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PULSE

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Heart Sounds Press



Stories

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"The writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in 'The Farmer in the Dell' standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes. You're outside, but you see things up close through your binoculars. Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are..."

-Anne Lamott

What's in a
Name
by Jim
Sullivan

Clip Joint
by Lad
Moore

Dating, Relating,
& Sex
by Elizabeth
Crane

Rose Petals
& Prune
Juice
by Bradley
Silvius

The
Shakespeare
Follies
by Joseph
Coroniti

The
Chuckles
and Me
by Patricia
Ann Florio

NEW!
Wind Chill by
Roselee Blooston

every teenage girl.
Their new song
Runaround became a
hit and because they
were from my
neighborhood of South
Brooklyn we were
going to be the first to
witness their singing
debut at a local candy
store. I remember how
excitement filled the
air: The Chuckles were
coming!

Wind Chill by Roselee Blooston

He kept his door
closed, especially when
he wasn't there, a
perfectly normal action
for a fifteen year old
boy, but one that sent
waves of confusion
through Esther
whenever she passed
it, usually a dozen
times a day. Her mental
nausea did not come
from the usual fears
that kept parents of
adolescents awake at
night: the threat of
drugs, sex, chat room

predators, alcohol. No, Zachary just wasn't that kind of kid, never had been, never would be. He was smart, honest, sensible and mature. This wasn't merely a mother's delusion. Everyone described him that way, his teachers, the minister, the friends who trusted him as a sitter, his peers who looked to him for leadership, the baseball coach. You took one look at Zac, his wavy brown hair shading his serious brow, his thoughtful mouth, the listening eyes and you instantly knew this was no kid, this was a young man waiting patiently for time to pass, for permission to come into his own.

Wind Chill

by Roselee Blooston © 2001

He kept his door closed, especially when he wasn't there, a perfectly normal action for a fifteen year old boy, but one that sent waves of confusion through Esther whenever she passed it, usually a dozen times a day. Her mental nausea did not come from the usual fears that kept parents of adolescents awake at night: the threat of drugs, sex, chat room predators, alcohol. No, Zachary just wasn't that kind of kid, never had been, never would be. He was smart, honest, sensible and mature. This wasn't merely a mother's delusion. Everyone described him that way, his teachers, the minister, the friends who trusted him as a sitter, his peers who looked to him for leadership, the baseball coach. You took one look at Zac, his wavy brown hair shading his serious brow, his thoughtful mouth, the listening eyes and you instantly knew this was no kid, this was a young man waiting patiently for time to pass, for permission to come into his own.

But the door was an affront. Esther couldn't help taking it personally. They had always been open with each other. When Zac was a toddler he had followed her everywhere, as if the umbilical cord was still attached. It took six months of pleading to get him to step away from the bathroom door when "Mommy had to go."

"But why can't I come in?" he would whimper.

"Because I need privacy when I go to the bathroom, Zac."

"Why? You come in when I go." He maintained perfect logic as he slammed his whole body against the door.

"That's because sometimes you need me to help you." Esther knew full well that she was setting herself up for what followed.

"Don't you need me to help you, Mommy?" She sighed, flushed and opened the door. There sunk on the floor was her wet-cheeked sweetheart. She took his hand and walked him to the sink. He mounted the step-stool and reached for the soap.

"Here, Mommy, use this."

"Thank you, honey."

"Don't forget to wash both sides." He was beaming. Zac loved to help.

"I won't." He handed her the towel. She kissed his perfect

brow. He was her baby, her little man.

Now things between them were much more complicated. She didn't want to buy the obvious Oedipal explanations: separation from an all-consuming connection, rejection of the female within, sudden discomfort with the sensuous pull of a mother's touch, the absolute necessity of turning outward and away from the one woman whose love could destroy him if he did not reject it first. But there were irrefutable signs of them all.

The past two years had been filled with hazards. It took her a very long time to believe her ears when she heard his voice on the phone, unmistakably male, the sweet bird-like trill gone forever. Esther had felt queasy when Zac's wiry arms pushed her away from an unthinking after-school hug. She had recoiled, wounded by the sound of a hostile, "What?" as she pecked him on the cheek in the morning. But she had accepted the new boundaries. After all, there was nothing worse than their mutual embarrassment when in all innocence, Esther had called Zac's attention to the "newspaper smudge" on his upper lip. No sooner were the words out of her mouth and before reddened horror washed over his face, did she gasp, wholly remorseful and truly shocked at the depth of her own denial.

