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Fresh Ears

Rachel Rawn

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Will

I don't want to be driving to the city on a Saturday. I want to sleep and watch TV. But we all have to go because school is going to start soon and me and DD need clothes and Mom doesn't want to drag our butts all the way to the city again right after just taking Grandma for her new ears. Even Dad is going because he's Dad and he can go anywhere he wants to, especially if the truck is involved and it is. My dad has a nose that's like a bowl. There's no dent from his forehead and it curves out and gets bigger and I think my mom doesn't like it because she's always glaring at it. Perry is coming too because he likes to go everywhere Dad goes. We had to bring the dog. Mom was worried that with nobody home she would get out through the tear in the screen door that Dad was supposed to have fixed three months ago, damn it, and then go through the garden, under the fence, and get into the neighbors' gardens and everybody would hate us and then we would be the only family on our block that doesn't get invited to barbeques. Our dog's name is Stacey and she's a springer spaniel. She doesn't really have a tail, just a little stubby thing. Her hair is really long and the hair on her tail hangs down off it like a horse's tail. Stacey is short for Anastasia Penelope. She was really cute when she was a puppy but now nobody gives her baths or anything and she gets dirty and gets burs in her fur and smells bad.

DD won't stop kicking me and the dog. Stacey is lying down under my feet so I keep holding my legs up a little because I don't want to hurt her, but she keeps wiggling around because of DD and so I keep having to lift my legs higher and higher. Now my feet aren't even really touching her, they are just hovering above her. I can't stand it anymore.

"DD! Stop kicking the dog." Of course she just giggles and pokes me in the side. "Stop it." I grab her finger and hold it. When she starts crying Mom glares at me through the mirror.

"Leave your sister alone."

"But she started it!" DD gets away with everything and I don't want her to this time.

"I don't care who started it, but I'll finish it," she says and then turns her eyes back to the road. Mom is so scary. Her hair is bigger than me, it could swallow my whole body and there would just be a little lump in it, like when a snake swallows an egg. I'm not letting

go of DD's finger because she's crying and saying it hurts. I want to hurt her. I'm letting go because I am scared of Mom's hair. I wish she would bug Perry instead of me and Stacey. He is sitting on her other side, looking out the window. There's nothing good out there though, just grass and hills and some trees. In the front seat they have the armrest pushed up so Grandma can sit in the middle. She mostly just sleeps and snores loudly. Sometimes she wakes up and coughs so long you'd think she's dying. I guess you aren't supposed to push the armrest up and let someone sit in the middle like that, because Perry's friend Bobby has a car with only a front and no back and they won't ever let me go anywhere with them. But Grandma is so short nobody can see her sitting up there anyway. Besides, if you aren't supposed to do that why is our truck built that way?

Howard

Imagine someone as old as my mother wanting to get her ears done. This is what comes of too much time sitting around. You grow old and get batty. She saw some star on TV getting something or other unnatural done to her face and now that Dad's dead she's going to do it too. For Christ's sake, what does an 83-year-old woman need shorter earlobes for? It doesn't bother me, I'm open-minded. Just like Perry spending all his time in his room with that Bobby boy doesn't bother me. It's good to have close friends. Goddamn my wife can drive. Most women can't drive, but my woman can. She drives the truck like a caress. The truck is her lover. That I can understand. A woman and a truck. A man and a truck. My son and a man.

Linda

He's looking at me. I hate it when he just sits and stares at me, his eyes open like he can't blink. Snakes can't blink. My husband is a snake. If it weren't for the children I would smother Howard with his toupee in his sleep. But the children need things, so many things, and he has a job at least, if nothing else. But now his mother, Margaret. What couple our age has to live with their crazy 80-year-old mother? If Walter hadn't kicked it the two of them could have lived in their own little world of oldness forever and never come into ours. But she did come into ours, and now she wants new ears. Her skin hangs off her skeleton like a loose dress and it's her earlobes she wants fixed. But good. Maybe someone handsome and charming man will fall deeply in love with her new earlobes and sweep her off her feet and out of my house. They can go explore the Amazon and meet pink river dolphins. They can walk the river and measure exactly how

