

COLLISION

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AS WE'RE DRIVING past the high school this kid jumps in front of our car. He's standing there at the corner and as we come to it he leaps in front of the car and we hit him. Kathy's quick—she slams on the brakes as soon as she sees him. We're not going that fast anyway, and the kid just hits the hood with his hands and falls down. We get out and run around to the front and there he is, stretched out on his back looking up at the sky.

"Goddamn it!" he yells. Then he turns his head and looks at us and says, "I wish you'd been going a little faster."

"Are you crazy?" Kathy screams at him.

"He jumped in front of our car," I say. "I'd call that crazy." I kneel down next to the kid. I took a First Aid class once, but I don't remember anything about hitting someone with your car. "Are you hurt?" I ask him.

The kid thinks about it. He looks at his wrist. "I think my watch is broken," he says.

"Very funny." I stand up. My heart's still beating pretty fast, but then I remember the car and start checking the hood to see if he did anything to it.

Kathy's standing there with her hand on her chest, breathing hard. "What do we do now?" she asks me. "Should we call the police?"

"I can't even die right," the kid says. He's still lying on his back, but he's obviously not hurt.

Kathy and I look at each other. "It's the middle of the day," I say. "He should be in school. We should take him in to the principal's office. They'll know what to do." We've been at the doctor's all morning and I'm tired and hungry and one thing I don't need is this maniac kid on my hands. Kathy hesitates, though, and I can tell she's thinking something.

"Why do you want to die?" she says to the kid.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," I say. "Don't ask him that."

The kid sits up and looks down at the ground like he's never

thought about it. Then he lifts his head and gets this serious look on his face and holds out his hands like he's some kind of prophet and says, "Death is truth."

"What's your name?" Kathy asks him.

"Who cares?" I say. "Don't ask him any more questions. It's none of our business."

"Matt," the kid says.

"How old are you?" Kathy asks. I hate it when she ignores me.

"Seventeen."

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, like I'm some kind of moron.

I can't think of anything to say back. What I really want to do is smack him a good one, but Kathy says, "Get in the car. I want to talk to you."

The kid stares at her and she stares back. Then he shrugs and stands up.

"Are you nuts?" I say to Kathy. "What are you going to do?"

"I want to talk to him," she says, and she opens the back door for the kid. Then she gets in and waits for me.

"We could get in trouble," I say. "Couldn't we? Couldn't we get in trouble for taking this kid away from school?"

"His name is Matt."

"I don't think he's supposed to be in our car," I say.

"Dan." Kathy looks at me and I can tell by her expression she's made up her mind. "He obviously needs help. Taking him back to school won't do any good. They'll just punish him. Maybe we can help."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," I say. She's on another one of her crusades. Usually I keep quiet when she's trying to save the world, but this time she's gone too far. We could probably get arrested for kidnapping. I look at the kid, who seems pretty amused by all this.

"He's fine," I say. "He did this for attention, to see what would happen. Let him go."

"Matt," Kathy says. "If I let you go, are you going to do this again?"

"Probably," he says, real smart-ass.

"That settles it." Kathy starts the car.

"This is a mistake," I say as I get in. "This is a big mistake."

"Will you shut up?" she says.

She gets really smug whenever she thinks she's doing a good deed. There's this bum named Alex who comes in the store asking for money. The first time he came in, she gave him a dollar. "You know he's going to spend it on booze," I said, and when she looked out the window, there he was, heading for the bar. After that she stopped

giving him money, but she knows he's hungry so she gives him Pop Tarts. I usually keep a box around for myself, but now she buys them for him. She really thinks she's helping.

We start into town and the kid says, "So where are we going? Your place?"

"No," I say. "Absolutely not. We don't even know anything about him. He might be crazy. He might have a knife and try to rob us."

Kathy doesn't answer. She's really into trusting people. Whenever we get a customer who doesn't have enough money she always lets them take the stuff and bring her the money later. Most folks are honest, she says, but it's different when you've got an unbalanced kid in your car. She can't argue because she knows I'm right this time.

"We ought to take him to the Psych Hospital," I say. "They can lock him up and keep him safe."

"Knock it off," Kathy says. "Matt, where do you want to go?"

The kid thinks about it. "McDonald's," he says.

"Oh, wonderful," I say. "Look, would you mind dropping me home first? I've been to McDonald's."

