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Uncle

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UNCLE

We're driving to Youngstown, my wife Mavis and me, for the funeral of a man Mavis slept with many years ago, who also happens to be her uncle. The first time I heard about this, it sounded like the stuff of daytime talk shows, where people lunge out of their seats to kick each other's asses and every third word is bleeped out by the censor, but actually my wife's uncle was only her uncle by marriage, and a marriage that didn't last very long to boot, so it's not as dramatic a situation as it seems at first. Nevertheless, it's the kind of thing Mavis doesn't like to talk about much. I didn't know about it when I married her, though of course it wouldn't have made a difference if I had. She's made her mistakes and I've made mine. It's like I always tell her: we're too old to start pretending now that we don't have a past.

For the first hundred miles or so, this trip feels like a bit of a vacation: last time we took a long drive like this, just the two of us, it was to Niagara Falls for our honeymoon. On our way up we drop in on Katie, my eight-year-old daughter, who lives with my ex-wife Gladys in Columbus, just to say hello, and after that there's something exciting about it being just the two of us on the open road, though our destination isn't exactly a thrilling one. At home, I asked Mavis why we had to go in the first place. "The old bastard's not even your uncle anymore," I said, which is true, though of course I know better. Mavis's family is Russian Orthodox; her grandparents were from the old country and didn't even speak English, and the word family has a broader definition for her than it does for me. As Mavis is fond of pointing out, I can't even bring myself to send Gladys a Christmas card, and we shared six years and a daughter together. In the car, I try reaching for Mavis's hand and, when she ignores me, settle for putting mine on her thigh, though she just keeps on staring out the window like she's in the car all by herself. In all of the silence I get

to thinking about her family. We're staying the weekend with her mother, which means we'll end up running into her sister, one of my least favorite people in the world, and thinking about that kills whatever jovial vacation mood I had so that before long we are both just staring out the window, like two strangers who happen to find themselves sharing a seat on a bus.

An hour out of Youngstown we stop at a bar for lunch. "This is silly," Mavis complains in the booth, spreading a paper napkin over her silk pantsuit. "There'll be mountains of food all afternoon."

"I'm hungry now," I say, which is a lie, though I am in need of a drink. I order a double shot of Jack Daniels and a white wine for Mavis, her favorite, though over the years I've found that the more I drink, the less she tends to. As the wine works its way through her, Mavis starts telling stories about growing up in Youngstown: the constant hum of the steel mills at the bottom of the hill she lived on, and swimming at the public pool, and the abandoned amusement park, riddled with gangs, where high school kids used to go to screw under the skeletons of forgotten coasters. I'm hoping she won't get too drunk and start talking about her uncle, the dead one. I've heard the story only once, and that was enough for me. Mavis was seventeen, and her aunt and uncle were over for dinner. He touched her thigh under the table, and then later that night he pretended it was an accident when he walked in on her getting undressed for bed. He was young, Mavis told me that time – she was drunk then, too – in his late twenties. "Charming," she said. "I was flattered." At the time I stopped her, told her that was all I wanted to know, and I've never asked to hear the story again since. It's an arrangement that works out well between us: I don't ask about her past affairs, and she doesn't ask about Gladys, which is good because then I'd have to tell her about what all went wrong, the drinking and neglect that led to

Gladys calling me a no-good father before kicking me out on the street. Part of what works between me and Mavis is that we can put all of that in the past behind us.

Back in the car, we drive over a small lake and past many of the steel mills of Mavis's stories, now long abandoned, tall and gray like streaks of rain on a windshield. Because we stopped off for food we're running a little late, so instead of dropping our stuff off at her mother's house first, we drive straight to the funeral home. Already the empty cars are lined up behind a black limousine, cheap-looking magnetic flags stuck to their roofs, all ready for the procession to the cemetery. Inside, the place is busting with people in dark suits and dresses, despite the fact that it's June and nearly ninety degrees outside; everyone is walking around, talking to each other like they're at a party, except for the oldest ones, who sit in their wheelchairs parked right up next to the casket, as if standing in line for a show they don't want to miss. I point them out to Mavis: "I guess if any of them drops dead today this is the right place to be," I say, trying to hide my smile behind my hand.

