

## Responsibility

Adam noticed Vaughn sitting on his mother's front steps when he turned into her driveway. Vaughn sat smoking, and didn't move as Adam parked. Vaughn was his mother's boyfriend now, and lived with her, but Adam had only met him twice: once over Christmas, and once when he first got home for the summer, about three weeks before.

"It's good to see you," Vaughn said, holding out a pack of Camels when Adam got out. Adam had reached the point where cigarettes didn't nauseate him anymore. He'd started to like them even: they were good for time management on the long nights at his summer job with Emerson Electric and the long days without Sarah. He took one and closed the door of his father's car.

"Your mother will be excited you're here," Vaughn said.

Adam thought he could smell the booze on Vaughn's breath, but he knew his mother and Vaughn weren't drinking, that Vaughn was supposed to have quit.

"Well?" Vaughn said, his eyes bright behind his thin glasses and his mouth open wide enough for Adam to see his molars. Vaughn looked directly at him, like he was trying to meld their souls.

"Thanks?"

"OK," Vaughn said. Adam turned away from him, avoiding the gaze he couldn't return. Across the street was a house with a yard he'd once played in. He remembered the upstairs family's son, a boy named Phil. Most recently, Adam heard Phil was off

doing something other than college, something that involved a garage. Now in the yard the hoop was bent like someone had been hanging on it, and the net was missing, too. No one had played there in some time.

Vaughn stood up and patted Adam's shoulder. He tilted his head. "I like you, Adam," he said. "I think we can be buddies, me and you." He let his jaw drop after each word, his mouth wide open. "How would you feel about that?"

There was an enthusiasm in Vaughn's eyes that Adam couldn't match—they sparkled, as if he thought they could really be pals. "That sounds all right?"

Vaughn inhaled, watching through thin eyes, and then turned away to blow out smoke. "Good," he said. He brought the cigarette below his knee and rubbed it between his thumb and finger until the lit cherry fell onto the stoop. After rubbing out the rest of the tobacco, he dropped the filter into his shirt pocket.

"You want to see a trick?" Vaughn said. He dug his hand into the pocket of his shorts and brought it out with a rubber thumb. Adam could tell it was supposed to look like skin, but it was too light—it looked like it was made out of canvas.

"Do you like magic?" Vaughn said.

Adam looked away from the thumb, at his mother's Corolla parked in front of the house: Vaughn's Taurus was just behind it.

"Can I have your cigarette," Vaughn said. "You're done with that, aren't you?"

Adam took a last drag and passed the cigarette to Vaughn.

"Nothing in my hands, right?" Vaughn showed his palms and turned his hands over, holding the cigarette between his fingers. The thumb was even more evident now.

"And now," Vaughn said. He made a fist with his other hand and stuck the rubber thumb

in. The real thumb came out uncovered, then Vaughn took a quick drag of Adam's cigarette, and pushed it into his fist. "Always have to be careful here," he said, wincing. He pushed his real thumb in behind the cigarette and opened his hands wide.

"Gone!" Vaughn held his palms up, then clapped once. They were empty, the rubber thumb back where it had begun and the cigarette inside it.

Adam tried to look like he was surprised and enjoying himself, as if he was young enough to appreciate this.

"And now where do you think that cigarette is?" Vaughn said.

Adam checked behind his ears. "It's not behind my ears."

"What?"

"It's not behind my ears," Adam said, and Vaughn stopped smiling. "I don't have it," Adam said. He showed his empty palms to Vaughn.

"You saw the thumb, didn't you?"

"What thumb?"

"You saw it," Vaughn said. He wrung his hands together and the cigarette was in his palm, snubbed out and bent into a Z. He dropped it and clapped the ashes off his hands, stuck the rubber thumb back into his pocket. "You saw the thumb and you didn't say anything," he said. "You let me go on with that trick like an asshole."

"What thumb?"

