bond

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I don't know when he stopped needing me. I just know he did.

I remember a phone call. He was living in Atlanta, five hours from home, getting used to a new apartment and his first real job. It was late, dark outside, and the voice I heard on the other end of the phone was near panic.

"I'm at the airport, long-term parking. My car won't start. I don't know what to do."

When he was a little boy, I told him I could fix anything. I was Saint Barbara, patron saint of thunderstorms. I could calm the skies. I could bring back the blue sky. He believed me. He also believed I was once a cook on a pirate ship, and he'd gather his friends around me to listen to stories of adventures on the high seas. "I never found any treasure," I responded to their most asked question. "Remember, I was stirring up Blackbeard's grub."

That little boy was calling on me again. "Here's what I can do," I said. "I'll go to the airport website and get the number for security. Stay right there. I'll call you."

This was a time before cell phone everything would have made it possible for him to find this information himself. A time before Internet in the palm of your hand; before amazon.com, which would have delivered a battery to the long-term parking lot in their big blue van before an airport security guard would even find him. It was a time when mothers were less expendable.

"All right. But hurry."

Five minutes passed before I called back. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, no problem," he said. "I got it." The panic in his voice was gone, the fear that I'd heard. I had what he needed, but in the short interval that might have been as long as his childhood, he'd moved on. "I flagged down an airport cop. He's jumping my car. He's got it running. Mom, I gotta go."

Mom, I gotta go. Those became the words I heard most often in the months and then years that followed. If I didn't know better, I'd have seen them as *Cat's in the Cradle* moments, the grown son taking up the father's lack of attention.

But I knew better.

When he was a little boy, especially in summers when I was not teaching and when his friends weren't around—and sometimes when they were—we were explorers, scientists, authors, artists. We taught ourselves how to play cricket in the sideyard. We built a wooden calf from scrap wood to practice lassoing. We made popup picture books. We invented board games and played endlessly. We went pioneering, looking for raccoon, deer, and bear tracks. We figured things out together, like how to build model planes or how to use the jigsaw to make birdhouses.

When he became a teenager, our focus shifted from play to work. We painted his room. We rewired lamps. He climbed on a stepladder and hung a ceiling fan. We installed a new sump pump. He shared my love of puzzling through a problem. Like me, he could study a leaky toilet or a stuck door handle and figure out how to replace the washer or reset the lock on the door.

For a while, I lived for the phone calls that came because of a need. "Mom, how do you cook a Vidalia onion?" "Mom, I need a good book. What are you reading?" "Mom, what ever happened to that old music box?" That kind of thing. Things only I could answer, only I could do.

This is what we did together. This is the life we had when he was a boy, when he was a young man, before he grew up and quit needing me.

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Years pass. He marries, has a child, moves to Connecticut, where Bill and I are visiting to celebrate his son's—my grandson's—second birthday.

In the living room, I watch him work. His fingers aren't tapered like mine but stubby like jack-o'-lantern candles. Still, they are deft as an artist's hands, soft, a businessman's hands with the aggravation of hangnails. In high school art class, he sketched them on a newsprint page he later gave to me, a throwaway drawing from him that I cherish, pencil lines filled with erasures, like his childhood, its young lines there but no longer prominent.

He dumps the contents of the box onto the

image info

living room floor, squats beside the collection of plastic-wrapped screws, wheels, bolts, unfolds the instructions, tugs the hair behind his ear with those thick fingers, an old habit.

"I didn't know this thing had so many parts." The little boy is upstairs headed to bed, and it's time to prep for tomorrow. "Baghera," the box reads. On the side, the drawing of a large RAF rideable airplane, a two-year-old's dream toy.

"Need help?" I ask. I'm perched on the edge of the couch, leaning over the coffee table, gift-wrapping a book. My husband, Bill, is beside me, my son's wife—the mom now—upstairs with their son.

"I can get it."

A light shadow of beard dusts his face. He scans instructions, beginning with number one, the back wheels. Our conversation is idle chatter, passing time. Let's get this airplane together, it says, these gifts wrapped, these cupcakes baked, so we can all head to bed.

I watch him slide an inch-long rubber tube over a stick of metal—the plane's rear axle—until it won't slide further. He reaches into his toolbox for a hammer and beats the rubber end onto the stick, but it's stuck fast at the halfway mark.