"Hush," she says. "You smell like whiskey."

I pretend to look around for her mother, though really I'm checking for Mavis's sister, Gwendolyn, who I know is here someplace. She's a few years older than Mavis and, because of that, thinks she has a right to comment on everything in Mavis's life, including me. Twenty years ago, when I was still a very young man, I fell in love with a girl and because she was sixteen and I was twenty, her father kicked my ass and then pulled some strings to get me put on a national list of sexual offenders. I told Mavis this and she told her sister, and since then Gwendolyn has not let me within fifty feet of her child, as if I am some kind of child molester or the kind of guy who sits around playgrounds getting his kicks out of taking pictures of little girls. It's a shame, too,

because her daughter, Amy, is a sweet little thing. She's good at school and looks a lot like I imagine Mavis looked when she was that age, freckled and lean.

Before Gwendolyn found out about me, I used to pick Amy up from preschool sometimes when her parents were too busy or working, since they only live about a half-hour from Mavis and me. I'd take her to McDonald's for a Happy Meal even though she wasn't supposed to eat any meat, and then usually we'd go for a drive someplace. I'm a big fan of garage sales – it's truly amazing what some people will give away for pennies – and many times I'd take Amy with me as I drove around searching for good ones. She liked digging through boxes of fifty-cent stuffed animals while I looked at tools and other household stuff, and usually I'd buy her whatever she wanted, though I had a pretty good idea that Gwendolyn would just throw it all out anyway the second I dropped Amy off at home. My own daughter has always preferred Gladys to me, even as a baby, and so it was nice to spend time with a little girl who liked the same things I did, who was happy just driving around country roads eating Chicken McNuggets and listening to whatever garbage happened to come on the radio. But all of that's over now, long over; even Mavis isn't allowed to go anywhere near her own niece, and she and Gwendolyn don't even speak to each other except once or twice a year, at Christmas and at funerals like this one.

Eventually Mavis's mother comes over to say hello, and asks if we've been up to the coffin yet to pay our last respects. This is something else about Mavis's family I've never managed to get used to: the way they put dead bodies in open boxes for all the world to admire. Everyone in my family gets cremated; the way I see it, this is either because of a lack of funds or a lack of faith or both, although I've always felt there's a certain dignity to it, no makeup or embalming fluid required. What gets me too are

the things people think to put into the coffin with the body, as if the dead person is King Tut and will need framed photographs of their grandchildren or their lucky golf shoes in the next life. But Mavis takes my hand and says, "Well, we might as well go see the old bastard, right?" and nudges me toward the coffin anyway.

I hold Mavis's hand in line, and when it's our turn I stand next to her as she peers inside. The dead uncle is younger than I would have expected, handsome even, his hair not quite all the way silver yet, and leaner than I am, though that is probably a side effect of the cancer. I look at this man lying in the coffin and try to imagine him holding and kissing my wife, knowing, like I do, the dimples in the sides of her thighs and the tiny mole on the small of her back. I steal a glance at Mavis, but she's as stone-faced as always. Her lack of emotionality at home can drive me nuts, especially during arguments, but this is one of the times when I'm grateful for it. I try to keep my face neutral to match hers. I keep on holding her hand as we kiss her aunt, who is sitting in a folding chair near the head of the coffin – apparently since neither she nor the uncle ever remarried she has been assigned the role of the grieving widow – and as we walk back to our seats, past the old relatives who sit staring at us with unseeing eyes from their wheelchairs, a few of them nod as if to say, I know you.

