**Bartleby, The Scrivener**

Jude knows that her daughter Chloe has a boyfriend. She knows this even though Chloe is fifteen and not talking. If Jude were to ask, Chloe would tell Jude that it’s none of her business and to stop being such a snoop. (Well, if you want to call it snooping to go through Chloe’s closets, drawers, and backpack on a daily basis, check the history on her cell phone and laptop, check the margins of her textbooks for incriminating doodles, friend her on Facebook under a pseudonym so as to access her page—hey, if you want to call that snooping, then, guilty as charged. The world’s a dangerous place. Isn’t getting less so. Any mother will tell you that.)

So there’s no point asking Chloe. She talks about him to her Facebook friends—his name is Eli—but the boy himself never shows. He doesn’t phone; he doesn’t email; he doesn’t text. Sometimes at night Jude wakes up with the peculiar delusion that he’s in the house, but when she checks, Chloe is always in her bed, asleep and alone. The less Jude finds out the more uneasy she becomes.

One day she decides to go all in. “Bring that boy you’re seeing to dinner this weekend,” she tells Chloe, hoping Chloe won’t wonder how she knows about him or, if she does, will chalk it up to mother’s intuition. “I’ll make pasta.”

“I’d rather die,” Chloe says.

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Chloe’s Facebook friends are all sympathy. Their mothers are nosy pains-in-the-butt, too. Her own mother died when Jude was twenty-three, and Jude misses her terribly, but she remembers being fifteen. Once when she’d been grounded, which also meant no telephone privileges, her mother had left the house and Jude had called her best friend Audrey. And her mother knew because there was a fruit bowl by the phone and Jude had fiddled with the fruit while she talked.

So Chloe’s friends are telling her to stand her ground and yet, come Saturday, there he is, sitting across the table from Jude, playing with his food. It was Eli’s own decision to come, Chloe had told her, because he’s very polite. Good-looking, too, better than Jude would have guessed. In fact, he’s pretty hot.

Jude’s unease is still growing. In spite of this, she tries for casual. “Chloe says you’re new to the school,” she says. “Where are you from?”

“L.A.” Eli knows what he’s doing. Meets her eyes. Smiles. Uses his napkin. A picture of good manners.

“Don’t go all CSI on him, Mom. He doesn’t have to answer your questions. You don’t have to answer her questions,” Chloe says.

“I don’t mind. She’s just being your mom.” And to Jude, “Ask me anything.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“What year were you born in?”

“Nineteen ninety-four,” he says and there isn’t even a pause, but Jude’s suspicions solidify in her mind with an audible click like the moment in the morning just before the alarm goes off. No wonder he doesn’t text. No wonder he doesn’t email or call on the cell. He probably doesn’t know how.

“Try again,” she tells him.

Vampire. Plain as the nose on your face.

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Of course, Chloe knows. She’s flattered by it. Any fifteen-year-old would be (and probably lots before her have been). Jude’s been doing some light reading on the current neurological research on the teenage brain. She googles this before bed. It helps her sleep, not because the news is good, but because she can tell herself that the current situation is only temporary. She and Chloe used to be so close before Chloe started hating her guts.

The teenage brain is in a state of rapid, but incomplete development. Certain important linkages haven’t been formed yet. “The teenage brain is not just an adult brain with fewer miles on it,” the experts say. It is a whole different animal. In quantifiable ways, teenagers are actually incapable of thinking straight.

Not to mention the hormones. Poor Chloe. Eli’s hotness is getting even to Jude.

Of course, none of this can be said. Chloe thinks she’s all grown-up, and if Jude so much as hinted that she wasn’t, Chloe would really lose it. Jude has a quick flash of Chloe at five, her hair in fraying pigtails, hanging from the tree in the backyard by her hands (monkey), by her knees (bat), shouting for Jude to come see. If Chloe really were grown up, she’d wonder, the same way Jude wonders, what sort of immortal loser hangs out with fifteen-year-olds. No one loves Chloe more than Jude, no one ever will, but really. Why Chloe?

“Mom!” says Chloe. “Butt the fuck out!”

“It’s okay,” Eli says. “I’m glad it’s in the open.” He stops pretending to eat, puts down his fork. “Eighteen sixteen.”

“And still haven’t managed to graduate high school?” Jude asks.

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The conversation is not going well. Jude has fetched the whiskey so the adults can drink and sure enough, it turns out there are some things Eli can choke down besides blood. Half a glass in, Jude wonders aloud why Eli can’t find a girlfriend his own age. Does he prefer younger women because they’re so easy to impress, she wonders. Is it possible no woman older than fifteen will go out with him?

