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Andy

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My mom was gone for a while before I figured out that she had split for good. She's a painter with a workspace on Avenue D that she shares with a bunch of other squatters, and she's out most of the time and sometimes doesn't come home until morning.

At least I had the keys. Before I turned 12, my mom used to say, "No son of mine is going to be a latch-key child." I kept telling her that it was 1988 and everyone else in my class had keys. But she'd watched some dumb *NBC News Special Report* about how latch-key kids were the silent victims of the feminist revolution, so she wanted to let me in after school herself. That would have been fine if she'd been home when I got back from PS 15. But she never was. So I'd wait for her on the spiky green welcome mat in the hall outside our apartment or on the marble stoop outside the building. Back when I was in fourth grade, I only had to wait about half an hour before she'd run up the stairs, her pink hair sticking out in all directions and her bangle bracelets clattering so loudly, I could hear her before I could see her. She'd unlock the door, kiss my face, ask me how school was, and then put a frozen dinner in the oven for me before heading out again to whatever party or rock show or art opening she had going on that night.

By the time fifth grade rolled around, those minutes locked outside became hours, and I started having problems. The first time my mom was over three hours late, my insides felt all twisted up, and the longer I waited, the more I had to use the bathroom. Finally, she showed up, acting as if nothing was wrong, and I made it to the toilet just in time. When I asked her why she was so late, she said she was busting her ass to pay the rent, so I shut up about it. But later that night, she pulled me close on the couch during the *11 o'clock News* and asked me if I knew that she loved me. She smelled like clove cigarettes and paint thinner and sweat. I said yes and wriggled out from between her white, veiny arms to go put on my pajamas. "Why are you always hiding from me in your room?" she shouted from the couch during the commercial break. "I'm afraid to go in there because I don't know if I'll find you playing with

your Legos or jerking off." I hated it when she said stuff like that, so I just pretended I couldn't hear her and put myself to bed.

The next time she was super late, I couldn't hold my pee so I knocked on old Mrs. Epstein's door and asked if I could use her bathroom. She didn't want to let me in, but when she peeked through the peephole and saw my knees buckling in a last ditch effort to keep from whizzing all over the hall, she waved me in toward a pink powder room decorated with seashells. Afterward, I thanked her and tried to leave before my mom caught me bothering the neighbors, but she told me to sit down and pointed at the kitchen table. She poured me a glass of grape juice and spooned a weird white dumpling out of a jar onto a tea saucer and set it in front of me. I thanked her for the juice and pretended not to see the dish.

She asked if I wanted to call my mom and gestured at the phone hanging next to the fridge. I told her no thanks, that my mom's studio didn't have a phone. She frowned and asked where my dad was. I said he was traveling around painting murals on government buildings. She frowned some more and asked if I had a babysitter to watch me after school, but I pretended I couldn't understand the question through her thick Eastern European accent. I thanked her again for the juice and left just in time to see my mom in a paint-spattered pair of coveralls lugging a grocery bag full of frozen dinners up the stairs.

I hoped she hadn't seen me leave Mrs. Epstein's, but no such luck. She waved at the old lady's peephole, then dragged me inside our apartment where I caught holy hell. She didn't hit me or anything, but she did scare the crap out of me. "Damnit Andy, do you want to be taken away from me?" she whispered, as if child protective services were already waiting outside the door, listening. I shook my head no. "Well that's exactly what's going to happen if you keep advertising the fact that I'm running late," she warned, poking me in the chest with a calloused finger. "Do you know what happens to kids in foster care? Do you?" she demanded. I nodded yes. She had already freaked me out with stories deliberately read out of the newspaper and *NBC Special Reports* about the lost children of The System. And while I knew my life wasn't perfect, I also knew I was lucky not to be one of them.

"But I *really* had to pee," I explained, trying not to whine but not totally succeeding. She softened a little, and I thought I might actually get keys. But she wasn't ready. "You're too young to have keys," she said,

jiggling her own set nervously from hand to hand. "What if you got mugged and someone took your keys and robbed us?" she asked, gesturing toward the TV. "From now on, pee before you leave school," she said, "and if you still have to go while you're waiting, find a McDonald's, or a dumpster you can hide behind to do your business."

Alphabet City didn't have too many McDonald's, but we did have plenty of dumpsters. So after the Mrs. Epstein incident, I pissed behind every dumpster from FDR Drive to Second Avenue. It kind of became my thing. I thought if I always pissed behind the same dumpster, people would start complaining about "the kid always pissing behind our dumpster." So instead, I'd case different areas for privacy, and then pounce like a ninja when the timing was right.

