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Xtratuf

Phil McDermott is up on his roof examining the iridescent green moss smothering the shingles when his granddaughter Melanie comes home from her mindfulness seminar, upset and howling with uncontrollable laughter that bleeds into crying. Not the response to meditation he'd hoped for.

It's summer in coastal Alaska, maybe 45°, clouds like wet cement, a persistent cool rain seeping through the big spruce trees surrounding the house. Not a day a man his age would choose to spend on a roof. But suddenly a fifteen-year-old girl lives with him, and Phil's taking his responsibilities seriously now.

From up here he can see Kachemak Bay, where a boxy white cruise ship appears in the layered mists like an invading troop transport. With the pandemic feeling more and more in the distant past, projections are that this is going to be a very big year for tourism in Homer. Across the bay, oblivious to economic forecasts and every other concern of men, glaciers chew through the stony mountains as they have for millennia, while Phil is reluctant to buy metal roofing that will outlive him by mere decades.

Melanie pedals up the driveway on her bike wearing her bright yellow Helly Hansen slicker. In spite of the cool rain, she's riding barefoot and laughing out loud, an ominous sign that she's slipping again. By the pitch of her hilarity, Phil has a feeling this could be a bad one.

"Melanie!" he shouts down to her.

Startled, she chokes off her laughter and gapes up into the wet sky like she's just heard God beckoning from somewhere above the spruce tops. Her face, framed by the yellow rubber hood, is festooned with shiny piercings. Several strands of bright blue hair lie plastered to her forehead. Rain mingles with the tears on her cheeks. She finally sees Phil on the roof and gasps. "Pops?" She's sniffles. "What the fuck are you doing on the roof?"

"What happened, honey?"

She steps off the bike and yelps in pain from the sharp gravel under her bare feet. "Someone stole my boots from the meditation room at the wellness center!"

"Okay," he sighs. "I'll be right down."

* * *

In the house, they peel off their raingear and she drops into a kitchen chair, quiet now, but eyes still wild as she massages her wet, wrinkled toes. She's ridden home barefoot through the town's pitted and puddled streets to avoid soaking the beautiful wool socks she knitted in rehab. She's also learning to spin yarn, another activity he has encouraged since her arrival a month ago. Despite the generational differences, their relationship has been mostly peaceful most of that time, and he thinks they're going to be all right. Still, he has locked up his guns.

When Melanie was a week old, her father, Phil's son John, committed suicide. Soon after, Melanie's mother Sandy declared Homer unlivable for a young widow: winters too cold, too wet, and too long; summers too cold, too wet, and too short. She took baby Melanie and left for warmer, drier climes. Over the intervening fifteen years, Phil has mailed checks for his granddaughter to every major city in the American Sunbelt. He should've made an effort to see Melanie more often, should've sent for her sooner, and he knows it. But he and his wife Polly split around that dark time too, and he never reached out to Polly again either. So, with no one to blame but himself, he's on his own now with his granddaughter, and he has to remind himself that under that bright blue haystack of hair, the spidery tattoos, those lips so heavily pierced they look like they've

been riveted onto her face, lies a wounded teenage girl. He's taken time off from his boatyard to be home with her. She is not to be left alone for long.

He takes a chair across the kitchen table from her. "Mel, do you have this under control, honey?"

"They stole my boots from the wellness center!" she says, and then she's laughing again, the hysteria rising. She shrieks, "The fucking wellness center! That's funny!" But knowing what's funny and what isn't can be a challenge for her.

* * *

Phil once had an Uncle Henry who laughed at all the wrong times. When Henry was a teenager he was diagnosed with what was then called hebephrenic schizophrenia. Henry was in and out of mental institutions for most of his life. More than once Phil overheard his parents discussing the barbaric so-called treatments his uncle endured and he lay awake nights throughout his own adolescence worrying where the disease might next rear its awful head in their family. Phil got lucky. His son didn't fare so well. And now his granddaughter.

Melanie's doctor told Phil not to worry too much about labels. "Just think of it as a possibly temporary imbalance in brain chemistry."

Her fondness for recreational drugs complicates things. Do the drugs make her crazy, or does her craziness incline her to do drugs? In Phil's mind, this is a chicken-or-egg dilemma that simply baffles him.

