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The Trouble With Sudoku

On the day of my mother's funeral my father and I stop at Carla's Clearance Tuxedo Boutique. It has 3.7 stars and two dollar signs on Yelp and we have been sitting and waiting for someone, Carla maybe, for 46 sticky, unairconditioned, Alabama summer minutes. Dad is sitting in one of the plastic folding chairs beside me, gnawing on his pen cap and leaning over his prized copy of *Absolutely Nasty Sudoku: Dangerously Difficult Puzzles for Adrenaline Junkies and Serious Mathematicians*. Dad is neither, but he is deep in thought when an employee, who is decidedly not Carla, walks into the waiting room. The man, Rob, according to his hand-written name tag, clears his throat to catch Dad's attention. Rob is young, with a slicked-back blob of greasy hair and a week's worth of stubble. His pants, a pair of cheap, polyester slacks are creased from being folded in the wrong directions and are a good three inches short too. He smells like cigarettes and dollar store aftershave. Dad stands quickly, grinning and sticking his hand out to Rob. Dad is a good head and a half taller than him, but they both have matching sweat patches blossoming under their arms. Rob ignores the handshake offer and opts instead for an open mouthed sneer, simultaneously revealing years of missed dental appointments. He swivels around to call into the room behind him.

"Carla! There's someone here to see you!" We hear a low groan from somewhere in the back followed by the scrapping of a chair against the plastic carpet protector. A moment or two later, a woman emerges in the doorframe. She stoops a bit, and she rests her hands on her knees

to catch her breath. Tufts of dull, flaxen hair have slipped out of her scrunchie and are tickling the saggy skin pooling around her jaw. Long strips of tape measure dangle around her neck like Mardi Gras necklaces.

“What can I do for you today, Dearie?” Carla looks like she should have the voice of a grandmother, the kind of voice that’s good for telling bedtime stories and sharing cookie recipes, but instead it’s raspy, tainted from years of nicotine dependence.

“I’m looking for a suit.” Dad pauses, considering. “For a funeral.” Carla nods slowly, moving to grab Dad’s arm and pull him to stand in front of her. “Who died?” She doesn’t look away, tightening the tape around Dad’s torso like a boa constrictor.

“My mother.” Carla turns and looks me up and down, scrutinizing my pale lumps of thigh sticking out of last year’s too short bermuda shorts. Clara meets my eyes and responds, “It looks like you’ll be needing something to wear too.”

Thirty minutes and two declined credit cards later, I, my father, and one extra-long garment bag finally settle ourselves into the cheap, coated plastic of the pea green ‘02 Honda Accord. In the church parking lot, Dad mans the car door, and I change into the dress that Carla dug out of storage for me. The dress is full of creases from a haphazard folding job, high necked, and its material brushes the top of my ankles. Carla promised I would look mature and sophisticated. Instead, in the dim yellow light of the car backseat, I see the truth; I look like a fat Laura Ingalls Wilder. Dad’s suit—only \$69.99 if we return it before eight o’clock—is brown tweed with elbow patches. The matching slacks fit tight at his thighs, flair at his knees, and then stop at his ankles. He looks like an angsty professor from a low budget 1980s movie. Or an overstuffed jacket potato. I can’t decide.

We're late into the reception hall, and the air is even warmer than outside. The dials on the fans have been turned to TORNADO, and relatives push their faces so close to the whirling blades that I'm afraid they might get sucked in. I am greeted by a gaggle of cousins, pink sparkle scrunchie wearing, bubble gum scented not-so-little-anymore girls whose hair I used to french braid in the backseat of somebody's station wagon on the way to family beach bonfires. They squeal at me in their junior high chipmunk voices and pucker their tinted lip balm lips and beg me to come visit them, and I pinky swear promise I will (cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye), so they know I'm being serious.

Dad trails behind, scratching at the dried snot in his mustache. He reaches into the back of his trousers and pulls out a precious piece of contraband: *Beyond Black Belt Sudoku: For the Emerging Number Samurai*.

"It's a real stroke of luck that these pants fit so strangely." Dad says, tugging at the ill-fitting waistband. "There's the perfect amount of room for a few of my favorite sudoku books." The pages of the book are damp and stuck together, but Dad pulls out his chewed up pen and begins jotting down digits in the boxes. We stand there for a while, and I watch relatives approach the coffin across the room, some cry a little, a few women reach down and stroke my mother's face.

"Should we go up to see?" Dad doesn't respond, and I nudge him just enough so his pen slips and leaves an inky streak down the page. "Hey!" Dad looks up, annoyed. "This is a limited edition Japanese import, be careful." He turns back to the puzzle and shrugs, "bodies always give me the creeps."

We step outside for a breather. The night is buzzing and warm, the air is half mosquitoes and half heat. Dad wiggles out of his dress shirt and sits beside me on the curb, his bare stomach skin a glowy yellow under the parking lot lights. Each time a mosquito lands on him, Dad gives a little squeal and waves around his arms; I crush them in between my thumb and index finger. Dad switches to pushing the bugs away with a copy of *Ninety-Nine Mind Numbing Sudoku Puzzles for the Number Ninja*, but he's too allergic and too late, because a small colony of red bumps are already emerging on his forehead. By the time we finally seek refuge in the car his face and arms are riddled with itchy lumps.