I was usually lucky about not getting caught, but finally my luck ran out. I was taking care of business in a parking lot behind Stuy Town when some eighth graders popped up out of the dumpster and caught me. "Hey! Look what I found!" a tall skinny kid in a Knicks jersey shouted, jumping down from the ledge of the metal container and grabbing my arms behind my back. "If someone leaves sneakers, a bookbag, and a ball cap outside on trash day, that means they're up for grabs, right?" A chubby kid in head-to-toe green camo struggled to the lip of the box as trash shifted beneath him. He stared at me, confused, until he finally caught on.

"Oh yeeeaaaaaah!" he replied, swinging one stubby leg over the edge and then the other before cautiously dropping to the ground. Two more kids in acid-washed jeans and heavy metal T-shirts followed, both filthy and stinking from wet food trash. They were the scariest ones, because they didn't say a word. They just walked casually up to me, knocked the hat off my head, wrenched the bag from my shoulder, and removed my shoes one at a time, as if this were their real job and the dumpster diving had just been a lunch break.

"You got something to say faggot?" Knicks kid asked. I shook my head no and kept my eyes down on my big toe sticking out from the tip of my sock. "Didn't think so," said camo kid, before hocking a loogie right on my head where my hat had been. That made the silent kids laugh, which I guess broke the tension enough for Knicks kid to let me go. "Run back home to mommy, pussy," he growled. So I took off toward home, trying not to flinch at the little pebbles and chunks of asphalt and beer bottle shards that bit into my heels.

By the time Mom got home, it was too late to buy me new shoes since all the stores were closed. Luckily she wasn't mad. She was just coming home to change before going out again, and she said the party that night was really really important for her career, so she didn't really care that I had lost my shoes and bag and hat. Mom played Siouxsie and the Banshees super loud on her boom box while she set her hair in hot rollers, then painted her eyes with heavy black liner just like the picture on the cassette cover. I stayed in my room for a while after that, since she liked to change clothes over and over again all over the apartment before a party. But when I finally did come out, she was wearing a tight black dress with a bunch of silver amulets around her neck, and her hair looked like a puffy pink cloud of cotton candy. I told her she looked awesome, and she giggled like the girls who hung out on the smoking patio after school.

In the morning, still wearing the dress from the night before, she took me by cab in my socks to Payless on Delancey and told me I could pick out any pair of Pro Wings I wanted from the clearance rack. Then she walked me over to the locksmith and had a set of apartment keys made for me. She tucked them in my pocket, along with a note for my teacher Ms. Conway explaining my lateness and my missing schoolbooks, and told me I could walk the rest of the way to school by myself.

Once I had keys, Mom didn't even try to be home at a certain time. Days would go by without us crossing paths, but I would know that she had been there because either the freezer would be refilled with frozen dinners, or there would be a 20 tucked beneath a little ceramic cat that she kept on the kitchen counter. I liked the money better, because I could use it to get Twizzlers and cheese-flavored popcorn from the bodega for dinner instead of eating the mushy Hungry Man green beans and damp fried chicken. But a 20 was supposed to last me more than one day, so if I wasn't careful and spent it all at once, I'd either have to go to bed hungry the next day or invite myself over to Tran's house for dinner.

Tran was one of the only kids at PS 15 less popular than I was, because when he started there in September, he didn't speak any English. He spent part of the day in the English as a Second Language room, and part of the day in Ms. Conway's class. But when he was with us, every time he was called on, the girls would whisper about his accent and the guys at the back of the room would pull the corners of their eyes into slits and bow at each other. They called him "gook" and "chink" in the

cafeteria and made fun of the weird-smelling food his mom packed him for lunch. And even though there were other Vietnamese kids at our school, they said he was "fresh off the boat," and stayed away as if his immigration status were a disease none of them wanted to catch.

His mom packed him lunch every day, and once I told him he was lucky, since I never had food from home. The next day, he sat down across from my usual spot at a table labeled "the cootie corner," by the extra pretty Puerto Rican girls who hung out toward the middle of the cafeteria. When Tran unpacked his bag, he had a takeout box for me. He said the little cigar-looking things inside were fresh rolls, and he even brought dipping sauce to go with them. I asked him if he thought the Fresh Prince ate fresh rolls, but he had no idea what I was talking about. The food was good, so I asked him if he would trade me more in exchange for help with English. He gave me a thumbs up, and then carefully bent his fingers into the sign for OK.

