



Oh no, is all that Joshua can think.

What's Mom going to do?

She always told him that she will love him *no matter what*. He has been raised to understand that a mother's love is unconditional, a notion that doesn't necessarily comply with the puritanical standards of the day: but this is nonetheless where he comes from when he contemplates what she will say when he tells her the news, when he tells her what he has done.

These thoughts race through his mind as Joshua skates on the white wheels poking out of his left black sneaker, from the concessions kiosk back to the table. On his way, he dries his hands with a brown paper napkin, crumbles the napkin into a ball, and tosses it into a nearby trashcan.

A little pudgy, wearing a striped polo shirt that's a bit too tight, and white cargo shorts that reveal his pinkish-pale chicken legs, Joshua pushes his white wheels back into his shoe, sets himself down in the whitish wooden chair at the table with his best friend in the world -Rand Miller- and Rand's mother who -not too slightly- resembles Big Bird, with her long, awkward body, her feathered polychromatic hair shining alternately gray and black.

Getting comfortable, the idea inexplicably pops into Joshua's mind: She looks much older than *my* mom.

'You alright, Josh?' she asks him from across the small, roundish table.

'Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks for the coffee.'

'Sure thing. How's your mom doing?'

'She's doing...alright.'

Joshua turns his head to the right, to Rand, who's oblivious to the volatile moment.

Rand sips down his mocha with warm glee. 'Mmm,' he reacts. He sets the drink down, and -with his dark red sweater encased elbow- wipes the foam from his upper-lip.

'Mom,' Rand blurts out with enthusiasm, 'did you know that Joshua's never had coffee before? This is his first time.'

Joshua blushes, cringes in his seat without moving a muscle. Everything internal and sudden, a reflex. Oh no. What will his mother think?

He hadn't asked for her permission before coming here to have his first cup of coffee.

That is the problem with Rand: he always does things for which Joshua isn't quite yet prepared. Rand always gets entangled in some kind of trouble, and though Joshua is always happy to go along and remain a dotting accessory -if not a straight partner in crime- he also always feels a sincere sense of guilt for going along with Rand's excessive antics.

What can one expect? Rand is one of those kids who plays the guitar -since he was a toddler, doesn't really know his father, and has a tall, lumbering older sister who will -though they keep it a secret- beat the crap out of her younger brother any time she has a chance.

Joshua is very frightened of Rand's sister, but knows that Rand's an amazing guitarist who is able to play any tune Joshua requests: any TV show, any movie theme song, any song in the limited database that Joshua keeps stored in his mind.

Rand has been Joshua's best friend since the first morning of elementary school. They met on the first day of second grade, early in the morning when they had run afoul of one another at The Learning Connection, an early-morning day care center for kids whose parents couldn't take them to school because of an early work time.

Oh no. Joshua cannot stop shivering; he hopes Rand's mother doesn't notice. If she sees him like this, there will be questions, and then... But, Joshua realizes suddenly: Rand has already told her, and she seems not to mind in the least.

'Really, Josh?' Rand's mother sputters excitedly. 'You've never had coffee before? How fun! What do you think? How does it taste?'

Rand goes back to his own drink, slurps it down with effervescent delight.

'Uh,' Joshua goes on to say, 'the coffee's good. I like it. It's very warm and sweet.'

'That's because you got a mocha,' Rand's mom says.

'Yeah,' interjects her son, his mouth hinged on the rim of his mud-stained paper cup, 'and you also got vanilla in it, too.'

'Are you okay, Josh? You're not chilly, are you?' asks Rand's mother, tipping her head back with its tuft of black-and-gray hair.

'Yeah, I'm alright. I...'

But, should he ask? One phone call won't hurt: what will he say, though? Alright. Joshua keeps thinking about it -quickly and with vibrant celerity, ideas and thoughts and memories churn in his tiny head.

'Did you meet the guy your mom's out with tonight?'

Joshua can't remember. He slept over at Rand's last night, hadn't seen his mom leave with her *lorette du jour*, tried to recall if he has met this one previously. 'Yeah, my mom's date seems like a nice guy.'

'That's nice,' Rand's mom says. She picks up the paper cup from off of the table, stirs the tea inside -the small square label from the tea bag dangles off the bifurcated lip of the double-layered cup. She sips the tea.

'I'm, uh... Can I please use your cell phone?'

'Sure, sweetie. Everything okay?'

'I think I should call my mom. I want to make sure everything's alright.'

'Well,' Rand's mom grins, 'your mom's on a date right now, Josh. Don't you think it could wait?'

'No, it's okay. She won't mind.' And he knows that his mom will not. She has always made it crystal clear to Joshua that -even when she's at work- he can call her any time.

He isn't allowed to come into her room at night anymore, he isn't permitted to come in when he has a nightmare or has trouble getting to sleep. When he was younger, he was granted safe passage, but now going into her room unannounced is explicitly forbidden.

