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BY JENNETTE MCCURDY

*I'm Glad My Mom Died*

*Half His Age*

# HALF HIS AGE

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4th ESTATE • London

It's bad form to groan when a guy's going down on you, I know that, but right now it's hard not to.

"You taste so good," he says, licking his lips.

"Thanks."

Randy Julep's fingers clamp down on my splayed-out thighs, his death grip tightening. His cunnilingus technique is underwhelming: Eyes shut reverently. Occasional *mmms*. Slimy tongue that loop-de-loops over and over like a carnival ride, mechanical and passionless.

"You know what, why don't you just come up here?"

"You don't want me to keep going?" he asks, cocking his head.

"No, let's just . . . get to it."

"O-okay, if you're sure." Randy tries and fails to hide his excitement as he whips a condom out from his pocket then runs his clammy hands through his mop of hair. The same mop of hair I found so mysterious when we met over the summer at that Fourth of July party. The same mop of hair that shielded his hooded eyes while we threw back red, white, and blue Jell-O shots, while we ate corn on the cob with too much butter, while we swam in Goose Lake and watched illegal fireworks burst in

the sky. The mop of hair I found so intriguing. So seductive. And that I now just find greasy.

“You need help with that?” I ask as Randy struggles to rip open the wrapper.

“Um, would you?”

He chucks it at me, I tear it open and chuck it back at him. He kicks off his boxers and discards them in the corner.

I close my eyes and start moving my hands down, imagining I’m somewhere else, somewhere with someone I connect with, someone who gets me and who I get. It’s a shame. For a second, I really thought Randy could be the guy. He’s quiet and moody. I figured that must mean he had thoughts so riveting that he couldn’t utter them out loud or he’d spoil them.

“Your tits are beautiful,” he says.

“Thanks.”

“So beautiful,” he repeats, mashing and squishing them between his fingers like a kid with a ball of Play-Doh. “Your whole body is . . .”

“Thanks,” I say again, hesitantly. Maybe it is beautiful, my body. I wouldn’t know, since in the two years that I’ve had this new version of it, I’ve been much more consumed with dealing with it than appreciating it. Shaving it or scraping it or strapping it in or exfoliating it or lathering it or shoving a coarse cotton plug into it. Always doing something to stop my body from doing what it wants to do. Oozing or bursting or bleeding, making too much hair in the wrong places and not enough in the right ones.

I’m not used to this new body yet, with these new curves and stretch marks and this unrecognizable silhouette. It’s like my smaller-framed, flatter-chested body could no longer contain all that was inside it, so it expanded to make room. Now my body’s ahead of my mind and my mind needs to catch up. Needs to real-

ize this thing isn’t an Airbnb. This is home now. Even if it doesn’t feel like it yet.

“You ready?” Randy asks, eyes narrowing with a weird intensity. I want to remind him this isn’t *Apollo 13*. It’s a couple kids about to fuck on a twin-sized bed.

“Yeah,” I say in a wispy sex voice that I feel like I’m supposed to use.

Randy pumps into me with a staccato pump, pump, pump. Same as they all do. Or at the least the three boys I’ve fucked, all of them with their boners and their closed comedones and their way of touching my body like they’re fumbling for their car keys. No passion, no bond. Just sweat and bumping and genitals. Body parts in body parts.

It’s not for lack of trying. They’re trying. I’m trying too. But no matter how much spit or cum, how much dry-humping or making out, going down or eating out, petting or edging, sex always falls short. Feels clunky and perfunctory. Clumsy and performative. A blatant reminder of the misshapen puzzle pieces that are private parts.

And afterward, they re-buckle their pants and I re-clasp my bra and accept in the awkward silence the itchy fact that I settled for pleasure when I wanted connection, an itchy fact that I refuse to scratch by saying it out loud, so instead we go and get ice cream.

Maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m the problem. My mom called me hard to love when I was seven and the phrase always stuck with me even though she swore she didn’t mean it twenty minutes later, and by two days later she denied she’d ever said it at all.