I've never really say up front before, and the passenger's seat was adjusted for someone taller. The lever on the side of the seat is stuck, and I craft myself a makeshift booster seat from twenty or so well-loved sudoku books that were stuffed between the backseat cushions. Dad's bug bites have swollen to the size of marbles, and he digs in the glove box, shifting through receipts and ketchup packets, but all he can find is a half bottle of children's cherry cough syrup, three years expired. I reach over to fiddle with the radio tuning dial, the one that came broken when Dad bought the car. It only plays one station, *Animal Intuition: Interpreting the Secret Language of Pets*. Tonight's guest seems promising, a pampered corgi who's adjusting to having a new puppy at home. Halfway through the ride, Dad's eyes swell almost shut. He steers and I watch the traffic, calling out each time an oncoming pair of headlights illuminate the road in front of us. We bicker a little bit, I tell Dad we have to return our dress clothes to Carla's before eight, because can't afford to pay the overnight fee, but he says he's tired and wants to go home. Dad's the one behind the wheel, so we skip the strip mall exit and continue out towards the suburbs, their house lights dull and throbbing in the distance.

We really do need to get our stairs sanded. Dad likes to say he'll get around to it, but he's really just a self-confessed sudoku fanatic with a subpar fashion sense, not a carpenter. I take the stairs two at a time, avoiding the flaps of wood threatening to splinter me. Upstairs, the bathroom mirror awaits. It's the kind of mirror you can't buy in the store. My father and mother bought it for cheap at a yard sale almost five years ago now, and by the way my father complained of back pain for a week after he lugged the thing upstairs, I'd say it weighs at least as much as a decent sized load of bricks. It's all pretty and ornate, the carvings were done by someone who knew what they were doing, a real artist, maybe. I like to think it's the sort of thing you'd see in the bathroom of a castle. But now in the harsh yellow light, my reflection look sickly, like the color of bad milk. My mother stares back from behind the glass. She watches as I shake off my dress and as I peel off my tights. She marvels at my bare nubs of breast, and she smirks disapprovingly at the inner tube of soft, pus-colored flab that encircles me. She waits as I run the shower, she hands me my toothbrush, and she reminds me to floss.

"Watch out." Mother warns me. "Tooth enamel doesn't last forever, you know."

"Be quiet." I tell her. "You can't be here right now. I don't believe in ghosts." I pull back the shower curtain, but she steps in front of me and sticks out the underside of her wrist to test the water. And when she thinks I'm not looking, she follows me inside. I wash my mother off of me. My nails scratch violently at my scalp, until they are covered in my own ketchup. I stick the dripping fingers into my mouth and suck. I am the flavor of an over-chlorinated pool, salty and dry. Mother tastes of lavender, a nasty concoction of cat urine and camphor.

When the water turns cold, I twist the tap and wrap myself in a threadbare towel from the Salvation Army. I step onto the wood and it screams under the weight of my bear paws. When I

grew tree trunk legs and boats for feet my mother sent me to etiquette classes. The girls were all baby pink and leggy. Perfect, skinny flamingos who curtsied and used phrases like “pardon” and “if you please.” I hid in the bathroom and mooched Snickers from the sweet, old lady who worked at the reception desk. The classes were a short lived affair.

I walk out of bathroom, naked except for a stranger’s discarded bath towel. Down the hall, in his bedroom, my father is sitting back on his haunches, searching for a book on the bottom shelf. He looks up when he hears me, and he quirks his mouth into sleepy half smile.

“Are you interested in some light bedtime puzzle solving?” Dad asks me, waving a sudoku book in the air. I shake my head at his offer, but pad into the room anyway. Dad smells like allergy ointment and body odor when I sit down criss cross applesauce next to him, and he hands me a pen and a dog-eared copy of *Diagonal Sudoku: Wild and Wacky Riddles for the Mathematical Wizard*. “This is one of my absolute favorites.” Dad tells me, holding up a hand to my protests. “I picked it up at a gas station years ago, and I still haven’t been able to put it down.” I flip to the back of the book, where the margins are full of smudged scribbles, but most of the boxes are empty. “You haven’t finished these ones.” I tell him, motioning towards the unsolved puzzles. Dad looks sheepish and averts his eyes. “I know. I’ve never quite been able to crack those ones.” I nod and lean back against his shoulder, playfully smacking him on the thigh with the old book. He cracks a smile and taps me over the head with the puzzle book he’s holding: *Three Hundred and Sixty Five Days of Sudoku Madness: Becoming an Expert In a Year*. It’s funny, because my mother has just died, and here we are, flipping through sudoku books and giggling like it’s just any other night. Although, actually, when I think about it, it doesn’t seem very funny at all.

