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Mrs. Smith

Julie Brown

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Mrs. Smith

Say it to yourself three or four times when you wake up and you're alone in the bed. *You're a widow, you're a widow, you're a widow.* Maybe one day you'll begin to believe. The bed feels so empty. You're still sleeping way over to one side, knees pulled up and your back to the middle. You haven't changed the sheets for over a week and the pillowcase still smells like him. On his night stand, *Revised Manual for Safety Engineers* and small perfect stacks of coins: pennies, nickels, dimes. Only Michael's keys are missing.

Put on his bathrobe and go downstairs. Max isn't in his room, he's watching cartoons in his pajamas. "Hi, Mom," he says. You tell him he's going to spend the day with Grandma. Pick him up and carry him down the hall to change his clothes. He's wet the bed again. You bathe him, dress him in the corduroy overalls your mother made, and fix him some oatmeal. He seems to be in pretty good spirits, spooning in the steamy cereal. Mornings aren't so bad, regular routine helps. You decide to skip breakfast yourself.

Get dressed and get into your rental car, driver's side. Put Max in his car seat. Buckle up. "Where are you going, Mom?" he asks.

"To pick up your other grandma."

"At the train station?"

"Yes." You still can't decide if he should go tomorrow or not. He steers the little wheel Michael fastened to his car seat, pushes the knob in the middle and beeps.

"Which way, Mom?"

"Left." You point. He makes a motor sound with his lips, his voice rising and falling as you shift.

Can't spend much time at your mother's, just give her a hug at the door. Squat down to kiss Max and tell him to be good. Your mother looks tired, her eyes are a little puffy. "Say hi to Marian for me," she says. You wish you were spending the day with your mother instead.

Marian waves from a window as the train slows down and you push yourself to the door where you figure she'll get out. First time you've ever picked her up alone. Her window's steamy but she's wiped away a circle that frames her face. Same blue coat she wore last Christmas. Wearing a hat this time. She sees you and you both begin to cry.

Driving back to the house makes you feel nervous, full of a million stupid things to say but none that really matter. Think of something polite. Ask about his niece. "How is Jenny? Is she doing OK in school? Sorry she can't make it. But I understand." Secretly you wish that no one could have made it. Secretly you wish that you yourself had been hospitalized until it's all over. But you didn't even get scratched and somehow that makes you an accomplice.

You take the highway that follows the coast and look out over the ocean as you drive. You and Michael met near this beach, four or five years ago. You count.

Five years ago. And you've been married for four and your son is nearly three. The sun coming up over the mountains hurts your eyes and you put on black sunglasses. "There's the new jetty," you say. "Just finished it this winter. Keeps the water calmer on this side for the boats." She's only mildly interested. You go on. "The rocks are all from eastern Oregon, blasted out of the side of a mountain with dynamite." You're making this all up. "Three men were killed in one bad explosion that misfired." Suddenly she takes more of an interest in what you say and sits up a little straighter.

You enter the long tunnel and take off your sunglasses, turn on the headlights. Michael always honked the horn in tunnels and you find yourself doing this now. It makes an eerie tension in the blackness. The tunnel ends in bright light and you put your sunglasses back on. The car feels small and you open your window and the sun roof. You turn on the radio to a station you know she'll hate and shift into fifth.

"Here we are, Marian," you say, a little skip in your voice. "Max is at my mother's for the day. He'll be home in time for supper."

"I can't wait to see him," she says. "How's he holding up?"

"O.K." How can she look so pale and be so talkative?

"We have so much catching up to do," she says. You see now that taking him to your mother's was a mistake.

You carry her bags upstairs and show her where she'll stay. You're polite, courteous. "What time would you like breakfast tomorrow?" you ask. "The funeral's at eleven." You show her a pile of clean towels by the tub and notice a hair in the sink. You know she'll notice it too.

Over tea she asks what sort of financial situation you're in. You know she's thinking about Max, and now you're touched in a small way. "Fine," you say. "We can live off the life insurance until Max is in school, then I can go full time at the nursery." Her thin fuchsia lips curl into a tight smile and she puts a wrinkled hand over yours. She says to let her know if she can help. You look her flush in the eyes, see how blue they are, surrounded by star-shaped wrinkles. They are your husband's eyes, you think, they're watching for your mistakes.

