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Little Mister Utah

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JAMES P. AUSTIN

Little Mister Utah

My mother likes to tell me why she's famous. Usually it's late on some weekend night, after drinks at The Lasso, when she comes home fumbling with her keys, pressing her weight against our trailer's plastic door, falling into our little home I've made warm and snug for her, and I'll hand her the green tea I've had steeping for an hour, keeping it warm with shots from the microwave, until it's brown and thick. She plops down on that plush chair that's older than me, and she points to the faded poster of David Lee Roth, that first guy to headline and sing for Van Halen, which she's hung on the wall above our television, and she goes on about her days as a groupie. I always curl myself into the corner of our couch, the end closest to her, and cup my own tea and listen to her wild tales about what she did when she was a younger, happier woman. I watch the past make her face all bright.

Brady, she says, and I let only her call me Brady, everybody else calls me Brandon by now, have I ever told you about me and David?

She has, she's told me a million times, but I know she wants me to hear it for the first time again, so we play pretend and I shake my head and she goes on about that winter she spent following Van Halen when they were just a club band, before they hit it big in the eighties, when David was still their front man—not Sammy Hagar, no!—and she followed the band in a black Pinto with two other girls, and the competition was fierce! They all wanted David, she says, but show after show he always went with other women. They made notes and kept them from each other and spiked their hair higher, tightened those skirts and cropped them closer to their rear ends, anything so that David would see them late in the concert, screaming in the front row, looking up to the great David Lee Roth and his long sandy hair and spandex bodysuits and white teeth—it's here my mother cringes, the memory of David turning her face so bright I could read by it—until one night at a small show in Nevada he did see her, and he liked what he saw, yes, yes indeed.

But it was a small show that night, she says, her mouth corners drooping in doubt, lightbulb dimming, and what if he just settled?

This is where I come in. I lean forward in the couch to make sure she gets just how much I mean what I'm about to say. I clear my throat and try to talk deep and slow like an adult would. Mom, I say, you are a beautiful woman, and I am sure that you were a stunner back then, all decked out. It was only a matter of him seeing you, I tell her, and she accepts the comfort, nodding her head in my direction and sipping from her tea—good for one's immune system, keeps a lady healthy—and finishing the story with a flourish: David nodded to a security man at the side, who swooped over to my mother and placed a backstage pass around her neck, and only an hour or two later, after

mingling backstage with the people and the drugs and finally getting David alone, did she finally get time alone. February 26, 1975, she says. The day it would all change forever.

She spares me the details because she isn't that type of lady. Instead her voice trails away, her body against the firm, worn cushion back, and she stares off into the distance of that poster, still autographed to her, which she says David signed against her back with the sharpie he kept on his nightstand: *To Babette, with memories from today until sometime tomorrow, Love David Lee Roth*. Babette the name my mother went by, the one she gave to men less famous than David, but he liked it, a nod and a guffaw when she told him. It's not as good as her real name which is Madeline. It's classy and I tell her sometimes, when she's feeling all hollowed out, that a woman named Madeline is too good for a rock star, and in fact too good to wait tables at a restaurant, because I'm always pushing my mom to become more than she is. I believe in potential, in her potential, in the future and our future together, since she is smart and beautiful and she has had it rough besides. I want more than anything for her to be a happy Madeline.

She is still looking at that poster, and she has set down the tea saying, It's a bit too strong, Brady, and for the first time I catch the liquor coming off her. Graham crackers? I ask her, Want some vanilla wafers? I'm getting up to take the two steps to our kitchen, but I see that her eyes are heavy. So I sit down again and I look at her, a drunk curled in the seat, still wearing her apron from work, starting to fall off toward sleep, and I leap up to prepare the bed and fold the covers just the way she likes, with her pillow plumped and the sheets peeking out so she can just fall in there and I can wrap the warmth around her.

Brady, she says to me as she falls asleep, It's just you and me, kiddo, and don't forget it. And I know she's talking about my daddy again, who only comes up when she's drunk or screaming in her sleep. It's just us, the two people he left behind when he went with that pretty young girl on his gleaming new motorcycle, kicking up desert behind him to remind us we're as old to him as the dirt in this town, the way it sets on top of everything, even us, even us, that's what she says, half poetry, and then she is asleep.