Under advisement from his girlfriend Ingrid—she's the principal at Homer High School and seems to understand teenagers as well as any adult can—Phil is keeping Melanie involved in wholesome activities until school resumes in the fall. Wholesome activities like mindfulness, knitting, and spinning. He's vaguely aware that in bigger cities "spinning" is something that is done on bicycles that go nowhere, and that it may or may not be related to something else called Pilates. But in this town spinning involves animal hair, skein-winders, and a commitment to sustainability.

This is that kind of place, Phil thinks. Or it used to be.

Now that Melanie has the laughter under control, he thinks they should try to talk calmly about the incident. "Okay, someone stole your boots from the wellness center," he says, hoping that saying it aloud will minimize his astonishment. Homer has just a single two-lane road connecting it to the contiguous highway system of North America, and the town seems to Phil remote from the ugliness of the times. But lately the guys at the boatyard tell him he should lock his truck every time he steps out of it, and his insurance company would like him to unleash ferocious hounds inside the fence at night. He's not buying their dire assessment of local circumstances. Not yet anyway.

"Maybe it was an accident," he says to Melanie. "Who would steal used boots?"

"Druggies," she says, like that's almost too obvious to articulate. She pulls thick wool socks out of a pocket and tugs them onto her chilled feet. "They'd scrape the enamel off your teeth if they could get 5 bucks for it."

The casual certainty with which she declares this is disturbing, yet he's happy to hear her say "druggies" in that vaguely general way the word is thrown around by people his age who have never even seen hard drugs. If only that were true of Melanie. The deal he made with his daughter-in-law was this: he paid for his granddaughter's rehab; he gets to make sure she stays clean now that she's out. Whatever the guys at the yard say, he's pretty sure Homer is still a hell of a lot safer than the many distant cities Melanie and her sun-seeking mother have sampled.

"Druggies?"

Melanie nods. "I'm telling you, Pops, they're taking over your town. Read the paper."

Every Thursday Melanie faithfully reads the *Homer News*, the town's weekly paper. Phil is encouraged by her interest in local life. He's looking for positive signs in *everything* she does. That's not always easy. This week she pointed out an article about the extraordinary number of discarded syringes people have been finding on the beach near the Alaska State Ferry terminal.

Still struggling with the loss of her boots, Melanie sighs. “Those were real Xtratufs. Fuckers cost Mom a fortune.”

She had, in fact, gotten off the plane in Anchorage wearing the brown, calf-high rubber footwear and the giant yellow raincoat, looking like she’d just escaped from a Winslow Homer painting. She wore them in the truck on the drive all the way down the Kenai Peninsula to the town. Melanie won’t set foot in the twin-engine prop planes the commuter airline uses. Her view is that the big jets are safe enough, but anything with propellers is a death trap with wings.

“I’m sorry about this,” he says. “I’m sorry it ruined your meditation today.”

Slipping her warmed feet into clunky, blaze-orange garden clogs, Melanie confesses she’s not sure mindfulness is right for her. “Too focused. I sort of just got my brain back from the cleaners, you know? I want to let it wander wherever it wants to go right now. Is that okay?”

“Sure, honey.” Frankly, he’s relieved that this didn’t take root. Mindfulness sounds suspiciously like the kind of thing a well-meaning enthusiast might insist her grandfather join her in. He’s determined to help her, of course. But if he has to become a better person himself, all bets are off. “Fine. Let’s forget mindfulness for now.”

She already has. “Didn’t they used to, like, hang guys for stealing boots in the Old West days?”

“I think that was horse thieves,” he says, picturing a horseless and bootless cowboy facing a long walk across the desert in his stocking feet, a vision that seems not unlike living with a teenage girl at his age.

Melanie frowns. “Horse thieves, horse shit. I thought this place was going to be different.”

“It is different. Or . . .” His pause is unintentional, but long. “. . . It was, once.”

“It was different ‘once’?” She snickers. “Oh, Pops, you are so old. Is that painful?”

She has no idea.

But she’s laughing in a healthy way now, and that’s what mat-

ters to Phil. Even before her sickness had her giggling at phantoms, she was a kid born to laugh. In her earliest photos, baby Melanie flashed grins that could ignite a pile of wet kelp. Somehow, in the cosmic crapshoot of heredity, she dodged both her mother's and her father's grim tendency to find a single tiny cloud in an otherwise sunny sky and stand shivering in its shade. Phil scratches his head at the memory of his son and daughter-in-law. Those two could suck the joy out of Mardi Gras. Even at her craziest, Melanie never loses her charm. Not in Phil's eyes.