After the funeral there is a big wake at the aunt's house out in the country. Her backyard is huge, bordering what looks like a couple of privately-owned farms. My people are from Cincinnati as far back as I can remember, and I never can get used to the sight of a bunch of land all stretched out that way, like the ocean. The entire back porch of the aunt's house is lined with tables full of food and bowls of punch and piles of white linen napkins arranged in perfect rows, everything set out and waiting for us,

almost as if the funeral was just a detour to give them time to set up the party. I tell Mavis that and she whispers, "Don't be crass." Her mascara is streaked from when she cried during the service, at the part at the end where the priest sings Ave Maria and everyone always cries. The funeral was an odd experience for me. Many times I've sat through similar services with Mavis, staring at the coffin and wondering if the person really would get into heaven, as the priest was saying. This time, though, I was pretty certain that he wouldn't, no matter how many prayers they chanted and how much incense they swung over his body. Married men who sleep with young girls, especially those who are related to them, don't make likely candidates for eternal salvation. But you would never have known that from all of the wailing that was going on in that church, Mavis included, though I imagine that it was her guilt making her cry as much as anything else.

We help ourselves to cold cuts and take a seat at one of the picnic tables set up in the yard, next to Mavis's mother and her aunt Janice, the divorced widow. Janice is wearing a low-cut blouse, playing absentmindedly with the crucifix around her neck, and saying, "He wouldn't have been half-bad if it hadn't been for the gambling. Other than that, I had no complaints."

"He could have been an alcoholic," Mavis's mother says, looking at me a little sideways.

"Yes, he could have," agrees Janice. "That would have been a lot worse."

I try to change the subject by asking Janice about the farms that back up against her property, beyond a line of ever-green trees and stretching out as far as the horizon. "Soybean, mostly," she says. "Some cattle too, though the land here's not much good for grazing."

A few tables over, Amy sits with her parents, wearing a frilly navy blue dress that I know has to be making her miserable

in the heat. She's polite as always, talking to the other adults at their table, nodding away like a miniature grown-up. It's terrible, how Gwendolyn tries to stifle the child right out of her. I nudge Mavis, but she's still locked in conversation with the aunt.

"He always liked you," Janice says to Mavis. "He always had a soft spot for you. He told me once that he wished we'd had a daughter of our own to spoil, that's how highly he thought of you."

I decide that's my cue to head back to the porch for a drink, though I can feel Mavis watching me go, her disapproving eyes. I'm helping myself to some Jack and mopping off my forehead with a napkin when I hear Janice again: "Now, the bedroom was a different story. The bedroom, at least, was one place where there was never a problem."

I walk out across the yard, past where Janice and Mavis are yapping away, past Amy, who smiles up at me as I go by. I'm thinking, for no reason at all, about Gladys, about how things were between us the night we got married fifteen years ago, when we couldn't even wait to get upstairs to our room and ended up consummating the whole thing right there in the fancy men's room outside the Hilton's Silver Ballroom. All of that passion, and look where it got us. I've always appreciated Mavis for that reason, for her even keel, her lack of highs and lows, but the thought of her having that kind of passion with some other guy, a corpse no less, is making me crazy.

I walk out along the edges of the fields, where the grass is cut short. I've smoked and drank for most of my life, and I've never been one for exercise, and the heat combined with the walking makes everything blurry and a little bit hazy. Once or twice I think I might throw up, but I keep on going, out to a low fence with a group of cattle on the other side, just lazily munching on the stubbly grass. That's when I hear someone pushing through

the weeds behind me, and turn around and see Amy standing there, her white tights all scratched up and muddy. She's a good head taller than she was the last time I saw her; like Katie, she's growing up too fast. Already, Gladys tells me, boys are calling the house for Katie, asking about homework assignments. "You let her talk to them?" I demanded when she first told me, and she rolled her eyes and asked what I wanted her to do, call the cops? I wonder if boys have started calling around for Amy yet, though of course that's the kind of thing I'd never be allowed to ask.

We stand there for a while, just watching the cows, the slow way they chew without even bothering to lift their heads. "They're so beautiful," Amy breathes, in that way that kids have of being awed by the simplest things.

"They don't smell so great, though."

She makes a face at me. "How can you eat them?"

"Makes me want a Big Mac right now, just looking at them," I say, grinning at her. "Hey, you," I call to one of the big ones. "Come on over here, lunch."