I go back to the living room and clean up our little mess, the cups and the tussled blanket where she crumpled against the fabric, and I look at David and then I look out the window. The mountains are gone behind the dirt and snow and dark and the town settles in deep in the distance, all disappeared. Our town is barely a blip on anything, and Madeline's had it hard. That's what I think about while I stare out there at all that blank nothing, as David watches from above the television set, his big rock star mouth puffed out, spandex leg up on an amplifier, blonde locks falling over his tight tan face, saying to me that my mother was the best he'd ever had, period, and you should be proud, boy, and your daddy was a fool to let this shit get away. I can't decide for awhile just how to feel about that.

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These days my mother hasn't been coming home every night, so her hot cup of tea steeps until morning. It looks awfully strange in the daylight, like cold

syrup, and it stinks up the whole living room, but rather than worry I busy myself with cleaning. The problem with a small place is that it gets dirty in about a day, no matter how much I clean it, even if there are only us two, but it keeps me busy and busy is a good thing to be.

My mom has been staying with that Terry and I don't like it one bit. He's a lumberjack from Oregon who came down here for reasons he won't really talk about if you ask him, but he left behind a wife and a couple rugrats, as he calls them, to start anew. That's what he says: *anew*. With his tinny voice coming out of his tiny, trim, bowlegged body. He looks like a big faker. Thought maybe I'd try a new line of work, he said over dinner one night, one of their first dates. My mother was so nervous that she kindly asked if I would mind being locked in my room for a couple hours so that she could enjoy some alone time with this new man. No matter—I pressed my ear against the plywood door and listened to this Terry talk. He talked all about being a lumberjack and the need for strong hands, for strength in general. Especially he said in keeping a family together or in losing one through no fault of one's own. He said how difficult it can be to find someone to appreciate you, how even the people you create and bring into this world and provide for are blind to all that you do.

After their date had ended and Terry was putting on his coat, my mom clicks my lock and springs me. Brady this is Terry, she says, I just made him that broccoli special you like so much. Of course I taught her how to make it, but I know she wants to impress this Terry even though I'm not all that impressed by him, so I let her have that one. Oh, I say, isn't it great? Terry rubs his belly and I hear his calluses scratch against the fuzzy flannel shirt and he says, Yes, little man, I loved it a lot, your mother is a very sweet woman, did you know? I want to tell him that I taught her nearly everything she knows, but I don't want to embarrass her. Instead I say that she and I are a package deal so maybe I'll be seeing a lot of him.

That's when he looks at me sort of funny, like he just had the best thought of his life, and he asks me to step forward into the light, so I do and he walks up and points to my chin and says, You have quite the jaw for a boy of your age. I tell him I got it from my father, who was quite handsome, and Terry just grins into his tiny face, making it smaller, and turns away like I'm not even there and he asks my mother if he can see her again. She goes bright again, brilliant even, and Yes, why yes, I'd like that, she says. That's all it took. Now my mom likes to stop by his house in town—It's a real house, she says, not like this little shitbox—for a drink or, I'm guessing, maybe a little romance, and she often calls me and says she won't be home, she's much too tired to drive out to the country, do I understand? And I always do since she has to make her own choices. Just to let her know that I'm thinking about her I'll leave the tea out so it smells up the joint by morning when she rolls in, and even though I have cleaned up and our place looks as nice as it will look, she opens the door as tells me the place stinks like a rotten pear, and I remind her that she's the one who decided not to come home for her tea last night, and I make her clean it up herself.

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She comes home one morning more chipper than usual, and it puts me in a good mood until she tells why. Terry thinks you can win this, she says, handing me a bright yellow flyer. I read: the Little Mister Utah teen-boy pageant. Teen-boy pageant? I say, handing her the flyer, Aren't I too mature for this sort of thing? But she's already pointing at a line on the paper, which says the age ranges are eight to twelve. You're twelve, she says. Twelve! You'll fit right in! I tell her, Those judges all want cute little boys who can still sing soprano, not some gawky twelve-year-old who can't even dance. I got no skills but domestic skills. She points again and says, Look, the flyer says it is looking for all sorts of style and flair, a strong presence, and all the things that make Utah the best darn state in the country!

I am still not liking it, and this must have shown because my mother gives me a desperate look. A look that tells me she wants me to do this. So I hug her tight and say, Okay, let me think about it for a day or so, just to be sure I want to do this. As I'm hugging her I look above the television, where David is hanging, and I give his face a long stare and I squint my eyes like him, and I think: That there's a star.

