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His father hadn't actually abandoned the family, but he worked so much that he was mostly an off-screen character in the boy's mind. When his father was not working or commuting or golfing, he was surfing or spending hours in his office staring at the computer, absently present. The boy spent the bulk of his time with the mother, who wheeled the dull grey Jetta from the general parking area into the lot of the bank proper.

"Run and get me an envelope, boy," the mother said as she dug through her purse. The Jetta's fan kicked on as the engine idled in the late summer heat.

The boy's Airwalks clapped on the pavement as he hopped out of the car and hustled over to the ATM just adjacent to the bank's entrance. He was tall for his age and did not have to reach for the box labeled ENVELOPES; he grabbed a small stack, thinking the mother might need a few for later.

The Jetta had completed its reverse arc out of the parking space when the boy turned back around. The mother had a Cheshire Cat smile on her face, her head bobbing up and down as she laughed, her mouth extended into an "O" that said to the boy that she could not believe he had fallen for it. The boy took two quick steps toward the car, but the mother quickly peeled out, swung the car over to the light at the entrance of the shopping plaza, which had just changed in her favor, turned sharply onto the street, the "Baby On Board!" sign affixed to the

Jetta's rear window swinging wildly side to side as though waving good-bye, and sped up, merging into traffic until the Jetta disappeared from view completely.

The boy took a few wandering steps, then stopped and looked behind him, the thought occurring to him that maybe he had seen another Jetta driving off and that he was just looking in the wrong direction. The thought was dismissed as quickly as it had occurred to him since there were no other Jettas in sight and he was standing in the parking spot where his mother had just been parked.

Run and get me an envelope, boy,"

The boy stood there in his Airwalks and board shorts and white t-shirt that read simply "Schweppes," still holding the envelopes and feeling the tinges of something he had never felt before. There was

a sharp tingling in his stomach, and he wasn't sure whether he was going to be sick or if he had to go to the bathroom and sit down. He replayed in his mind how quickly the Jetta had disappeared from view and he felt a tightness in his chest like when his father would grab him by the shirt and yank him in close and get in his face and bark at him in a soft, quiet way that still always felt like his voice was raised, the shirt slowly constricting as his father tightened his grip. He felt like that now as he stared at the nearly empty parking lot and the passing traffic in the distance and tried to take a full deep breath, the act becoming more difficult the more he tried to do it, and he could feel his wind getting away from him like when he ran down the hill near his house and felt his body start to carry more downward momentum than his legs could keep up with, regardless of how fast his little league coaches said he was, until he was finally pulled down by his own momentum, and had he done something to the mother to make her feel like she needed to teach him a lesson,

he thought, as he went over the past few weeks in his mind, coming up with nothing, but he could not be sure of anything between the initial shock of her leaving and the fact that he couldn't breathe, so maybe there was something he missed and he was vaguely aware that he had never been this out of breath, not even after a really intense little league game or spending all day on his skateboard. He took another few breaths before finally sitting down on the curb like a dog that is so confused it doesn't know what else to do.

Sitting on the curb he began to calm down, and no sooner did he take a satisfying breath than he heard a familiar revving behind him as the Jetta rolled up to where he was sitting. The mother looked at him through the passenger window and failed to stifle another giggle.

"Need a ride, kid," she called out.

"Where did you go," he demanded.

The mother revved the engine and the boy noticed that the passenger door was locked.

"Come on."

He reached for the door and the mother pulled the car ahead a few yards. He ran up to the window.

"Please?"

"What are you going to give me for a ride?" The mother had the mock-serious look on her face that she always got when she wanted the boy to think a prank was over when it really wasn't.

He looked at her, baffled.

"Toss those envelopes in here," she said.

The thought occurred to him that giving her the envelopes did not necessarily equal a ride home. By making the exchange sound so simple, the mother had actually presented him with a familiar dilemma. He could toss the envelopes through the window and watch the

mother drive off again. He could jump through the window before she had time to step on the gas. (Although the vision of the boy getting only halfway through the window before the mother sped off, careening into traffic, his legs swinging wildly and looking like an inflatable dancing man didn't seem all that far-fetched.) He could not give the mother the envelopes and she could drive off. The last scenario, the one that seemed the least plausible, was that the boy gave the envelopes to the mother and she let him into the car, that the exchange actually ended the mother's prank. Years later, looking back on incidents like this, which were surprisingly frequent, it would amaze the boy that the trust in the mother eroded but was never fully washed away. The damage was mostly directed inward, turning the boy into someone who couldn't really function or talk to people or get along in society and who always felt like no one ever really liked him or wanted him

**What are
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around and who had never had a fulfilling relationship with a woman because who even knew what that was anyway. (In the few blinks it took the boy to make up his mind, he could see his father, gaze locked on the computer, smiling and nodding as the boy told him all about the mother's latest prank, saying something like, "Your mother has a very unique sense of humor.")

The boy stood at the Jetta's passenger window, looking out over the gulf that lay between him and the mother, and realized that it did not matter whether they made the exchange or not because what he was feeling was something that would never recede. He still felt the tightness in his chest as he looked into the mother's eyes and reared back, the whole time feeling absolutely...