Vaughn stood and brushed off his shorts. "Forget it!" he said. "Just forget it!" He went inside then, up the stairs onto the porch and through the screen door. Adam watched him disappear into the house, then got up and followed him. Vaughn was

already up the stairs to Adam's mother's half of the house—the second and third floors. He started as soon as he got to the landing. “Your son doesn't like magic!” he said.

Adam noticed a new picture on the wall. In it, his mother and Vaughn were smiling, pulling for control of a long-handled metal spatula, the kind you would use with an outdoor grill. Vaughn had his hands on the handle, but Adam's mother had both hers on his wrists. Her face was tan and happy, her short hair being blown by some vacation breeze.

“What are you talking about?” Adam's mother said. She came out of the living room wearing a shirt that Adam had given her for her birthday when he was fourteen. She smiled but tried to hide it by keeping her mouth closed, but her happiness spread up into her face, making her eyes beam and glisten.

“Adder,” she said. “Do you see what shirt I'm wearing?”

Her face was young; there was something about her eyes that men always noticed. Guys had been telling Adam that his mother had great eyes since she left his father ten years before. At first they were good guys, money-earners with careers, but as time went on their résumés weakened. Vaughn seemed an improvement over the last couple of losers, however, simply by the fact that he was Adam's mother's own age.

But Adam knew his mother liked Vaughn: the night after they first met, his mother had called to ask what Adam thought, and he told her he liked him, that Vaughn had seemed all right. “I'm so glad you said that,” she'd said. “You know, it's been a while since I've felt this good about anybody, you know. And Vaughn really likes me. He tells me.” She was almost giddy. “It's so cool.”

She said this and Adam had listened. He listened to her explain how Vaughn made her feel especially wanted, a feeling she had never really had, she said, not even with his father, and when she finished he told her he thought that was great. He said it was good to see her happy, that that was his only concern.

And now she stood in front of him smiling, asking him who'd given her the shirt they both knew he had, standing next to a picture of herself and Vaughn.

"I gave you that shirt when I was in the eighth grade, Mom," Adam said.

"Right. That's why I love it." She smiled. "Because my son gave it to me." She waved her arms toward her. "Come up. Come up," she said. "We're finished with dinner, but we're just going to have ice cream. Can you stay for a little while?"

When Adam reached the top of the stairs, she reached out and touched his wrist, making a circle around it with her first finger and her thumb.

Adam pulled away. He looked at his mother and then at Vaughn, the two of their faces quiet, standing next to the picture of them laughing. "I could stay for some ice cream," he said.

She padded into the kitchen in her slippers. "You two are going to get the best sundaes you've ever had," she said. "My two handsome men."

Adam went into the living room and sat on the couch; Vaughn came in and sat across from him, on his mother's favorite chair. "How's the nightshift going?" Vaughn asked.

"Fine."

"Just fine? Things have been big business down at the lot," Vaughn said. He smiled and waved his hands in front of his face, then started in about his sales

commissions and how, just that afternoon, he had all but “sealed the deal” on a new Explorer with a guy he had known from his old days.

“He’s always owed me since I introduced him to his wife,” Vaughn said. He crossed his legs and leaned back—his shorts fell back to show Adam the pale, hairy undersides of his thighs.

“She was my girlfriend first, you understand,” Vaughn was saying. “Used to follow me around when I was in the band.” He uncrossed his legs and then re-crossed them on the other side. Adam looked away. “I got to know her pretty good at first, before we were dating, but then when we started going together we found out it wouldn’t work.”

Vaughn leaned forward, put his hands on the coffee table. “She couldn’t handle me,” he said, shaking his head. He leaned back, gesturing toward his lap. “I’m a big man,” he said. Adam cuffed the back of his neck and looked up at the ceiling. He massaged the two rods below his skull. “It’s different with your mother though, she—”

“Enough,” Adam said, closing his eyes. “Jesus Christ it’s enough, Vaughn. Let’s just not talk anymore.”

