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The Man with My Name

First I hear a car door slam. There aren't many sounds at night, so every time I hear something I hope there will be more—there's things that go on at night, things people don't talk about. It seems like the sounds have messages, telling me about other homes. But then there's a bang—three sharp raps on the windowpane. It's him, it must be. At first I can't move, but then I think of my mom, and I'm afraid that if he knocks again she'll wake up. I run to flick on the light, then go to the window and pull open the blinds. I can just see the back of his head. His hair is long, and when he turns around the curls, loose and misshapen, seem alive. I raise the window and the breeze comes in.

The first thing he asks is if my mom's awake. Then he asks how I am. After that he just looks down, not saying anything. Then, suddenly, he blows out a laugh, wheezy and loud. Hey, he says, his eyes narrowing, did I ever tell you how you got your name? He's told me before, in front of company. It had come down to David and Willis, he goes on, not waiting for an answer. I wanted David, but your mom was set on Willis after her old man. Ha, what a name. We fought about it. I couldn't stand the old fart—her dad, I mean. He'd tried to keep us

from marrying. He'd tell her things, *lies* about me you wouldn't believe. I didn't like the idea of having to say his name on a daily basis, or you being stuck with it the rest of your life. But your mom wouldn't listen. We couldn't. . . . You've told me, I say. I don't want to hear it. I don't want him to get to the part that made everyone laugh, when he looks down his nose like he's scolding me and says I'm lucky I even *have* a name. I don't want to hear how they finally found my name on someone's name tag—some guy in a marriage group—and how my mom's eyes lit up and she smiled, and then he knew she was still on his side. Oh, he says, looking down again. Okay.

Then his eyes glisten. Hey, I almost forgot. There's something I want you to see. He tells me to get on the windowsill and he'll lower me down. It'll be okay, he says. I won't let you fall. I'm not sure what I should do because of what my mom said. I look at the ground, and then at the silent gray street and past it, where the fence is and the dark clumps of trees. Somewhere behind them I hear a light tinkle of laughter. I sit up on the windowsill and lift my feet over. He turns around and tells me to get on his shoulders—broad and sturdy, like a horse's back. But as soon as I'm on he starts running. I grab

hold of his hair and dig my feet into his sides. He's puffing out laughs and saying I'll be bigger than him. Before he reaches the street he swerves back along the curb, keeping in the yard. His hair is damp and sort of sticky. It feels like there are bits of dirt in it. I'm half-laughing now, the sound close like I'm inside a box. I lean over to try to make out his face, imagining the stern, turtlish frown he'd make when he was joking. Then I hear my mom scream and when he stops I hurl off, knocking my shoulder in the grass. Get out of here you son of a bitch! You drunken son of a bitch! I run past her and when I reach my room I slam the door. At first I can't think. I try to stay out of view while I watch him, dark and still like a bear on the lawn, taking in her screams. He raises both arms and puts his hands over his ears, his elbows sticking out. He looks calm. It seems like he's trying to steady himself, thinking what he'll do. I know he can fix things, that he's

changed and any minute now he'll show my mom, that he's only waiting for when the moment is right. He's just thinking how he'll make her believe.

I feel bad for being mean to him. He told me he couldn't talk to the man who had my name, he was so afraid he'd be an asshole like everyone else. He wanted me to start my life clean, to be my own person, and he didn't want to tip the scales before I was born. He didn't want some jerk dragging me down my whole life. Because of my name he knew the tides were turning, and that all of a sudden, out of the blue, things could change.

Then I see him lower his arms and walk off. It isn't until I hear the car start that I notice the blood, thin smears of it on my hands. At first I think it's mine, but then I remember his hair, the way it felt. And I wonder what it was he wanted to show me. 