"Come on," he says. "I'll buy you lunch at Ethereal." This is his idea of parenting. Melanie cannot resist the Ethereal Eatery. It's the last of the New Agey, old-Homer restaurants in town, now staffed by neo-hippie twenty-somethings. She loves the sheer goofiness of the name and the dreadlocked college kids cooking curried enchiladas and Thai-style pizzas for American heartland tourists. Vaguely foreign-sounding cuisine is the very white town's nod to diversity.

It puts her in better spirits. "Great. You go grab a booth before the tourists snatch them all. I'll meet you there in a few minutes." She waves her phone at him. "Gotta call Mom first. You know how she hates to be disappointed."

Phil knows all too well that his daughter-in-law cannot stand even the slightest setback to her expectations. He and Sandy did not part friends.

"Give her my love," he says.

Melanie snorts. "Funny, Pops."

Before she can dial her mother, her phone rings. She apparently recognizes the incoming number and answers cheerfully in a way that tells Phil it's someone her own age. He's got his coat on and is almost out the door when he hears her say, "No, silly, you can't get STDs from oral sex. Trust me."

Oh, good. This is *exactly* what he needs now.

* * *

At the Ethereal Eatery, Phil slides into the last available booth, trying not to think about his granddaughter's self-assured dispensation of inaccurate sex advice. The place is indeed mobbed with

tourists, as reliable each summer as clouds and rain and returning salmon. Not the cruise ship folks with their identifying badges or bracelets; they get overfed like house pets onboard and shop only for T-shirts and mugs. This is mostly the road-weary Winnebago and rental car crowd.

There is also a young, obviously local couple sitting at a two-top by the big window facing the street. They're wearing Carhartt bibs, plaid flannel shirts, and brown Xtratufs of their own. They both have their heads down low over the table, and for a moment Phil thinks they're a couple of the town's many fundamentalist Christians giving thanks for their mochas and avocado toast. Then Joni the waitress brings their beverages, and they sit up. A cell phone lies face up on the table before each of them, the screens radiant. They've been praying all right, but to newer gods than Jesus.

Phil recognizes the boy—the kid's dad operates the sling gantry at the boatyard—but Phil hasn't seen the kid since he was in high school. He looks like a lot of the twenty-somethings he sees around town these days, home from college and looking for work. Or not.

Ingrid—Phil's battle-hardened high school principal—says that, given the lack of jobs in a place this small, there are only three kinds of kids that age in town: the ones who never managed to leave; the ones who left but found the outside world a lot less “snuggly” (Ingrid's word) and retreated home; and outsiders there to sell dope to the first two groups.

Phil would bet both testicles that this couple is from the second category and have nestled into an apartment over the boy's parents' garage, eating out of Mom and Dad's refrigerator and smoking now-legal weed between bouts of youthful humping. Really, blessed with that kind of setup, who looks for work? Seeing them makes him wonder if Melanie will ever find a life that passes for normal, even around there.

Through the front window he sees her pedal up in the still-falling drizzle and dismount. There's a bike rack alongside the building, but she parks hers in the middle of the sidewalk, determined, he supposes, to prove to him just how larcenous his beloved town has become. Her heavy clogs and big, stiff raincoat make her lumber

like an astronaut. As she sets the kickstand, he catches a glimpse of her small silver-spangled face inside the rain hood, and asks himself once again whether a parent who presented his own son with a life apparently not worth living is the best candidate to steer the next generation straight.

Just as Melanie turns for the door, her bike falls over and slams against the tempered plate glass window of the restaurant with a nerve-jouncing blast that nearly launches the young couple out of their chairs. Every head in the place turns. Melanie looks down at her bike, then through the window at everyone inside watching her. She smiles, but Phil can tell that her mind is whirling. She can deal with one, maybe two small problems at a time. The stolen boots and her wet feet may have maxed her out today. He braces for her reaction.

Melanie leaves the bike where it lies on the sidewalk, walks in, pulls back the rain hood, and brays, “Has everyone heard the good news?” All eyes are on her. “With luck, none of us will get what we really deserve!”

Her maniacal outburst worries him, yet he finds the message comforting. Apparently, most of the tourists do too. They go back to their Korean chimichangas, their vegan fajitas. Girls with Melanie’s punk trappings are probably not all that unusual in the cities these people come from, Phil muses. And they’re getting more common here too. But Joni gives him a stern-waitress look, suggesting that Homer is not the kind of town where people shout cryptic pronouncements at full volume inside restaurants. He waves Melanie over to his booth. She takes the seat opposite and wriggles out of the bulky rubber raincoat.