When Adam opened his eyes, Vaughn was looking at him with his head tilted expectantly. “Adam? I’m really sorry, pal. I totally appologize for what I said. Sorry.” He held up his empty palms as if the hidden cigarette might still be an issue.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Adam pointed toward the kitchen with his chin. “That’s my mother,” he said. She came in, carrying bowls of ice cream, as Vaughn raised his shoulders. His face was plain, empty.

Adam's mother sat next to him on the couch. "It's good to see you," she said. She handed Adam a heaping bowl of ice cream, topped with hot fudge, and reached her arm around his shoulders. "Remember when you used to eat whipped cream right out of the can?" she asked.

"I still do."

She laughed, and Adam ate his ice cream. He managed a smile. "I'm taking this great class on grooming Bonsai trees," she said. "I'll finally start my Japanese garden!"

"That's great, Mom."

Vaughn asked who she was taking the class with, and Adam's mother said his cousin, Deb. She started talking about how Deb had moved back up to Boston after art school and was living with a guy she'd been dating.

Vaughn was shoveling big spoons of hot fudge and ice cream into his mouth. "You should go see her," Adam's mother said. She wiped hot fudge from the side of his bowl with her finger, then licked it off.

"I thought she broke up with that guy," Adam said.

His mother nodded. "They're back together now. Call her. She'd love to hear from you." She went in the other room and brought back his cousin's number.

"Call her," she said.

Adam spooned up the last he could eat of his ice cream and set the bowl on the table. He stood. "I should go."

"It was good to see you," Adam's mother said. "Let me give you a hug." Vaughn was still eating. "That's good," she said. "My Adder."

Vaughn placed his bowl on the coffee table and stood up.

“Call me this week,” Adam’s mother said.

Vaughn offered his hand and Adam took it. “My two handsome men,” his mother said again.

Adam went downstairs and let himself out. He bought a pack of Parliaments and smoked two on the drive home. After a third in his room, he called Deb. “Hold on?” she said. Her hand muffled the phone. When she came back on, there was less noise in the background. “Can I talk to you about something?” she said.

Adam heard a door close on her end. “Vaughn?” he asked.

“Vaughn,” she said. He closed his eyes and waited to hear what came next. “I went to your mom’s last week and he told me that I’ve gained too much weight,” she said.

Adam tapped another cigarette out of the box.

“Too much for who?”

“So I told him he was an asshole,” she said. “I couldn’t believe he would talk to me like that and I told my mother and she said it isn’t fair for some idiot to keep me from seeing my own aunt, but now I don’t like to go over there because he’s an ass.”

Adam knocked the filter end of a cigarette against his desk.

“What did my mom say?”

“What can she do? My mom talked to her. She said she’d talk to him. Maybe she talked to him. Maybe he’s too much of an idiot to hear anything she says.” Deb grunted, getting ready to say something. “It’s embarrassing,” she said, finally. “Don’t you think he’s embarrassing your mom?”

Adam switched the phone to his other ear. “It’s bad,” he said. “I know.” He tasted the cigarette and got ready to light it. He wanted to like Vaughn; he wanted Vaughn to be a good guy and for everything to be great for his mom. He did want these things. Adam saw his mother and Vaughn in the photo they had on the wall, the one where they were laughing.

“I should go,” Deb said. “Josh and I are in the middle of a movie.”

“Okay.”

“Call me again and we’ll hang out!”

“Okay,” he said. He hung up the phone.

His mother had gone from one boyfriend to another after the divorce, lowering her standards by degrees with each one. She reacted as if every failure were her fault—as if her mistakes came in trying to be with men who were better than she. In a short amount of time she’d come to this.

On the wall at his desk were Adam’s old pictures. He looked at the picture of Sarah. She wears a black tank-top and leans forward, holding the shirt up to her chest so that only a thin line of cleavage shows. She has dark lipstick on and her long, curly black hair falls all around her face. Her smile looks genuinely happy. If they were still together, Adam thought, he’d have more to do than go to work and visit his mother. The whole summer would’ve been completely different. *He’d* have been happy.