First time you met him was at a penny arcade on a hot day in July when your girlfriend wanted to ride the bumper cars. What the hell, you said, climbing into a tiny brown station wagon. The man at the booth started you and off you went, around and around in an eddy of metal gadgets and thumping and children screaming. Good looking guy in a police car wheeled by, running his siren. He looked at you and winked. You winked back and he was off. The cars were swirling faster then, fire trucks, sports cars, a taxi, all tethered to the electric ceiling by silver poles. Your car stopped. Pushed the gas but no go and you looked up to see that there wasn't a spark when BAM he got you from the back. And BAM in the side. He was really grinning then, laughing, his blond hair flipped back, his siren singing and a wild look in his eyes. He swiveled his wheel and BAM into the side of your car again but you were cornered next to another dead car and there was nowhere else to go.

"I've got a little headache," says Marian. "I think I'll go upstairs."

"Aspirin's above the sink," you say. "I hope it goes away."

You change into cutoffs and grab your basket of tools. Pass through the sliding glass door to the patio. That brown circle's still there from Max's wading pool. You

haven't worked in your garden for over a week and it feels good to kneel in the fragrant grass. Michael wanted to extend the patio, pour cement here over your small garden and get you to plant things in hanging boxes. You clean out around the snapdragons. Bright orange, unfurling to red and yellow. Pretty. Your gloveless hands pull the weeds one by one, feel the gentle suck of rootballs lifting from the stubborn soil. It feels good to be out here alone, sun warm on your shoulders, and you wonder how Max is doing today and if he'll keep asking about his daddy. You wonder how long Marian will stay.

Open a canvas bag of bulbs. Next spring they'll be red tulips. Their layers look like tissue, peel off like dead cuticles. You plant them along the house under the kitchen window, pushing them into the dirt with your thumbs. The row isn't straight so you try to rearrange the crooked ones. Try to force some sort of order on them. With a trowel you turn over soil to pack them tight and notice how dry the worms are, like bits of twisted string. Go deeper, worms, you think.

Hear the toilet flush upstairs. You first met Marian on a Thanksgiving when Michael had you over for the big dinner. Her golden turkey, the stuffing, everything — it had all been perfect. Even her cranberries were fresh, not jellied in a cylinder. You brought dinner rolls in a cellophane bag. The thought of so much food now nauseates you.

Sit back and look at your knees with a bored fascination. Wrinkled and creased, worse than Max's cheek after a long nap. Lie back in the grass. The sun makes you sleepy, makes your eyes a little watery, and they begin to run at the outer corners. Say it to yourself again. *You're a widow*. Is it better than being divorced? More respectable? Dwell on all the crummy things he did and maybe you won't feel so bad.

For one thing he was always so sarcastic. At your wedding rehearsal you wore blue jeans, walked down the aisle with your brother at your side. Reached the end where Michael was and smiled, took his arm. In thirty-six hours you'd be married, would be Mr. and Mrs. Michael Everett. You hummed Mendelssohn and didn't feel nervous. After the ceremony he helped you on with your coat and then he made some crack about your father's not being there. You smiled a little. Afterwards, at dinner, he repeated the joke, that he'd never have in-law problems as long as they were always away on business, to a few of your friends, and to your brother. You picked up your water and tried to smile. That was the first time he really hurt you.

Shift your basket to where the marigolds are, scoot yourself over and bend forward to thin them a little. You always loved helping your mother in the garden. Her marigolds had such large blossoms, red petals trumpeting through a brassy orange. You remember once when you were about nine, how you asked your mother if you were pretty. You had snipped a dozen flowers with your small scissors, braided their thin stems into a wreath. You balanced it on your brown hair like a crown and waltzed into her kitchen, humming a little song, smiling with your shy question. She set down her sewing and returned your smile. Yes, she told you, you're beautiful.

Time to get up, go inside and make some kind of lunch for Marian and yourself. You don't feel like eating much. You put your tools away, throw the weeds on the compost pile, and see in the kitchen she's got sandwiches on the table and a pan

of soup on the stove. The kitchen's filled with a split-pea aroma. Why does she have to be so nice? Over lunch she stresses how much she wants to help you and Max. "We don't need a thing," you say. "Just time to sort through it all." Maybe she's afraid you'll drift away and she'll lose Max, son of her only son. "I might need you to babysit now and then," you say. Her nose gets a little red and she almost begins to cry.

"Was he in pain when he died?" she asks. Picks up a sandwich and nibbles at it.

"I don't know," you answer. You were knocked out and don't remember much. Just the sound of the sirens. He died before you came to. But why not lie? Make her feel better. "I don't think so," you say. Stir your soup. Jesus Christ, she'll figure it out when the funeral starts and his coffin's closed. She asks if you're hurt anywhere. "Just where the lump on my head is," you say.

