

Aubrey's Boyfriend

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Aubrey's boyfriend is coming for dinner.

First of all, there's that phrase "Aubrey's boyfriend" to get past. Dave would rather think about the dinner part. He'll pick up some ribs on his way home from yoga and make Maura's favorite sauce for them. Hoisin, ginger, honey, sesame oil. He uses these as his mantra, gets them humming in his "third eye"—what kind of crazy idea is that? —as he tries to relax, relax his groin and his hamstrings, relax into the pose, even though, after years of running three miles a morning, his groin and his hamstrings have lost touch with what it means to relax.

He's doing yoga with Maura now because he's a humble guy, willing to go along with stuff. But when the class sits with the soles of their feet together and lowers their knees to the floor, the instructor looks at Dave with what he imagines to be quiet dismay—"compassion," she would call it—because his knees are pointing to the upper corners of the room like a pair of TV antennae. "Work from wherever you are," she intones as if to the whole class, but he knows she's talking to him.

Aubrey is in high school now. It's good that she has a boyfriend. She's supposed to have a boyfriend, though Dave disputed the use of this word with Maura last night over their habitual cups of ten o'clock decaf. "How long have they been—hanging out together?" he asked her. Maura is always more informed than he, not because he doesn't

care or even because he isn't paying attention. But because of their schedules, she's always been the one to drop Aubrey off at school in the morning and pick her up in the afternoon, and she is a keen observer of the social scene, even if she just drives past it twice a day.

"I don't know," Maura shrugged. "Maybe a month, six weeks?"

"That's not long enough," Dave said. Aubrey's algebra textbook was on the kitchen counter, and because he needed something to hold onto and his mug was too hot, he slid it toward himself.

"What, there's some rule about how long you have to date before you can call a guy your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

Maura raised her eyebrows. He loves the way they peak, like little carets pointing to inserted but unspoken thoughts. She waited.

"Six months," he said, and Maura laughed.

"Come on. After six months we were already engaged!"

"But we were ten years older than they are. More."

"Ah, so there's an age caveat as well," she said. Sometimes she still sounds like the attorney she used to be, back when they were a couple of DINKs living in a downtown condo, drinking wine in the evening instead of decaf coffee. Back when she used to wear four-inch heels and get \$100 haircuts. Now Maura's outrageously curly hair is halfway down her back, with a few streaks of gray, and she's just given up the duck boots she wore all winter in favor of canvas slip-ons. How many different lives have they lived together? At least three, maybe four. Dave will never be bored with her.

He flipped open the hard cover of the textbook. He knew Maura didn't really care about his definition of boyfriendhood, and she didn't even think he believed it, which was probably true. On the inside cover some errant boy—who were the parents of these boys, anyway?—had drawn in pen a frighteningly accurate representation of two large breasts.

“They even have areolas,” he said as if he'd been personally attacked, and he pointed to the painstakingly shaded areas around the nipples of the disembodied breasts. He knows this word only because Maura is now a lactation consultant at the local hospital—another one of those things he had never imagined her doing and never imagined himself having to explain to other men in ordinary conversation. He could see when he looked up at her that she had entirely missed his indignation over the X-rated drawing because she was so proud of him for using the word “areolas” correctly. He picked up a pencil and attempted to erase the breasts; then, seeing it was no use, he turned the pencil over and wrote beneath the drawing, “A WOMAN'S BREASTS ARE HER OWN PRIVATE PROPERTY.”

“You've just defaced *public* property,” Maura said when he was done. She was pretending not to be smiling.

“God help me,” said Dave.

Class is ending. *Savasana*, corpse pose. The instructor says it's the hardest pose of all, but Dave has fallen asleep doing it more than once. Now if only he could stop thinking about barbecue sauce, the bill they owe the deck guy, the meeting with the executive board tomorrow morning, and whether Maura will sew the button back on his good jacket in time. If only he could empty his mind like he's supposed to and just concentrate on the warm feeling of his breath spilling past his nostrils ATM Aubrey's

textbook hoisin sauce and the cool sensation lower back pain Aubrey's textbook deck bill of it rushing back in hoisin sauce Maura sewing button past his nostrils Aubrey's textbook Maura's nipples lower back pain Maura's nipples, he'd be really relaxing chair of the board e-mail Aubrey's textbook, he'd be really doing *savasana* hoisin sauce lower back pain, which apparently is the most difficult pose after all.

Aubrey and Jeremy, the boy whom she considers to be her boyfriend, arrive at the house in Jeremy's mother's Subaru Outback at 6:15. Dave has showered off his yoga torpor, made the sauce, and heated the grill. Maura is tossing a salad.

