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Emily Jordan

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Coming Home

Emily Jordan

He ran a wrinkled hand through salt and pepper hair and blew out an exasperated sigh. Foot tensely on the break pedal, inching bumper to bumper rush hour traffic. It was annoying there was no need to rush home. Other drivers were honking and waving dramatic arms, but Max laid his back on the headrest and dejectedly waited for a turn down the long stretch of blacktop.

A few blocks from home, Max stopped at a popular Chinese place for take out. The owner always recognized him and "the usual" order ready in minutes. A moment of small talk and he was back on the road, pulling into his own driveway. The two car garage was empty except for the lawnmower, his car, and a single bike leaning against the wall.

Inside, Max put his briefcase on the bench by the door, threw his keys next to it. Down the entry and to the right, he could blindly walk the familiar path to the kitchen. Reaching for the light switch, he noticed the overhead light was already on and scowled at wasting electricity all day. He set the Chinese food on the counter and reached to the cupboard for a glass.

As he leaned for the cabinet, he froze with his fingers still gripping the wood of the cupboard. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something on the kitchen table. He had not seen the article in fifteen years and the blood pulsed in his veins even as seemed to choke him. A blue and grey boy's baseball hat lay on the kitchen table. He would know the hat anywhere, could pick it out of a thousand hats. It looked ragged along the brim, much more worn than when he had last seen it.

Fifteen years ago, his son was home for one of those custody visitation weekends so many families have grown familiar with. The two of them went to the park and Max had the boy wear this hat because of the bright sun. They had a wonderful day playing tag, soccer and running in the open field. Max remembered every detail, played it over in his head throughout the years. Taking him back to his mom's home, the boy had asked to keep the hat with him.

Max never saw his son after that weekend. He had learned several days later that the mother had moved without leaving any information behind. Max turned his life upside down, traveled the country and hounded the police. He spent years and everything he owned searching for his son, but never found him. The blue and grey hat remained on the table. Max continued to stare at it, afraid looking away would make it disappear like the vapor it seemed.

Very quietly, Max pulled out a chair from the table. He tried not to bump, the air feeling as though any disturbance would alter the appearance of the connection to his Then he just sat and looked, taking in every thread and stitch on the hat. Max was so absorbed, he did not hear the footsteps on the stairs. He did not see the large but youthful hand on the chair next to him. But he heard the voice and would have known it anywhere, "Hey Dad, thought it was time to come home."