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HOW LONG BY JARVIS SLACKS

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My Mother.

"We want to go someplace fun!" she says to me. She is visiting. I live in a three room and bath, one bedroom, male, this is my place, my place. And she wants to visit. With a friend. Her and her friend Donna have made me give up my bed (guilt) and convinced me to take them on the town. Take them on the town? She has left her third husband. This has happened. And I am trying, I mean really trying to be a good son here. I want to be a good person in general and a good son in particular. I am ambitious. I have goals! But, man, fuck, I don't want my mother in my home. I masturbate in this place. Here is what I want to say to my mother: Hey, mother, mamma, Anita, hey, I might be black, but I don't go where black people go. I don't do what black people do. Half the time I am writing about my life and how amazingly complicated it is (thanks to you) and the other half I am, well, I have no idea what I am doing. But you, you are putting pressure on me. You are putting pressure on me! I don't know what the hell you want to do? You want to booty-dance around some pathetic middle aged dudes? Is that what you want? I am 29 years old. I don't booty-dance. The thought sends me into convulsions. Look at me! I a shaking!

I don't say this. I take her around town. I push her from bar to bar. And, finally, after I am drunk driving and she is complaining, does she see the pain I'm feeling. "I want to go home! Right now, Jay!" she says. She has this disgusted look on her face. She sees her son's world, of booze and loose women and loose lips. "I'm too old to be hanging out with these chaps!" Yeah, I want to say. No shit.

It is my fault my mother is border line close to divorce at fifty. Well, no it's not. But I feel like it is. There is this new weight. If she isn't married, who is going to take care of her in ten years? Twenty years? Me. Amazing. I sit in class, listening to people speak, and I am planning point for point for my mother's degradation. I was taught that the parents take care of the children and then the children take care of the parents. So amazingly circle-like. It looks like it makes sense and it does make sense. Upon my mother's visit, me, sleeping on my couch, late, unable to sleep, the couch is so fucking lumpy, I know my children won't be doing this. I will have them and raise them and make them these little representations of me, independent of me but able to preach my gospel, tell my stories, do as I do. And after I raise these little Jarvis', then I'm gonna drive off a cliff when they are through with college. They will cry and all that, but, when they have an epiphany or an insight or whatever, they will kneel and clasp their hands and say, thanks dad. I wasn't looking forward to paying your retirement home bills.

I love my mother. I do. But, come on, she is my mother. I noticed how different we are, would be, when I started getting smarter than her with the book and the pencils and pens. It was after she battled and defeated stomach cancer and became super religious. She found great comfort in God. But, after she survived a battle she didn't think she would survive, she saw this as a signal from the Big G to tighten up and do it right. And I accidentally said something.

"If there is a God, I don't think he'd like that."

"What do you mean 'if'?"

"Well..."

"How long have you been out the house?"

"Ten years."

"And in those ten years, and after all that education you got, what happened that made you not believe in God?"

"I didn't say that. I just have a few issues with it."

"Issues?"

"Yeah."

"You are my son, and I love you. But I am not burning in Hell. I am going to Heaven. And I want you to be there with me. It is up to you what you do with your soul."

"I know."

"I hope you know the consequences of all that thinking."

"Mom, just calm down..."

"Coming into my house with all that mess...."

"I am good. Me and God are good. We have a relationship."

And that's how it usually happens, isn't it? A sudden revelation that, just maybe, you are going to be different. And how do you absolutely, without question, love someone who is different? How do you do that?