From the kitchen window, Dave sees Jeremy step out of the driver's side of the car. Dave hadn't thought of this complication, and he starts in on the deep diaphragmatic breathing he learned in class that afternoon. It's supposed to calm his nervous system, but his system is feeling extra nervous.

"They're here," he says to Maura. That's all he says because he is afraid his voice might crack. She rolls her shoulders and arranges the expression on her face, and he realizes for the first time that she, too, is terrified of the direction their life as a family is about to take. When he looks out the window again, Jeremy is standing at the back of the car waiting for Aubrey, who is getting out of the passenger side. Did he open the car door for Maura when they were first dating? Probably not. Can't get the kid on that one, really.

Aubrey brings Jeremy to the front door instead of coming in the back as she usually does, and he and Maura go to the door together to greet them. Jeremy shakes both their hands, and Aubrey runs off to the bathroom, leaving the three of them bumping into one another as they try to close the door and move toward the kitchen. Dave offers to take

Jeremy's backpack, which feels like something a Sherpa would carry through the Himalayas. He thinks of cracking a joke about this, then wonders whether the kid will know what a Sherpa is, then decides he might—kids are pretty worldly these days—but by the time he is ready to say something, Maura is already offering Jeremy a soda and some chips and guacamole.

As they sit across the kitchen counter from one another—adults on one side, kids on the other—Dave tries to figure out what is different about Aubrey. Has she parted her hair differently? Gotten new glasses? Or is it just that she is in a sustained state of embarrassment? Whatever it is, he feels a little heartsick. She is his back yard buddy, the only one who laughs at his jokes and eats his creative sandwiches. She'll still sit and watch *The Simpsons* reruns with him even though she's seen them all at least six times. She's his insight into how the world as it's becoming works. She and Maura cross one another on nearly a daily basis; for the last few years he's had the fortune of being the good cop. For a few minutes he tries to catch Aubrey's eye so he can send her a signal—one raised eyebrow, meaning nothing specific, just a funny secret between them—but he can't get her to look at him. The guacamole needs more garlic, more kick, but he keeps delivering it into his mouth anyway on chip after chip until Maura asks him if it's time to put the ribs on.

"I'll help you with that, Mr. Calhoun," Jeremy says, standing up.

"Okay," Dave says, momentarily frightened that the kid wants to be alone with him. They're not going to have the kind of conversation a young man has with the father of his girlfriend already, are they? What kind of conversation would that be, anyway? None of the possibilities are good.

But it turns out that Jeremy just likes to grill. He's actually good at it.

"I cooked at Steak 'n' Stuff for two years," he says with a toothy grin, and Dave realizes after grinning back that this means Jeremy is at least a couple of years older than Aubrey. Of course he is. He's driving.

"So, what grade are you in?" he asks as casually as possible. He leans on the fence and watches Jeremy, who has put on the cooking mitts and is spreading the dripping ribs evenly over the grill surface, all on the same diagonal, to make what will turn out to be perfect sear marks on the meat.

"I'm a senior," Jeremy says. Aubrey has never brought a boy home before, not for dinner, not to study, not even for a quick introduction, and she starts with a senior? How many girls has this kid dated already? Can you ask that kind of a question? Not until you've had a beer or two, and he and Maura agreed there'd be no beer.

"A senior, wow," Dave says. "What are your plans for next year?"

"I'm going to MIT, probably majoring in mechanical engineering."

"Huh," Dave says, nodding. "I went to RPI."

"Really?" For the first time Jeremy looks directly at Dave. "What do you do?"

"I work for the Regional Water Authority. Mostly quality control." Usually this is a conversation killer at parties, or else people start asking Dave how dirty their drinking water *really* is, as if there's a conspiracy to hide the facts from them. Or they have some gripe about their sewage service, which has absolutely nothing to do with him. But Jeremy wants to know about the different kinds of vacuum breakers they use to prevent backflow, and how they monitor potential cross connections among their residential

customers. Dave is left wondering what Jeremy and Aubrey, who has never shown any interest in his work, have to talk about.

“Okay, done,” Jeremy says. He’s taking the meat off sooner than Dave would have, and he hasn’t slathered enough sauce on it. But when they sit down at the picnic table and bite into the ribs, Dave’s stomach groans in anticipation.

“These are delicious!” Maura exclaims. “Mr. Calhoun is pretty good with ribs, but I think you could teach him a thing or two.”

“Please, call me Dave,” Dave says to Jeremy. He hates it when the kids call him Mr. Calhoun. “So, if Jeremy is a senior and you’re a freshman,” he says, addressing Aubrey, “how did you two meet?” He can see out of his side vision that this senior business is news to Maura too, by the way the whites of her eyes briefly flash into view.

