

## Just For Today

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*fiction by Temim Fruchter*

On the night of June 12<sup>th</sup>, just like every single night since the accident, regular as breathing, Patty got into her car. She put the keys into the ignition, feeling the little thrills of independence she did every night about the efficiency with which she could release the parking brake, shift into drive, and turn on the radio all at the same time. She pulled out, clicking her headlights on and looking forward to the dark drive.

She flipped the radio to the classic rock station and zipped out of the cul-de-sac where she and Matthew once lived. She turned left onto Downing Avenue, a tricky turn, because the traffic came fast and around a sudden bend. She took momentary pride in executing this turn smoothly and safely, having done it so many times that she'd developed a third sense about knowing when she was truly clear on both sides.

Every night, at the same exact moment, Patty turned up the radio when Aerosmith came on. A guilty pleasure, obviously, but one that she and Matthew had shared, both having seen the same show in Pittsburgh during the *Get a Grip* tour in the winter of '94. On their first date, they'd sheepishly confessed this and laughed about it (in the way that it's gratifying to laugh with someone new about being young) and made up stories about maybe having moshed into one another before without knowing that one day, they'd end up flirting then dating then married.

*Tell me what it takes to let you go,* Patty sang in her near-perfect pitch, speeding along Downing Avenue, which was usually sleek and quiet with focused

traffic this time of night. Her cheeks burned slightly with how earnestly she sang this lyric—such a terribly cheesy song—thinking about Matthew and his new life and his new wife so many miles away. She thought this and sped up, almost in defiance.

Patty then made the same easy right through Pickwood Park, the shortcut through the darker and lonelier road making her feel rogue and a little bit in danger. She rolled down the window—not the driver's side window, but the passenger side window, so that she could still hear the music as it faded into the Rolling Stones. It was the quickest way to Tara's, and, like every night, she needed to drop off the pies for tomorrow's baby shower. Truth was, she could have dropped the pies off in the morning, but it was always nice to see Tara. Plus, then they'd have a nightcap. Tara mixed a great drink, and maybe she'd even get to stay awhile.

It was toward the end of the long cut through the park, where the road narrowed and a bridge rose like a sharp apparition when Patty closed the window. She needed to focus here. Driving on bridges made her nervous. She turned down the radio—now Led Zeppelin, she hated this song anyway—and stared straight ahead. She would never have told Matthew about this part. He had always worried about her proclivity for nighttime driving, entreating her to stay in with him and the record player and a couple of old-fashioneds, as she inevitably slipped out the front door.

This was the part where she slowed to a hazy speed, where vapors started to rise into her headlights, where the narrow bridge became blinding, unsafe, lousy with sunken cities and armies of escapees and ravenous water buffalo, all of the crazy things her mind

could conjure in this place. She shook her head slightly as she got toward the end of the bridge, clearing her throat, and reminded herself *Patty you got this*, turning the music back up. The DJ always said the same thing then, the story about the time he met George Harrison and how it was the first time in his life he'd even been tongue-tied, as the trippy opening chords of *My Sweet Lord* started.

And then came the turn off the bridge onto Verity Lane. Patty was always in autopilot by this time. This part was a breeze, and she thought about which pie she'd show Tara first. She felt a little self-conscious about being the brusque and curmudgeonly foil to her rosy and pregnant friend, but at least she made a mean pie. She tried to decide which pie was the greater achievement—the pecan or the blueberry-peach.

It was always 8:52 on the red-eyed clock when Patty lazed into the turn, heart sinking suddenly about the missing that her empty passenger seat signified. She looked over then, realizing that her travel mug was still on the seat—the one she'd bought herself at the Stax Museum gift shop on her trip with Matthew to Memphis. She cursed under her breath, having not realized before that it was slowly spilling two-day-old coffee. She reached over, using most of her line of vision and one whole hand to scoop up the cup and maneuver it, however awkwardly, into the cup holder.

It was always 8:53, then, when she hit the girl. The girl was crossing Verity Lane. The girl never expected the car and Patty certainly never expected the girl. The girl was carrying a stack of books and running. The girl wasn't looking. At 8:53 every night, Patty looked up to see the girl in a way that she could never describe. The girl was always something between human and whatever came next—unnaturally white, mostly eyes or mostly arms or mostly legs or mostly whichever came first in the tumble. Patty could

never tell. Patty lurched. The car lurched. Always the unnatural slow of the tire, the new literal sense of the word *sickly*, the smell of coffee cold and sharp, the tinny radio still singing *I really wanna know you, I really wanna show you, my sweet lord*.

Some nights, Patty shook her head, reset her resolve, shifted the car into reverse, backed up slowly off the girl. Nice and easy there. The girl got up, a little dazed, a little shaken, mostly fine. Patty, also shaken, rolled down the window saying, *So sorry, I wasn't looking*. The girl laughed it off like a seventeen-year-old would, saying, *No problem*, and Patty gave her a pie—the blueberry-peach—for her troubles.