He’s about to bring up the concept of “inside” voices when he realizes that’s a term that might mean something very different for someone with Melanie’s brain. Luckily, just then Ingrid walks in. His Ingrid. Six feet tall and brilliantly blond, she’s a former cross-country ski champ, and still frighteningly fit. Her idea of a relaxing leisure-time activity is ice climbing. Not a Norse goddess exactly, but as close to one as he’ll ever get, and he knows it.

Since Melanie arrived in town, he and Ingrid have not been spending nearly as much time together as he’d like. Ingrid claims

she doesn't want to intrude on his attempt at parenting. She's thirty-nine and dates Phil instead of men her own age, men who—unlike her—might want to start a family. She says she's "letting the clock run out." That's her business, of course. And in any case he doesn't want her to play the hated surrogate mom role. He's seen the family mayhem those situations have precipitated among friends in town with so-called "blended" marriages.

Melanie spots Ingrid and shouts, "Hi, Ingrid! Join us? The old guy's buying!"

"Ooh," Ingrid says, "if Phil's paying, slide over." She drops into the booth at Melanie's side. "I don't suppose they serve steak and lobster at lunch?"

Melanie waves a menu. "The 'halibut with chipotle-tamarind pesto on a bed of massaged kale' is the most expensive lunch thing."

Phil can see he's going to be the straight man at this performance. He doesn't mind. It's good to see Melanie making Ingrid her partner in comedy, and he forcefully resists the vision of the three of them together for anything more permanent than a lunch. Ingrid will have no part of it. He's not sure Melanie would either. It's quite possible he alone nurtures such domestic fantasies.

Joni comes to take their order and compliments Melanie on her neck ink. Wispy blue tree branches curl out of her raggy sweater and reach up her neck toward her many earrings. Butterflies and tiny birds perch on the twig ends. Flattered, Melanie yanks the hem of the sweater up and pins it to her collarbone with her chin, revealing to Joni—and everyone in the restaurant—the tattooed tree trunk growing out of her pink brassiere. When she stuffs four fingers under each cup and starts lifting, Phil is sure they're going to see the tree's root system, and much more. Ingrid gently tugs Melanie's sweater back down, and the two of them crack up.

Melanie howls, "He thought I was going to do it! He did! Admit it, Pops!"

Ingrid says, "I certainly thought you were." More laughter.

Melanie's discharge instructions included a caveat: "Coupled with the sometimes impulsive behavior common to her illness, Melanie has also learned to get attention by acting inappropriately."

Phil offered to pay the facility extra if they told him something he *didn't* already know.

Melanie barks like a harbor seal. "Ark! Ark! Your face! Oh, God. Hah!"

"Hah," he says, and sips his coffee, happy that, however inappropriate Melanie's stunt, this was at least intentional humor. Her laughter is not the deranged cackle he's heard too often, and it tickles him to see the two women in his life having a good time together. They eat their lunch without further theater, Melanie still snickering to herself and muttering, "I totally got you, Pops."

She finishes her food and says, "Thanks for the grub. I gotta go to Kundalini."

Phil momentarily thinks he and Ingrid will finally have some time to themselves, but Ingrid stands to let Melanie out of the booth and says, "I have to go too, Phil. School's never out for a principal. Thanks for lunch." She leans and gives him a peck on the cheek that doesn't actually touch his skin. Her hands remain at her sides. No contact at all.

Ruefully, Phil understands. In her years working at various Alaskan high schools, Ingrid has seen too many problematic teenagers shipped up from the Lower 48 by one divorced and overwhelmed parent to live in Alaska with the kid's other, soon-to-be-overwhelmed parent—or, more and more often recently, a grandparent. She knows what the odds are of that working, and she's steering clear. He'd like to say that he can't blame her. But the distance she's putting between them leaves a heavy taste on his tongue.

Or maybe that's just all the cumin.

* * *

Mid-afternoon, he's standing at his living room window, watching the Coastal Roofing Company estimator stow an extension ladder on his truck and wondering if there's some way to get Ingrid to ask Melanie about her apparent sexual expertise, when a Homer Police cruiser rolls up his driveway. There's a shock of blue hair visible in the back seat. If asked, Phil would say he thinks it's fair

to assume that nobody wants to see their granddaughter being unloaded from a police car. He assures himself that if this involved drugs, the police wouldn't be giving her a ride home. The two uniformed cops exchange howdies with the roofer, then trundle Melanie to the front door. One is Officer Ted Coover. Ted won the local king salmon derby last year and came in third the year before. Phil knows him and his boat well. They're not really friends, but Phil thinks they could be, given the chance. The other cop is a stranger: young, shaved head, tiny ears, concrete neck. Phil gets the picture: high school wrestler finally living his dream in law enforcement.