"You're disgusting," she says, but she's smiling.

"Your mom still got you eating bean sprout sandwiches and tofu?"

"Not just tofu," she says. It's an old joke between us, and I'm pleased she remembers it.

"I hear they've got tofu ice cream that's just fabulous," I say. It feels good to spar a little with her this way, like we've never been apart. "Tofu pizza, tofu cotton candy."

"Cotton candy's not an animal product," Amy says, with her hands on her hips in a way that reminds me uncomfortably of Gwendolyn. "I can have cotton candy."

"So you can have cotton candy but not a turkey sandwich?" I shake my head at her. The Jack has left a bad taste in my mouth and I spit into the tall grass at the edge of the fence.

"Spit stays in your mouth," Amy says.

"See, this is the country, though," I say. "It's okay if you spit in the country. It's good for the soil."

"Really?" she asks, believing me for a second before I wink at her. And then, almost before I realize I'm doing it, I reach out and ruffle her hair a little bit with my hand. It's a gesture that reminds me of Katie, back when she was small and she and Gladys and I were all still living together. I remember her climbing into bed between us each morning, how I'd ruffle her hair and tickle her armpits until she was kicking so much that Gladys would give up and get out of bed. But the minute I touch Amy, she flinches and steps away, a motion so sudden and almost violent that even the cows seem to stop chewing to notice it.

"My mom says you're never supposed to touch me," she says, looking at the ground. "Never, not ever."

"Well, your mom says a lot of things. That doesn't make them true." I can feel the anger welling up in me, choking me in the throat and behind the eyes, but there's no sense in letting it out at Amy; she's just a little girl after all, and only repeating what she's been told. Instead, I try to smile. "You know I've got a little girl too, right? Katie. She's eight." I get out my wallet to see if I've got a picture, but the only one I have is all frayed, and besides it's at least two years out of date. So instead I grab a five out of my billfold and hand it to Amy. "Here you go," I say. "Buy yourself a real ice cream when your mama isn't looking."

She looks down at the bill in her hand, turns it over once or twice like she doesn't know what to make of it, and reaches it back out to me. "Here," she says. "I don't have any pockets."

"Hell, you don't need a pocket," I say, wiping a fistful of sweat out of my eyes. "Just fold it up and put it in your shoe or someplace."

She keeps on holding it out. "I can't, though," she says,

her voice whiny, like at any second she might start crying. "I can't take money from --" She starts to say "from strangers," but at the last second she changes it to, "From anyone."

"Well, I'm not anyone," I say, feeling more angry than I know I should. "I'm your goddamned uncle." She hands the bill back to me and I toss it into the grass. "Either you take it or the cows eat it," I say, trying to make light, like I'm joking. "Your choice."

I watch her watching the five dollars just sitting there in the grass, tossing back and forth a little bit in the humid breeze. The stench of cow is thick around us, and yet all I want to do right now, in this moment, is hop the fence and lose myself among them, wrap my arms around them, lean my face against their warm, brown sides, feel their hearts vibrating deep in the caverns of their bodies. But instead I keep on standing there, watching as Amy stares at that money with a look on her face like she's trying to decide between good and evil, life and death; then she turns away and heads back in the direction of the party, picking her way carefully to keep from getting her tights even dirtier. I know that I should say something to her right then. Maybe I could remind her of the good times we used to have together once, or ask her about school. But it's been too long for me to know what to say, and so instead I just watch her leave, the weight of her almost too slight even to divide the grasses. When she's almost too far gone, I call after her. "Hey," I say, cupping my hands around my mouth. "You want to go for a ride?"

"No," she calls back. The Amy I remember from the old days was always full of stories and chatter, her mouth never stopped moving, but now she's like a smaller version of her mother, all tense and buttoned-up, like she even forgets how to smile. I feel the Jack sloshing around in my stomach and toy with the idea of puking, but I know that wouldn't help matters much,

so instead I just bound along after her like a puppy in the grass, surprised at my own speed. She just stands there, watching me come, like she's too shocked to move. I have about two seconds to decide what I'm going to do when I get to her. I don't want to go back to the party, that much is for sure. Mavis will be all pissed at me for drinking and leaving her alone, like I'm such an embarrassment to her, when I'm the one who has spent the whole day shaking hands with near-strangers, wondering how many of them know that the dead guy used to sleep with my wife.

