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Heath Johns Hot Chocolate

My mother and I haven't always been so close. For starters, she gets on my nerves and she's always nagging me; it seems the only time she ever talks to me is when she's telling me to put on a coat, do a chore or who not to date. Then the divorce happened. The divorce did nothing for our relationship.

Before there was constant fighting, yelling, tension in the air so tight you could pluck it and make a tone. After, came the merciless land-grabbing. It got so bad I almost moved out, even though it would've meant quitting school to pay the bills. But we made it through. My sister went to college, and I ended up with my mom, and so far we haven't come to blows, so I guess that's a good sign. Probably the most trying time we've had so far was the night three days after the divorce was official.

I was going out with this girl that my mother would have described as a serial killer or a Satan worshipper, but I, at that time, chose not to judge women by their hair color. She was in the backseat of my Corvair, more than slightly inebriated. I checked on her several times on the way from the nightclub to my house, and each time, she'd sunk deeper and deeper into the floor of my car. I considered several places to ditch her but doubted she would have appreciated any of them. I decided to take her to my place so that she could sleep off the oyster shooters she had so gleefully devoured. The trick was to make sure my mom didn't see her.

As my tires hit the gravel on the driveway, I cut the engine. This was a much practiced skill I'd learned right after I'd gotten my driver's license. I cringed slightly when the brakes squeaked. They needed oil or something, but I knew that I wouldn't do anything about them. I opened the stuffed glove compartment and searched around for the spare bottle of Scope that I kept for

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special occasions such as this. I got out of the car and swished some through my teeth and spit it out on the grass. I checked the backseat to see if Twist had thrown up yet, tapped the car for good luck and headed for the door.

I opened the door slowly so it wouldn't creak and stepped inside. I was just about to close it when the lights went on. Oh shit, I thought, I'm busted. Then I saw my mom and she looked as surprised as I was. She said, "You're out late."

"Uh, yeah," I replied, my mind racing for an excuse I hadn't used lately.

"Did you have fun?" she asked nervously, and I relaxed. I now had the upper hand. It was no mystery that my mom was seeing someone. Probably the same one she'd been seeing during the tattered remains of the marriage.

"Oh yeah, had a real great time," I said, in my best Beaver Cleaver imitation, trying not to slur any of the words. But my mom picked up on something because she asked me if I was still seeing that Twist girl. "No," I lied, "I broke up with her a long time ago." There was a creak in the floorboards above my head.

"So," my mom said, trying to pretend the house was settling, "would you like some hot chocolate?" I knew what she was trying to do. She knew only too well that hot chocolate made me sleepy, and I knew that caffeine kept her up. She was trying to outlast me so she could get Sam out of the house, and I had to outlast her so that I could smuggle Twist in.

"Sure."

Soon I was sitting down in the kitchen. Mom poured more mix into a pot full of milk and put it on the stove to heat up. Then she said that she'd left her hair curler on and had to go up to her room to shut it off. I knew that she was going to tell Sam to hold tight and shut up for a while, but I enjoyed seeing her squirm and I didn't say anything. When she came down her appearance was a bit better and her lipstick was smudged.

She stood in front of the stove and stirred the sleeping serum. "So how's school going?" she asked.

"Fine," I replied. Mom realized she'd put in too much hot chocolate and was now trying to scoop out the sediment at the bottom of the pot. I sat there, tugging at the kitchen tablecloth, staring at her, wondering if she was tired at all. We didn't talk until the hot chocolate was ready and she'd sat down across the table from me.

"Um...", she started.

"So, house seems to be settling," I said with my biggest grin. From behind her mug, she replied, "Aren't you going to drink your hot chocolate?"

"No, I thought I'd let it cool down a bit," I said. Then there was a knock at the door.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Sounds like the door," I said. "I'll go check it out." I swore under my breath as I hurried to the door. As I stepped out, Twist collapsed into a smelly heap in my arms. I called out to my mom that I would be back in a second and dragged her into the backseat again. This time I locked the door.

"What was that?" my mother asked when I returned. If she didn't know about Twist, she sure picked up on the worried look on my face. I hated that smile.

"Oh nothing, just a friend who dropped by," I said.

"Well, who was it? You should've invited him in. There's plenty of hot chocolate," my mom said.

"It was just...Bob, but he...had to go," I fumbled: She wasn't merciful about it at all.

And so we sat at the table, Mother in her maroon floral bathrobe, sipping impatiently at her hot chocolate and looking around, her eyes drifting anywhere but on me. Myself, I just stared right at her as if by trying really hard I could implant a hypnotic suggestion: go to bed.

"Aren't you going to drink your cocoa?" she asked again.

"It's too hot, I'll just stir it till it cools down," I responded again. So we sat there silently, listening to the constant clink clink of the spoon against my ceramic mug with the words emblazoned on it: *My mom's from Sweden, why'd you ask?* I've never understood what it meant; like so many other things my mother gave me, it confused me. I was just about to say to her that I knew about everything and ask her if we could just go to bed, but when I looked up at her face so full of impatience, frustration and sadness, and she saw my face full of the same things, something clicked. We stared at each other for half a second, and then like two absurd kettles past their boiling point, we started laughing crazily. We must have laughed for five minutes straight, because by the time we stopped, I couldn't see through my tears and my throat was raw. And so we talked. Just talked. About my father, life, all the things that had ever gone right or wrong in our lives, about what that stupid mug meant. The man upstairs, the drunk in the car, we forgot. All of a sudden they just seemed like trophies to beat each other over the head with. For the first time in years, I was more than her son, and she was more than my mother.