“You heard me wrong,” Mom explained after I brought it up on our weekly trip to the Dollar Zone for processed foods (jumbo bags of Cheetos and SunChips, a jar of Skippy, and a couple

boxes of Hamburger Helper that usually expired before they got used) and essentials (toothpaste and toilet paper and trash bags so thin they ripped if you filled them all the way up) and usually one novelty item Mom couldn't resist (a cream for cracked feet or any product with the word "detoxifying" in it).

"I dunno, those don't seem like easy words to mishear," I said.

She popped a stick of Big Red in her mouth and chomped down on it.

"Well just cuz they're not easy words to mishear doesn't mean you didn't mishear 'em."

"Sorry."

"It's alright. But just know I never said that. Maybe I said you were a lot. Because you are. You need a lot and you are a lot. That's me being honest, not mean. But never would I ever say you're hard to love."

Problem solved, I thought. I'm not hard to love, I just need a lot and am a lot. And then I grabbed a coloring book I wanted, but thought better of it and set it back on the shelf. Maybe wanting things is what makes me a lot. If I could just want less, I'd be the right amount of person. The amount I'm supposed to be. The not-a-lot amount. The easy-to-love amount.

It's an approach I've taken with me into my three relationships, if you can call them that, which you probably can't. I've tried to not ask for much, and to expect even less. I've tried to make them feel funny when they all say the same jokes, feel smart when they all have the same point of view, feel right when a quick Google search confirms that they're not. I've tried to laugh on cue, smile on cue, compliment on cue. I've watered down my personality to a cardboard cutout version of myself, and I thought that was fine so long as my body showed up in 4D with

bells and whistles, ready to grab and grope and lick and suck. But the more I try, the more I realize it's not possible. A body can't just connect on command, or find a spark that isn't there, or force a nonexistent chemistry. You might be able to squeeze a couple of cheap thrills out of it, but eventually, the body says *no more*.

Like mine is saying to me right now.

"I'm gonna cum!" Randy shouts in my ear.

And he does. At least he did what he said he was gonna do. I can appreciate reliability, in any form.

He pulls out, panting. I glance at his nightstand—at his plate of pizza crusts that's been sitting out the past few times I've been here and his dog-eared copy of *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*, lying face up, like he's proud of reading it. I scan the floating shelves on his wall, crammed with soccer trophies, and the trifecta of movie posters pinned up next to them: *Scarface*, *Goodfellas*, *Pulp Fiction*. The Holy Trinity. What is it about boys and these three movies? Always with these three movies.

"Do you ever feel like your body and mind are saying two different things?" I ask him.

"Um . . ." Randy says, staring at me dumbfounded. "No. Not really, no. Do you?"

"Me? No . . . not really," I say. It's unsettling how often agreement doubles as giving up.

Randy peels off the condom then flings it in the trash like it's a slingshot, even squinting his eye for accuracy. He makes the shot at least. If you're gonna sling your progeny into your trash can, you better make that shot. He snatches a dirty sock from the carpet and starts wiping himself off with it.

"Hey, Randy," I hear myself saying while I shimmy into my jeans, my voice flat and distant.

“Mm-hmm?” he asks, still sopping up his cum with his own sock.

“I think we should . . .” I pause, trying to find the right words.

“Break things off?” he asks effortlessly, tossing his sock into his dirty clothes bin. “Honestly, I was kinda thinking the same thing . . .”

“Great.”

“Great, I’m glad we can be so mature about it,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. He falls back onto his bed and kicks one foot over the other, swiping open his phone to laugh at some video a friend sent.

“See you around,” I say over my shoulder as I head out.

“See you,” he says without looking up.

And that’s that. As unceremonious as a breakup could be. No tears shed. No *why*’s or *I can change*’s. Just a clean, simple break. Another cheap thrill crumpled up and chucked in the trash. Or, perhaps, sling-shotted.