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I'm reading my book on building airplanes later that day when Terry knocks on the door. Funny thing is, my mom's not with him. I dropped her off at work, bud, he says, and thought I'd come by so you and me could have a talk, you know, man style. He brushes past and heads straight for the refrigerator, which I stock except for the beer, exactly what he grabs. He must have seen me looking at him funny, because he stops short, still standing on the kitchen tile, and tells me a man can have a beer anytime the day he likes. Then he walks slow into the living room has a seat in the center of the couch and looks at my book on the coffee table. Plane building, bud? he says, all friendly, so I say Yes, plane building, that's what I'm meant to do. I will build planes. Why do you want to do that, he asks, and I say that it's so I can go wherever I want. My mom too.

He nods like he's agreeing or something, then he says that he likes my mom lots, and starts up what he calls a metaphor about the forests up in Oregon, and how he used to cut down trees to help us all, to make chairs and tables and so on, and how that's like a divorce, or leaving a person. Sometimes you chop something off and change it around and use it differently, and it's all better that way. That's why, he says, I had to leave my home, and golly I love those kids of mine, but I had to go, it was a bad deal, one of them was getting into the reefer already, but if I left and went somewhere else, then maybe I would be more greatly appreciated, bud. Do you see? He takes a big slurp off that beer. I want to do so much for your mother, he says, I can tell her heart is aching inside and I'm just the man to fix it up.

Great, I say, even though I'm thinking that the job is already taken, buster, by me, we're doing okay, me and her. And David too. It's David makes my mother happy, in a sad kind of way. She likes how he made her famous for a little while, in her own head, and I can remind her and when she is in the glow

of being reminded, she is like the young woman she was before I came along. I like to see the young face return. I don't tell any of this to Terry. He doesn't need to know and anyway I don't feel like telling him.

Terry tells me that I should really do this pageant. For my mother, he says, because she is so excited about it, and we'd get to travel to Salt Lake City, which is a big place with lots to do. He says, We'll stay in the nicest hotel in the city and we'll win that pageant because I have experience with these things. I know how to train you to win. He pulls photos out of his jacket, bent at the corners and uneven, the shine worn away. There is a cute little girl walking across a stage in one picture, dressed in a rhinestone jumpsuit. Think Dolly Parton, Terry says. He closes his eyes and thinks Dolly Parton. There is another one with a man bent over, placing a crown atop her head, and another one of the girl up close, standing with the crown on her head holding a dozen roses, smiling big and happy into the camera, teeth huge and white, hair a big lampshade of platinum. Who's this, I ask, and Terry tells me it's his little girl, before she got all caught up with the reefer and the punks that live like termites in small Oregon towns, termites that just eat everything you've built from the inside out so you can't even see it until it's too late, bud, and this is her as he always wants to remember her, when she won The Dalles River Queen Pageant, junior division, hands down, nobody touched her, and I trained her, he says. I taught her how to walk and talk and dress, she was a natural and so was I, he says. I never knew I had it in me. Do you know what it is to realize you're good at something you never would have thought you would be good at? Well, we were quite a team. Makes a father proud. Then he gives them a good long look himself, smiling like he's eaten something rotten but doesn't want to let on. He turns to look at me and puts the pictures face down on the table. It's hard to watch them grow, he says.

But hey, he says, slapping his little hands like a desperate salesman, you want to make your mother happy, don't you, bud? Yes I do, I say, nodding. This is your way, he tells me, this would make her so proud, if you'd let me train you for this pageant because then you could win it, you're a natural, quite handsome and also mature for your age. You got the look they're looking for. They love that mature shit. What do you say? he says. Help her see that something good will come from that whole mess with your daddy that'll make her happy. What do you say?

I say, Make my mother happy? Sure, where do I sign up? So Terry pulls out a paper from his jacket, a registration sheet, and I grab my pen I'm using to take notes on the building of airplanes and fill it all out, every last question and line. You won't regret this, Terry says, and things are feeling pretty good. I have some ideas but Terry said that I should listen to him, if I want to win the pageant. So I don't say anything.

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Terry's ideas are pretty screwy, ideas about how I should go about pleasing my mother, like how I should start shaving off my peach fuzz to make my face all smooth, how I need to walk with my shoulders back, way back, and stick my chest out, and I think to myself but never say, This isn't the military, this is the

Little Mister Utah teen-boy pageant, this is all about the looks on my mom's face when I strut out to play guitar or sing a jig or dance some two-step. That's what matters to me: that look on that face, inspired by yours truly. He says, This is very important, bud, because you'll be eliminated by the time we get there if you don't know how to walk or shave, or even talk, so get rid of that accent you got there. Because he's not working, he's very intense and has lots of energy for me, and in a way I am thankful, because he cares so much about making my mother happy. I know he can help me.