"Oh, Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean...Oh God, I'm such an idiot."

"Just stop, Mom, stop, don't!" He used his mortification like a

bludgeon. From that moment on, she silently agreed to whatever made him comfortable. He was going through overwhelming changes even if he couldn't put a label on them, so she would change too. She would muzzle herself, break her old assumptions about what they were to each other. The rules had changed overnight. She would give him space. She would respect his need for independence.

But there were long stretches, usually alone in her car, when the thought of him, now and before, would suffocate her in an avalanche of grief and longing for the sweetness of his neck, the chubbiness of his baby toes. And she would cry, silently, dryly, at the cruelty of loving a son.

When Zac was three years old his father left. It was February in Philadelphia, hardly motorcycle weather. But Gus never took wind chill seriously. He strapped a duffle bag to the back of the bike, donned his leathers and drove away. Zac stayed glued to the picture window in the living room, clutching his toy cycle, the one they'd put in his stocking that year. Esther had to pry him from the pane, leaving little donuts of nose and mouth on the glass. She had known for a while that Gus was leaving. For at least two weeks the house had been unnaturally quiet, like it too had given up. At least when they argued they were engaged, the struggle still alive. She thought she was fighting for something when she pushed him to get yet another job, to stop drinking, to get help with his depression. Most of the time though, she was only postponing the inevitable. Ever since Zac's birth, Gus had been spinning out of control and Esther had withdrawn further and further into herself, protecting what was left of her strength against the

day when she alone would be responsible for their son.

After a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies, comfort food only, Esther sat Zac on her lap and told him the truth. "Daddy's not coming back." Instead of asking, "Why not?," Zac studied her face as if she too might turn her back, jump on a bike and take off.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, honey."

"Are you sad?"

"Yes, baby, I am."

He ran his fingers down her cheeks. "Then how come you're not crying?"

Esther stroked his then sandy hair, smooth and wavy like his Dad's. "I don't know."

"Don't you want him to come back?"

Esther cupped his hands inside hers, a prayer within a prayer.
"I want us to be happy."

Esther did laundry twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Zac knew the drill. If he didn't want his Mom to enter his room he would have to be responsible for bringing his dirty cloths and sheets out (especially the sheets). Usually this worked fine for both of them. But lately he'd been forgetting. Laundry just wasn't on his top ten list of things to do.

Esther's friends thought she was crazy. Lucy, her best and oldest friend dating all the way back to junior high Home Ec class, had told her to stop babying him.

"Have him do his own laundry! Nan and Elliot do," Lucy chided over coffee one morning in her newly-renovated state-of-the art kitchen. Nan was twelve, Elliot sixteen. Her kids were always ahead of the curve: first to go to sleep-away camp, first to have a part-time job, first to do their own laundry. Lucy was the most organized and persuasive Mom she knew. Then again she could afford to be. Simon was still supporting her.

"I don't mind doing the laundry" Esther sighed, "I mind his shutting me out."

"He's not shutting you out, he's taking you for granted."

There's a difference."

Lucy, ever the voice of reason, had perspective that Esther sorely lacked. Esther poured another teaspoon of watery skim milk into her cup. She missed half-and-half, but lately she'd been gaining a pound for every cookie crumb.

"That's true, but isn't he supposed to take me for granted? I'm his mother after all."

"Listen to you, you sound like a talking doormat."

It was Wednesday and Esther replayed this conversation as she approached Zac's door. He had not even grunted "Bye" this morning as he dashed into the cold for the five block walk to school.

"Zip up your jacket!" she called after him. It was futile, but sometimes she couldn't help herself. "The wind chill is minus 2!"

Zac threw her a look of utter disdain and bellowed back, "There's no such thing!" She shook her head and closed the storm door as tightly as its warped frame would allow. With every retort he became more and more his father's son.

Esther walked down the narrow hall, stuffy with dry heat. She hesitated as she paused in front of his door, toying with the idea that she could skip his room for today. But he had forgotten to strip his bed, two weeks in a row. She would have to go in or risk condemnation by the health department. The sign had been up since middle school: "Danger-Police Line-Do Not Cross." He had taken it off a tree after a storm hit one of the power lines down the street. When he first posted it she thought, how cute, how clever. Now it scared her. She believed it. Warning. Danger.

