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'78 Beige Chevy Malibu

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'78 Beige Chevy Malibu

It's so late the nocturnal guitar player upstairs has gone to bed. Even "Horse With No Name" and "The Weight" and "Ziggy Stardust," played over and over and over again, lose all meaning after three hours. It's just me now.

I know I should forget about it and get some sleep like the guitar player. That would be the sensible thing to do. I turned off the heat hours ago and it's under 60 degrees in the apartment now. My hands are shaking and I don't want to drink any more coffee. Hazelnut, your favorite. Just set the alarm for eight. Get a few hours of sleep before you arrive and I see you for the first time since you walked through the doors at Gate 12 and left for Belize with your friend Mark. No reason to wait around for six months, you said. Things will be different afterwards, you said.

In the morning I'll have just enough time to make a strong pot of coffee and take a steaming shower. When my hair is almost dry—just about the time I begin to feel cold again—there will be a knock on my door as I'm sitting in the kitchen finishing *In Watermelon Sugar* once more.

For a few seconds, as I walk over the creaky floorboard near the coffee table, I will delude myself into thinking the landlord has come looking for his rent, but it will be you. Standing there before me. Stretching your long, toned arms behind your head. Your fingers caught in your unbrushed hair. Your breasts pushed forward. The straps of your backpack pressing into your tanned shoulders.

You will be yawning when I open the door. You will brush your chestnut hair away from your face. You will open wide your water-gray eyes and stick out your tongue with relief and exhaustion after driving all night from Wilkes-Barre to get here.

I'll say that I hope I-90 and 71 South weren't too congested through Cleveland. I'll say that I hope you remembered to bring enough Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young to last the ten hour drive. And then I'll say other such things that try to keep you on the other side of the doorway for just a little longer while I try to notice what's different about you.

But I won't notice anything. Sandals in the winter. Loose-fitting Levi's. Faded t-shirt. Even your smile will seem the same.

I won't be able to prevent you from putting your arms around me—your fingertips cold on my neck—and telling me how good it is to see me again. Teardrops will collect in the corners of your eyes for reasons I'm not sure of. I won't want to guess and instead I'll be remembering how nice it was to have you hold me.

"When did you buy the car?" you'll ask, referring to the shiny old car parked in front of the apartment. It won't occur to you that it could be someone else's. I'll try very hard to laugh, but even considering, it won't seem very funny.

"I'll tell you about it," I'll say.

A lot can happen in six months, sure. My hair has grown longer and I bought some furniture, a desk chair and a new kitchen table. I published a few stories and my grandfather died and I got a car. Two months ago now. Grandpa Duggan.

A few weeks after you left, he had a stroke. We thought we had lost him right then, but he hung on, tubes and IV's and machines and all, longer than anyone, especially the doctor, was willing to hope.

"Tell your Bronwyn to come on in and say hello," Grandpa said, when I

visited him on one of his more lucid days.

"She's not here right now," I said.

"Sure," he said. "That's her out in the hallway. He lifted his right hand slightly and curled four fingers under his index finger. I turned and looked. Don't ask me why. He didn't have his glasses at the hospital and his vision was so poor they took his driver's license away from him eight years ago. The '78 beige Chevy Malibu hadn't left his garage since.

"No, I don't think so, Grandpa."

He closed his eyes for a few minutes. I thought he was asleep. Or maybe even dead. But he opened his eyes wide and stared at me. Against his pale skin, his eyes never looked more blue. Tubes came out of his nose and he couldn't move his neck very well.

"Where did you say she was?" he asked.

"She's away now," I said. "In Belize."

"Belize?" he said softly. "Where on earth is that?"

"Central America."

He rolled his eyes and tried to whistle, but no sound came out.

"She hasn't left you, has she?"

"No," I said. "She'll be back. To see you soon, Grandpa." He always used to say how pretty you are and what a smart woman you are and other such things which never quite got at what went right or what went wrong between you and me.

"That's good," he said. His lips curved into a tenuous smile and he grabbed my hand. His hand was cold and shaky and I wanted to leave.

Three weeks later, he died. The doctors think it was another stroke, but they couldn't be sure. It happened very early in the morning and no one was there, except for a nurse on night rounds.

At the reading of the will, he left my mother and father his house in Worthington. To Uncle Gerald he left his bank assets. Then he came to me. "To my grandson Richard and his wife Bronwyn, I leave . . ." I don't know why he thought you and I were married, but his attorney never questioned it.

Grandpa Duggan left you and I his '78 beige Chevy Malibu. Twenty thousand miles. New all-weather tires. Not a spot of rust. I took our car in for a tune-up and it runs just fine. That attorney said that there would be no problem having the title changed to list my name only since you aren't, of course! my wife, but I told him not to bother.

When we have sat down at the kitchen table for coffee, I'll say that I guess you didn't get the birthday card that I sent, what with the mail system in Central America being so unreliable, but you'll nod your head and say that Mark picked it up for you. I'll say that I hope everything is going okay with you and Mark and you'll say yes.

We will fall silent for a few minutes. Sipping hot coffee hesitantly. Re-adjusting our legs under the table. Counting crumbs on the tablecloth.

Then the nocturnal guitar player will awaken and play something like "City of New Orleans" or "The Waiting," and I'll ask you if you'd like to take a drive in our '78 beige Chevy Malibu. You'll say that you'd rather get some sleep. You've been driving all night to get her you'll say.

- Craig J. McDonough '94