

## Hope

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The car creeps across the Pulaski Skyway<sup>1</sup>. Hope stares out the window at brackish water, the Hackensack River, and thinks of her father, a lawyer and intermittent<sup>2</sup> tyrant, and how her mother waits on him like a slave and what he would say if he could see her right now. [...]

It is very early on a Sunday morning, not many cars on the road and what sun there is, a hazy globule lolling<sup>3</sup> just above the horizon, adds a sour lemony hue to the atmosphere.

Her boyfriend, Artie, beside Hope in the back seat, turns to look behind them, the blue rental sedan<sup>4</sup> still there.

“What’s the exit again?” Barry asks.

Artie, directions rumpled and clenched in his palm, says, “Thirteen.”

*Unlucky thirteen*, Hope thinks, shutting her eyes.

“You okay?” Artie asks.

Hope looks at him, then away, thinks of a conversation she had about art school, her mother saying Hope could go if she studied Art Ed<sup>5</sup>, how she could teach and support a husband through medical school or law school, how she would have “something to fall back on,” and how, when she told that to Artie, they both laughed.

The large green sign looms into view.

Down the exit ramp to a stop sign, one turn then another, Artie supplying directions, Hope twisting in her seat, trying not to watch.

“They’re still there,” says Barry, eyeing the sedan in his rearview mirror.

The service road runs parallel to the turnpike<sup>6</sup>, close-set one-family homes lined up along its perimeter [...]. The road ends in a T.

“Take a left over the highway,” Artie says, reading from the paper in his hand.

On the overpass Hope looks down at cars whizzing beneath them, for a moment thinks she will shout: *Stop! Let me out! I’m going to jump!*

“Take a right,” says Artie, his tone flat. “Then two blocks to a mall.”

Through her window Hope surveys small signs of life: attached houses, a few leafless trees, boarded-up shops. No, she thinks, no signs of life at all.

They pull into the strip mall – drugstore, supermarket, coffee shop, discount shoes – everything closed, New Jersey blue laws<sup>7</sup> in effect.

“Drive around back,” Artie says, “to the parking lot.”

Hope holds her breath as they make the turn.

“I guess dis is da place,” Barry singsongs, trying for cheerful. He parks at the edge of the lot.

The blue rental follows and parks beside them.

Artie’s college roommate, scrawny with glasses, an anti-Vietnam radical of some notoriety<sup>8</sup>, gets out of the car, his girlfriend, Rochelle, dark-haired and petite, just behind him.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pulaski Skyway*: bro i New Jersey, USA

<sup>2</sup> (her) af og til

<sup>3</sup> *hazy globule lolling*: uskarp kugle, som dinger

<sup>4</sup> *rental sedan*: (her) udlejningsbil

<sup>5</sup> *studied Art Ed*: læste til billedkunstlærer

<sup>6</sup> (her) motorvej

<sup>7</sup> *blue laws*: lukkelove

<sup>8</sup> *anti-Vietnam radical of some notoriety*: noget berygtet modstander af Vietnamkrigen

Artie opens his door and gets out too. Hope doesn't move. He leans back in, extends his hand, but she just sits there. "It's going to be okay," he says. Hope sucks in a breath then struggles out of the car, nods at the roommate's girlfriend, whom she hardly knows though they are in this together [...].

40 Hope can't focus on anything, not Artie, his roommate or his roommate's girlfriend, her brain like a loaded shotgun ready to go off. Artie pulls her close.

They hear the car before they see it round the corner, their heads cocked at the sound; Hope stiffens against Artie's side.

"It will be okay," he says again.

45 A black car, in need of a wash, angles alongside theirs and stops. A woman gets out, scarf over her hair, cat's-eye sunglasses, a bulky blue parka.

Hope watches as Artie hands the woman the envelope, red fingernail slashing it open, fingering the bills, lips moving as she counts before she stuffs it into her pocket.

His roommate hands over a second envelope. The woman counts again.

50 Hope studies the woman's face, the lines around her mouth, guesses she is somewhere in her late thirties, possibly forty. The woman looks up, arcs her chin toward the car idling<sup>9</sup> behind her, a man at the wheel, fedora<sup>10</sup> low on his forehead, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth like a gangster.

Hope thinks, *No way*, but then the roommate's girlfriend nods at her and they head toward the car holding hands like little girls.

55 The woman in scarf and sunglasses flicks a smile at them, then says to Artie, "Be back here at eleven," opens the car's back door for the young women, who climb in.

Artie wants to say something, to call out, but can't think of what before the door slams shut and the car takes off. He watches it disappear from the lot.

"Well," his roommate says, a cloud of smoke surrounding the word.

60 Barry calls from the car. "You guys want to get something to eat? There's a diner across from the mall."

The roommate shakes his head, "I'm going to stay here," tugs a copy of their college newspaper, of which he is editor, from his back pocket. The headline reads: IMPEACH JOHNSON<sup>11</sup>.

"I'll stay with you," Artie says.

65 "No, go with your brother."

"In-law," Artie says. "You sure?"

His roommate nods, adjusting his wire-framed glasses.

Barry says, "C'mon, Artie, I'm starving."

70 The diner is all hard surfaces, tiled floor, tin ceiling, metal cases filled with cakes and pies that look as if they are made of Styrofoam, cold fluorescent lighting, disinfectant thickening the air.

Artie slides into a booth, drums his nails on the scratched Formica<sup>12</sup> tabletop.

"Coffee?" the waitress asks, thirtyish, eyes smudged as if she is exhausted or wearing last night's mascara.