long it is in units of the tiny feet of a blue-haired, four-foot-five, small earlobed woman. Then Margaret and her dashing lover will soar off to Europe, where they will tour the continent and invite a string of exotic men and women into their relationship. They will travel to the Antarctic and lie on glaciers above ancient ecosystems of bacteria trapped in ice, and whisper to each other about their own ancient ecosystems. "My father taught my brother and my husband the good way to smoke pigs, a recipe he made himself." Her brother died at thirty though, run over by his own tractor under suspicious circumstances (his wife was rumored to be sleeping with the same women that he was), and her husband never passed the recipe onto Howard, believing that it was this that made him special, and that he would live forever. For years Margaret and her lover will travel everywhere, until finally they will die, beautifully and tragically, mauled by a tiger in a Sundarbans mangrove swamp or crushed by an ancient Grecian urn while exploring the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. And I will be able to mourn her because she will be far away and not living with us.

I hate this truck. I am too close to Howard. His mother does not provide an effective shield she's so little, shrunk down to the size of a cricket by time. Her legs dangle around the gearshift, and every time we hit a bump they swing up. If Howard were sitting in the middle his legs would envelop the gearshift. But if I changed gears too fast and too hard I could hit him with the shift right on the pecker. If I did it hard enough maybe I could make it so we wouldn't have any more children. Thirteen years until DD is old enough to go off on her own. Then I can leave him.

Perry

If I don't think about it it didn't happen. But did it? No. No. Dad would have screamed at me if he had really found us. He would have hit me. He would have threatened to chop off Billy's dick with an axe. He wouldn't have just walked out of my room, leaving me and Billy shivering, scared and naked. It was just a nightmare. That was the wet spot on the sheets. I wet the bed in fear, Billy was never even there that day. I never touched Billy. I don't even know that he has tan, nearly hairless skin. I don't know about the muscles that stretch his body into a triangle of shoulders and hips and then down, down into long legs. Legs that he uses to run the mile in under six minutes, to drive to my house and pick me up so we can go places where other people can't see us, legs that gather beaded sweat while we dance wildly to songs we don't understand the lyrics of. I don't

know the impossible beauty of Billy's body, I have never kissed the curve of his upper lip and wished that I could curl myself into it and live there forever. His body, his face, his black hair; they aren't mine to touch.

Stacey

I love it. I love driving. It's warm and rocking. I feel safe and excited. I want to howl. I want to jump on people and lick them, taste their salty skin. Even though the boy has his feet on my side and the girl is nudging me with her toe, every part of my body is alive and happy. Even though I can't get to Howard from back here I am happy. He's right there, I can see him. I can see his hands, where they rest on his thighs. Hands that stroke me, that love me. I love him. I love him more than anyone else I have ever met. I belong to him, and when I am with him everything is right. When he's gone I think I could die. But he comes back. How? It's like magic, he disappears. But he comes back, always, and when he does he make my entire tail, my entire body, move more than I can control. I'm so excited that I could howl. And he's there right now. So close. I can see him, and smell him, and his hands where they rest on his thighs and, and I'm happy and I'm his.

Will

"Shut up Stacey," Mom's voice is scary. I press my foot into Stacey's warm firm side. I want her to be quiet so that Mom won't yell. Stupid DD, if she would stop kicking people, Stacey would be asleep and Mom wouldn't be annoyed. But she's only five. That's what people say. Like that's a good excuse. She's only been getting more annoying the older she gets. When she's Grandma's age she'll be so bad. I hope everyone who says "She's only five," is still around to see that it was a horrible excuse and that she has always just been evil. But Grandpa died so I guess people aren't always around. I miss him, even though he was mean sometimes. He used to hit me on the back and say nice things. He told me I was a good kid. We used to visit them a lot, and sometimes they would visit us. Living with Grandma is not as fun as visiting them was, even though you'd think it would be even better. Plus she took Perry's room so he had to move in with me and DD. Now he gets to kick us out whenever he wants to study or anything, and that's always. But I love Grandma, and she is still nice. She gives us candy, even though sometimes the candy is just cough drops. I don't think she needs new ears, even though she says it's so she can get a new man.