When I get home, I kick my shoes off, take a leak, and throw the toilet paper away since we’ve never not had clogging issues. I wash my hands with Mom’s favorite hand soap, the lemon ver-bena from Bath & Body Works, five for \$27. I do the dishes and a quick load of laundry, pop a Stouffer’s frozen lasagna in the microwave, and check the kitchen island for Mom’s latest sticky note:

*Waldo—spending the night at Tony’s. There’s lasagna in the freezer. Have a great first day tomorrow. Senior year, baby! So proud! Xxoo, Ma*

I don’t know why she still bothers with the sticky notes when she could just text—she must think they give a personal touch—or why I keep them all. I must think so too.

I head into my room with my lasagna and my sticky note, tuck the sticky note in the jewelry box overstuffed with them, and burn my tongue on the lasagna. I watch ten-step curly hair tutorials on YouTube that seem so complicated that I figure I’ll just go back to frying it with a blow-dryer and straightening iron every day and deal with the self-acceptance later. I switch to a video of a girl my

age thrifting, then JFK getting his brains blown out in the back of that convertible, then a beauty guru's seven-hundred-dollar Sephora haul. I follow the links in her description box to the items from her haul as she tells me that she seriously has a problem and needs to delete her Sephora app so that she doesn't keep purchasing multiple shades of products that she hasn't even tried.

I order the same shades of cream blush stick that she did, except for Venetian Rose, which is sold out and would've looked too harsh on my pale skin anyway. I know that a blush isn't gonna transform my life, but it's still nice to believe during the three-day shipping time that it could. It's nice to believe that the only difference between me and Margot Robbie is a stick of blush. It's nice to believe promises, even empty ones in cute typefaces on the backs of little cardboard packages. Especially those ones. There's something about how assured they are in those pretty little fonts that feels more credible than the ones coming out of people's mouths.

I fill out the delivery page and the payment page, then my heart races as I scroll down to that bold, red, looming PLACE ORDER button. I click it and a combination of regret and excitement flushes through my body. A combination so potent that it leaves no space for whatever feeling lurks underneath it.

I polish off my lasagna with whatever taste buds survived that first bite, then wash my face, brush my teeth, and pick my zits even though I know I shouldn't. I get in bed but can't sleep so instead I scroll.

I end my night by loading up a cart on Shein despite the damning ethics of fast fashion, because it's the only place you can get a pair of pants for twelve bucks. The cancer warning comes up on all the items, which I appreciate because it helps me prioritize my cart. Velvet trousers? Not worth the cancer. Crop top? It stays.

"I'm a failure" is the first thing he says to us. "An absolute failure."

It's dramatic, sure, but it gets me to stop scrolling, which is more than I can say of any of my other teachers—all of them trying to force a rapport, getting all chummy with us by cracking some "You get it" joke about Principal Sanders, the panic of their growing obsolescence bleeding through every word, as if the approval of a few hormonal Gen Z-ers means they're still relevant. Still in the game. Still a worthwhile human being.

"This was not my dream," Mr. Korgy says as he paces up and down the rows, his loafers hitting the floor in a smooth, rhythmic beat. "I wanted to be a writer. A novelist. But I couldn't handle the lack of security required to be one. I couldn't tolerate the fluctuating, inconsequential strings of income. The consistent rejection. The scrutiny of my parents' friends. *How's that novel comin', champ?* The uncertainty. I chose being able to afford takeout from the Thai place on the corner over roughing it, living off of ramen noodles. I chose going to the game with the guys over submitting my short stories to publications. I chose catching up on my favorite TV show over finishing a draft. I chose comfort over betting on myself."

My attraction to Mr. Korgy is instant. So sudden it's alarming. So palpable it's confusing. It's not that he's patently unattractive. He was clearly once a prizefighter. Once. But his looks have faded. Atrophied. Withered with the gross decay of glaring middle-aged-ness. And now all that's left are his deep eyes and charming smile, the last remains of a once-good face.

The guys I've hooked up with are all nice to look at. Maybe not chiseled-face quarterbacks with newly minted abs, but the kinds of guys who've made at least a few girls' panties wet with their signature good feature—their pouty lips or their tanned skin or their shaggy hair. And yet, what I feel toward Mr. Korgy is more intense than anything I felt toward any of them.