After that, I ate better than anyone else at PS 15. And then after school, Tran would use the payphone at the bus stop to ask his mom if he could come over to practice English. On the days she said yes, we would sit together on my saggy, stained couch and watch *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *ThunderCats*. During the commercials, he'd ask about the plots in broken English and I would try to explain. Sometimes I'd do this by talking really slow and loud or by writing out the storyline, because reading English words was easier for him than listening to them. If I was feeling creative, I'd draw pictures explaining what I wanted to say, and if I wanted to be really goofy about it, I'd act the stories out, which always made Tran laugh. At first, we could barely understand each other, but soon he was picking up the language on TV faster and faster. Although a few times, I had to explain that it wasn't cool in real life to say "cowabunga dude," so don't ever do it at school.

On many nights, I'd wake up briefly to the jangling of mom's bracelets just before dawn. Then I'd pass her slumped on the couch with the morning news blaring on the TV in front of her while I was on my way out the door to school. If her feet were still on the floor and in her shoes, I'd slip the grimy converse or spike heels off and ease her legs onto the couch so her ankles wouldn't swell. Sometimes, especially on mornings when I could still smell the red wine on her, this would startle her out of an uneasy dream and she'd launch a swift kick toward my face. But I'm quick and could usually dodge her.

If I woke up and realized she hadn't come home at all—no loud TV, nothing in the freezer, no cash under the cat—I didn't worry. This happened from time to time, and though she didn't appreciate questions like "where were you last night?" and refused to answer them, she did always come back. That is, until she didn't.

Life went on as usual for a while. Tran came over after school, and after a few days of no freezer food and no dinner money, he started taking me home with him below Houston Street to eat. Tran's parents and older brothers barely spoke English, so I just slurped up the noodles and broth his mom put in front of me and listened. I didn't mind not understanding anything. To me, they sounded like a flock of tropical birds calling to each other across the jungle. Once, after I had inhaled a platter of pork and rice, Tran's mom gestured at me and said something that sounded pointy like a stick. Tran didn't want to tell me what she'd said, but his mom elbowed him in the ribs until he spoke. "She wants to know why she's feeding you all the time," he said, his mouth turning down in an embarrassed half smile. "She says she keeps feeding you but I always come home hungry from your house."

I didn't know what to say. I only knew what not to say. "Tell her we're poor," I said. Tran told her this, but she just shook her head and gestured at the rest of the table. "She says we're all poor," Tran said. "If you want to eat here all the time, you have to work."

That put an end to the English lessons after school. Instead, as soon as three p.m. rolled around, we both headed down to Tran's parents' takeout restaurant, Pho Garden, where I'd take the English-speaking phone and counter orders and write them down carefully before passing them to Tran so he could write the orders in Vietnamese for his family cooking in back. Tran taught me how to keep track of the orders and then bag them for pickup or delivery by whichever one of Tran's brothers was riding the bike that day. If delivery orders got backed up, Tran and I carried them on foot. But if that happened, his mom always sent us together, because once she'd sent Tran alone and the customer had taken the food and slammed the door in his face without paying. "She doesn't think they'll stiff a cute white kid," he said before our first delivery, and it turns out she was right.

Thanks to Pho Garden, I didn't have to worry about going hungry, but I had plenty of other things to worry about. After Mom had been gone a week, and a visit to her studio turned up no sign of her, I used the

restaurant phone to call around to some of the galleries and ask if anyone had seen her. "I think she said something about doing a residency upstate," an assistant said at the third place I tried. "Is there something I can help you with?" I didn't answer. I just quickly hung up before Tran's mom noticed I hadn't been taking an order. That was my first clue that Mom wasn't coming back. The second was the postcard.

"Greetings from the Great Smoky Mountains" it said in curvy red letters above a photo of a log cabin with smoke coming out the chimney. I flipped it over and noticed familiar handwriting, almost unreadable except for the dotted i's and crossed t's that gave the scrawl some meaning. "Hey Andy," it started. "Your mom wants you to come stay with me for a while. I'll send you a bus ticket after I finish this job. Keep an eye out for it. —Dad."

I imagined my dad—a lankier version of Paul Bunyan in flannel and denim—painting a forest of spruce firs on the wall of some Tennessee municipal building. I could barely remember his face, but I could always remember his brush strokes, since he had painted the whole ceiling above my bed with stars and comets and planets and flying saucers before he hit the road when I was eight.

So that was that. I went to school, worked at the restaurant, did my homework with Tran while his mom packed up leftover rice for me, and sorted through the mail every day looking for the bus ticket. Now and then I'd have to field uncomfortable questions. Mrs. Epstein stopped me in the hall three weeks after Mom's disappearance and mentioned she hadn't seen her in a while. I said she'd been working a lot. When I brought in a forged signature on a permission slip for a field trip, Ms. Conway doubted that it was Mom's handwriting. But after she left a few messages at Mom's gallery and got no call back, she let the issue drop and I was able to go with the rest of the class to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.