When I get to Amy, I pick her up. She's lighter in my arms than I would have expected; I pick her up and swing her around the way I used to do with Katie when she was maybe three or four. I say, "Let's get out of here, go for a ride, just you and me."

She waits until I set her down, too dizzy from heat and booze to spin her anymore, and then takes a step away. "This is a funeral," she says. "You can't just leave a funeral."

"Sure you can," I tell her, happier than I know I ought to be that she at least seems to be considering the possibility. "Hell, the body's already in the ground, right? What's he gonna know? And I happen to know that he was a pretty big sonofabitch in the first place anyway."

"You can't say that about dead people."

"No?" I kneel down in the tall, scratchy grass so that I'm practically at her level. Between the row of pine trees I can see patches of the wake still going on, dark spots of black moving around the yard, hot and bored but unwilling or unable to leave. "Well, I'm sorry. I was rude. Forgive me."

"You should say, I beg your pardon."

"I beg your pardon, then." I reach out my hand for her to shake and after a second, she actually takes it: just the fingertips, but still, it's a start. I don't know what it is about this kid that makes it so important for me to win her over. Most kids with her

attitude I would be happy telling to just fuck off. Maybe it's all those afternoons we used to spend in my truck together driving around. Those were good afternoons. The only other time I've ever been that happy was with the girl I loved when I was twenty, the one whose parents called the cops on me, and for the first time the irony of it hits me, that the two females I've most loved being with in this life are the two that I've been forbidden to see.

"I'll buy you anything you want," I tell her. "You want some kind of tofu milkshake, you got it." I'm already picturing her sitting in the cab beside me, that long navy blue dress of hers billowing around in the wind from the open windows. I picture her wiggling out of her tights and throwing them in a sweaty bundle under the seat. I wonder how long it would take for anyone to notice we're gone, how far we could get before the cops catch up with us: ten, twenty, fifty miles? I imagine us driving all the way up around the lake to Canada, to the little group of cruddy cabins near Niagara Falls where Mavis and I went on our honeymoon. The cabins weren't much to look at, it was true, but I'd sleep on the soggy couch and give Amy the bed, and during the day we'd walk around with all of the other tourists, taking pictures of the falls and drinking hot chocolate. "You ever been to a wax museum?" I ask her. "I know a place with some of the best wax museums. You'd swear those bastards were real, standing there looking at you. You want to go?"

"What's a wax museum?" she asks, screwing up her nose.

"Ah, forget it. You're probably too young for that kind of thing anyway." I lick my lips in the heat, wishing for a drink. "What are you into these days, anyway? Makeup and boys and shit?"

"Boys?" she says, and laughs, and I feel my shoulders relax. She thinks a minute and says, "I take piano lessons. And soccer, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

I laugh. "Gonna be a jock, are you?"

"What's a jock?"

"Like an athlete."

She shrugs, but she looks proud. "I like piano better."

"What about school?" I ask. "You still liking that?"

She shrugs again. "All but math."

It's nice, sitting in the grass this way, chatting with her, but I get the feeling that we're running out of time, like any minute now someone from the party, Gwendolyn or Mavis maybe, is going to come looking for us and won't like what they find. "You sure about that ride?" I ask her, trying to make my voice as soft and gentle as possible. "I don't know about you, but I've had enough funeral to last me a lifetime."

"I'll get in trouble." She cuts her eyes at me then and adds, "You'll get in trouble."

"For what? Going for a ride?"

"With me," she says, shaking her head like she's frustrated with me for not understanding. "For going on a ride with me."

"And why is that? If you're so smart."

She fidgets a little, pulling at the sides of her tights, and then says, in a voice barely above a whisper, "Because you're bad."

