

Remember

My father is explaining how the cell phone company owns all of your personal information. "They write those plans in legal jargon," he says, "so you won't understand that your records belong to them. They own everything on the phone. All your photographs, any documents you've opened. Your accounts, every password. If you lose your phone they can steal all your money."

"Who can steal all your money?" my mother asks. "The phone company?"

"Hackers within it."

"Dad," I say, "that is categorically untrue. Having a cell phone does not mean--"

But my mother is shaking her head no at me. "Jake," she says again, "the ice cream. Basement freezer."

"You want ice cream?"

"Yes. Please. Bring it up."

This is the third time in five minutes, and as he finally rises and shuffles down the stairs she lifts her eyes to the ceiling. "Will he come back with it?" she asks the light fixture.

My keys are in hand already. "I've got to go, Mom. No ice cream for me."

"Well, no ice cream for anyone anyway," she says a beat after the downstairs TV suddenly blares on.

This time I notice her earrings.

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A pattern has been established and I cannot seem to make myself turn away. The first time I saw them was accidental, my recent Friday evening ritual being to dine alone at the neighbourhood bistro they happened to choose. I like to sit, wallowing, at the very back corner table, obscured by the jutting bar and ever-occupied stools.

When they entered, I did not rise. I thought absently that the woman only looked like my mother. My mother rarely leaves the house in the evenings. My mother rarely leaves the house without my father. And yet. And yet here she was with a man I did not know. Absorbed in their conversation, they did not glance in my direction. That time I noticed her necklace.

Now it is some weeks later and in they come again. Friday, 8 p.m., like clockwork. I know where they'll sit, I know how to hide. She is wearing red. Red. And kitten heels. His hand grazes hers and she is laughing. Earlier, she would have had time to clear the kitchen table, to load the dishwasher, to change into this smart outfit once my father descended downstairs. To call out goodbye to him. To slip out the front door, red outfit and kitten heels unremarked.

Or perhaps on this particular Friday evening she claims a migraine, waits in their bedroom until her escape knowing with certainty that my father will be down for the count in front of the television before long. That he will fall asleep in his threadworn recliner only to rise again for bed well past midnight.

How is this possible? The mother I know does not have the bravado to sneak out silently like a defiant, grounded teenager. Nor is she capable of weaving a carefully worded deception each time. And yet. And yet - can what's said or unsaid by her even really matter?

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"It doesn't matter," I remember my father saying. "You're not going unless I take you."

My older sister, Julie, and I - children then - were out of sight playing in the adjacent room. Julie had tilted her head up, putting me in mind of old Arthur when he caught a scent on the wind. "Let's go outside on the swings," she'd said. But I had shrugged Just wait, maybe they'll stay in the kitchen.

We heard "It's a funeral, I need to go."

"You can't possibly think you're going by yourself. You'd have to navigate two airports and a taxi to the city. Alone.

There's no way you'd manage that when you can't even drive five minutes on the highway without hyperventilating."

"I won't be flying."

"Correct. I'm not paying plane fare when we have a car."

"I was planning to take a Greyhound to Moncton, then Marcia will get on there and we'll travel together. It's our cousin's funeral, you don't need to come. And next day there's going to be a reunion dinner with all us girls. Just the girls. I haven't seen them in so long; there'd be nothing for you to do."

"Driving you there is what I'd do. Saving us airfare or bus fare and keeping you from getting lost in Montreal is what I'd do."

"Jake, it's not - Thank you for always being willing to drive me anywhere, I appreciate that. But I just - I'll be safe, I'll stick with Marcia, no sightseeing. We'll spend time with family. It's much simpler if you stay here. With the kids. That's how you can help. I'll only be gone a few days and I'll leave dinners in the freezer."

Nothing. The radiator began warming up, clanking for a long moment. Finally Julie and I heard our father's chair scrape across the floor as he rose. "Enough," he said. "Make arrangements to take the kids to my mother's, pack your stuff. I will drop everything this week so we - we - can go. You should be there so I'll make it happen for you."

Mom had said softly "I'm not a child", and then we heard the sound of something substantial being slammed against wood.

The word *Ingrate*.

The car roaring out of the driveway.

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Who would have expected, more than three decades later, to see her as she is this evening? In red, enthralled, giggling, one hand reaching across the table every so often to give her companion's bicep a playful shove. He must be very funny because I have never seen her laugh this much. She toys with her necklace, leans forward, wiggles one foot out of a shoe. She is, incredibly, relaxed.

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My father once asked why was she so incredibly uptight about what he had done. "It's one hundred per cent better," he had said. "Someone might actually hire you now."

I had seen my mother draw a breath, exhale it slowly. "But you didn't ask," she had said. "You didn't ask if you could change it."

