



Listening for Grace

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At the Dairy Queen in Van Horn, Texas, about a hundred miles outside of El Paso, Grace waits in her little hatchback for two women with frosted hair and capable forearms to open for the day's business. Leaning her head against the already hot glass of the driver's window, she keeps the window cracked while she smokes a cigarette. When one of the women turns over the sign on the front door, Grace unfolds herself from the car and walks to the bathroom. She chooses the door with the sign that says "Cowgirls" and locks herself in.

First, she brushes her teeth. She scrubs hard at the last seventeen hours and 950 miles. When her gums begin to bleed a little and her mouth tastes like mint, she fills the rust-stained pedestal sink with cold water and rinses the heat and smoke from her long brown hair. She digs around in her backpack for a barrette and pulls the wet hair away from her face. In Los Angeles, her hair is curly from the wet, salty air of the Pacific Ocean. But as she has driven mostly south and a little east for the past seventeen hours, the air has grown drier and her hair has gone flat and full of static.

In El Paso there had been a bloody nose. So after she washes her face, she looks for any small flecks of blood she might have missed when she pulled over at a rest area and used a wrinkled McDonald's napkin to stop the blood that was coming, fast.

Someone knocks on the bathroom door, then shakes the copper doorknob a bit. Grace says, "Just a minute," and tries to sound as if she is not using the bathroom in Van Horn's only Dairy Queen as her personal rest area.

A woman's voice, low and flat as the land, comes from the other side of the door. "Sorry, Hon, you take your time."

Grace begins to hurry. She digs through her bag for a clean bra and panties, stacking her clothes on the toilet seat. She stuffs the toothpaste and old panties back into her bag, shoves a dollar into her jeans' pocket for the chocolate dipped cone she will buy on her way

out the door. She looks at herself in the mirror. She thinks she looks fine, maybe a little tired, but who wouldn't be a little tired, after driving for 950 miles without stopping? She is only twenty. She can still drive 17 hours straight and snort an eight ball of cocaine without too much wear and tear. Grace is going to visit her father for the first time in two years. She doesn't want him to worry.

On Saturday morning, Adam rises a little earlier than usual. His daughter is coming home for the Fourth of July, her first visit since she moved to Los Angeles two years ago. He is awake by 5:30. He drinks a pot of coffee. He mows and edges the yard before the day gets too hot. He walks through his small house, straightening. In his daughter's old bedroom, he presses his face into the sheets on the bed to make sure they haven't grown musty. In the bathroom he moves his razor and shaving cream off the counter and clears a spot for his only child in the medicine cabinet. He moves his box of condoms to a shoebox he keeps in the back of his closet. In the kitchen he looks over the groceries he bought on his way home from work the day before.

For the past six months he has worked as a security guard at the only mall in town. He works the noon to nine shift. It is a big mall, with a Walgreen's, a Sears and a JC Penney's, that suffers from more than its fair share of stealing. Grace's father detains shoplifters, encourages teenagers to move along, helps lost children find frantic parents, helps frantic parents find their lost children. Mostly, it is good work. Mostly, he likes his work. Mostly, he is grateful for the work.

But yesterday, there had been more shoplifters than usual. Most of them were boys stealing auto parts from Sears or girls stealing lipsticks from the Estee Lauder counter at Penney's. One had been a thin, middle-aged woman who was hiding an EPT pregnancy test and cans of baby formula under her sweater. The sweater was a dead giveaway, the manager at Walgreen's told him. A sweater in July! Ridiculous.

The woman in the sweater had cried some, sitting in the small security office in the back corner of the mall. She was sweating by then, her head down on the folding card table Adam kept pushed against one wall. He had spent most of his afternoon trying to figure out a way to let her go. After work he had walked quickly, up and down the aisles of the grocery store. He had forgotten his shopping list. He could not stop thinking about the sweating woman, and the way her smell, thick as a quilt, had stayed in his office even after the police had come and taken her. At home, he put away his groceries and had several glasses of Jack Daniels, neat.

Saturday morning he discovers he shopped well. In the refrigerator, he finds the cube steak he will use to make his daughter's favorite, chicken-fried steak. There is a bag of dinner rolls. There is corn on the cob, fresh greens beans, and okra. There is margarine. In the freezer he finds a frozen piecrust, and a gallon of Rocky Road ice cream. On the counter he has sweet potatoes, pecans, and a two-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper. Though he doesn't remember buying them, he finds Oreos tucked behind the sweet potatoes.