She washes the dishes, you dry. It's nice to have someone to help, you're used to doing them alone. "Marian," you say. "Some time you'll have to help me go through his things." Old pictures held with rubber bands, filed in shoeboxes by year. Dry-cleaned clothes, hung by season and type. Stamps arranged by country of origin, chronologically within country. He was so damn tidy about his possessions. Filing systems for everything.

"Just let me know when," she says. "Whenever you're up to it." When you finish washing she opens a cupboard door and brings each stack of clean dishes down and sets them on the counter. Then she takes a damp cloth and wipes out the cupboard shelf, catching all the crumbs in her other hand. You're a little embarrassed. Then she restacks the dishes in a new arrangement, glasses on the bottom shelf and plates above. This annoys you but you smile and tell her thanks.

Later on, it's time to get Max. She wants to come along and on the way home she holds him on her lap. His eyes are sleepy, you know he didn't have a nap at your mom's. He asks Marian if Dad's coming back today and she says, "No, Honey." He asks if she's moving in and she looks at you and says, "No, Honey." He opens the glove box, finds your sunglasses and puts them on. He looks like a large-eyed beetle and it makes you laugh.

You remember drives you'd take with Michael. Before you were married, up and down the coast highway, his hand moving up and down your thighs and the tape deck turned up loud. The time you drove down to L.A. and slept on the beach. You woke up early and the blankets were damp and you were both shivering. After you were married, drives to Portland, visiting friends and sometimes a night in a nice hotel — he'd sign you in as Mr. and Mrs. Smith and you'd both snicker. And how whenever he'd get mad at you he'd get in the car, take off, come back maybe eight or ten hours later. Still mad, pout till you went to bed and then he'd forgive you in time to have sex. It seems to you now that he was mad quite often.

For dinner you fix pot roast with gravy, Marian tears lettuce leaves for a salad. She slices tomatoes and tosses everything in a wooden bowl. You pare potatoes, watch the long strips of peeling wind away from your knife and curl in the sink. Michael's favorite dinner. You start to feel sorry for him. The three of you will sit down to eat and he's dead and tomorrow they'll put his body in the ground. As if he reads your mind, Max starts to cry. "Where's Dad?" he asks. "When's he coming home?" You put him on the booster and push him to the table.

"He's gone, Max." When it's all ready, you cut his meat in small pieces and mash his potatoes down with a fork. "Be good for Grandma and eat all your sup-

per." It hits you how you'll be raising him alone for the next fifteen years. But what did Michael ever do but yell at him, spank him for little things like tracking in mud?

Last summer after Max turned two the three of you went over to the state fair in Salem. It was a hot day and the fair was crowded, so crowded it was hard work maneuvering the stroller through clusters of people. Michael wanted to see the livestock, took Max's hand and led him into the barn. "Cow," he'd say, or "pig, sheep, horse," pointing each time for Max to learn. Max was happy, playing with Michael's watch and imitating his words. Then Max wet himself and Michael gave him back to you. You changed him and pushed the stroller for the rest of the day.

"Good roast, Honey," Marian says. Max isn't eating, just kicking his feet against the table. She moves her chair over next to his and picks up his fork. She plays a little game with him and he eats his food without complaining. He's even laughing with her. Meanwhile her food's getting cold. You play with your salad, watching them. Her spotted hand flies the fork around his head, pops it into his mouth. He laughs again, gravy on his fat cheeks and his bib's a mess. Then Marian starts to cry again. Maybe she sees a young version of Michael eating. She sets his fork down and takes off his bib. He stops laughing and looks scared. She carries him to the kitchen counter and sponges off his face, his hands, in the webs between each sticky finger. Then she turns away toward the sink and really cries. Her rounded shoulders are rising and falling with each teary breath. He doesn't leave. He clutches her leg, still looking scared, as if she too will disappear. You stack the plates and carry them to the sink, then give him a cookie.

You knew this was coming. Knew she'd start to cry and you'd feel helpless. Her tears fall in organized furrows down deep wrinkles; one droplet settles at the tip of her chin. There is no reason why you can't be kind to her. Even though when you'd cry he'd tell you to buck up. You put your right arm around her soft shoulder and say, "I know it hurts. I'm hurt too. Every time I see my son I think of Michael. Everything I look at in this house reminds me of him. The yard even reminds me of him. I feel awful inside. And it's been hard arranging this funeral and everything. I'd like to just run away, but I can't.