Other nights, before the police came, before the girl's family came, before the girl disappeared into a bag into a truck into the night, Patty had time to throw all of the garbage from the floor of the passenger side seat into the trunk. Then, at least when the cops came, at least when the family came: *Were you drinking? Did something scare you? Are you on medication? Did you hallucinate?* At least when she told them, *No, nothing, I was fine, I ... I ... think I got distracted. I didn't see her*. At least then, she always had a clean car. At least there was that. And she remembered to turn off the radio. George Harrison wasn't singing anymore.

Some nights, Patty never even met the girl. She didn't go through Pickwood Park, thinking of the bridge and the shadows and the buffalo. She didn't go to Tara's, thinking she'd rather go in the morning, when it was safer and less foggy, and she was more alert. She stayed home with Matthew, who mixed them old-fashioned and never had the chance to leave her, to become fed up with Patty, her pride and stubbornness, or to fall in love with Alina—the statuesque Russian poet he'd met in London while working on a translation of her work. Matthew, who never had a chance to remember there

were people out there more magical and less neurotic, people who didn't seem like they itched for a break from him. She stayed home with Matthew and they played the *Dream On* record, their mutual favorite in the catalog. They lip-synched the dramatic verses of the title song, the one that always made them laugh and feel like they were in something together, even when they weren't sure what that something was. They laughed at themselves like people who'd grown past all that. She fell asleep, legs braided in his, dreaming about something easy.

And there was never the girl. The girl whose parents were dead and so whose grandparents came out in their robes and pajamas, grief-stricken and confused. The grandparents who were Christians and didn't press charges. The girl whose name she couldn't even say, despite its chaste simplicity: Mary.

There was never the car. There was never the cup. There was never the coffee. There was never the pile of scarves and wrappers and notebooks, first on the seat, then on the floor. There was never the radio. There was never the parking brake. There was never the cul-de-sac or the front door or the record player or the flour and pie filling that crusted sticky-hard on the counter the night Patty spent at the police station, eyes burning because she wouldn't let herself blink, not even once.

Other nights, Patty was just alone, before there was a Matthew. She was in her bed, the bed she loved for its breadth and fluffiness, with its extra pillows and thread counts and downy yellow comforter. She was wringing her feet, a secret solitary thing she liked to do in bed, while feeling untethered and naked under the covers. She was stretching her legs out and bending them one at a time. She called Tara from under the covers, an indulgent act, to say a giggly good night, feeling like a girl, blushing a little and letting her hand move (almost

unconsciously) to her chest and thighs as Tara spoke, her husky voice making her forget that her pregnant, married friend was not something else to her, too. Those nights, Tara was something else to her, too. Patty hung up, drunk with possibility, a pleasant knot between her legs, a head full of warm wine and tomorrow.

Every night, though, in the end, she still hit the girl. Mary. She had never been the kind of person who would hit a girl. Now she would always be the kind of person who had hit a girl. She could not back up the car. There was no backing up that human-stuck car. There was no disappearing. There would never be a Matthew where there once had been. And always, the grandparents with shocked grief like she'd never seen, shock and grief in the same breath, or no breath at all. No blinking, eyes on fire, the only penance, not even the right *I'm sorry* rising to her lips. Always the same story: *No, nothing, I was fine, I ... I ... think I got distracted. I didn't see her.* Every night the same no, the same, *No, Mary, no.*

On the morning of June 12<sup>th</sup>, when Patty woke up and wanted coffee, she forgot for just one moment how long it had been since she'd woken up and wanted coffee. The thought of coffee made her ill now. Did Mary even like coffee? Living with her grandparents, maybe she had been more of a tea drinker? Matthew hadn't liked coffee, preferring strong black tea. She wondered if Matthew and her parents ever spoke anymore. Her parents, who were sad and disappointed and distant. Her parents had long taken her car from her, a forty-two-year-old woman who wasn't allowed to drive. She wondered if they'd managed to get the coffee stain out of the passenger seat. Patty didn't talk to Matthew. He and Alina lived in London now. They took the Tube because driving was too expensive.

If Patty had lived in London with Matthew, there would've been the Tube. There never would've been a car and there

never would have been a girl. Or maybe there would have been a girl, but instead of hitting the girl Patty and Matthew would've run into her, walking—a humorous collision—the kind that happens in romantic comedies when people unexpectedly collide and papers go flying. Maybe they would've laughed and introduced themselves. Maybe Mary would've been crossing the street to take her trigonometry textbooks to her boyfriend's house. Only this time, Patty and Matthew would've looked at one another, happy for Mary's young love and for their love, saltier and grayer and lovelier with the years. Maybe Patty would have smiled at Mary, the smile of an older woman with a big life and a big love. Maybe it would've been profound. Maybe it would've been regular. Maybe Patty and Matthew would have said, *Nice to meet you*. Maybe they would have gone around the corner for a laugh and the morning's second coffee. Maybe they would've made plans. Or maybe, they would've gone out and made a night of it.