At ten, he begins to listen for Grace's car, though he is sure she will not arrive for a few more hours. He makes a ham sandwich, then washes a few dishes. He calls the toll-free number on the back of his Visa card and checks his balance. He thinks he would like to take her shopping while she is home, get her a new pair of jeans. He wonders if she still eats Oreos.

At noon, he tries to take a nap. He has always had trouble sleeping. In the first year of his marriage, he would lie still in his bed and listen to his wife's smoky, asthmatic breathing. He listened for burglars, for thunderstorms, for pipes that might not hold much longer. In



the winter months, he listened to the sleet that never quite turned into snow as it slapped against the window of his bedroom. A few years later, when he was barely 21 and Grace was barely off the breast, his wife had left a note taped to the bathroom mirror. The note, scrawled on a piece of typing paper in thick black magic marker, a hurried note, said that marriage and motherhood, like certain spicy foods, did not agree with her. And then, he had begun to listen for Grace.

He listened for changes in her breathing, him stumbling out of bed and knocking his hipbone against the dresser to go to her when she cried out in her sleep. He listened for signs of flu, signs of bad dreams, signs of the mother's absence.

When she was three and began to walk in her sleep, a habit that would continue into her early teens, he listened as she wandered up and down the hallway between their rooms. He listened as she tried to open the front door to the house, listened to her settle onto the couch or the floor of the hall closet where, if not carried back to her bed, she would wake up the next morning, wrinkled and afraid.

When she was ten and watched *The Exorcist* at a slumber party, he listened to nightmares for a time. He listened for the sounds of closets and beds being checked, and then he listened as she made her way down the hall and into his bed, where he hugged her for a few minutes, then carefully pushed her to the other side of the bed.

He listened for Grace when she was seventeen and started staying out past her curfew, sneaking into the house at three in the morning, drunk and deliberately quiet. He tried to listen as she spoke on the phone late at night, recounting the details of her dates to friends and later, when she was on the phone to a girlfriend in California, he listened as Grace made plans.

Now, when she calls collect from California, he listens anxiously as she talks about her roommates and her voice lessons; as she talks about the acid blue-green of the Pacific Ocean and the mist that hangs over the city each morning before dawn and fades into a dependable late morning sunshine. She has never seen anything like it, she tells him, as he waits for her to say that she is eating well. Now he listens for signs of trouble or hunger or sickness. But since she moved to California, Grace has only good news for her father. She tells him amusing and tender and careful stories, not unlike the stories he read to her when she was a baby.

As he lies in his bed and listens for her car to pull into the driveway, he thinks about how he will meet her at the door, with his arms wide open as a summer month. He thinks he will fix a little lunch for her, maybe a ham and cheese sandwich. He thinks he will ask her to tell him stories about what she has been doing, and he never quite falls asleep, listening as he is for Grace to come home.

In the parking lot just outside of Pecos, she parks next to the industrial dumpster in the back of the building and cleans out her car. She empties the ashtray and pulls fast food bags from under the front seat. She scrubs at a stain from some coffee she spilled when she took an exit ramp too fast just outside of Phoenix. She throws away the little steel coke spoon she has been keeping in the glove compartment.

When she has finished with the car, Grace breathes in the heavy, familiar smell of the oil and natural gas fields. It is stronger than she remembers. She is not far from the place where she grew up. She gets back into her car, turns on the air conditioner and carefully begins to apply makeup. She covers a few freckles on her nose with powder, puts a little extra under her eyes and just below her nostrils. She applies eye shadow, liner and mascara. Her hand is un-

steady from the coke and lack of sleep; and she is out of practice. In Los Angeles, she mostly goes without, but she doesn't want her father to worry and she is sure that he would worry if she told him she no longer wore makeup.

She remembers summers when she would spend a few weeks at her grandmother's house in Brownsville. Mornings, she would sit on the toilet and watch her father's mother put on makeup. I have to put on my face now, her grandmother would say as she tamped her Pall Mall against the ashtray she kept on the vanity. Just let me put on my face, then we'll drive over to the mall and do some shopping.

Grace would watch her father's mother smooth Oil of Olay on her neck, working her way up to her eyes and forehead. Always smooth up, the old lady told the girl, her namesake. Take care of your skin, Grace, and your skin will take care of you. For her part the girl had spent years imagining the old woman returning to her bedroom from kissing her husband goodnight in his room down the hall and carefully removing her face, then setting it on the bureau next to the bed.

In the parking lot at the Texaco, Grace draws a thin, dark line of red from one corner of her upper lip to the other. She fills in the center of her lips with a lighter shade, for maximum fullness. She sprays her wrists and ears and hair with the perfume sample she keeps in her bag. Then she sprays the interior of the hatchback. She looks at herself in the mirror. If she were to pull into her father's driveway without makeup, he would worry. He would wonder what she has been up to.