She turned the knob slowly, eyes on the floor, as if she might suddenly be struck blind by the very act of invading his sacred space and uncovering the profane secrets of her son's private world. The floor was carpeted with clothing, dirty and clean, sweat socks living down to their name, inside-out tee shirts, wadded jeans, flannel pajamas marking a plaid road to the bed. Esther threw it all into the blue plastic laundry basket under his bed that he had ingeniously turned into the perfect repository for his collection of Mad Magazines. "Fire hazard," she muttered as she moved the three year-old stack of sophomoric humor to the bedside table. The bed was made, barely. Lumpy in the middle. He never did know how to smooth a sheet and the red, white and blue geometric quilt oddly misaligned, a diamond on the platform frame. Oh well. After years of threatening to replace his sheets with a sleeping bag if he didn't learn how to make hospital corners, she gave up, figuring that it must be some kind of allergic reaction, this inability/unwillingness to master domestic skills.

This was one among many adolescent behaviors for which

Esther lacked a frame of reference. Not only was she the single mother of an only child but her upbringing made secrecy and disobedience, even the mild variety exhibited here, a foreign country. Her mother and father would not have tolerated a poorly-made bed or a closed door. She was regularly grilled as to the minutiae of her daily schedule, her friends' habits and her grades on every test and quiz. The contents of her purse, her desk drawer and her closet were public. It was not that her parents didn't trust her, though that was the message Esther received; no, it was that the parent-child relationship lacked all boundaries. A social worker she once saw after Gus left called her upbringing a classic example of an "enmeshed" family. No one, not her brothers, her parents nor herself knew where one of them ended and the others began, at least not until the children reached their twenties and a furious and wrenching post-adolescent rebellion nearly destroyed them all. In the aftermath of this storm Esther swore that if she ever had children she would not do to them what was done to her. She would allow them their autonomy, even encourage it and above all, respect their privacy.

Esther scanned the desk, a yard from the bed. "This is where he did his homework!" She was both appalled and in awe. Five years ago, when Zac was finishing grade school, she bought him this "Ikea special," easy-to-assemble-if-you-read - Swedish student desk as a kind of "graduation" present. It took them three hours to put it together. Zac was thrilled to have his very own workstation. But Esther had missed the comfort of watching him do his assignments at their chrome and laminate 50's style kitchen table while she made dinner. Every so often he would ask her a question about a math problem or a vocabulary word and she would steer him in the

right direction. He had welcomed her help then. Now, interfering with homework was another taboo. She couldn't even ask him what he was studying without eliciting a world-weary eye-roll. Surveying the desk-top collage of pencils, pens, erasers, markers, post-it notes in rainbow colors, photographs of their life together, drawings of his favorite comic book characters, crumpled loose-leaf paper and CD's, she realized that separation truly began with this one piece of furniture. As soon as he had a space of his own to think, to dream, he shut the door and left his mother behind.

She picked up three crumpled pieces of paper and bent to toss them into the wicker wastebasket. Just as her fingers began to uncurl, releasing the rejected drafts she pulled back, her hand an angry fist, crushing the sheets to her chest as if they were a part of him she couldn't bear to let go. It was pointless to tell herself not to look, not to pry. She was there, wasn't she? She had already violated the inner sanctum. She had already committed the crime. "Be honest," she told herself, "this is what you came for." And slowly she unfolded the smallest ball and read.

"Je suis. Tu es. Il/elle et (a red line through this last). Il/elle est." She couldn't have helped him there. Esther had studied Spanish. She re-wadded the paper and threw it away, quickly moving on to number two. This was a yellow legal-size sheet with a list of names in alphabetical order: "Armand, Balthazar, Coriolanus, Darwin, Estragon, Fielding, Gustave, Hermione, Ione, Jasper and on and on all the way down to Zander." Esther laughed. She turned the paper over. Up-side down, on the back it said, "The Montebellagio-Ludwig Family, and below was a pen and ink drawing of a family

crest, an olive tree whose branches framed a Bavarian castle impaled on the tip of a mountain. Instead of two crossed swords, sat two crossed cannons, a sausage-like display of the family's might and Zac's wit. He hadn't changed that much, her goofy, talented son. All through his childhood he had invented characters, created worlds, populated comic books with the good, the bad and the hysterically ugly. She often thought in her guilt at not providing him with a sibling that he was substituting fictional families for the real one he lacked. But what if he was? Esther smiled again as she reluctantly deposited it in the wastebasket. She used to save every scrawl, no matter how incomplete. Guess this didn't meet with her son's high standards.