So I guess attractiveness and attraction are different things. Maybe what I felt in the past was . . . appreciation, for a good physique or face or haircut. And maybe *this* is attraction. Something more primal, that makes less sense.

"Why am I telling you all of this?" Mr. Korgy asks as he approaches his desk. "Because in this class, I don't want your writing to be showy or cool or slick. I want you to be truthful. And if I'm asking you to be truthful, I figure it's only fair that I do the same."

He tugs his pant legs up and leans against the edge of his desk.

"So there it is. My truth. The truth about how I got here, to where I am today, a forty-year-old man teaching creative writing to high school seniors at East High in Anchorage, Alaska. The truth about why I am a failure."

My vagina pulses. It's not about him being a failure. I don't know whose vagina would pulse at that. It's about him being able to call himself one. Him being able to be honest about his regrets, his status, his shortcomings. Not mask them the way every-

one else does, pretending to be fulfilled by their nine-to-five and their once-a-year vacation to wherever had a discount on Kayak. By the pride of paying their taxes on time or always having a sheet of stamps in a "just in case" drawer next to a tube of Neosporin and an extra phone charger. This is someone who has faced, head-on, the disappointing reality of where their life landed, and is willing to be direct and vulnerable about it.

I study Mr. Korgy's thinning hair and nose pores. The broken blood vessels that bloom at the sides of his nostrils. His soft jawline and the lines around his eyes. His so-called unattractive features that I'm so attracted to. It's excruciating. Intoxicating. Inevitable. This kind of attraction. The kind that already knows I'm gonna be with him, it just doesn't know how.

## 4

She shakes her breasts in my face and twirls around in the pink-striped dressing room. “Ohmygod, this fits so much better! Look at my rack!” she says.

After a full day of irritable customers making demands for out-of-stock items as they douse themselves in half-bottles of passionfruit eau de toilette, I needed this reminder of one of the benefits of working at Victoria’s Secret: helping women feel better about themselves. It doesn’t take much. Sometimes just a well-fitting bra. Yank those tits up and the self-worth comes with it.

Most of the stores at the mall have shuttered over the past few years—Dick’s Sporting Goods, Barnes & Noble, Claire’s—because no one plays outside, reads, or lets a sixteen-year-old pierce their kid’s ears anymore. So many stores are gone that the mall has started to feel postapocalyptic anytime other than Black Friday and the day after Christmas. Empty store after empty store—carpet ripped up, gates yanked down, 75% off EVERYTHING MUST GO signs hanging crooked in the windows. The last remaining survivors are the ones that cater to selling women self-esteem in a jar (Lush), a bottle (Bath & Body Works), a powder (Sephora), a handbag (Michael Kors), or a bra (Victoria’s Secret). We also have a food court.

“Those skanks at Macy’s have been telling me I’m a 36C . . . ulch,” the woman says with a cheek-click. “Gosh, fifty-eight and finally getting my first bra that fits right. Can I compliment you to the manager or somebody?”

“Uh, once you make a purchase, there’s a website at the bottom of the receipt. You can go to that and fill it out. Or not. No pressure.”

“No pressure? Please, hon. Don’t go selling yourself short with the ‘No pressure.’ You hear me? I don’t like when women sell themselves short, bugs the crap outta me.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t go apologizing now, makes it worse. Selling yourself even shorter,” she says. “Lemme ask you this, do you know your worth?”

The question takes me off guard, especially coming from a woman who’s standing in front of me topless with fried ends and poor boundaries. Also, I don’t know the answer. Or even the question really. What does it mean? How does one know their worth? What constitutes worth? I’m seventeen with bad grades. I live in a nine-hundred-square-foot apartment with a single mom. Most of the things I ingest are sold in a 7-Eleven. And I know people say worth is a thing you’re born with, a thing you just intrinsically have by nature of being a human being, but I’m not so sure. People are too precious about what it means to be human. We’re just people. We’re just gross little people who shit and fart and fuck. Who eat too much dairy and search for meaning in our iPhones and carry at least one undiagnosed mental illness. People who, maybe, aren’t worth much at all. But that all feels like too much to tell her, so I just nod my head and say, “Yeah, I think I do.”