

Torn

The room fell silent. Jack and Erin were at one side of the family library, holding their wine glasses nervously, and Erin's parents looked intensely at each other, communicating through a wordless rapport. Jack reached for Erin's hand and held it tightly. He took a drink of wine and waited for someone to speak.

Erin's mother finally let her face crack a smile, hesitantly, and said, "So when is the baby due?" Erin's father shook his head in embarrassment.

Jack and Erin started to talk at the same time. Erin's voice was stronger. "There's no baby, Mother. We're not having a baby or getting married. We only want to move in together."

"Because you're in love?" she said, using a sharp, accusing tone.

"Yes," Jack said.

"I'd prefer a baby," Erin's mother said, and reached for a slice of cheese from a silver tray on a finely polished sideboard.

Erin's parents lived in a majestic brownstone in the old-money part of the city. Jack had no affection for the

neighborhood, and hated to park there. As far as he could tell, residents never used their cars and only bought them to take up parking spaces. Erin said that was largely true; her parents only used the car when they took a road trip, only three or four times a year. So whenever the time came to visit her parents, Jack and Erin would drive to a parking garage at the end of the subway line and leave his car there. Taking the subway was almost as expensive as parking in the city, and much easier on the nerves. Jack and Erin liked riding the subway together.

Within a few minutes of receiving the big news, Erin's parents announced that they were tired and needed to go to bed. Jack and Erin were only too eager to get out of there and said their goodnights quickly. As they stepped out of the foyer and into the street, Erin's father closed the heavy wooden door behind them and locked it, noisily. The young couple started walking toward the subway station, which was a few blocks away.

"You know," Jack said, "I've made a point to kiss your mother on the cheek whenever we say goodbye to them, but this time she didn't give me a chance."

"That's just as well," Erin said. "It's strange to see you kiss my mother, Jack."

"I do it for you," he said. "It's all political theater."

They enjoyed the night sounds of the city for a few steps. Erin put out her hand for Jack to hold, and they walked together in silence.

She spoke up. "You did great back there, you know."

He stifled a laugh. "I have my moments."

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"No, really. My parents were completely out of line, and you were an angel. Give yourself some credit."

After a moment, she continued. "They mean well. This is one of those generational things. They think that a relationship has to be validated by marriage. It's just a generational thing."

"Do you have any cash?" he asked. "I spent the last of my money on that bottle of wine."

"I don't have my purse," she said.

"We'll have to stop for cash."

"Do you have enough for the subway?"

He jingled the change in his pocket and thought about it. "Just enough. But we need to get my car out of the parking garage."

"There's a cash machine there. Don't stress about it, darling."

Jack and Erin never watched much television together, but they did enjoy watching the other people on the subway. They noted the reading preferences of their fellow passengers and whispered words of approval or disdain. They looked at the crazies with pity, or with amusement, depending on the situation. They passed judgement on all the other couples on the train: guessed how long they had been dating, whether they were married, which would be the first to have an affair, and so on. It passed the time, and it made them feel like superhumans, so highly evolved that they could sit above the swarming masses of normals and comment with authority on

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the state of society. They were happy on the subway.

"You know how they say half the fun is getting there?" Jack said.

"Yes," Erin said, resting her head on his shoulder.

"When we visit your parents, I think all the fun is getting there."

She giggled. "What about getting home? Let's not forget that."

"Getting home is good, too."

"They're not bad people, you know. My parents are smart, and they like you."

He laughed out loud. "Sure they do."

"Do you think I'm kidding? They have always been impressed that you paid your own way through college, and that you don't get any help from your parents..."

"They have nothing but pity for me. They know I was brought up by white-trash alcoholics, and they pity me. I can see it in their eyes."

"They like you, Jack. I promise."

At the next stop, a man entered the subway car with a lawnmower.

"We're in the heart of the city," Jack whispered. "What's he going to mow?"

They reached the end of the subway line. Stepping off the train, there were two sets of escalators to carry passengers to the surface: one led to the street and the other took them to the parking garage where they had left the car. It was getting