DD

Grandma is going to be a pretty princess. Mom told me. A doctor is going to make her one. Then she can be like me, and we can wear crowns together and walk through forests and meadows holding hands. I will be the princess who sings with animals and she will be the princess who kisses frogs. We will be enchanted by witches and saved by princes. Mom and Dad and Will and Perry will be our servants. Mom will weave flowers into our hair, Dad will buy us dresses with ribbons and lace, Perry will put our shoes on for us. Will can be our food taster in case of poisoned apples.

Linda

Margaret doesn't like the air conditioning, so we can't have that on. Never mind that it's 80° in here and some of us are pretty sure we're going through menopause. I can't handle this, I'm opening a window.

"Linda, close the window, it's so chilly, we don't want anybody to get sick. I'm 83, one bad chill could be it for me." Batty old woman. Don't laugh like that, it's not funny. I wouldn't be happy if she died from complications of earlobe surgery, I wouldn't. I might not mourn her for years, but I wouldn't dance on her grave or anything. Maybe I can convince Howard to get some of his gut sucked too. Maybe they would both die during their surgeries. So tragic, people would feel so bad for me. "Lost her husband and her mother-in-law on the same day, poor thing." But the money... I wonder how long it would take to get some life insurance out on them.

Margaret

My husband used to love my ears. My earlobes are so long, I never understood why. But there were many, many things I loved about him that maybe nobody else would understand either. I'm glad he died, it was his time and he died as happy as a man who thinks he's invincible can. Just a heart attack. Nothing unusual at our age. We know so many people who have died; in wars, in accidents, at rest. They stay with us; we're wrapped in their laughter. It's best to die when you're happy. My Walter was happy.

Linda

"Pit stop, everybody out." Howard likes stopping at rest stops, but I like stopping at gas stations. I like the smell of gasoline. I always stop at rest stops though, because that's where Howard likes to stop. I can't tell him I want to stop at a gas station because I like the smell of gasoline. Even if everybody in the world likes the smell of

gasoline, nobody says it.

Howard is doing push-ups on the grass, and Perry is laughing and counting for him. Exuberant. They are exuberant, and when Howard stands up from his push-ups and claps his hand on Perry's back, his eyes are luminous, all the love a father can have for his son is in his eyes. Howard looks at me and for a moment our eyes share that light. We know what it is to love.

"Back in the car guys," he says, and we are in the truck and it's his turn to drive and the rest stop is just a memory of light. A yelp and Howard slams on the brakes. Everybody in the truck is exactly two inches from where they were settled, Margaret nearly fell out of her seat. Oh God. The dog.

"Stacey," screams Will, panicking.

Howard's eyes look glassy, he's muttering "I don't think I felt anything, we would have felt it if I hit her. I don't think I hit her." But he's not moving. He's afraid to look. I will. I will look. For a few minutes I want to protect him, in exchange for the light he has given me.

"Stay here everybody, I'll go look." Nobody but Howard listens and they all race out of the truck behind me. I can see Stacey's body, under the truck, next to the tire. "Stacey. Stacey girl, are you okay? Here girl." For a few minutes she doesn't move, but now I can see her side, and it's lifting with hot breaths of air. Suddenly she jumps up and runs to us and we all yell "Stacey!" in unified disbelief and joy. She wiggles against us and we wiggle against her and we are all puppies just happy to be alive and to be with each other. We let her into the truck, Will gingerly climbs in and puts his feet next to her, leaning over to pet her, we are all shaking and laughing.

"Everybody in?" I ask. Howard is grinning and laughing too now.

"Yes, everybody's here," says Perry.

I look at Howard, over Margaret's thin blue hair. "Not a scratch on her," I say, and we drive away, toward the city and a new pair of ears.