

Terese Mason Pierre

## Endowed

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Jerry waited beneath the underpass<sup>1</sup> for Tre, away from the streetlamp's light.

Not many people were about in that part of the city, but he could always take out his phone and pretend to chat if anyone got close. It was cold, really cold, and under any other circumstance, Jerry would have gone down to Tre's apartment in the Junction<sup>2</sup>, but Tre insisted that he pick Jerry up, promised a free dinner for his time – even a ride part of the way to his house.

Jerry had agreed, but he was regretting it now. Nina was home alone, and it was getting dark.

Headlights turned the corner. Tre's beat-up Corolla swerved slightly as it headed towards Jerry. It jerked when it stopped.

Jerry opened the passenger door and got in. "You're late."

"There was a bomb ting<sup>3</sup> by the Tim's<sup>4</sup>, bro," Tre said as he turned onto Eglinton<sup>5</sup>.

Jerry rolled his eyes, but his lips twitched in a smile. Tre was his most loyal customer. [...]

They passed a first, and then a second, set of stoplights. "McDonald's is fine," Jerry said. [...]

"Right there." Jerry pointed to the golden arch, shining over a near-empty parking lot. [...]

Tre [...] opened the driver's door. "You want the usual?"

"Yeah."

Tre left and headed into McDonald's. Jerry scanned the parking lot slowly. There was an older man coming out of a convenience store with a lottery ticket in his hand. He got to his car, lit a cigarette and drove away.

Jerry reached into his backpack and pulled out a small pouch of white powder. Digging around in the backseat of the car, he found Tre's gym bag. He removed one of Tre's socks and slipped the pouch inside the sock, before returning it to the bag. Jerry looked around the parking lot again – empty this time – and waited for Tre to return. It was Charles's idea to do the exchanges that way: surreptitiously<sup>6</sup>. Jerry thought it trivial, but it wasn't as if he could complain.

A few minutes later, he heard Tre's footsteps approach, and the car door opened, briefly letting in the cold and the sounds of late-night millings about<sup>7</sup>.

Tre handed Jerry a McDonald's bag.

Jerry buckled his seat belt. "Let me out at Jane<sup>8</sup>."

"All right. Make sure you sit at the back of the bus, eh?"

Jerry looked at his friend, was about to say he knew that already, but decided against it. Tre returned Jerry's gaze, and Jerry could see an opening behind the man's bloodshot eyes, through which something soft and resilient<sup>9</sup> passed.

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<sup>1</sup> fodgængertunnel

<sup>2</sup> *the Junction*: kvarter i den canadiske storby Toronto

<sup>3</sup> *bomb ting*: (her) lækker pige (slang)

<sup>4</sup> canadisk café- og restaurantkæde

<sup>5</sup> gade i Toronto

<sup>6</sup> hemmeligt

<sup>7</sup> *millings about*: mylder

<sup>8</sup> gade i Toronto

<sup>9</sup> ukueligt

“Tell Nina I said hi.”

Jerry nodded. He got out at Jane and Eglinton and waited for the westbound bus. When it arrived, he sat at the back and ate his meal. At the bottom of the bag, was a small wad of cash covered in plastic wrap, which he didn’t take out. Not all of it belonged to him.

Their street was quiet. Most homes were sleeping, but a few saw<sup>10</sup> people on their front porches, chatting discreetly, smoke from cigarettes and joints fading into the dark above. Jerry walked up the steps to his duplex<sup>11</sup>, checking the frequently empty mail slot on the side of their dark red front door. He fumbled with his keys – chilled fingers – before letting himself in. Nina was lying on the couch, wearing his old painting T-shirt and basketball shorts. The television was on, but she wasn’t watching it.

“Where’s Mom?” Jerry asked.

“Working,” said Nina.

Jerry kicked off his shoes, placed the McDonald’s bag on the side table by the door, and headed into the kitchen to wash his hands. A large, covered platter of Swiss Chalet<sup>12</sup> take-out sat on the counter, untouched, not a hint of condensation on the plastic.

“What’s all this for?”

Nina sat up from the couch. “Mom’s celebrating. Results came this morning.”

Jerry knew she’d been stressing about the blood test for days, wondering how a diagnosis would affect her livelihood, even if it was curable.