In the parking lot of the Texaco just outside of Pecos, just an hour or so from the town where she was born, Grace does the last of her coke, using the nail of her little finger to snort the fine, warm powder, and she puts on her face.

The hatchback needs a tune up. This is what Adam thinks when he first hears her little car tremble into the driveway. Then he is in the driveway with plenty of hugs and kisses, and she is telling him that she no longer eats red meat. The only animal she will still eat, she says, is fish. Fish is OK, but beef is out. Ham too. Especially ham. Besides, she's not the least bit hungry, she says. The heat is doing terrible things to her appetite. Actually, she feels a little sick. Maybe she should lie down for a while, take a little nap. It was a long drive. In Phoenix, she came off an exit ramp too quickly and almost had an accident. She spilled coffee all over the passenger seat. Does he have any stain remover in the house? Oh it's good to see him. He looks good. How about her? Does she look good? She's lost some weight, can he tell? Lost her baby fat, thank God. Getting rid of the chicken-fried steak didn't hurt. Does she sound any different? Her voice teacher says she has to lose her accent if she is ever going to find a job as a radio announcer on the West Coast. Her voice teacher calls it the twang. Isn't that funny? She is so glad to be home. Maybe they could go out to Red Lobster for dinner. She hasn't been in a Red Lobster for a while, she can tell him that. OK, then, she's just going to lie down for a little while, maybe an hour or so, and then they will drive over to the Red Lobster and have some dinner. The yard looks great. Could she have a glass of water?

Adam watches her talk. It occurs to him that his daughter has always been a good talker. He listens, turning his head to the side and nodding from time to time. She has a little smudge of lipstick on her chin, and he reaches out to her, to wipe the smudge away, then lets his hand fall back to his side. Yes, he says, taking her arm and leading her toward the house, she should take a little nap. Red Lobster will be fine, he says. Would she like an Oreo and a glass of milk before she lies down? She looks thin. Maybe she'd like a snack. Is she sure?



Grace sleeps for the rest of the day. She wakes up around eight and has Oreos and a glass of milk. Sorry, she says, I'm just so tired from the drive. Her father tells her not to worry, that they have plenty of time, that they can go to Red Lobster tomorrow, for lunch maybe. Get a good meal in them before the fireworks displays get started. He's got some time off from work, he tells her.

She picks at the cookies, drinks the milk, and then goes out to get something from her car. She is out there for a long time. When she comes back into the kitchen, she looks frustrated but she kisses her father on the cheek and heads back to her bedroom.

While she is sleeping he makes a sweet potato and pecan pie. He calls his sister in Houston for advice on how long it takes to cook. He asks her about baby fat, asks her if she ever had any, how much she lost. He calls the woman he has begun to date recently and asks her if she ever had any baby fat. It is a short conversation. He makes a ham sandwich for his dinner, has a glass of Jack Daniel's, and watches the news. He checks in on Grace from time to time, but she is sleeping hard, flat on her stomach, her right cheek deep in the pillow. She is breathing noisily through her nose, and she makes a thin whistling sound when she exhales. He pulls the sheet up close to her head, sits on the edge of her bed for a while, and wonders if she still talks in her sleep.

Are you awake? He asks, are you OK?

But his daughter doesn't move, so he rubs the center of her back for a moment as he listens to the noise from the television in the living room.

Sunday afternoon, the Fourth of July, he takes her to the Red Lobster on the 52nd Street parkway. She has showered, curled her hair and put on a lot of makeup for what she is calling their lunch date. She wears a black T-shirt and a pair of jeans. In her old chest of drawers, she found a silver chain with three little silver beads on it and, after noting to her father that she didn't do so well on the "add-a-bead thing," she asked him to help her with the clasp. Grace also wears a pair of workmen's boots, not unlike the kind her father might have worn when he still had work in the oil patch.

Adam wears jeans, a navy dress shirt, and tennis shoes. In the back pocket of his jeans, there is the thick, square outline of his wallet. Before they left the house, he put his good Visa card in front of his driver's license. He looked at a photo of the woman he has begun to date and he thought about the condoms hidden in his closet.

Once, just before Grace left home for good, Adam had searched her bedroom. He was looking for drugs. He thought it might explain some things. He looked through the top drawer of her desk, felt around in the pockets of the jeans and jackets she had thrown over the arm of her chair. He listened for her car to pull into the driveway, for the headlights to shine through the thin curtains on her window and catch him there.