"I'm what?" I lean closer, cup one hand around my ear, all of the insects in the field buzzing so loud all of a sudden that I can't tell if the sound is coming from inside my own head. "I'm what, little girl? Speak up."

"Bad," she says, and this time her lip wobbles.

"Bad?" I start laughing then, because I've been called many things in my life, mostly by women, but never bad, never something so simple, and yet it hurts more than pretty much anything else that anybody has ever said about me. "You don't know anything about me," I say.

But then Amy looks up and meets my eyes and it's like

she does know me, like she can see every bad thing I've ever done, every rotten thought inside of my old drunk head. It's more than I can stand, her looking at me that way, so I wipe my hands over my sweaty face so that she won't have to see me. "Well, that's great," I say, all sarcastic. "Why don't you get along on out of here, then, if I'm so bad?"

I look up and she's still standing there, watching me that way. For a second, all I want to do is hit her. I've never hit a woman in my life, but I imagine that this is what people are feeling right before they do. My hands shake with it. "Get out of here," I say again, and wave my hands around my head like the crazy person I know she thinks I am. "Boo," I shout, wagging my tongue at her, and finally this is enough to get her to turn and run back in the direction of the party, not worrying about keeping her tights clean this time, just running like the devil himself is after her, which maybe, according to her at least, he is.

Mavis's room is like a shrine to her childhood, though her mother has made a nod to change by moving the nightstand out from between the two twin beds and pushing them next to each other so that they are almost, but not quite, touching. I hop onto one of the beds and wait for Mavis, who goes into the bathroom and comes a few minutes later wearing her nightgown, her hair brushed into a fluffy brown cloud around her shoulders. She still isn't talking to me. One great thing about Mavis is that she's not the type of woman to play games, to tell you everything's fine when it's not, and she's also not one to hold a grudge. One night we got into a discussion about children and I told her I wasn't sure if I wanted another one or even if I ever would, and she cried, but she still let me hold her; she curled her body around mine and let me put

my chin on the top of her head while she breathed slowly to calm herself down. Tonight, though, she climbs into the other twin bed and snaps off the light like she's ten years old again, like I'm not even lying there on the other bed, fully dressed, watching her.

It's been too long since I slept in a twin-sized bed, and it feels disturbingly like lying in a too-narrow box. Next to me, inches away, Mavis is staring at the ceiling, breathing. "You're not being fair," I whisper, not even sure what I'm in trouble for, but she doesn't say anything back. It's odd, sleeping in Mavis's old bed, surrounded by her old stuffed animals and trophies, listening to the floorboards creak as her mother moves around in the next room, getting ready for bed. I wonder what Mavis was thinking about all of the nights that she stared up at this ceiling, hugging the dolls that now sit in an antique rocking chair against one wall. If it were daylight, I could see the skeletons of the old steel mills from her window, the same rusted gray as the winter sky. Maybe it's the sound of the trains moaning in the distance, but being here always makes me feel lonely, even when Mavis and I are getting along. I look over at Mavis to say something, but then I see that she's crying. At first I think it's out of anger, but her shoulders are shaking too hard, like she doesn't care if I see her or not, and then I know that it's about more than me. It occurs to me that maybe she left out a part of the story about the dead uncle when she told it to me, that maybe she was in love with him too, all of those years ago, when she and I were teenagers in two different beds in two different parts of the state, living two completely different lives, each of us making our own mistakes. I think that maybe she has been trying to tell me this, in her own way, all day long. I want to tell her that I understand. Sometimes when I get low I get to thinking about that girl I loved, the one whose father got me into trouble, and how she may have been the only person I've loved who ever truly loved me back. Maybe

Mavis feels the same way about the uncle. Maybe there's plenty we should have been telling each other about ourselves all along, that just because we don't want to remember something doesn't mean it goes away. So I wait a minute, until her crying dies down a little, and then I reach for my wife in her childhood bed, reach out across the few inches that have sprung up suddenly, wide as a valley, between us.