

The Chariot

Don's phone vibrated on the table between us, causing the remnant ice in my glass to clink. He silenced it without looking at the screen and continued to wax on about the dismal condition of the prison we'd just left while I picked at the cold fries on my plate. Don had been a civil rights attorney for more than thirty years; I'd been one for about six months. And while I admired his passion, I often wondered how I was going to pay off my student loans if we never worked for a client who actually paid us.

Don's phone vibrated again. "Sorry about that," he said, turning it over to see who had called. His brow knitted, but he silenced it. "It's my wife, Sarah. I'll call her back when we leave. She's probably wondering what time we'll be home."

"It'll take what, six hours?" I asked.

"Seven," he responded, stretching his mouth wide, teeth on full display, in a grimace designed to make me laugh.

"Yikes," I said, laughing on cue, as he settled our lunch bill.

As we walked out of the restaurant, Don's phone vibrated for a third time. He dug it out of his pocket, throwing me the car keys. "Give me a minute," he said, looking down at his phone.

I climbed into the passenger seat of the car, closed my eyes, and dreamed of swapping my pencil skirt for sweatpants the moment I walked through my front door. What on earth were we going to talk about for the next *seven* hours? Don had been a dream boss. He was kind and patient. He even made me feel like I had something to contribute despite my lack of experience; but he was old enough to be my dad, and after three days of driving through rural Virginia, eating every meal together, it felt like we'd exhausted all topics of polite conversation.

After a few minutes, Don climbed into the driver's seat. Instead of moving to start the car, he just sat there, staring blankly ahead. "You alright?" I asked after a minute passed.

Don slowly turned towards me, as if he'd just remembered there was someone else in the car. "It's, um, my daughter," he said trailing off.

"Anna?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "It's the strangest thing. She's dead."

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I brought my hand to my mouth to stop myself from audibly gasping; my eyes instantly stung with the threat of tears. “What happened?” I croaked through my hand.

“I don’t know,” Don said calmly. “They are taking her to the medical examiner now. It’s the strangest thing,” he said, trailing off again.

I sat with my mouth agape, unsure of what to say next, tears dampening my cheeks. *Stop it*, I ordered myself, wiping the tears away before Don had a chance to see them. The man had just received the worst news imaginable, and *I* was the one crying? I dug my sunglasses out of my purse to conceal my wet eyes. I needed to say something, to tell him how sorry I was for his loss, to tell him how painful I know this must be. But what did I know about the pain of losing a child? I was twenty-five; I’d just graduated from law school. Children weren’t even on my radar. No, there was nothing I could say to take away Don’s pain. I needed to do something.

“Don, get out of the car,” I said, a bit too forcefully. “I’m driving you home.”

Hour One

Don was a music aficionado. Every time we got in a car together, which was often, Don had a carefully curated playlist ready to go. He loved all kinds of music, from country to punk to pop, and he didn’t only know which bands were touring or who had released a new album that year, he knew the story behind each song he played, old or new, often giving a preamble before he played it.

Now, we sat in silence, save for the hum of the engine. After we’d switched seats, gassed up, and reached the highway, I asked Don if he wanted any music. He’d responded with a simple “no,” and because I wasn’t sure if he meant, no, he didn’t have a request or no, the idea of playing music at a time like this was too painful, I took his response to mean that all music was off limits.

Don sat eerily still in the passenger seat. He stared out the window, silently watching the Blue Ridge Mountains rise and fall, as I sped ten miles over the speed limit, trying to get him home as quickly as possible without risking a speeding ticket. Every now and then, his phone would buzz to life, and he’d take the call, responding flatly with a “yes” or “no” or “are you

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sure?” Then, he’d lean his head back and look out to the blur of blue and violet peaks, softened by fog, as if the mountains themselves were exhaling.

Hour Two

“Do you have any plans this weekend?” Don asked, breaking the long silence.

“What?” I answered, sure I hadn’t heard him right.

“Do you have plans, this weekend?” Don asked again. “Please. I need to get out of my head for a bit.”

So, I told him about Eric, the guy I started dating a couple weeks ago. I told him we had dinner plans tomorrow, but I wasn’t sure where we were going because Eric wanted it to be a surprise. I told him what I hadn’t told anyone, that I thought Eric might be the one, that even though it was new and I was scared and it was complicated because he was going through a divorce, he was the first guy I’d been out with in a long time that I felt a genuine connection with.

Don smiled. “I met Sarah when I was going through a divorce,” he said.

“Really?” I asked. “How did you know she was the one?”

“People always think its sparks or fireworks,” Don said, “but it’s not. It’s steadiness. It’s safety. You finally feel like you don’t have to perform, like you don’t have to prove anything anymore.” He paused, closing his eyes, as if trying to unearth a memory. “They’re the person you want to reach for in the worst moments of your life, when the world feels unrecognizable,” he said, a tear sliding down his cheek. “They’re the person you want beside you, not to fix it, but to bear the unbearable with you.” Don stopped, unable to continue. I reached over and took Don’s hand in mine as the first sob ripped through him.

Hour Three

“No, no, no, no, no,” Don said into his phone, shaking his head. “I told you; Anna didn’t have a heart condition.” He listened to the hum of the person on the other line. “She’s only twenty years old for Christ’s sake!” he said incredulously.

More humming.

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“What signs? What are you implying?”

Hum.

“You don’t think I know my own daughter’s medical history?”

Hum.

“NO.”

Hum. Hum.