Eli is drinking fast, faster than Jude, but showing no effects. “I love Chloe.” Sincerity drips off his voice like rain from the roof. “You maybe don’t understand how it is with vampires. We don’t choose where our hearts go. But when we give them, we never take them back again. Chloe is my whole world.”

“Very nice,” Jude says, although in fact she finds it creepy and stalkerish. “Still, in two hundred years, you must have collected some ex’s. Ever been married? How old were they when you finally cleared off? Ancient women of seventeen?”

“Oh. My. God.” Chloe is staring down into her sorry glass of ice tea. “Get a clue. Get a life. I knew you’d make this all about you. Ever since Dad left, everyone has to be as fucking miserable as you are. You just can’t stand to see me happy.”

There is this inconvenient fact—eight months ago Chloe’s dad walked out to start a new life with a younger woman. Two weeks ago, he called to tell Jude he was going to be a father again.

“Again? Like you stopped being a father in between?” Jude asked frostily and turned the phone off. She hasn’t spoken to him since nor told Chloe about the baby, though maybe Michael has done that for himself. It’s the least he can do. Introduce her to her replacement.

“This is why I didn’t want you to fucking meet her,” Chloe tells Eli. Her face and cheeks are red with fury. She has always colored up like that, even when she was a baby. Jude remembers her, red and sobbing, because theLittle Mermaid DVD had begun to skip, forcing her to watch the song in which the chef is chopping the heads off fish over and over and over again. Five years old and already a gifted tragedian. “Fix it, Mommy,” she’d sobbed. “Fix it or I’ll go mad.” “I knew you’d try to spoil everything,” Chloe tells Jude. “I knew you’d be a bitch and a half.”

“You should speak more respectfully to your mother,” Eli tells her. “You’re lucky to have one.” He goes on. Call him old-fashioned, he says, but he doesn’t care for the language kids use today. Everything is so much coarser than it used to be.

Chloe responds to Eli’s criticism with a gasp. She reaches out, knocks over her glass, maybe deliberately, maybe not. A sprig of mint floats like a raft in a puddle of tea. “I knew you’d find a way to turn him against me.” She flees the room, pounds up the stairs, which squeak loudly with her passage. A door slams, but she can still be heard through it, sobbing on her bed. She’s waiting for Eli to follow her.

Instead he stands, catches the mint before it falls off the table edge, wipes up the tea with his napkin.

“You’re not making my life any easier,” Jude tells him.

“I’m truly sorry about that part,” he says. “But love is love.”

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Jude gives Eli fifteen minutes in which to go calm Chloe down. God knows, nothing Jude could say would accomplish that. She waits until he’s up the stairs, then follows him, but only as high as the first creaking step, so that she can almost, but not quite hear what they’re saying. Chloe’s voice is high and impassioned, Eli’s apologetic. Then everything is silent, suspiciously so, and she’s just about to go up the rest of the way even though the fifteen minutes isn’t over when she hears Eli again and realizes he’s in the hall. “Let me talk to your mom,” Eli is saying and Jude hurries back to the table before he catches her listening.

She notices that he manages the stairs without a sound. “She’s fine,” Eli tells her. “She’s on the computer.”

Jude decides not to finish her drink. It wouldn’t be wise or responsible. It wouldn’t be motherly. She’s already blurred a bit at the edges though she thinks that’s fatigue more than liquor. She’s been having so much trouble sleeping.

She eases her feet out of her shoes, leans down to rub her toes. “Doesn’t it feel like we’ve just put the children to bed?” she asks.

Eli’s back in his seat across the table, straight-backed in the chair, looking soberly sexy. “Forgive me for this,” he says. He leans forward slightly. “But are you trying to seduce me? Mrs. Robinson?”

Jude absolutely wasn’t, so it’s easy to deny. “I wouldn’t date you even without Chloe,” she says. Eli’s been polite, so she tries to be polite back. Leave it at that.

But he insists on asking.

“It’s just such a waste,” she says. “I mean, really. High school and high school girls? That’s the best you can do with immortality? It doesn’t impress me.”

“What would you do?” he asks.

She stands, begins to gather up the dishes. “God! I’d go places. I’d see things. Instead you sit like a lump through the same high school history classes you’ve taken a hundred times, when you could have actually seen those things for yourself. You could have witnessed it all.”

Eli picks up his plate and follows her into the kitchen. One year ago, she and Michael had done a complete remodel, silestone countertops and glass-fronted cupboards. Cement floors. The paint was barely dry when Michael left with his new girlfriend. Jude had wanted something homier—tile and wood—but Michael likes modern and minimal. Sometimes Jude feels angrier over this than over the girlfriend. He was seeing Kathy the whole time they were remodeling. Probably in some part of his brain he’d known he was leaving. Why couldn’t he let her have the kitchen she wanted?