So I start shaving, but I'm not sure I'm progressing as much as Terry wants because one night around dusk, he sighs at me while I'm trying to strut in the way he wants me to strut, shoulders back, my big handsome chin jutting out to the judges and the audience, my smile big but more teeth, dammit! You've got naturally straight teeth, and they'll be looking, because they can sight a natural-grown mouth from a mile away, Terry says, and they like that, they like it all natural-like. They can smell a faker, bud.

So I say, I got my straight teeth from my dad. Terry sighs, and grins again, and he grabs me by the arm and almost drags me out of the house, down our front steps and straight to the edge of the little mobile homes collected in a circle around an old fire pit that never gets used anymore. He points out past the edge and says, Go up that bluff. So I do, climbing mostly out of fear, and Terry scampers up just behind me, I hear his boots crunching down on the little rocks, and finally we reach the top. He takes a couple long breaths, rests his hands on his knees, then comes up beside me. Look around, he says, and I do, and I see two things. The first is our town, set in between a bunch of bluffs like the one I'm standing on, all sunken in and gray, invisible to the rest of the world, just a tiny place that doesn't do anything. The other thing I see is the rest of Utah, or most of it, a bunch of ragged mountains and pink-purple bluffs, all right beside each other, and they look so different from each other that they can't possibly be in the same place at the same time, no way, but there they are, cut and pasted from picture books. What makes it better is that the sun is just then catching the tip of all this, and the sun lights the bluffs and darkens the mountains—day and night, right there in front of me, what a sight. The Utah of postcards.

And Terry, he knows exactly what I'm seeing. He had that kind of sense about him. He puts his heavy arm on my shoulder, and he says, What you got to do, bud, is make them judges forget about that town. He uses his hands to turn my head away from that beautiful scene and back to the gray town, You see that, he says. That place sucks, we both know it, and if they think of that when they think of Brady, then we'll be headed home early, bud. What you want them to think of—and here he cranes my head back to the land—is something like this. Look at it, Brady, see how beautiful that is?

I say, Yes, I see.

That is how you want those judges to feel, like they're looking at a boy as beautiful as the land. That's why you must shave, and stand straight, and use them pearly whites to win the judges over. Make them think you're too good for this place, that you transcend it. See? And I say, I see.

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That night my mother comes home crying, and wouldn't you know, I didn't make any tea for her because I think she'll be with Terry again tonight, why bother? I'm busy with a craft project so I don't hear her car. But she stumbles up the iron steps, totally surprising me. When I hear that I'm up in a flash, grabbing for the tea and trying to act like I was just then getting it ready, yes I knew you were coming and all that, but then she opens the door just as I am pouring a spoonful of honey into the cup and as the water is heating on the stove. She's in tears and falls to the floor shrieking something awful. She gets a little weepy sometimes when she's all drunkie, but not like this. I want to open up my heart and swallow up hers to keep it safe, the way Han Solo saved Luke by sticking him inside the body of a hot-blooded animal.

What is it, I ask her, and she looks up and tells me, slowly and between sobs, that Terry showed up at her work to say maybe I didn't have what it takes to be Little Mister Utah after all. I was a difficult pupil, he had said, so much potential but so much attitude, and maybe I just wasn't getting it, maybe he had been wrong about me. He had been wrong before, he said, what with the daughter and the reefer. Dead wrong about that one. My mother, bless her heart, begged Terry not to give up hope, that I could still do it and we could all stay in a nice hotel in Salt Lake City the night before the pageant, and then the next night I would walk away with the title and shower all that prestige on her, and we would celebrate by having the best steak dinner ever. Porterhouses all around! It could still happen, she said, but Terry shook his head, No, he said, when I look at Brady I still see this dirty little town and all the grungy people who live here. In my professional opinion, he'd said, I don't think he'll ever be any different. He'll be like everyone here especially you, Terry'd said, jabbing his finger against my mother. I guess that's when she started to cry, hiccups and sobs and tears from there to here. It's a terrible thing to me.

I pat her on the back and say, Have some tea, it will calm you down, it will help you feel better like always. I walk to the kitchen and pour the hot water into the cup and stir it quick so it will steep, then I slip in a shot of the vodka she keeps hidden under the sink, next to the cleaning supplies.