"What do you have to do that's so important?" Kathy says. "We're taking the afternoon off anyway."

Like I really wanted to spend my afternoon with a teen-age kook. I look at the kid, who stares out the window like he's bored.

"Where do you live?" I ask him.

He doesn't answer.

"Ask him where he lives," I tell Kathy. "I bet he has parents."

Kathy looks at the kid through the rearview mirror. "His parents don't understand him," she says.

"How the hell do you know? Do you know them?" She meets someone and thinks she knows everything about them.

"Matt," she says. "Do your parents understand you?"

"No."

"See?" Kathy smiles.

At McDonald's the kid orders a Big Mac, fries and a shake. Kathy gets the same. I order a fish sandwich and wait for her to ask me for the money, but she has some. We used to fight all the time about money, but a long time ago we agreed not to, so I keep quiet. If she wants to buy his lunch, it's her business.

The kid acts like he hasn't eaten in days. Kathy and I sit together facing him. The kid's wearing army pants and a black t-shirt and this long trench coat, which he doesn't take off even though we're inside. He's got dark hair with one of those tails in the back and black stubble on his chin, and a little ring in his ear. He's not bad looking. Too pale, though. I wonder if anyone thinks he's our kid. We're too young to

have a kid his age, but you can never tell. I don't think I'd want my kid to look like him.

"Didn't you eat breakfast?" Kathy asks him.

"Yeah. I had a Twinkie."

Kathy shakes her head.

"That's wrong," the kid says. "A Twinkie doesn't provide proper nutrition for growing boys." He's making fun of her, but she either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

"Do you smoke cigarettes?" she asks him.

"Yeah. You want one?"

"No, thank you," she says. "Do you drink alcohol?" I can't figure out why she's doing this.

"I'm not old enough to drink alcoholic beverages."

"Matt." Kathy leans forward. "Do you take drugs?"

The kid leans forward, too, so their heads are about two inches apart. "I take aspirin sometimes when I get a headache."

Kathy sits back. She's pissed, but she's trying to hide it. I don't know why she's wasting her time.

"I'm serious," she says. "Do you take drugs?"

The kid sits back and strokes his chin like he's thinking about it. "Yeah," he says.

"A lot?" Kathy asks.

"Well, I don't know," he says. "Compared to some of my friends I don't do a lot. Compared to you, though, I probably do."

Kathy eats french fries and watches him. The kid takes his Big Mac apart and scrapes off the special sauce with his fingers.

"Do you steal?" Kathy asks. As if he's going to admit it to her.

"Steal?" the kid says. "You mean like money?"

"Anything."

The kid takes the top off his shake and licks the straw. "I steal money from my old man. I steal cigarettes from my mom."

Kathy waits, but he doesn't say anything else, just finishes his burger. He doesn't act like someone who wants to kill himself. Not that I've ever known anyone who wanted to kill himself, but the kid seems fine to me. Maybe a little screwed up, but most kids are. He probably does this all the time. Maybe every time he does it he gets a free meal.

"Excuse me," Kathy says. She gets up and goes back to the bathroom. The kid watches her walk away. I can't tell if he's looking at her legs or her shoes. Then he leans over his shake and sucks on the straw. I wonder what would happen if I weren't here. I wonder if Kathy would ever want to do it with a kid. I want to ask him what he thinks of her. Kathy's good looking and the kid is seventeen; he's old

enough to notice. I saw him look at her when she walked away. I want to ask, but it wouldn't sound right. I can't think of anything to say, but then I ask, "Do your parents beat on you or something?"

The kid looks up, probably wondering why the hell we're so interested in his life. "My parents are professors," he says. "They don't believe in violence."

"Oh."

Now I want him to look down again, but he keeps watching me. "Where do you work?" he asks.

"My wife and I have a store."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

The kid nods. He folds his hands together and leans forward like he's really interested. "And is it a fulfilling career for you?"

"Yes."

He nods again. "And your wife? Is she completely fulfilled?"

He acts like he knows something. "She likes it," I say.

"That's very interesting." He looks right into my eyes like he's trying to freak me out.

"Do you work?" I ask.

"No."

"You should."

"Yeah," he says, and I can't tell from his voice if he means it or not.