The other picture on Adam’s wall was of his mother and father when he was little, when they were still together. They stand next to their old car in somebody’s driveway, Adam’s mother holding him, his head in the crook of her arm. She leans toward his father, wearing a denim summer dress with a paisley patch over her chest. Her hair is

shorter and her face younger, and she looks a little confused, as if she isn't sure where she is, but she looks good, healthy. His dad has on a denim blazer with patches at the elbows and a wide brown tie. His has long hair and grins.

Those were different times, Adam knew, and his mother had come through a lot. She was on her own now and there was something she needed from Vaughn, but before she met him she had been all right. She had taken Adam to a nursery in Concord the previous summer, and seemed happy in her independence.

The weather had been nice that day, not too hot, though it was summer. She drove them out to the country and took Adam to the back of the nursery, where a long table of Bonsai trees stood behind all the other plants. Each of the Bonsai was potted in a shiny porcelain pot with a Japanese character painted on its side. His mother had chosen one in a purple base. The tree looked delicate: its trunk curved to one side with a small wooden splint supporting it.

“Isn't it beautiful?”

“I guess so,” he said, but she was right: there was something unique and tragic about the tree. She picked up its purple pot and looked at the bottom, judging the size. Adam touched it, felt the raise where the letter was printed. He fingered the strange shapes.

“Do you think I could take care of this?” she asked.

He nodded. “Sure, you could, Mom.”

She put the tree down and stood back to look at it. “I could,” she said.

She bought her first Bonsai that afternoon after talking to the man who worked there about how she could transfer it into her backyard in the summer and how much

light to give it in the winter. He told her to buy special shears to keep it the right shape and size and she asked Adam about them—if she should buy the ones with the blue handles or the red—and he told her the red, which were the ones that she chose.

Adam shut off the light and sat at his desk in the dark, watching the headlights of passing cars illuminate the walls around him in rectangular ghosts. When he was ready, he went outside and sat behind the wheel of his father's car, holding the keys. He put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and turned the ignition.

The drive from Newton to Cambridge was familiar terrain for Adam; he'd done it enough times that he could make it now without thinking, almost without paying any attention to the road. He drove mindlessly until he came to his mother's turn, but then he kept going. He passed the old hospital, and the new one, and the turn he had taken all through high school to get to where Sarah lived. He drove down her street and looked to see if the light was on in her bedroom. Last he'd heard, she was going to B.U. and living with her parents, but that could have changed. Her room was dark.

He came to a turn that led back toward his mother's and took it. These were the old streets he'd learned to drive on, with his mother beside him and Sarah in the back seat. Just once he had looked back at her—a quick smile to tell Sarah he was doing it—and his mother had had to grab the wheel. She surprised him, but he turned back in time to see the car come within a foot of hitting the phone pole.

After a little while, he came to his mother's street and parked in front of her house, behind Vaughn's car. A light was on in the top floor window—the room that used to be Adam's—and another was on in the kitchen.

He didn't have a key anymore, so he rang the bell then waited while his mother came down the stairs, her heaviness creaking the wood at each step. She wore her nightgown. "Adam," she said. "Is everything all right?"

Adam shook his head, moving past her. "This is because I love you, Mom," he said and headed upstairs.

"What? What is because you love me?" she said, behind him. "What are you talking about, Adam?"

"Wait here."

He went upstairs past the living room where her book lay open on the couch and kept going, to the third floor, where he knew Vaughn would be. He could hear noises coming from the TV, like some inhuman yelling.

In what used to be his bedroom, Vaughn was asleep on the futon, the remote control balanced on his leg. On TV, a creature with a hairy face, covered with dirt, bared its teeth and then made a sound like an animal screaming. Adam shut it off.

"Adam," Vaughn said, opening his eyes. He rubbed his hands over his eyelids and sat up, scratching the back of his head.

"Stand up," Adam said.

Vaughn patted his thighs and put the remote control down next to him. "What's wrong?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"Stand up."