“YOU’RE NOT LISTENING TO ME,” he yelled, as the call disconnected. Don looked at his phone as though the phone itself was responsible for the bad news he’d just received. Then, he slammed it against the glove compartment, over and over and over, until thin white lines spread across the screen in a mosaic pattern.

“Don,” I said, hoping I was loud enough to break through the storm inside his head, “you’re going to need that later to reach Sarah.” He paused mid-swing, eyes still feral, and slowly placed the shattered phone into the cupholder between us. Then, he closed his eyes.

Hour Four

“She called me,” Don said, eyes still closed.

“Who?” I asked, not having heard his phone buzz in some time. I assumed Don had fallen asleep. Almost an hour had passed, and he remained in the same resigned position he’d assumed since the phone incident.

“Anna. She called me last night, and I didn’t answer,” he said.

“Oh,” was all I could muster in response.

“I was preparing for our meeting,” he said. “I thought, I’ll call her back today.” He turned towards me, his eyes wild, the desperation in his voice rising, “what if she called to tell me something was wrong? What if she was sick and didn’t know what to do? I would have told her to go to the hospital. I would have told her to call 911. I would have called 911. I would have driven home, through the night, to be with her. I could have done something. I could have helped her. Maybe they could have caught it before...”

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“Don, you didn’t know. You couldn’t know,” I said, my sunglasses no match for the fresh tears streaming down my face in warm, uneven paths.

“I should have answered,” he repeated, closing his eyes again.

Hour Five

Two more hours, I told myself, as hints of civilization started to reappear, including a rest stop that it physically pained me to pass without stopping. My back was stiff; I had a headache from crying; and my bladder was threatening to burst, but I didn’t dare say a word. I was not stopping this car until we reached Richmond.

The sun had just started to set when Don said, “are you close with your dad?”

Now, *that* was a loaded question. “It’s complicated,” I responded, cautiously. It seemed cruel to tell a man who had just lost his daughter that I thought my dad was kind of a jerk. I didn’t hate my dad, exactly, but it was a relationship that continued out of mutual obligation rather than affection.

“How so?” he asked, not accepting my vague response.

“Well,” I said, pausing to search for the right words, “we’ve never really gotten along. He’s not the, uh, warmest person. He’s not easygoing, like you,” I added.

Don’s shoulders shook. *Oh no*, I thought. I shouldn’t have said anything. But then, the shakes gave way to laughter, exploding from Don’s body in fits and bursts of guffaws. “Sorry,” he choked. “I’m sorry. It’s just, if Anna ever heard someone call me ‘easygoing,’ she’d lose her mind.” He bent over, slapping his knee, as tears filled his eyes. His laughter reverberated through the car, too contagious not to join in. “She calls me ‘grumpy monkey’ when I’m cross.” Then, in an instant, his face changed. “Called,” he corrected himself. His shoulders started to shake again, but this time, he wasn’t laughing.

Hour Six

“Have you ever heard the song, ‘Tears in Heaven’?” Don asked.

“By Eric Clapton?” I responded.

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“Yes, that one,” Don said. “Did you know Clapton wrote it after his son died? He was four years old. He fell out of an apartment building window.”

“That’s horrible,” I said, not sure what to say.

“I think Clapton was trying to accept the uncertainty of death. Of not knowing what really happened to his son after he died. Was his son in Heaven? Would his son remember him? Would his son still feel his love so far away from him?” Don paused, contemplating, “what do you do with all that love, the love you have for someone, when they’re suddenly unreachable? When you can’t touch them or hold them or comfort them? Where does the love go? How do you go on living without them?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You just do.”

“I don’t want to forget her,” he said.

“You won’t,” I said.

“I don’t want her to forget me,” he said.

“She won’t,” I said.

Hour Seven

Don had been on the phone for a while, making the necessary arrangements with the mortuary and checking in on Sarah’s wellbeing. I toned it out as best I could, trying to give him some semblance of privacy.

“Next exit,” Don said, breaking me out of my trance. “That’s me.”

“I thought we’d never make it,” I said, unable to hide my relief.

“You’re telling me,” Don chuckled. “Thank you,” he said, more seriously. “For everything.”

“You don’t have to—” I started to respond.

“I do,” he interrupted. “I couldn’t have made it without you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, choking up.

As we pulled up to his house, Sarah appeared in the doorway. Before I’d even put the car in park, Don was running to meet her, collapsing into her arms. I opened the trunk, removed his

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suitcase, and set it in front of the garage. Then, I got back in the car without saying goodbye, leaving them to finally grieve together as a family.

As I backed out of the driveway, I felt every emotion I'd bottled up over the last seven hours catch up to me. Tears flooded my eyes faster than I could wipe them away, making the road disappear in fragments. I had to keep going. I couldn't let them see me like this. But as soon as I turned the corner, as soon as I was out of their sight, I pulled to the side of the road and parked. Finally, I let the weight of the day wash over me. I let the sobs rack my body. I let the animalistic sounds tear through the silent car. I let the snot and spit and tears leak from every orifice. I'm not sure how long I sat there allowing myself to mourn for Don and his family, for a man I'd met only six months ago, but at some point, my tears started to slow, my breath started to regulate, and I could see the road in front of me again.

I restarted the car, remembering the sweatpants that were waiting for me. But first, I needed to make a phone call. I dialed and waited as the phone rang.

"Hello?" said a voice I hadn't heard in while.

"Dad? It's Mia," I said.