He moves the straw up and down in his shake. "So," he says. "Do you beat on your kids?"

"I don't have kids."

"You going to?"

I shrug. It's the last thing I want to talk about right now. "Someday."

The kid nods. "Keep your eye on them," he says.

He stares at me again when he says it. It's like he's trying to tell me something, but I feel confused.

Kathy comes back. She looks at me and she can tell we've been talking. I bet she's dying to know what we've said, but she doesn't ask.

"So," the kid says when she sits down. "How long you guys been married?"

"Four years," I tell him.

"You like it?"

"Yes," Kathy says.

"That's good."

I guess sometimes Kathy and I think alike, because then she says, "What are your parents like?"

The kid looks at me like we've got a secret. "What do you mean?"

"How do they treat you?" Kathy says. "Do they . . . abuse you?"

The kid just looks at her. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to help you," she says.

"Why?"

"I care," she says, and I feel embarrassed for her.

"Oh yeah?" the kid says.

"Yeah."

"You think you can help me by asking me a bunch of stupid questions?"

"I don't know," Kathy says. "It might help explain why you want to kill yourself."

"Maybe I don't."

"But you jumped in front of our car."

"So?"

"Forget it," I tell her. "He's a mind-fucker. He's just playing with you."

The kid turns to me. His voice gets real soft and he says, "Don't you ever play with her?"

I feel my face getting hot. It's like he knew what I was thinking before.

"Let's be honest," the kid says. He gathers up all the empty stuff on the table and takes it over to the trash can. Then he comes back and sits down and rests his elbows on the table. He leans forward. "Why don't you tell me what you really want? I know all about people like you."

"What do you mean?" Kathy says.

"It's not just a little chat, is it? There's got to be something more." He looks at me. "You want to watch me fuck your wife?" he asks. "Or maybe you want me to watch you fuck your wife. Or maybe you want me to fuck you while your wife watches."

"That's enough," Kathy says. I can't look at her.

The kid doesn't say anything, just sits there and smiles at us. Then he smacks the table hard with his hand and we both jump. "Just kidding!" he says, and laughs.

"Do you get some kind of thrill out of trying to shock us?" Kathy asks.

"You know, that's exactly what my mother would say," the kid says.

"You say things like that to your mother?" Kathy sounds disgusted.

The kid watches her. "Yeah."

"Why?"

He shrugs. "It's fun."

"If I were your mother I wouldn't put up with it," she says. "Not for a minute."

"Good thing you're not my mother."

Kathy and the kid nod at each other. For a few minutes no one says anything, but they're both thinking.

"I know what's going through your head," the kid says. "You're wondering what my parents did wrong."

Kathy looks down at the table and runs her finger along the edge. The kid waits.

"Aren't you," he says.

She doesn't answer.

"You're thinking they must have been bad parents or they wouldn't have such a fucked-up kid."

She shakes her head. "No, I'm not."

She's lying, and the kid is pretty damn smart. She's always looking at kids and rating their parents. Anytime she sees someone yelling at a kid, she shakes her head like it's wrong. But she also thinks it's wrong when people let their kids run around and scream in public places, so what are they supposed to do? She says people shouldn't have kids unless they want to dedicate their lives to raising them right. She thinks every bad kid is the result of bad parents.

"It can happen to the nicest people," the kid says. "Well-educated parents, a nice home, a good school, money. Then *bam*." He snaps his fingers. "Something goes wrong. They end up with a kid like me."

Kathy just sits there with her head down. The kid taps on the table and she looks up. "You could end up with a kid like me."

"No fucking way." There, I said it. I don't care if she's pissed. I'm not going to sit here and listen to this anymore.

I can tell they're both surprised because I've been pretty quiet. The kid sits back. He looks at me, then at Kathy, then at me again.

"So," he says. "How come you guys don't have kids?"

"None of your business," I say, but it comes out really loud. I can tell people are looking at us.

The kid strokes his chin and nods like he's our therapist. "I understand," he says. "It's very clear to me now. You want to have a kid, but you can't get it up, so you want me to get your wife pregnant. The only thing is—"

He doesn't finish the sentence because right then I stand up and reach over and grab the front of his coat and shake him hard. "You little prick," I say, and I'm glad because he looks scared for a second.

"Dan!" Kathy grabs my arm. The whole place is watching.