Joshua's mom had a talk with him on the edge of his bed a few months earlier about the needs of men and women and what they do together and why he isn't allowed to come into her room without knocking first anymore. She had been remarkably specific and straightforward, and Joshua took it all in stride and with preternatural comprehension.

Nevertheless, calling her will be fine.

He can't sit here anymore with Rand and his mom, knowing that he has done something that may or may not break her heart. No matter what she will say or what she will do, he knows that he will definitely feel much, much better after calling her and alerting her to what he has done.

Good or bad response, telling her is the right thing to do; it will be the honest thing to do, and Joshua knows that the only way he can *really* make his mom mad is by lying. He can do drugs or even, he has been told, kill someone, and she will still love him the same. But, lying: that is simply against the rules. So inculcated with this belief is he, that it's no longer a choice for the boy.

He *has* to tell her, feels completely compelled to do so, cannot sit still or enjoy the rest of his night here with Rand and his mom at the coffee shop.

'Are you sure, Josh? We could wait until we get back from the coffee shop, or wait until tomorrow morning when I drive you back home.'

'No, that's okay. I'll call her now, if that's all right with you.' Joshua and Rand -and, really, most of their friends- use a manner of speech with adults that other kids their age wouldn't dare. They are never particularly nervous, never reticent or shaken.

Some parents, Joshua suddenly realizes, are taken aback by this seeming precociousness, but there are a few parents -such as Rand's mom- who either don't seem to care at all, or who understand that Hey these kids are human beings as are we...why shouldn't we all be able to talk to each other on equal levels?

'All right. Here you go. Dial in the number of your mom's cell, then press the green Talk button. When you're done, press End, or you can close the phone. Okay?'

Joshua reaches his short, stubby arm across the table, accepts the cell phone from Rand's mom, and stands up, out of his chair. 'I'll be back in a second. Thanks.' He rolls on his wheeled heels to the corner of the coffee shop, where there aren't as many people.

Along the brief journey to the other, less-crowded end of the café, he notices the quiet din of the place, the fact that everyone seems to be talking, and yet there isn't a loud noise from it all. Joshua remembers what Rand had told him once about acoustics and the way that sound works at arena shows and concerts and the like.

Huh, Joshua thinks to himself. His eyes catch a clear glass display case exhibiting green Coffee Shop Junky T-shirts and blue/brown hats for sale under fluorescent lights.

He arrives at the other corner of the shop, all but wedges himself into the area where one wall meets the other at a forty-five-degree angle, and -with his back to the rest of the shop- he calls his mom -his fingers tremble- he takes a deep breath, holds it, lets it out, and waits for the ringing to stop, for the other line to pick up.

One ring...two rings...more of a beep, really...another ring, and then a clicking noise, followed by a blast that is the sound of someone breathing into the phone concomitant with a staticky wave of gust.

'Hello?' Mom says on the other end.

'Hi,' blips Josh. Quick, repressed. Wait for it...

'Hello?' she asks again.

'Mom, it's me.' No use holding off now. Here he is, on the phone with her: it's over, it's done. Either perdition or salvation. One way or the other, this is the choice he's made -even if it's not necessarily the one he would prefer.

'Hey, Cookie,' she says. Then, to whomever she's with, somewhat out of range of her phone's mouthpiece: 'Hold on a sec, Ron. It's my kid.' Then back to Joshua. 'What's up?'

She sounds so happy, Joshua realizes. She sounds as though she's ready to hear about the good time he's having, ready to tell him about the good time *she's* having at the Fair with Ron.

'I'm good. How are you doing?' Keep it easy, to the point. No reason to reveal his iniquity quite yet...

'Great. How's Rand? You boys being good?'

Joshua always tells his mom everything that Rand and he do together. She knows all about Rand's sister, knows all about some of the weird things that Rand says and does and wants to do.

It is for this same reason that he's on the phone with her now. Joshua's mom has made it clear to him, whether directly or inadvertently, that *lying* is equivalent to not saying the truth. He cannot get away with remaining merely circumspect about something in an attempt to subvert the truth.

'Yeah, we're being good. It's fun. We watched a movie last night, and then Rand's mom brought us to lunch today.'

'Are you eating alright? Nothing too junky, right? Having any vegetables?'

'Yeah, I had some salad and a roast beef sandwich.'

'Oh, Joshua. You have to be careful. I don't want you eating too much red meat like that. Roast beef is so fattening.'

'I know. I'm sorry.' Time to: 'Mom?' begins Josh.

'Yeah?'

'I...had some coffee today. With Rand and his mom. I'm sorry. They were going, and I thought I'd have some, and I thought it was time, but—'

'You had coffee? How was it?'

'It was good. I like it. But, I feel bad because I didn't tell you.'

Joshua scrunches his forehead, swallows hard.