He had not found any drugs, but under her mattress he came across a little book of erotic fiction. *Delta of Venus*, it was called, and he stood next to his daughter's bed, thumbing through the mottled and discolored pages, his face red and shamed by his searching and finding. He remembered a conversation he had had with his brother about the hardships of raising teenagers. His brother said, When I find my son's first girlie magazine, I'm buying him a subscription, and he reached over to slap his brother's hand.

But that day Adam stood next to his daughter's bed, the book hot in his hands, and he wished, not for the first time, that she had been a son.

In the lobby of Red Lobster, while her father talks to the hostess, Grace looks at the lobster tank. There's my dinner, she says, leaning down for a closer look. She taps the glass in front of one large lobster. Sorry, she says.

They are seated in a booth that looks out over a mostly empty parking lot. The restaurant shares the parking lot with a small studio that teaches dancing lessons to little girls. Grace slides into the booth first. She chooses the side that faces the door to the restaurant. Her father sits awkwardly, with his back to the door, and faces the window to the parking lot. Grace digs through her large purse for a lipstick. The waitress is upon them immediately. She smiles at Adam, tells him she will be their server for the afternoon. Could she get him something to drink? He orders bourbon and water for himself, then asks his daughter if she would like a strawberry daiquiri. She looks up from her handbag, then at the waitress. Sure, she says, and sits up straighter.

The waitress looks at her for a couple of seconds, then writes something in her little book.

OK, then, she smiles at Adam again. Would you like the house bourbon or something a little smoother?

He looks at his hands. The house is fine.

Grace says, Could I have Bacardi in mine?

Her father and the waitress look at her. The waitress writes something in her little book. Whipped cream? she asks the girl.

Yum, she says. I mean, yes; that will be fine.

The waitress writes something more in her little book. She says, Back in a flash, and then she is gone.

Adam looks out the window and watches a group of little girls leaving their dance class. They scatter across the parking lot in their leotards and pink shoes as parents lean through the windows of minivans and pickups, their lips moving when they call out to get their children's attention. Some of them honk their horns.

Thanks, Grace says, for getting me a drink. She puts on more lipstick. She kisses her dinner napkin a couple of times, blots at the extra lipstick.

I'm glad you could make it home, he says. Are you still tired from the drive?

Not so much, she says, but I'm starving.

She tells him that California is the most amazing place she's ever seen, completely different from Texas. Interesting. She tells him about her job in a little coffeehouse in Marina del Rey. She tells him about her voice lessons and how well they are going. She tells him about her roommates and the house that they've rented less than a mile from the beach. She tells him she is learning to surf, but she is terrible at it.

He listens and nods his head. He says, How many roommates do you have? I forget. Seven.

Oh. How many bedrooms?

Two, and a garage that's been converted to a third.

Oh.

Daddy, don't start.

OK, he says. He looks out the window, watches the parking lot empty as the little girls find their parents and climb thin-legged into the minivans and pickups.

Adam runs his hands across the menu that is lying closed on the table. Grace opens her menu and reads a few things out loud. Scampi. Fried Shrimp. The Hungry Fisherman's Plat-



ter with a little bit of everything. She tells him the entrees come with soup or salad. She tells him that, for a little extra, he can have bay shrimp on his salad. She thinks she will have that, the bay shrimp on her salad. And lobster. She is starving.

He looks at her thin shoulders bunched up close to her neck as she reads the menu. He tells her to have whatever she wants. He says, You have lost weight since you left home.

Lost my baby fat, thank God, she says and laughs, hard and loud enough that the middle-aged couple in the booth behind them look up from their menus.

He looks out the window at the parking lot, quiet now, and mostly empty. In the days before Grace left home, after they had fought about her moving to California as they had fought, hard, about everything in the two years before she left, she held a garage sale to get some money together. She woke up early on the Saturday before she left home for good and she hung signs around the neighborhood. The signs read: Everything Goes! She stacked the boxes she found behind the grocery store up and down the driveway. One box held her collection of stuffed animals, sold for a dollar each. Another held her books, fifty cents each. Still another was stuffed full of her clothes, juniors, size 11, prices varied. Adam sat at the kitchen table, drinking a pot of coffee and reading the *Dallas Morning News* and trying hard not to choke on the deep knot in his throat while Grace, arms full of boxes, her plump cheeks red with exertion and the cold, early May air, moved back and forth from her bedroom to the driveway.