75 Barry nods and she fills his cup. Artie says, "Tea," the idea of coffee nauseating. Barry orders two eggs over easy with bacon and hash browns, rye toast.

"How about you, Artie?" he asks.

"Can't eat."

"C'mon. Eat something."

Artie sighs, says, "One egg, scrambled. Toast, whole wheat." [...]

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<sup>9</sup> i tomgang

<sup>10</sup> blød filthat

<sup>11</sup> IMPEACH JOHNSON: STIL JOHNSON FOR EN RIGSRET (Lyndon B. Johnson, amerikansk præsident (1963-1969) under Vietnamkrigen)

<sup>12</sup> (her) laminat

80 Artie watches Barry eat, ketchup on the edges of his brother-in-law's mouth while he talks, thinking how his businessman father had given him the \$500 needed for today without hesitation, without the usual criticism or the ongoing question: "What are you going to do with a degree in *art*?"

"Be an artist," Artie always says, though he has no idea what being an artist means or requires.

85 He wonders if his father has told his mother about the money. He figures he has; his parents are close.

"Does my sister know?" Artie asks.

"I had to tell her something," Barry says, staring into his coffee.

Artie finishes his tea. "We should get going." [...]

"We're only five minutes away," says Barry, but Artie is already edging out of the booth.

90 The windows of the roommate's rental car are fogged.

Artie raps on the glass, simultaneously wiping away the icy mist, the frost starting up again. His roommate flinches, cracks the door, says, "Guess I dozed off," the newspaper with IMPEACH JOHNSON crumpled in his lap. "What time is it?" He takes off his glasses, rubs at his eyes.

95 Artie can't believe the guy fell asleep. He feels as if his nerve endings are electrified, his mind sparking. He walks to one end of the parking lot and back, replaying everything – Hope crying as she told him she was two months late – "and I'm never late" – asking around until he got a name – everyone seemed to have one – making the call and the way he felt in the phone booth on Commonwealth Avenue, small and scared as the unidentified man on the other end of the line told him the cost, where and when to meet.

100 He is sweating inside his coat though it's frigid, his face pricked by icy needles. He thinks: *What if something goes wrong?*

Barry ambles<sup>13</sup> over, tells him to relax, pats his shoulder.

The three of them huddle together, a helpless trio of boys with no idea of what to do, what to think, how to imagine what is going on. Artie grubs<sup>14</sup> another cigarette from his roommate, blows smoke rings into the bitter winter air.

105 Barry says, "It's freezing," heads back to his car, but Artie and his roommate do not, pacing and smoking until the black car rounds the corner and comes to a stop. The back doors open and the girls get out.

Artie thinks, *She's alive!*

110 He runs toward her, notes how pale she looks, gets an arm around her and asks, "Are you okay?"

"I feel – empty," she says, and sags<sup>15</sup> against his chest.

His roommate's girlfriend, Rochelle, is crying as they get into their rental.

No one says goodbye.

In the back seat of the car Artie and Hope hold hands but look in opposite directions as Barry drives them to Newark Airport for a flight back to Boston where they are both in school.

115 Hope thinks about the appointment she has tomorrow with a gynecologist, who will check her out, someone she's never met, a recommendation from a girlfriend who has assured her that the doctor will be "cool." How many stories has she heard about botched abortions<sup>16</sup>, about women who could never bear children again though she is not sure she wants to have children, not after this.

120 "Everyone okay back there?" Barry calls over his shoulder. Hope doesn't answer. She curls up, arms across her belly, crying softly now, like a mewling kitten, Artie's hand resting lightly on her back.

On the flight Hope falls into a deep sleep and Artie watches her, still the observer, looking for signs of what she has gone through.

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<sup>13</sup> lunter

<sup>14</sup> napper

<sup>15</sup> synker sammen

<sup>16</sup> *botched abortions*: mislykkede aborter (før 1973 var det ulovligt at få foretaget en abort i de fleste stater i USA)

125 Back in Boston things are strained and he just wants everything to be the way it was, carefree, easy,  
two young people in love, but it isn't; Hope is moody, wounded, seemingly mad at him and she doesn't  
want to do anything, no movies, no parties and he is beginning to resent it. He keeps asking her if she  
is okay, she is always crying.

It is several weeks before she tells him the details.

130 *It was a house, a small private home with a room decked out like a doctor's office but there was no  
sheet on the metal table which was stained and rusty and the doctor – if that's what he was – was  
smoking! – his cigarette ash falling onto the table, onto the floor, and the place looked so dirty – and  
the woman, the one who took the money, was his assistant, maybe his wife or girlfriend – I can't  
remember if either of them wore gloves but I don't think so. The woman kept telling me it would be  
okay and held my hand – Oh, I remember now, I can feel her hand in mine – she wasn't wearing gloves,  
135 both of them smoking as they attached my legs to stirrups<sup>17</sup>, and all I kept thinking was... I am going to  
die.*

Artie listens, afraid to say anything wrong because once when he said, "But you wanted to do this,"  
she snapped: "No one wants to have an abortion!"

140 The roommate and his girlfriend break up soon after. "She was always mad at me," he says to Artie,  
"and what did I do?"

"Well," Artie says, his tone slightly mocking: "You did get her pregnant," and they almost smile the  
way young men do because there is something powerful in the idea that a man can get a woman  
pregnant – a way to prove you are a man.

145 Five years later Artie and Hope marry and she supports him through graduate school<sup>18</sup> by teaching and  
they have one child and lose another to a miscarriage, but they never talk about the abortion.

(2018)

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<sup>17</sup> fodstøtter

<sup>18</sup> graduate school: kandidatuddannelsen