You've said more than you wanted. You carefully fold the dishtowel in half, then into fourths. You line up the sides until they're even and smooth out the fringe.

"Mom, why is Grandma crying?"

"Because she misses Dad like you do."

"Grandma, I want Dad back." Marian picks him up and kisses him on the cheek. She sets him on the counter and ties his shoelace.

"Let's have coffee in the other room," you suggest. You sit between them on the couch and smooth his yellow hair. He's had a bad week. Take a sip of coffee and when he reaches for your cup you say no. He whines a little, reaches again. Marian fills her cup with milk and hands him the beige mixture. Let her win. Let him drink it.

"Go sit on Grandma's lap," you say.

They sit on the couch, you take an armchair, put your feet up. You'll be going back to work part time in two weeks. Fall's always a busy season at the nursery. You'll have to remember to bring home a tree for the front yard. Apple tree maybe. Or something with pink blossoms, maybe cherry. You think about how much work it is to dig holes in clay soil. You've been wanting to plant a tree ever since you

bought the house. He said it would make lawn mowing hard, and the roots would tear up the sidewalk. OK, you decide, you'll plant two.

"What are you thinking about, Honey?" she asks.

"The funeral," you say. "I hope I ordered enough flowers." Take a sip of coffee, set your cup on the table. She slips a magazine under your cup and you smile.

"What will he be wearing?" she asks.

"It doesn't matter," you say.

You go into the kitchen and come back with the coffee pot, fill up your cup and add some to hers. Max falls asleep. "I know how much you miss him," she says. "You had a good marriage, didn't you? Not like these people who marry and divorce in a short time. Over small things that don't even matter."

Your scalp feels tight and you drink the coffee hot. It sloshes around and makes your stomach feel hollow. The tension is really killing you. You close your eyes and imagine what you'd like to say to her: Marian, our marriage was great for a while. But I wasn't happy the last couple of years. I was smothered by him. I was considering divorce. I even called a lawyer. You imagine what she'd say: Well, now that you mention it, I wasn't so happy the last years of my marriage either. Like father like son. Both bullies, I suppose.

"Yeah," you say.

After a time Max wakes up. "Would you like to put him to bed?" you ask.

"Doesn't he need a bath?"

"Sure." He had one this morning. But she might enjoy it. "Would you do it please? I'm going for a drive."

The cold air whips through the sun roof and blows hair into your eyes and mouth. Pop in *Hotel California* and move onto the freeway, driving fast in third gear, pushing the motor. Build up power and speed. You shift into fourth and your muscles relax some. Catch up to the tail lights of a station wagon. Easy. Pass it on a straightaway and move back into your lane without hitting any bumps on the center lines.

Sing along with the tape. "We haven't had such prisoners here since 1969." A little off key, but who cares? He always hated it when you sang. You'd be happy, having a good day, and you'd start singing a corny song from an old musical. Always made him mad and he'd turn on the stereo to drown you out. Quit singing those goddam songs, he'd say. You were going to leave him, but couldn't decide about Max. Why wouldn't you just try to work it out with him? You eject the tape, push your foot down till it says 85 and grip the steering wheel tightly. Your fingers and ears are cold but you don't care. Driving south in the dark makes you feel good, less edgy. You imagine you're going down to California. Or even Mexico. Why not? She'd take care of Max. Why do you want to go to the funeral anyway? You aren't old enough to be a widow. Then you remember something. You haven't seen the car yet. Must still be at the junkyard. In a weird way you're curious, want to see what it looks like. You don't have any idea.

You take the next exit, loop around and glide back on. See a hitchhiker holding a sign for BC, slow down to look, but pass him by. Too dangerous. Back track a few miles then slow down when you get near the city. You can't exactly remember where the junk yard is, but you know it's on the right side of the road near a little bridge. Slow down. There.

Pull in the gravel driveway. All the floodlights are on but the office is closed. You get out of the car and the lights are so bright they make you squint. RESCUE

TOWING AND STORAGE the sign says, above a small building with two large windows. Three tow trucks parked in front and a huge, fenced-in lot behind. Maybe you could climb the fence. Look up to see barbed wire coiled all around the top. Jesus, like some concentration camp. You're a little afraid but your adrenaline is flowing and you've got energy in your hands, your legs. You walk around the perimeter of the fence and remember that hitchhiker. Hope he doesn't walk this far and see your car.