“I’ll wash,” Eli says. “You dry.”

“We have a dishwasher.” Jude points to it. Energy star. Top of the line. Guilt offering.

“But it’s better by hand. Better for talking.”

“What are we talking about?”

“You have something you want to ask me.” Eli fills the sink, adds the soap.

That’s a good guess. Jude can’t quite get to it though. “You could have been in Hiroshima or Auschwitz,” she says. “You could have helped. You could have walked beside Martin Luther King. You could have torn down the Berlin Wall. Right now, you could be in Darfur, doing something good and important.”

“I’m doing the dishes,” says Eli.

Outside Jude hears a car passing. It turns into the Klein’s driveway. The headlights go off and the car door slams. Marybeth Klein brought Jude a casserole of chicken divan when Michael left. Jude has never told her that Jack Klein tried to kiss her at the Swanson’s New Year’s Party, because how do you say that to a woman who’s never been anything but nice to you? The Kleins’ boy, Devin, goes to school with Chloe. He smokes a lot of dope. Sometimes Jude can smell it in the backyard, coming over the fence. Why can’t Chloe be in love with him?

“If you promised me not to change Chloe, would you keep that promise?” She hears more than feels the tremble in her voice.

“Now, we’re getting to it,” Eli says. He passes her the first of the glasses and their hands touch. His fingers feel warm, but she knows that’s just the dishwater. “Would you like me to change you?” Eli asks. “Is that what you really want?”

The glass slips from Jude’s hand and shatters on the cement. A large, sharp piece rests against her bare foot. “Don’t move,” says Eli. “Let me clean it up.” He drops to his knees.

“What’s happening?” Chloe calls from upstairs. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I broke a glass,” Jude shouts back.

Eli takes hold of her ankle. He lifts her foot. There is a little blood on her instep and he wipes this away with his hand. “You’d never get older,” he says. “But Michael will and you can watch.” Jude wonders briefly how he knows Michael’s name. Chloe must have told him.

His hand on her foot, his fingers rubbing her instep. The whiskey. Her sleepiness. She is feeling sweetly light-headed, sweetly light-hearted. Another car passes. Jude hears the sprinklers start next door sounding almost, but not quite like rain.

“Is Eli still there?” Chloe’s pitch is rising again.

Jude doesn’t answer. She speaks instead to Eli. “I wasn’t so upset about Michael leaving me as you think. It was a surprise. It was a shock. But I was mostly upset about him leaving Chloe.” She thinks again. “I was upset about him leaving me with Chloe.”

“You could go to Darfur then. If petty revenge is beneath you,” Eli says. “Do things that are good and important.” He is lowering his mouth to her foot. She puts a hand on his head to steady herself.

Then she stops, grips his hair, pulls his head up. “But I wouldn’t,” she says. “Would I?” Jude makes him look at her. She finds it a bit evil, really, offering her immortality under the guise of civic service when the world has such a shortage of civic-minded vampires in it. And she came so close to falling for it.

She sees that the immortal brain must be different—over the years, certain crucial linkages must snap. Otherwise there is no explaining Eli and his dull and pointless, endless, dangerous life.

Anyway, who would take care of Chloe? She hears the squeaking of the stairs.

“Just promise me you won’t change Chloe,” she says hastily. She’s crying now and doesn’t know when that started.

“I’ve never changed anyone who didn’t ask to be changed. Never will,” Eli tells her.

Jude kicks free of his hand. “Of course, she’ll ask to be changed,” she says furiously. “She’s fifteen years old! She doesn’t even have a functioning brain yet. Promise me you’ll leave her alone.”

It’s possible Chloe hears this. When Jude turns, she’s standing, framed in the doorway like a portrait. Her hair streams over her shoulders. Her eyes are enormous. She’s young and she’s beautiful and she’s outraged. Jude can see her taking them in—Eli picking up the shards of glass so Jude won’t step on them. Eli kneeling at her feet.

“You don’t have to hang out with her,” Chloe tells Eli. “I’m not breaking up with you no matter what she says.”

Her gaze moves to Jude. “Good god, Mom. It’s just a glass.” Then back to Eli, “I’m glad it wasn’t me, broke it. We’d never hear the end of it.”

Love is love, Eli said, but how careful his timing has been! If Chloe were older, Jude could talk to her, woman to woman. If she were younger, Jude could take Chloe into her lap; tell her to stop throwing words like never around as if she knows what they mean, as if she knows just how long never will last.

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