“And she’s out again?” Jerry said. “Shouldn’t she be resting?”

“I know, right?”

“Where’s Will?”

“Man, I dunno!” But she was right, no one knew where their stepfather was. As long as he paid the rent.

“Did you do your homework?”

“Of course.” She sounded offended.

“Did you eat?”

“Yeah...”

“You know you lying. Come eat.”

Her face twisted into that scowl of hers, whenever she was about to fight with words. Her moaning always worked on their mom and Will, since she was little, but it didn’t work on Jerry. He pushed back. [...]

While Nina’s food warmed in the microwave, he brought the McDonald’s bag downstairs to his low-ceilinged bedroom in the basement. He opened the small wad of cash and peeled off two fifty-dollar bills to keep in his wallet. The rest he put in a locked metal container underneath his unkempt bed.

When Jerry returned, he set Nina’s food in front of her, took the bread rolls for himself. [...]

Jerry turned to Nina. She hadn’t moved. “What, you not hungry?”

Nina didn’t say anything. She picked up her fork and set it down again.

“Mom’ll be fine. She makes good money.”

“That’s not what I’m concerned about.”

“What is it, then?”

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<sup>10</sup> *a few saw*: nogle få steder var

<sup>11</sup> tofamiliehus

<sup>12</sup> *Swiss Chalet*: populær canadisk restaurantkæde

70 She looked away and pursed her lips<sup>13</sup>. Jerry knew she always did that when she was planning her response.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll take your fries,” Jerry said.

He brought his hand close to her plate, and she slapped it away.

“I got a scholarship<sup>14</sup>,” she finally told him.

75 Jerry’s eyes grew wide. “What?” he yelled. “Oh, my God, that’s amazing!”

Nina’s lips twitched. “I know that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, you know that! Gimme<sup>15</sup> some.” He held his palm out and she slapped it halfheartedly. “That’s my girl!”

Nina picked up a fry and bit into it.

80 “We need to celebrate. We need something fancy. Like an ice cream cake.”

“Mom’s lactose intolerant.”

“Good. It’s not for her anyway.”

They laughed.

“How much?” he asked.

85 “Ten thousand.”

Jerry mimed falling off his chair. He pressed his hand against his chest, took exaggerated breaths.

They laughed some more.

Nina’s smile disappeared first. She took another fry.

Jerry picked at the bread. “Do you not see that this is good news?”

90 “I guess.”

“What?”

Nina looked at her plate. “I don’t want to use it.”

“What do you mean, you don’t want to use it? You’re just going to hold on to it?”

Nina looked up at him. “Charles called.”

95 Jerry froze.

“I want to pay him back.”

Jerry frowned. “No.”

“But it’s my fault!”

“Nina, I swear to Christ, we are not having this conversation again.” He cursed Charles for calling the

100 house. He knew Jerry’s cellphone number. “Just eat your damn fries and pay the school.” Why was she like this?

“You won’t have to work for him anymore!”

“Don’t worry about who I work for. I worked for all kinds of folks, people you don’t even know about.”

“What if I got a job?”

105 “You have a job,” Jerry said. “Being a student.”

Nina pushed her plate aside. It scraped loudly across the wooden table. She didn’t meet his gaze.

Jerry stared. “You already got a job, didn’t you?”

“I figured you would be mad.”

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<sup>13</sup> *pursed her lips*: kneb munden sammen