At the back side behind some brush you see a hole in the fence, big enough for kids to break in and maybe you can squeeze through it too. It's one of those cyclone fences with the stupid plastic slats woven in and out of the wires like a giant brown basket. You squeeze through and look around.

Your shoes crunch on the gravel and an odor of dust rises. Hundreds of cars, a lot for the dead and dying, the stolen, the abandoned, the illegally parked. Everything filmed with sheer gray dust. One after another, arrayed in rows like tombstones in a cemetery. Each one dented, crumpled, windshields broken, tires flat and doors twisted off at strange angles. You walk down the first aisle, a little bit afraid. Your footsteps sound loud, conspicuous. All sorts of cars, a station wagon with two flat tires, a truck with its motor pushed into the dashboard, a convertible with one side caved in and a shoe on the seat. You think about all the people hurt in these cars. All the ones who died. You imagine explosions, people trapped in burning vehicles, but you keep going, around the first corner and up the second aisle. You want to find your car. You see a blue metallic one, a 280 Z like yours was, but it's got different plates. Its rear window is cracked like a jigsaw puzzle.

Down the third aisle. You stop when you see it. Your plates, your car, but it looks so bad you can't believe it. You tremble and cry out. The car roof is folded up like a tent. You step closer and look in the left side where the window was, but there isn't enough light to see much inside. You notice three beer cans on the floor behind his seat and you remember that you were on your way to a movie. The left side of the car is completely shoved in, you see flecks of red paint on the ridges. Run your fingers along one of the dents. You were hit by a red car.

Tears fill your eyes. What he must have looked like. How funny that you weren't badly hurt. You sit on the hood and cry aloud, wiping your face on your jacket sleeve. You feel so guilty. Sometimes, before, you almost even wished he was dead. Well he's dead now. Now you can sing all you want, spend money, plant your stupid trees — all the freedom you wanted is yours. You wished him away. Pound your feet down hard on the hood, hear more glass fall out of the windshield. You wince. You're ashamed that you'd called the lawyer but you had no way of knowing. You say Michael's name. "I'm sorry," you say aloud, crying. You sit and whimper for a while. There's a cool breeze from the ocean and you can hear the cars on the highway.

Wait a minute. He's sucking you into it again. You have nothing to be sorry for. That son of a bitch was always after you, always monitoring, always perfecting. Like the way he said you were getting fat after Max was born. You lift up your right leg and with the heel of your boot you kick the window in. Jagged glass splatters all over his seat. The day he bought this stupid car he said he'd never let you drive it. Only gave in weeks later when he got sick of driving you to the grocery store. You kick in more glass, kick off the little pieces until there's nothing there

but a big hole. How much you admired him at first — his intellect, his self-confidence. How you worked to please him and all you did was mold yourself to his idea of perfection. Spit it out: you hated him.

You're trembling a little but you feel relieved at the same time. Almost feel like laughing. Slide off the hood and look around. The lights are so bright it's impossible to see beyond them. You kick up a little gravel as you walk back. Breathe deeply. You're glad you made yourself come here.

You drive back home, pass the hitchhiker again. Barely notice him this time. You follow a camper into the city and up the hill to your neighborhood, turn and stop at the store. You're really hungry now. Pick up one of those frozen pies and some milk. Grab a bag of Oreo cookies. If Marian's still up she might be hungry too.

Pull in the driveway and see that all the lights are out except a small one in the living room. The door's unlocked, you go in and toss your jacket on a chair. She's on the couch with some mending in her lap — one of Max's shirts. She jerks open her eyes and acts like she's been awake the whole time.

"Hi Marian," you say, "I brought home a pie. Let's go into the kitchen and I'll heat it up."

While the pie's in the oven you dump the Oreos into a bowl and grab a few. Shove them into your mouth.

"Have a nice drive, Honey?" she asks.

"Sure," you say. Hope she doesn't ask where you went. Get the pie out and cut two huge pieces. Pour some milk. Too bad there's no whipped cream.

"Where'd you go, down to the beach?" she asks.

"No," you say. "I went to the church and prayed."

"Looks like it did you a world of good."

The truth is you haven't stepped into a church since the day you married Michael, and won't again until his funeral. You wonder what will bring you there next. Maybe your mother's death. Maybe Marian's. Maybe a million years from now you'll get married again.

"What did you do, Marian?"

"I gave Max a bath, then I went through his clothes and sorted them. I washed some things and hung them out to dry. I'm just now mending a few shirts."

"That's nice," you say. "That helps."

—Julie Brown