They fought over the bedroom furniture, he remembers, with Grace arguing that he had given it to her, so it was hers to sell. Besides, she argued, did he want her to starve to death in Los Angeles? Did he want her to fail? Of course he did. He wanted her to fail so she had to come back to West Texas and spend the rest of her days in misery, like him.

And so, with the help of a boy who lived down the street, the bedroom set, with its white canopied bed and little matching vanity, was moved to the driveway. And when it was done, Grace had come and stood beside her father for a moment, her arms full of bed linens.

Everything Goes! She said. Everything goes. Adam thought he heard in her voice something low and mean, a growl and a moan, and he remembers the sound of his own hand moving from the newspaper, the creak of his shoulder as he faced the daughter who was leaving. He remembers the catch in his neck as he turned too quickly in his chair. He remembers the smooth, round of the daughter's cheek as the flat of his hand landed there, the flush of red that spread across her face and into her neck, like a sudden bloom of Hibiscus flowers. Everything goes, she said again, a little louder, her voice trembling. Everything goes. And then Adam turned away from his daughter. This turning away he remembers well, but the memory of her leaving the next day—the hatchback only half full with her two suitcases, the print of his hand still faint on her cheek—is hazy as a window after a sandstorm. A few months after Grace had gone, he replaced the bedroom set with a twin bed and dresser he found at the Salvation Army thrift store. He covered the bed with an old quilt he found in the attic, a quilt that his mother had made for her hope chest, and he began to call it the guest room.

The waitress returns with their drinks, places the Jack Daniels and water on the table in front of the daughter and says, Oh, that's not right, now is it? She laughs at her own joke, then slides the drink toward the father. She sets the strawberry daiquiri in front of the daughter, then stands up straight and writes quickly in her book as they order shrimp cocktail for an appetizer. The daughter orders the lobster, with everything. Her father tries to order the

fish and chips, but then changes his mind and orders the Hungry Fisherman's Platter, with everything. They both order bay shrimp for their salads. They order two more drinks. The waitress is grateful for this. The more they drink, the more they'll tip. She writes everything down, nodding her head in approval from time to time and saying Good, good. When she has finished taking their order and moved to the middle-aged couple in the booth behind them, Adam nods his head at the strawberry daiquiri.

Good, good, he says, mimicking the waitress. Grace laughs, and hearing her laugh for the first time in two years, he says it again. Good, good, he says as he pretends to write something in a little book. He leans his head to the side, looks at his daughter, and asks her what she'd like to eat. Shrimp Remoulade, she says, exaggerating the pronunciation. Ree-moo-laid.

He laughs until he begins to shake, and he is still laughing when his daughter toasts him, when she bumps her glass hard against his, whipped cream spilling over the edge of her glass. She leans back against the booth and laughs some more, and her shoulders bump up against the booth until the middle-aged couple looks at each other for a very long time.

And it is as if something has broken inside them, something stopped up and tight has broken loose from each of their chests and gone floating toward their livers. They laugh when the waitress brings their salads with the bay shrimp, and they laugh when she takes their salad plates and delivers their dinners. They laugh until the waitress is no longer laughing along with them. They laugh, and Grace eats everything on her plate, right down to the garnish, which she holds up at the end of dinner and says, Good, good, Grace, then pops the garnish into her mouth. Adam listens to his daughter laughing and he thinks it is a laugh loud like her mother's, deep and off-key like his, and he orders another drink for each of them. Grace, he says when it is his turn to make another toast. Good, good Grace.

After dessert and more drinks, when the restaurant has emptied out and most of the townspeople are watching fireworks, Grace will press her shoulders hard against the back of the booth and, eyes sleepy, she will try to tell her father a little about her life in California. She will tell him how many hours she works at the coffee shop, how her voice teacher has begun to make fun of her when she loses concentration and the accent—her voice teacher calls it that *dreadful southern drawl*—creeps back into her words. She will tell him that she thinks about trying to take a few classes at community college, that she thinks about coming home, that she thinks there would be nothing worse than coming back to Texas. She tells him he is the only good thing in Texas.

Adam will listen just as carefully as he did when she slept down the hall as a little girl. He will listen until she has finished telling him her stories and they are both tired and full up. Then he will drive them home, where Grace will go to the guest room and fall straight into sleep. Her father will lie wide awake in the bed that used to be his mother's bed and his grandmother's bed before that. He will listen as the house settles, and a wind from a summer storm in the Panhandle makes its way through town. He will listen to the firecrackers thrown from the cars of teenagers driving up and down the highway. The only good thing in Texas, he will think, and smile a little. And now, as he did all those years before she left home for good, he will listen for the pauses, the quiet spaces, and the things Grace does not tell him.