She almost forgot about the third piece of paper now sticking to her palm. She was so relieved at the insignificance of her first two finds that she blushed with embarrassment. What was she thinking? Zac was still Zac whether five or fifteen. She surprised herself. She was actually losing interest&emdash;his world was his. She didn't need anymore reassurance. He was all right. But then again, there was always good old-fashioned curiosity. "Leave no stone unturned," as Dad used to say. Esther passed the weightless ball to her left hand, cupping it gently. It was folded with the precision and complexity of origami and looked like it might take flight if the winds were favorable. She unfolded it carefully as if she were saving the wrapping from a beautiful gift. "Dear Dad, I'm not sure what I can say to you now. You say you're sorry but why should I believe you? You don't get it! I don't care anymore." Everything was crossed out with a pen slash that sliced through the paper. Esther gasped and sank into the blue denim beanbag chair in the middle of the room. She had never been able to get up out of that chair by herself. Zac would

find her there, stricken with guilt and terror. This would be his chance to wield power over her without mercy. He would tower over her with disgust. Without a hand extended or an explanation she would surely drown in that damned chair.

Esther had never forbidden Zac from contacting his father. But Zac took his cues from Gus and with the pathetic exception of a fifteen-dollar check on his son's birthdays and age-appropriate gifts at Christmas, Gus had taken himself completely out of Zac's life. Zac seemed to accept this. After the first couple of years, he rarely referred to Gus and lately, almost never. Their lives had become so self-contained, their conversations so self-referential that Esther had no warning. When she talked with Zac about their family, they both knew they were talking about each other.

After she managed to roll herself out of the chair and on to her knees, Esther literally crawled out of his room, still clutching the aborted letter. As she pulled herself to her feet just outside the doorway, her legs began to quiver. She hadn't been this scared since Gus left. Clearly Gus had been in touch with Zac without her knowledge. But when? How often? Had they actually seen each other? The letter implied that Gus had initiated the contact but it was possible that Zac had sought out his father. The boy's hurt and anger leapt off the page. He was venting twelve years of fury. Had another draft of the letter been sent? When? Esther knew that she wasn't going to get any answers from Zac. She could not confront him.

She went to the kitchen phone table. Her address book had

only four entries under "F": the Finches, Zac's grade school best friend's family who moved to Toronto when the boys turned ten, Dr. Ferrier, their dentist, Alice Felder, Gus's sister, the only one in his family Esther ever felt close to& emdash;she lived thirty miles from here just over the New Jersey border, and Gus. His entry was nearly two pages long, an abstract grid of cross-hatched blue and black pen lines and smudged pencil listing every address he'd had for the past dozen years. Actually, she knew it was only a partial list. There had been long periods when he didn't write or call and she would lose track, not really wanting to find him, pretending with each erasure that he was out of their lives for good. Then, after a phone call or a postcard, she would, with a nauseating mixture of reluctance and relief, add the new contact information. From Dayton to Tampa, from Baltimore to Portland, Gus never stayed more than a couple of years in one place. His life defined the phrase, "doing a geographic." The most recent entry was made a year and a half ago. Esther would be lucky to catch him; he was due for a change. The listing was only a P.O. Box in some small town in upstate New York. Caledonia. She couldn't imagine what he was doing up there. How much of a job market could there be? Esther called information.

"What city please?" Esther wasn't sure if she was talking to a machine or a human being, bored out of her mind. The voice was vacant, automatic.

"Caledonia."

"What listing?"

"Gus Felder. F-E-L-D-E-R."

"One moment please...." He wouldn't be unlisted. If he didn't want us to find him why did he send the postcard? It showed three puppies in a laundry basket. "Reminded me of Jake" was all it said. Jake was their first dog together, before they got married. Esther missed having a dog, but they weren't home enough to take care of one and she couldn't afford a walker.

"Hold for the number." Esther was perspiring even though it couldn't have been more than 65 degrees in the room. What was she doing? However neglectful Gus had been, he wasn't a bad person. He had a right to a relationship with Zac. Her son was old enough to make up his own mind. This was none of her business. She should stay out of it. They needed to work this out themselves. Zac would come to her if he had to. What could she say if she got Gus on the phone? Invite him for dinner? Act as a mediator as they battle out their blood feud? It was absurd. Bottom line: she was a coward. She knew it as she sat paralyzed, holding the number with the other hand on the phone. If she called Gus she would be admitting to both of them that she had been spying, that she hadn't any respect for either one of them. All these years she had harbored the belief that she, not Gus, had abandoned the marriage, that it was her fault that her son had no father, that she had ridden away on the motorcycle of motherhood as if it was all her little boy would ever need. Gus had merely acted out her intention. He started the engine. She drove him away. She put down the receiver, stuffed the number in her pocket and lay down on the living room couch.