“Don’t you remember *Once Upon a Mattress*, Dad?” The winter musical. Aubrey played the part of a huge bird in full plumage who was lowered to the stage in a gigantic cage and sang horrendously—on purpose, of course. The audience loved her. “Jeremy was the stage manager.” Yes, she also spent a lot of time painting sets, he now recalls. Much more time than she spent in rehearsal for her two-minute gag part.

Jeremy suddenly drops his fork, wobbles his head and gargles out a ridiculous version of her song—even more ridiculous than the original—and Aubrey, an Aubrey whom Dave has never seen before, rocks toward Jeremy, landing her head on his shoulder, and laughs.

Not with a mouthful, you’ll choke. That boy has his hand around your back.

Maura is laughing too, a littler laugh, just a crinkle at the corners of her mouth, and she nudges Dave playfully on the thigh. Why did they agree on no beer?

“That show was awesome,” Jeremy says. “I played Jud in *Oklahoma* when I was a sophomore, but it was much more fun being backstage.” Yes, they saw that one, too. They took 12-year-old Aubrey and her girlfriend to see it and sat a row behind them. If anyone had told Dave then to keep an eye on Jud...

“Mr. Calhoun isn’t big on musical theater,” Maura says. But Dave protests, “I am too, when my daughter is in it! I went to all four shows,” and Aubrey smiles at him because she is old enough, at least, to understand this as a sign of his devotion to her. That one smile from her lifts his spirits, and he helps himself to some more ribs.

“I do prefer a good rock concert,” Dave says. But even this phrase sounds like something an old guy would say—“rock concert”—because now the kids listen to hip-hop, rap, ska, whatever the hell it is they listen to. Jeremy presses Dave for names, which he gives—Bruce Springsteen, U2, Tom Petty, The Clash—but he silently prays Maura will change the subject for him, which she does.

His beautiful Maura. She changes the subject to Ogunquit, where they’ve camped every summer for years, to lacrosse, which Aubrey is playing JV this season, to Jeremy’s mother’s painting business, which she seems to know something about. She carries the conversation for him all the way through seconds on ribs and brownies with vanilla ice cream for dessert. He is a buoy floating on the sea of her; it seems no effort for her to hold him up, and later she will even deny having done it, though he feels she does it often. Then, to cheer him up, she will tell him she still loves his ribs best, and she will stand in front of him and slip her slender fingers between his ribs and hold him like that while she kisses him.

But for now, the sun is shooting low across the new deck, and Dave is sitting at the picnic table in a state of concentration more intense than he was able to attain during yoga class, watching his girl-woman daughter and this boy-man shoot a lacrosse ball back and forth. Aubrey is a pretty good lacrosse player, but as Jeremy dodges in and out of the long shadows cast by the Norway maple, Aubrey stands still or bends over, giggling, and misses half the passes he sends her way. She moves her hips like a woman at a cocktail party. Dave is irritated, wants to call out to her to play sharp, show this kid what you can do. She's not playing lacrosse; she's playing the game he's seen so many women play, for some inexplicable reason pretending to be clumsy and helpless in front of the boy she wants to be liked by, even loved by. She's playing stupid.

Dave shifts his attention to Jeremy, lean and brown and shining, calling out teasing words and reaching his young arms high to catch the flying ball in the cradle of his stick. Dave knows it, that rush of being young and powerful, of being nervous, excited, right on the edge of flying. Screw attaining a calm state of acceptance. Dave pushes off the bench and dances a couple of jogging steps on his toes. Just inside the back door is his own lacrosse stick, the one he uses to pass with Aubrey in the back yard as Jeremy is doing now, and when he reaches for it, he hears Maura's distant voice, "Dave..." warning him not to stray too far out of his own territory. Then he is down the steps and onto the yellow-green spring grass. The ball flies out of Jeremy's stick and into his own, and he wings it back, the muscles across his back broad and strong, so light on his feet he might be an inch above the ground. The ball sails back at him, a shot so high he has to jump. Then Dave turns swiftly and whips the ball toward Aubrey, and her

instinct flares to meet it, hips squaring up, arms crooking, fingers strong, and she draws the ball neatly into her stick's pocket.

“Wow,” Jeremy says, stilled by the catch, and his arms fall to his sides as he stares at Aubrey. Dave gulps a deep breath as he, too, looks at his daughter, both the one he recognizes and, in the curve of her smile, a woman he's never seen before—a woman who, he knows in that instant, is going to break his heart irreparably. He is going to have to give her up, to surrender. *Savasana*. They stand there, both of them, staring at Aubrey, and Jeremy says again, “Wow.”