<sup>14</sup> stipendium til at studere for

<sup>15</sup> Give me

He raised his hands and stared skyward for a moment, before leaning forward. "Do you not hear me  
110 when I talk, girl? Am I talking to a wall?"  
Nina's voice grew high. "It's small. Tutoring. Six hours a week."  
"Six hours where you could be studying."  
She leaned back, face disgusted. "Excuse me, I just got a huge-ass scholarship. I think my studying habits  
are fine."  
115 Jerry wiped his face with his hand. "Look..." He didn't know what to add. "Just. Don't."  
"It's my life."  
"Exactly. Don't screw it up with your running around trying to be like all your friends."  
She glared at him. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about."  
"Fine. Let me handle the money," Jerry said. "I'm almost a quarter of the way there anyway." He looked  
120 at her. "Just... just let me take care of you, okay? Let me take care of you."  
She stared at him, her eyes darting around his face, as if searching for something. The clock ticked loudly  
in the living room.  
After a while, she said, "A quarter, huh? That's a lot."  
He scoffed<sup>16</sup>. "Yeah." He smiled at her. "But don't worry about it. I'll get you whatever you need. Just  
125 ask."  
She pursed her lips again. This time, she looked out the sliding doors to the yard. But it was dark outside,  
and Jerry could see his sister's reflection perfectly in the glass. [...]  
Jerry shook his head, reining in<sup>17</sup> his frustration at the last second. "You're in my business too much."  
"You're in my business, too!"  
130 He smiled, and she smiled back, just a little.  
She rubbed her temples, running her fingers against the wispy hairs along the perimeter of her forehead.  
"I just... I feel bad."  
"Don't. Feel determined. Feel special."  
"It's hard. Knowing what happened."  
135 Jerry shrugged. "I saw an opportunity. And if I'm working for Charles for the rest of my life, it doesn't  
matter. Not as long as you're something."  
Nina shifted in her chair.  
"Hey," he said. He reached for her hand and held it. She squeezed it. "You can't stay here, you know. I'll  
be damned if you're my age and still living here. You gotta have that... that inter... something. That thing  
140 where you save money for your kids."  
"Intergenerational growth<sup>18</sup>?"  
He pointed. "Yeah, yeah, that."  
Nina opened her mouth to respond, but he held a finger up. "You don't owe me anything."  
She nodded, swallowed hard. After a few seconds, she said, almost hopefully, "But you'll come to me if  
145 you need anything, though, right?"  
Jerry smirked. [...]  
They looked at each other some moments. Long enough for understanding to pass through them like  
smoke, but not too long. [...]

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<sup>16</sup> fnøs hånligt

<sup>17</sup> *reigning in*: kontrollerede

<sup>18</sup> *Intergenerational growth*: Bedre livsbetingelser end den foregående generation

150 “What with my recent endowment<sup>19</sup>.” She picked up a napkin [...]. “I’ll get you an Xbox for all your hard work.”

He kissed his teeth<sup>20</sup>. “Xbox? Get outta here. PS4<sup>21</sup>.”

They laughed.

155 Charles texted Jerry later that evening. Jerry held his phone tightly in his hand as it buzzed. Once, twice, three times, before it settled. He lay on his back, across the surface of his bed, staring at the popcorn ceiling<sup>22</sup>.

In his mind, he pictured Nina, half a lifetime ago, her hands wrapped around a medal she won for a chess tournament, the only girl among a sea of her lighter-skinned peers. The closer he approached adulthood, the more iridescent<sup>23</sup> she became, and he felt light and heavy at once.

160 He headed upstairs, the metal lockbox of cash at the bottom of his backpack. Charles was always out somewhere at an ungodly hour, waiting. As Jerry passed the living room, he saw Nina sprawled on the couch, asleep, two textbooks open on the coffee table in front of her. The bright dead colours of the aquarium channel<sup>24</sup> splashed onto her face, her slightly parted lips.

He touched his sister’s cheek. Her face was warm, her breath warm. And her body rose purposefully and safely as she breathed in sleep, in future. He stared at her some time.

165 His phone buzzed again.

170 Before he left, he spotted his jacket folded over the top of a closet door, and put it on over his hoodie as he jogged down the front steps. There. Better. A buffer<sup>25</sup> against the wind, which had picked up, it seemed, in the absence of bodies. It was as if the world around him misunderstood its relationship with its inhabitants, and Jerry felt something he couldn’t quite articulate. At the end of the street, near the intersection, he could see the familiar blue-and-yellow lights of the bus, and headed toward them.

(2021)

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<sup>19</sup> pengedonation

<sup>20</sup> *kissed his teeth*: (her) lavede ironisk en hånlig lyd

<sup>21</sup> Play Station 4

<sup>22</sup> *popcorn ceiling*: strukturloft

<sup>23</sup> farvestrålende

<sup>24</sup> *aquarium channel*: YouTube-kanal

<sup>25</sup> værn