blouses, pants, shorts, tee shirts, bras, underwear by Jockey in a variety of pastel colors, pantyhose, shoes, socks, hair clips, rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, hats, scarves, purses, pain pills, tampons and her partial denture with the incisor, the canine and the pre-molar. He threw her toothbrush in the bathroom trash can and felt something stir in his chest cavity. He regarded her bed, wondering if he could sleep in it, if he could even look at it, what his new house would feel like with the old bed in it.

He put the pain pills, the tampons and the teeth into a plastic bag and set the bag on the sink in the bathroom. He was standing in front of his mother's dresser piling costume jewelry into a small box when a soft tap emanated from the foyer. Jason answered the door. Anderson brushed past him leaving in the doorway a person with a round stomach, thick legs, and black hair with matching black lips. And all her clothes were black. Her eyes, too, were painted black and narrowed into a sneer. She stood a full head taller than Jason.

"Hi," Jason said, reluctantly lifting his hand in a wave.

Amanda pushed past Jason without saying a word. Her father stood in the living room, his hands on his hips. "Is this all you've done?" Anderson asked, gesturing with his arm.

Up to this point, Jason was pleased with how much he had accomplished. "The refrigerator is cleaned out," Jason said, pointing towards the kitchen just off the foyer. "But the bag is too heavy."

"Help him with the bag, Amanda," Anderson ordered.

Jason walked towards the kitchen and Amanda followed. He thought he heard her click her tongue. A wave of fear rolled through him. There were girls who looked like Amanda at his high school, but Jason never dared speak to any of them.

When they reached the kitchen, Amanda inspected the bag and said, "You put too much in it."

"What should I do?" Jason asked.

"Get another bag you twit."

They split the large bag of garbage into two and each carried one towards the elevator.

"Where do you go to school?" Amanda asked as the elevator doors closed in front of them.

“I graduated,” Jason said.

“Lucky you,” Amanda said.

“Where do you go to school?” Jason asked.

“Hell,” Amanda answered. “I go to school in hell.”

When they returned to the apartment, Patty Rausch’s mattress and box springs leaned against a wall in the living room.

“What are you going to do with all her clothes?” Anderson asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said.

“We will call Goodwill,” Anderson said. “Or the vets.”

Amanda and Anderson followed Jason to the bedroom and the three began to stuff Patty Rausch’s many things into the big black plastic garbage bags. “Do you want this?” Anderson asked, holding up a rabbit fur coat on a shiny gold hanger.

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t want that.”

“Can I have it?” Amanda asked.

“Sure,” Jason answered, wondering what she might do with an old rabbit fur coat.

They stacked eight bags in the hall outside the apartment door and moved the empty dresser to the living room. Amanda came out of the bathroom with the box of tampons.

“Can I have these, too?” she asked, holding the box of tampons in front of her, her black fingernails appearing ominous against the pale pink box.

“Yes,” Jason said. He wanted to say he had no use for them and that they weren’t his, but she frightened him.

Jason used the credit card his mother gave him for emergencies to rent a fourteen foot U-Haul box van to facilitate moving things from the apartment to the new house. By the time all the furniture, the computer, and Jason's box of clothes were loaded into the truck, it was dark. Jason decided to wait until morning, but he had nothing to sleep on. He lay on the hardwood floor of his mother's empty apartment and listened to the din of traffic in the street below until the din was barely perceptible.

He drove through mist illuminated by a sliver of sun peaking between buildings to the east. The truck filled the whole width of the lane, or at least that's how it felt to Jason who had never driven anything as big as a U-Haul box van. He turned onto Flushing Avenue and then the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. When he reached the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge he looked to the left and saw where the rising sun lit up the Lower Bay like a sheet of orange glass. As the bridge ascended higher into the air, he felt the ground move away from him and he sensed Brooklyn behind him. At the peak of the bridge he had the sensation of flying a plane. Staten Island spread out before him, covered with a fluffy layer of smog. Blood rushed to his head and his palms began to perspire. He could feel the purr of the engine and smell remnants of diesel fuel as he realized he was one of the only vehicles on the road and it occurred to him, as a cloud moved in front of the sun and darkened the road before him, that he would miss his mother very much.

It took Jason most of the day to unpack the truck. The dresser was too heavy for him but a man walking by stopped to help. He had to cram the cardboard boxes and mish-mash of furniture into the house, which made it feel very tiny. He made a path from the bedroom to the bathroom and another to the kitchen. The refrigerator didn't get cold, so he didn't buy any groceries. He stepped out the front door for some air and stood on the patch of grass in front of

his house with his hands in his pockets. A breeze shook the tree tops and the sun shined bright but low against a pale blue sky. He felt the cool of the breeze and the warm of the sun on his naked chest.

He went back into his house and washed his face in the bathroom sink and when he looked in a box for a clean tee shirt he found the bag with his mother's teeth. He lifted the teeth from the bag and ran a finger along the rough pink palate. It seemed too precious to just throw away. *There should be rules for this sort of thing*, he thought. When he returned the teeth to the bag, he saw the pain pills were gone.

Jason shuffled between the apple boxes giving each one a nudge with his foot. The boxes with kitchen stuff rattled, the box of clothes did not. He found a tee shirt, pulled it over his head and went back outside. He followed the scent of the sea to the east and walked past houses much like his own until he neared the beach where the houses were larger and newer. He found the public beach access and walked out onto the sand and felt the sun on his back until his scalp felt damp and his knees ached. He turned around and walked west, away from the ocean.

He stopped on the corner a few blocks from his house to watch a dark patch of clouds move across the sky. The sun broke through at the edge of the horizon, dropping orange rays over a clump of green trees. The air around him changed from hot and white and dry to a moist glowing green. He felt something on his nose and instinctively reached up to touch it and felt wetness. He stood and peered closely at the drop of water on the end of his fingertip as raindrops fell around him and into his hand, creating a tiny little pool in the center of his palm, and as the water dripped through his fingers he contemplated the providence of his mother, where she went when they cremated her, if the ovens of the crematory sent steam into the air and if the steam formed little droplets in the atmosphere that fell on him now. He wanted to think his mother

would forever be in the rain. He cupped her in his palm and squeezed her in his hand and rubbed her on his face.