I know what he's trying to do—get the rubber in place so the wheel will roll easily.

"Try a set of pliers," I say. "Grip it and twist it down."

He looks up, like the old days. "Good idea, Mom."

"Hand them to me. I'll do it while you work on the other wheel."

He can't find the standard pliers, only needle nose and an adjustable wrench. I tug and twist, one hand gripping the pliers and then the wrench, my other hand tight around the metal stick. The rubber tube is stuck fast.

"Another thing we might try," I suggest, "is to cut this rubber piece in half and then slide it on the other end. It would be the same length as the other side, it would just be in two pieces."

"Yeah, that might work." He finds an exacto knife in his kitchen junk drawer, hands it to me. "Be careful, Mom."

And just like that, the two of us become one, he is sixteen, and we are in this together.

Does he feel it? Has he tuned in, like I have, to the electricity popping, to sparks flying around this dark, late room? A problem in need of a solution.

In the end, he takes the exacto knife and slices lengthwise down the tube—my idea—enough to open up breathing room while maintaining a tight grip. His wide smile is a father's victory smile, a son's elated smile.

He slides the remaining wheel onto the back axle now sturdy with a rubber tube, places the Baghera airplane on the floor. It rolls, it spins. The steering wheel turns the front tires. Movement. Perfection. Success.

Three days later. We've spent this unseasonably warm August Saturday helping them move, filling a canvas wagon with clothes, shoes, silverware, dishes, spices, toys, books, and more and hauling it from this house to the house next door. The moving truck will come on Monday to transport furniture. Our goal is to tow the portables. It's amazing how much of a life gets tucked into cabinets and closets, how, when you start pulling it out, it multiplies.

As late afternoon moves in, we settle into canvas chairs on the patio of the new house, open cold beers. Pizza arrives. There's a palpable air of exhausted accomplishment. In short, the adults are beat. The boy rides his new airplane and his old plastic car, going back and forth from the patio to the grassy lawn with the ease of a well-seasoned traveler. I don't yet know who this little boy will be. Whether he'll be an artist who will stretch across the floor and draw in his large pad with washable crayons, or an explorer popping with ideas, color, and sizzle, or a fix-it guy with his own toolbox. What I know now is that he's mischievous and happy, and his hugs grab hold and don't let go.

As sun begins to fade and the last pizza slices cool in the box, silence moves in. A late season lightning bug flickers around the crepe myrtle. We listen to cars churning down the street, pulling onto the main road, families headed out for dinner or couples on dinner dates, occasional laughter from an open window.

Nothing is special about this night, nothing extraordinary. Quiet folds us into dusk. We watch the little boy, his energy rising as ours falls. A lightning bug sets on my shoulder, its tiny legs touching my bare skin. Just like that, it lifts and is gone.

A couple of hours later. I go downstairs to fix coffee for the morning, my task for the ten days we've been here. Bill and I will head out tomorrow after an early breakfast. Tonight, we've repacked suitcases, gathered the remnants of our time into bags and totes.

No Time to Die plays on the TV screen, and my son is stretched out on the couch, his large, bare feet crossed comfortably on the hassock. James Bond is his passion, like his barbecue smoker, Teddy Roosevelt, his family. I set the coffee pot for 6:00 am and then join him. He's scooping ice cream from a pint container, licking the spoon.

"Dad showering?" he asks, watching the screen.

"Yeah. Everyone else is asleep."

"Watch with me, if you want."

He shares his love of Bond with his dad, not me, but I'm happy to sit, and that's all it takes. Daniel Craig as James Bond is scaling the side of a skyscraper. He slips, catches himself, slips again, and at last kicks the glass on the top window and swings in only to face five guns aimed right at him. I've never loved Bond so much. I've never loved Bond at all until now.

Thirty nonstop minutes pass until finally I say, "I like it, but I'm afraid I'm done."

"Me too. It's late."

He clicks off the TV, and we carry our glasses and empty ice cream container to the kitchen counter, flicking off light switches as we go. I turn to head upstairs while he checks the cat's food and water.

"I don't know how we could have done all we did today without you guys," he says.

"You'd have figured it out," I say. And then, "I'll see you in the morning."

I shuffle upstairs, lights going out over my shoulder. He follows close behind, then passes me by.