That night at dinner, they sat over the lasagna in near-silence. Esther tried not to let on that anything was up. Zac had very sensitive radar. She must have been looking at him more than usual though, because Zac stopped mid-mouthful nearly spitting at her.

"What are you staring at?"

"Nothing." She bent over her plate. She had to handle this correctly. The stakes were too high.

"Ya, right." He answered with reflexive sarcasm, the easy perch from which all world-weary adolescents judged their parents. It drove Esther nuts.

"Don't take that tone with me, young man." Esther didn't like it when she became her mother, but she couldn't help herself.

Zac pushed away from the table, picked up his plate, still half-full, and practically threw it into the sink. "I've got homework to do." He tried to turn his back to her but couldn't help casting a hurt-little-boy-look over his shoulder. She knew this wasn't fair to him.

"I'm sorry, hon."

He shrugged, marginally satisfied that his mother could admit something. Many parents couldn't do that. She could see his confusion in the reluctance with which he left the room, slowly loping away like a wounded buck, hoping she'd call him back. She hadn't hidden her fear, and he wanted an explanation for it. The tension of withholding was unbearable.

Later that evening, she knocked on his door, carrying a peace&emdash;offering, his favorite cookies, oatmeal raisin and a tall glass of chocolate milk. "Need a break?"

He took the tray without making eye contact. "Thanks." His body blocked the door completely.

"Need anything else?"

"No, thanks." The door closed to a sliver of light.

"Zac?"

"Yes, Mom." He peeked at her with one huge brown eye. She could feel his breath.

"If you ever need to talk, I'm here." The eye scanned her up

and down, penetrating her like an x-ray.

"It's you who need to talk." Slowly and deliberately he opened the door.

Esther entered the inner sanctum. She hesitated before crossing the threshold, this time because Zac was watching her with his most penetrating gaze, noting every twitch, every glance. He had offered her the privilege of access and expected respect in return. Maybe he was just waiting for her to voice some knee-jerk reaction to his anti-housekeeping. The room felt inert with him in it, more a backdrop than a central symbol of his inner life. Zac backed up to his desk, now strewn with textbooks and papers, mid-homework. Esther stood in the center of the room and slowly rotated for a 360 degree view, taking in the epicenter of her son's existence, as if for the first time. She wobbled. "Sit down, Mom." Zac gestured to the bed, now covered with the blue-green flannel shirt he'd worn to school and a pair of lined jeans. He had on an oversized gray thermal shirt and the baggy flannel pants he wore as pajamas. He could fall asleep studying and be perfectly comfortable. It struck her that he'd make a terrific advertisement for LL Bean.

"Thanks." Esther sat on the edge of the bed, feet pressed together, body alert, on trial. She couldn't see his face clearly. He kept the ceiling light off, preferring to study by the desk light alone, which now created a halo around her angel boy. She smiled and involuntarily shook her head at the sentimentality of the image.

"What are you smiling at?" Zac still pounced on her whenever he thought she was making fun of him.

"My dopiness."

"I've got a history test tomorrow."

"Yes. Sorry." She started to get up. "It can wait."

Zac took a step towards her, his size 11 shoe dwarfing her tiny slippered feet. "No, it can't. You were really weird at supper. What's up?"

Esther brushed back the hair over her ears. She'd been meaning to get a haircut and color for the past two weeks, but just couldn't find the time. Her hours at the office had been longer than usual. Dr. Ryder had taken on a retiring doctor's practice and they were swamped with bronchitis, sore throats, ear infections and flu. She was exhausted. Maybe it was time to let herself go gray. After all, it wasn't as if her auburn of choice made her look thirty-five again.

"I've been thinking about your father."

Zac stood very still, hands in his pockets, eyes on the floor,

searching the braid of the hooked rug for a way out. The wind rattled against the storm windows. His was the coldest room in the house. She had wanted to turn it into an office, but Zac wouldn't budge. Like his father, Zac didn't mind the cold. He hadn't believed in wind chill either. "It's as cold as it is," he'd say. "20 degrees is 20 degrees, wind or no wind." Esther continued, "I've been thinking of giving him a call."

Zac looked at her and quickly away. He circled the bean bag chair. "Why?"