I was yanked awake early in the morning a few times by loud banging on the front door. When this happened, I'd lie very still in bed and count the stars and planets on the ceiling until the intruder went away. When I finally did creep out of bed, I'd usually find a nasty note from Eddie, the super, under the door telling my mom the rent was way past due. On those days, I would peek through the peephole before leaving for school to make sure nobody was waiting with a summons or something in the hall.

After a bunch of warnings, the electricity was cut off, and that's when my stomach got bad again. I hated being in that dark apartment alone after dinner, but Tran thought moving me into his already super-crowded bedroom with his brothers would make his mom flip out. So instead, he wrangled me a flashlight and a jumbo pack of batteries from the basement of Pho Garden, and I started actually reading the books we were assigned for homework to pass the time till dawn. I especially liked a book Ms. Conway gave us called *Julie of the Wolves*, about this Eskimo orphan who gets married off at 13 and then runs away and gets adopted by a pack of wolves on the Alaskan tundra. Tran really liked it too, even though his brothers made fun of him for reading a book with a girl on the cover. "Joooooo-liiiiiiii, Joooooooo-liiiiiiii," they'd call across the restaurant kitchen when their mom stepped out for a smoke break, and then they'd make an OK sign with one hand and stick a finger from the other hand in and out of the hole.

Whenever my guts hurt at night, usually reading about Julie surviving on her own made my insides settle down. But as weeks went by and my situation got more complicated, nothing could stop the nasty-tasting acid from squirting up the back of my throat whenever I tried to lay down. One night, I got home from Pho Garden and there was an orange eviction sticker on my door and a chain wrapped around the doorknob with a big padlock on it so I couldn't get in. Luckily, I'd been sleeping with the window open a little because I liked the sound of street noise, so I was able to get in through the fire escape. Instead of sleeping in my bed that night, I took my book to the couch so nobody would see my flashlight if they were looking up at my window from the street. My body started shivering all over, so I wrapped my mom's old afghan around me and fell asleep sitting up with my Pro Wings on, in case I had to make a fast getaway.

Four days later, the couch, the afghan, and even my trusty flashlight were gone. While I was at school, Eddie had cleared the entire place out and started repainting for the next tenant. I felt creepily numb when I saw that all my stuff had been chucked out. Even the fact that dad's painting on my ceiling was now a blank square of rental-apartment white didn't bother me. But when it finally dawned on me that I hadn't gotten a single piece of mail since the eviction notice had been posted, I felt the same weird feeling I'd had the first time I rode the Cyclone at Coney Island. A big, lurching, stomach flipping dip.

My window was nailed shut from the inside the next time I tried to climb in from the fire escape, so I crawled back down to the street. I'd already decided that if this ever happened, I would sleep in the schoolyard of PS 15, so that's where I was headed when I heard the tapping. At first it was really quiet, so I didn't even bother to turn around. But when the noise got louder and more urgent, I looked up and saw movement on the other side of Mrs. Epstein's window. She tapped and made weird motions with her hands and then tapped some more. When I just stood there, shaking my head because I didn't understand, she struggled to heave her heavy window open and leaned her thick torso out toward me. "Andy!" she hissed, "get in here before somebody sees you. I've got something for you."

It was eerie using the main staircase after days of climbing the fire escape. Mrs. Epstein hustled me in, and this time, when she set a white dumpling on a saucer in front of me, I devoured it and asked for seconds. "You're a hard man to find," she said casually. "Eddie asked me if I knew where to forward your mail, and I said I would take care of it." She shuffled over to a cabinet full of porcelain animals and opened up a drawer bursting with envelopes. Most of them had angry past due messages stamped across them in red, but one didn't. It was thick and worn around the edges, and unlike the bills, this one had my name on it. Inside, there wasn't just one bus ticket, but a few—enough to make all the connections between Port Authority and Richmond, Virginia.

I spent that night on Mrs. Epstein's sofa, and showered in her seashell bathroom the next morning, being careful not to leave my towel or any puddles on the floor. She made me an omelet filled with milk-softened crackers, and then I headed to school to say goodbye to Tran. When I told him I was leaving, he acted like it was no big deal. But when I decided to cut out early at lunch time, he told me he'd give me a lift to the bus station. We walked over to Pho Garden, and after a few minutes inside, Tran came back out with the keys to the delivery bike lock, and a big bag of Fresh Prince rolls for the bus.

He climbed up onto the slightly-too-high bike seat and motioned for me to stand on the two rods sticking out on either side of the back wheel. I hopped on and grabbed Tran's windbreaker to steady myself. "Cowabunga dude," he called over his shoulder as he shoved off against the flow of downtown traffic. "Cowabunga dude," I shouted back, and held on tight.