My father tapped the screen where her resume was displayed. "Look, we both know you're afraid of this beast. Wordprocessing

isn't the same as using a typewriter. See here, how I bolded the headings? And I deleted your Hobbies section. *Hobbies* makes you sound like a high schooler. *Reading. Trying new recipes. Making crafts with my children?* No employer would take you seriously."

"Jake, I'm applying to be a cashier at a No Frills grocery, not to be one of your execs. I got a job hunting book from the library and copied a sample resume from it."

"Well, I'm telling you it wasn't going to cut it. I've been hiring people for years, haven't I? I think I know a standout resume versus mediocre. This is what I do."

"Yes, but--"

"Your last job was before Julie was born, that's a big gap. You need magic to pull off even a semi-captivating resume at this point. I'm not saying it's through any fault of your own, don't be defensive," he said, waving his hand. "But this is the reality. Any housewife's resume would need magic in this day and age."

My mother had looked down at her feet. "I'm not being defensive. The point is, you should have asked me."

"The point is, it looks better, you're welcome. Also, I don't need to ask if I can open files on a computer I paid for. Jesus. Go back to the typewriter if you don't think you need my help."

He had clapped his hands on her shoulders then, jerked her around to face the door. "Out," he said, and with that had sealed her loss. The Smith-Corona was confined in its case and exiled to the top shelf of the closet; any required typing henceforth his domain. Which, over time, morphed into his autonomy over any online accounts. Email, banking, social media.

To be fair, he would always show her the photos posted by their children and grandchildren, even angling the monitor so she could better see them. And he would print e-mail messages from friends and family to read with her over their morning coffee.

For years they had especially enjoyed The Daily Joke forwarded by an old high school friend. "He doesn't write the jokes himself," my father had said when Mom couldn't remember Alex ever having been so funny. "He downloads them from the internet. You really thought he wrote them?" Then, as she was turning crimson, "I'm not laughing at you, I'm laughing with you."

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But the joke is on him, I guess; all passwords having been grudgingly, fearfully surrendered to my mother a little over a year ago. The long teaching sessions are over; his carefully

hoarded knowledge of computers and finances, insurance and lawnmower maintenance, duly transferred to her.

At last my mother possesses her own credit card and cell phone, knows where to take the car for repairs and how to fill the tank. She can use the computer to email her grandchildren, access bank accounts, and make dinner reservations for someplace where she can wear a red dress.

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I have decided that tonight is the night I will wait for her at the house. Enraptured by each other and a shared slice of Black Forest cake, my mother and her friend do not notice me walk past on my way out.

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Julie's car is in the driveway when I arrive at my parents' and this is unusual because she has Yoga on Friday evenings. No one hears me enter but there are voices coming from the den.

"She wouldn't have told you that, Dad," Julie says; then emerges from the room putting a finger to her lips when she sees me. She ushers me into the kitchen. "He's really bad tonight. My phone kept ringing in class, and when I finally called him back, he starts begging me to put Mom on. I just couldn't get him off the phone. I came over to calm him down."

"Oh. That's not good."

"No. He keeps insisting Mom said she's babysitting for me, but David's home so I don't know what he's talking about. He's so confused. I really hate this."

"Jule, I'm here - don't worry, go on home. Mom will be in any second."

But already Julie has turned to go; she can never leave this place fast enough. "Well, thank God. I *told* him Mom must be walking with you. She stop at the Kwik-Way?" she asks, but the door shuts behind her before I can reply.

With Julie gone, I notice the radiator clanking and another almost imperceptible sound. Someone is crying.

"Hey, I say peeking into the den. "Hey."

He keeps his head in his hands. "I don't know where she is. I don't remember."

"Well." I pull a chair up next to him, turn off the computer monitor. "I'll wait with you. We'll wait together."

"She's so pretty. Very pretty. I always tease her in Math but she's too shy to say anything."

I say, "Teased."

"She's scared of her own shadow. I'd do anything for her so she doesn't have to worry all the time. Where is she? Where does she go?"

And suddenly the surprising-enough trickle of tears becomes a flood. He is sobbing. My father. "She doesn't need me anymore. She won't let me do anything at all. I can't even carry her things now. I try but it's no good, I get it all wrong. Where does she go?"

Someone is opening the front door. I picture my mother stepping out of her shoes, placing them in the closet. It is taking too long.

Finally she is in the den with us. My father's chest is heaving, his face still in his hands.

"I saw you leaving the restaurant," she says to me, "and so I came home to--"

I laugh, "So you were there? After all? How did we miss each other, I told you I'd be at the very back, I waited forever but I never saw you, that's so funny, it was just too crowded, I guess, let's pick a different place next week."

But she is not listening. She is staring at her confused, weeping husband; the corners of her mouth turning very slightly upward.

"Jake," she says, "I'm home now. I'll take care of you."