"It's been too long."

His face contorted, "Why now?"

"I think you two should spend some time together."

"I hate him! I never want to see him" Zac's fresh bass boomed filling the room with rage.

"No, Zac, no."

"YOU hate him! Why can't I?"

She reached for him, his hands still hidden in his pockets. "I

don't hate him, Zac."

"Yes, you do."

"No, no, I don't hate him. I'm sorry if I've led you to think that. I'm sorry I haven't given you a chance to know him."

"He doesn't want to know me."

"Why do you say that, Zac?"

"Because...because.... Zac struggled, gulping, drowning in feelings he could no longer suppress. "Because he's never tried to see me."

Zac's statement pierced both of them, sucking the air out of the room.

"That's partly my fault. He didn't want to see me. Didn't think I wanted him involved. Maybe he was right. I didn't encourage it. I didn't think I could handle seeing him, even for your sake. I'm sorry Zac."

"He should have come anyway." His voice was quieter now, the bellow transformed into a whine.

Zac cut her off without looking up from his book. "Close the door, please."

Esther sat in the living room replaying the last scene in her mind. Maybe she should have been more direct—let him know she had read the note. No, that would only have led to more resentment. She picked up the framed photographs on the side table, two black and white shots Gus had taken of Zac. He was two. It was only a few months before the split. They had been vacationing on Cape Cod. It was Zac's first trip to the ocean. He loved the dunes. On the left was Zac, reaching towards the dune grass, arms outstretched as if he were warming himself at a fire or compelling the reeds to rise before him. His whole chubby body bent with the rushes, his face intent, awed. On the right was a very different boy, a little soldier at the top of the dune, marching over the hill, leading his troops into battle, jaw set, eyes resolved. Together the pictures formed a composite—the sensitive stalwart.

She couldn't help projecting. What if she hadn't found the letter? What if she didn't make the call? Zac would probably tough it out, try to handle his Dad's overtures alone. He would swallow the hurt and guilt. He would grow to hate her. She would continue to be the barrier between him and his Dad. She knew what Lucy would say: trust yourself you're doing the right thing—don't second guess.

It was almost ten. Zac had not come out of his room. Esther

went to the phone and this time without hesitating, called. Each ring vibrated in the pit of her stomach.

"Hello." The voice was rough, deep and weary.

"Gus? It's Esther." The pause was split-second but real.

"Esther! Is everything okay? Zac's okay, isn't he?"

She didn't know why she was surprised by his concern. "Yes, yes, he's Fine. He'd never admit it, but I think he misses you."

Gus took this in and sighed. He was much sadder than she remembered. "I don't know. He doesn't want anything to do with me. I can't say I blame him."

So she was right. Gus had tried and failed. It was up to her now. "I thought if I called, if you came to see him& emdash;us, you& emdash;we& emdash;could work this out."

"You'd do that? You'd let me visit?"

This was far less satisfying than she had imagined. He sounded broken, rudderless. "Yes, Gus, he needs to know you. He'll be in college in a couple of years. It's now or never."

"College! God, Esther. About the money&emdash;"

"We're fine," she interrupted. He's a good student. He'll get a scholarship."

"I can help."

She had heard this before and didn't want to get pulled in.

If she started trusting him again and he followed his pattern, she'd never forgive him. He waited for her to answer. When she didn't, he said, "You have to let me."

There was something in his voice this time, something different. Maybe the dog postcard had meant what she'd thought, that he had regrets. She couldn't go half-way now, not after what she'd said to Zac. She would have to open herself up.

"We can talk about the money later. Would you like to speak to Zac?"

"Sure, ya, that'd be great." His voice tightened with fear.

They both took two quick shallow breaths, simultaneously, like the Lamaze partners they once were. But this time it was Esther who tried to prepare Gus. "He's got a big test tomorrow. He doesn't like to be disturbed when he's studying." Then Esther called over her shoulder. "ZAC! YOUR FATHER'S ON THE LINE. HE WANTS&emdash;"

"You don't have to shout, Mom. I'm right here." She swung around, nearly choking herself with the cord. He was standing in the archway between the living room and the hall. She had no idea how long he'd been there. His eyes were softer, all the rage drained out of them leaving only a grateful puppy stare. She thought again of the card and handed him the phone. He grabbed the receiver, almost swooping in a gesture so broad that it seemed to clear everything murky and uncertain out of their path and in a voice nearly as deep as his father's said, "Hello, Dad." She touched his shoulder and left the room.

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