I let go of the kid and sit down. Right away I can tell I'm going to cry. I'm shaking so hard I can't see straight. I can't remember how long we've been trying to have a kid and we finally went to have some tests, but if it's me I don't want to know. All I want to do is forget about it. I sit there hunched over, trying to fight it, but it's too late.

Kathy stands up and I reach out and grab her arm. "I'm going to get a napkin," she says. She walks to the counter, but it feels like she's walking out for good and it makes me cry harder. I can't live without her.

We sit there and I cry, but after about five minutes I stop. I can't look at the kid, but I can't not look either, so finally I just do it. He's not looking at me. He's staring at Kathy and she's staring at him and I might as well not even be here.

"What else do you want to know?" the kid says.

"I want to know why you tried to kill yourself," she says.

The kid looks out the window. Then he looks all around the restaurant like he's bored. He acts like he's forgotten what she asked, but just when she's about to say something he leans forward and says, "I killed my mother."

"What?" she says.

"I killed my mother. I wrapped the phone cord around her neck and strangled her because I hate her fucking guts. I sat on top of her and held the cord tight and watched her kick and fight and claw at me. Her face turned all red and her eyes rolled back, but I didn't stop. I killed the cat, too. I stuck him head first into the blender. Then I took his blood and smeared it all over the house. I would have killed my old man, but he wasn't home. He'll know it was me, though, and he'll have me locked up. That's why I was trying to kill myself, because I don't want to be locked up."

Kathy just looks at him.

"Hey, I gotta run," he says. "Thanks for lunch."

"No," she says. "I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk," the kid says. "There's nothing left to talk about."

"Are you going to kill yourself?"

"Maybe," he says.

"Let him go," I say. The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned, but in a way the kid helped me.

"Wait." Kathy reaches into her purse and finds a pen and a scrap of paper. She writes down our phone number and gives it to the kid. "I want you to call if you get into trouble or if you decide to kill yourself. Will you?"

The kid shrugs.

"I mean it," Kathy says. "You can call anytime. Even if you just need someone to talk to."

The kid stuffs the paper in his pocket.

"Will you promise to call?" She never gives up.

"No," the kid says. He salutes and walks out. We watch him run

across the street and disappear behind a gas station. Then Kathy hands me the car keys.

On the way home she doesn't say anything. I find myself watching the sides of the street, expecting someone to jump out in front of the car. I look over at Kathy, but she just stares out the window and I can't tell what she's thinking.

"He didn't really kill his mother, did he?" I say.

She doesn't answer.

When we get home she unlocks the front door and I follow her into the living room. I can't tell if she's mad or what, but all of a sudden she turns around and starts taking off her clothes. She takes off her shoes and stockings and skirt and blouse, and she stands there naked and looks at me. I start to say something, but I stop because I know she doesn't want me to. I want to do everything right. She takes my hands and pulls me down to the floor. This time we make love just for ourselves, the way we used to, with no thermometers, no pillows underneath, no goal in mind. Just the two of us, but it almost feels like a performance, like there's someone watching.

When it's over we lie there with our clothes all around us. Kathy falls asleep right away, but I lie there for a long time, listening to her breathing, staring at the ceiling. The house is new, built on a street with a lot of other houses that look just like it. We don't have much furniture yet, but right now it feels like home. Kathy sleeps with her head on my shoulder. The carpet is rough under my back.

I've read about women who claim they knew the exact moment they became pregnant. They had visions of atoms splitting or huge pink balls of fire being penetrated by comets, or something like that. Kathy said once that she could tell she was pregnant, and her period was a week late, but then it came. She said she probably had a miscarriage, but we would never know.

I wonder if a man can tell, if men can ever sense it the way women do. I close my eyes and try to create a vision, an image of conception. I think of a fish swimming through water and a man and a woman running towards each other through a field of flowers, like they show in movies. I think of a film I once saw of a whale being born, how the mother spun around and around in the water until the baby came out.

I dream about Kathy spinning around and around in a field of flowers, holding a child in her arms. At first I'm not really there, but then I'm standing at the edge of the field watching. I turn and walk through a forest. I come to a stream, where a little girl kneels and scratches out letters in the mud with a stick. She writes a word, maybe her name or maybe "Daddy," but I can't really tell. Then she looks up at me and smiles.