Vaughn put his hands on his knees and stood. He offered Adam his hand and smiled. "It's good to see you," he said. "There's a good movie—"

"Take off your glasses."

“What?”

“Take them off.” Adam felt like he wouldn’t be able to say anything else, that he needed a cigarette. He closed his eyes and opened them, still standing where he was.

“What’s the problem?”

Adam swallowed. “Please take off your glasses, Vaughn.”

He heard his mother coming up the stairs, her steps heavy and slow. “What’s going on up here?” she said.

Vaughn took off his glasses. His face had never seemed so big; Adam could see every wrinkle around Vaughn’s eyes, every white hair along the sides of his head, behind his temples. His mouth was open; Adam could see his fillings.

Adam’s mother was behind them, breathing hard. “Stay downstairs, Mom? Please?” Adam hadn’t wanted her to come up, had forgotten about Vaughn’s glasses and now just wanted to get the whole thing over with. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. His arms felt heavy, like they were thin ropes suspending rocks from his shoulders.

“I just need to talk to Vaughn for a few minutes.” Adam put his hands on his hips, which felt like an exercise he could barely finish.

“But—”

“It’s all right,” Vaughn said. “We’ll be down soon.”

She nodded and started toward the stairs.

Adam turned back to Vaughn. He seemed much thinner and shorter than Adam had expected. His face was a few inches lower, but just in front of Adam’s. “Take off your glasses.”

“I did,” Vaughn said. He had his glasses in his hand.

Adam heard the door to the downstairs bathroom close. He opened his hands and clenched them into fists that felt like doorknobs.

“I don’t hit people,” Adam said. “But I’m supposed to, aren’t I?”

Vaughn shook his head, and Adam’s arms felt heavy, like he wanted to rest them by putting his hands in his pockets, but he knew that was not something he could do.

“For what you’ve done.”

Vaughn nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I understand, but no.” He shook his head. “What’re you talking about?”

“What you’re doing here.”

“Adam,” Vaughn said, shaking his head. “Let me ask you, do you know how much I love your mother?”

Adam felt something slipping away from him, like his chance at a significant decision had passed. He was beyond what he understood and this was not at all what he wanted. He opened his eyes and closed them, trying to see what he was supposed to do.

“Adder?” Vaughn said, putting his hand on Adam’s shoulder.

And that was when Adam hit him.

It wasn’t the good kind of punch that’d knock someone out in a bar—this all happened like something that Adam was only watching, like on television—but his fist caught Vaughn on the chest, below his neck, and knocked him back. Vaughn’s body doubled and he dropped on the floor with some noise, landing against a chair. His hands were down by his sides and his glasses slid under the bed. His eyes opened and shut like he wasn’t sure what he was seeing.

“You don’t do these things,” Adam said. He tried to point at Vaughn but could see it looked stupid, like something from a bad movie. “These kind of things are not what people say here, not what they do,” he said.

Vaughn shook his head.

Adam’s mother called from downstairs, “What was that noise?”

“If you have respect,” Adam said. He pressed the palm of his hand against his eye, letting himself see the dark stars for a moment.

“You should respect her,” he tried, and Vaughn was starting to get himself together. He looked up at Adam and his eyes were empty, as if he was unsure of what to do.

Adam turned and walked back to the top of the stairs. He could see his mother at the bottom, just starting up. “What was that noise?” she said. “Adam, what did you do?”

Adam started down the stairs. When he came to his mother, he tried to move past her to get down the stairs to the front door where he could have a cigarette and get away from all this, but she was blocking the way. She put her arms around him from the side and held him.

“What did you do, Adam? What’s wrong?”

“You’re better than this, mom.” Adam lifted his arms as high as she’d let them, and held his mother around the waist. “You’re better than this because I love you.”

“Adder?” she said. “What happened?”

He pulled her to him and held on.

“Vaughn?” she said, calling up the stairs. “What was that noise, Adam?” she asked. She let go of him and started up the stairs, looking for Vaughn.