And she is so much more cruel than me. She has this incredible ability to end life without remorse. There was Lady, the chow dog she poisoned. I remember Lady, this creature. Charles opened the Buick door and out Lady popped, prancing around the yard, peeping her territory, and my mother had this smashed up, mushed up, scribbled up look on her mug. Her entire face sort of bunched up into a ball around her nose and my mother said, "Oh no," and walked back into the house. And the months and months that Lady was there, the more my mother said Oh No, Oh No. It wasn't Oh No, something bad is gonna happen. It was Oh No, fuck this dog. You have to understand Lady. She never barked. She barely ran. She didn't move out of your way. You could command her all you want. Move Lady! That chow would just stand there, looking into your eyes. And she wouldn't eat around you. And she wouldn't let you pet her. Oh, she let Charles pet her all day long. But that's it. And there was my mother, looking at that dog, that dog looking at my mother. And then the tragedy. The moment where you could tell it was my mother or the dog. My mom reached her hand out to Lady, a first time act of kindness. It was something I would do. Reach out my hand to my step father or my real father and say, hey, let's make this work. But Lady, SNAP!, tried to bite my mother. Oh No. Oh No. That bitch was dead and buried by the end of the week. And there was Charles, my first step dad.

"I know you killed my dog, Nita!" he yelled once, walking to the door, for work. And when the door closed behind him she giggled, scrambling the eggs, saying Prove it. And even recently, with her visit, her and her friend on the porch of my home, in rocking chairs, there is a sense of importance. Maybe regret. I'm not sure what I'm seeing in her face at this age. Somehow I've lost the ability to read my mother. Maybe I don't care anymore. I've spent the decade reading other woman, the body language, trying to figure out what that hip swing means, what that touch on my arm signifies. It is all so confusing. And then I take my mother around my neighborhood, around my block, and she is swinging her hips, smiling, flirting?, with that guy that waves to me when I head to class.

"Don't wave at him," I tell my mother.

"Why not?" She bats her damn eyes and smiles and shows that gap in-between her front teeth, a gap some would consider cute. And she keeps waving and I forcibly put her arms down and she shakes her head, rubs my head, tells me something I've never wanted to know before.

"I'm a woman, Jay," she says. No. I refuse to buy that. No. You aren't one of them. No. But there she is, walking around, shaking her ass all around. You know, I think it becomes apparent that, just maybe, my mother has had sex before. Later. I call her because that is what I do. I'm seeing someone? This girl I'm seeing tells me that I'm going to Thanksgiving dinner with her. Oh No. Oh No. There are bricks being laid down on the foundation of this relationship that I didn't pay for. Who authorized this foundation? Who told this girl it was fine to make a commitment with me? What does she see? I call my mother for some sort of solace. She had ended things. Marriages. The life of small animals. I call and ask her how I end this growing thing that might make me happy. I can't risk being happy. What will happen to the narrative? I call my mother and ask her what she's been up to.

"I went back home and spent some time with Thomas," she tells me. Thomas? The husband she left? What is this now?

"We went to church and we went to dinner and we just spent some time together," she tells me. What does a smile sound like? I tell her about the new girl and Thanksgiving.

"That's great," she says. "You be the man I raised you to be."

So much information! Who is this woman? Resolving a marriage? Accepting my connection with another family and thanksgiving? I get off the phone and stumble a bit. Where are my pockets? What am I here for? What time is it? I thought I knew what I was doing. I truly did. I had a direction when I left the house this morning.

And I go and eat with this family. I do this. Meet so many people and every one of them is judge compared to my family. And I feel good. I feel right. But then I don't feel right. My girl hasn't touched me all day. We get to a bar. People everywhere and I ask and she says I can't do this any more. Do what anymore? Be with you anymore. And I drive six hours back, broken, embarrassed. Tired. Sleepy. My mother calls.

"How was it?"

"Fine," I lie. She knows I lie. She asks again and I mumble that we are done. And she laughs and laughs and she says: I get upset but she still laughs and laughs and I know why she laughs. She's been there. How many times? How long? When can I sit and relax and be in love and then I wonder how many times she's asked that.

"Give it time," she says. And I admit that I want the babies, I want the house, the love, the warm bed and love, love, love and she laughs and says it again, give it time. Give it time. Give it time. Be patient. She says. Her voice etched and hurt and different from fifty years. Give it some time. Give it some time. Give it some time.

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