Phil opens his front door. Before he can even ask, Ted Coover says, "Shoplifting."

Shrugging theatrically, Melanie pulls her spangled lips back in a toothy rictus. She looks like a hyena, if hyenas went in for tongue studs.

Ted tells him she tried to steal a pair of expensive pants from Seaside Sally's, the closest thing to a boutique in town. That is strange, given that Melanie wears nothing but shredded jeans and thrift shop sweaters so stretched out they look like they've been used as purse seines for salmon. But there's really no guessing what she'll do next. With her earlier phone conversation still echoing in his brain, he's relieved that it's only shoplifting and not soliciting. Who knows what those voices in her head are suggesting?

"Leather," Ted says and grimaces.

"Leather, Ted?"

"The pants."

"Are they pressing charges?"

Ted shakes his head. "That new school principal was there. Tall, nice-looking blond? She talked to the owner, smoothed things out, explained your girl's problems."

Phil should be delighted that Ingrid came to Melanie's rescue, but all he can hear is "your girl's problems." Is that the talk of the town now? He feels his blood warming.

The young cop—his name tag reads Officer Durez—smirks. "You know, sir, we can't give a kid a pass on something like this more than once."

Phil's pulse rushes. He'd love to wipe that look off Durez's face. But the guy is thirty years younger and wearing a badge. Never mind the taser, pistol, and nightstick. He decides to defer to the better part of valor. He turns to Ted Coover. "Thanks, Ted. I'll handle it."

The look on Ted's face says, Phil, what the fuck are you doing, trying to raise a troubled, drug-abusing girl? At your age?

Phil hopes his own face says, You're six months past due on last winter's boat storage, Ted. And I haven't made a peep because I know about your wife's MS. And because that's the kind of town we are here.

When the police leave, he turns to Melanie. All he can say is, "Leather?"

Melanie crumples, truly defeated for the first time in the weeks she's been there. She sobs and chokes and makes horrible injured-animal noises. But what shakes him most isn't the sound as much as the shape of her mouth, which, through his own watery eyes, distorts into a gaping hole in her heavily pierced face. What is it he's seeing?

* * *

When Phil was Melanie's age, he lived in a small industrial city in southern Michigan. One summer he caught a black bass in the fetid local river behind the radiator plant. Coming from water that generally produced nothing but stunted bullheads and puny perch, the gamefish was a rarity, a trophy worth mounting. His family couldn't afford taxidermy, of course. So he cut the fish's head off and set it out to dry in the summer sun, high on the roof to keep the rats off it. When the flies and maggots had done their jobs, and nothing remained except the desiccated skin stretched over the skull beneath, he brought it down and varnished it, coat after coat, until it glowed like a live wet fish again. Then he glued glass marbles into the empty eye sockets and painted them with glossy model airplane enamel: yellow rings around big black pupils.

He mounted the bass head on a wooden plaque and proudly hung it on his bedroom wall, and the fish glared out at the room with

those bulging painted eyes, its mouth gaping in silent laughter. The sun-hardened tongue pointed like an accusing finger, saying, "Look what you've done to me!" And Phil began to see it for what it was: the face of madness. Something he feared more than anything in the world.

* * *

Melanie is laughing again. Too hard. Too loud. Tears demolish her abundant makeup. Her eyes are frantic. Phil says, "Jesus, Mel, I'm trying here, honey. I'm not good at this, but I'm trying."

"Me too," she laughs. "I'm trying too. But I'm not good at this either!"

He gathers her into a hug, her cold ear metal pressed against his neck. Through the wild strands of her very blue hair, he sees her spinning wheel, her little wooden bench, her basket of yarn balls under their living room window, looking like an illustration of another time, another world.

Her phone rings and she pulls away and sniffs, "I've got to take this," and slips down the hall to her room, murmuring into the phone and leaving him standing there alone once more.

Outside the window, the roofer's truck backs down the driveway. The Homer Police cruiser remains parked out front. Officers Coover and Durez are filling out their report. And on some level, it comforts Phil to know that they are doing everything they can to keep this town the kind of place he hopes it still is.