She sits on the couch and drinks the hot tea in a few gulps like she needs what it has, just to keep breathing, then she calms down fast, she gets very quiet and if I don't look at her I can forget she's even there. When I look back she's fallen into a deep sleep like so many nights before, so I wake her up and say, You'll be all kinked up if you sleep on the couch, I've made the bed for you, go on in there. She stumbles sleepy into her bed, and I hear her peel away her clothes and collapse, and I wish for a second it was like it had been before that Terry had snuck his way into his life with his tiny lumberjack hands and his expertise, and all this talk about me being crowned Little Mister Utah.

I sit and cry for a minute on our big couch, by myself, but I remind myself to keep things together, that crying and screaming only make things worse. I sit there for awhile, maybe an hour or two, whispering to myself about what I have planned, and how perfect it is, and how I will do anything to get on that stage. I form my Plan.

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I'm up early the next day on almost no sleep. I'm too excited and besides, I need to do this part before my mom wakes up. I find the cordless and steal away to my bedroom with it and call Terry, knowing he's still sound asleep, and I tell him it's Brady, yes, it's early and I'm sorry, but mostly I'm sorry for breaking my poor mother's heart. I feel bad about that. You should have seen her last night, I say, it was a bad scene. I really want to do is make her happy. And so on. I eventually get around to begging him—Please!—for one more chance, just one more. I don't want to screw up and I want to make my mother proud. And you, too, Terry, I say. I want to make you happy too, I know you're only trying to help in the best way you can. I really sell that line, say it strong and clear and then wait through the silence on the other end to see what will be. Finally he says, Okay, one more time, bud, don't waste my time. My time has value. No, I say, I won't, and I don't, either—I'm the best student ever made, I listen to everything, throw my shoulders back, use my teeth just as he said, even working up a little jig for the talent part of the show that I think is totally gay, and after a few days Terry is all smiles. Yes, I think this will do, he says. This also makes my mother happy. She says that I'll make her so proud up there being Little Mister Utah, so talented, so good at things, I'll surely prove my daddy wrong for bolting with the pretty thing.

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Salt Lake City is a big place that pops right out of mountains and desert and lake, like if you mix them together right a city will grow out of the ground. When we first pull up I think, Wow, this is beautiful and our hotel must be just great. But it's in a part of town that's a little bit rundown and the windows have bars and everything looks like it needs a bath—It's the best I could get, Terry says, shrugging his shoulders, I'm out of work, after bud here wins I'll put us up in a helluva place. The Biltmore, he says, winking like we've heard of the place. Our hotel is called the Joseph Smith Jr. Inn. The air in our room is musty and still, dead-smelling. My mother airs it out because she doesn't want my clothes to smell. She's all business now. She's all focus. She's on board. She irons my formal wear and makes it look snappy. Then it's time to go to the place where the pageant is. I keep my little backpack with me at all times and tell them I'm superstitious about it, but they don't really care because they're having a little fight about the gunfire we heard outside our little hotel—Still nicer than your house, Terry says, this place don't have wheels on the bottom—and I just carry the backpack over my shoulder, nice and easy while I whistle, then they hardly notice when I have to register on my own, a wave and quick kiss and then back to their argument. Just before I disappear behind this huge purple curtain that says WELCOME TO ALL LITTLE MISTER UTAHS, I look and see my mother and Terry with all the other unhappy parents. Everybody is miserable. I see the crease lines on my mother's forehead, the sharp snap of her mouth as she barks out her share of the argument they're still having, and I think to myself, You just hang in there, and you watch close, and then I disappear behind the purple curtain.

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The early stuff went just like Terry said. I smiled enough but not too much and walked upright like I want to be president or at least an upstanding handsome citizen, just so I could make it out of those early, dull rounds—I could do them in my sleep, Terry had done his job right—and into that talent portion. I told Terry I was going to do some jig for my part, and we trained hard for it so maybe I'll get to the next round when it gets really tough, something with the fancy dance steps he's taught me. Thing is that I know Terry cares about this contest more than my mother. I know that woman inside and out. I hide with my little backpack and pull out the clothes in there. I put them all in the right places on my body, so I actually look like David, just the way he looks on that poster above our television. I have the tiniest spandex bodysuit that clings cold to my skin, and a mop for a wig, and some face makeup I learned to put on, all this I got for myself after my mother met Terry, when I had all that time. I head to the stage and grin, then snarl my lips at the other horrified children who don't understand a thing. I stick out my chest and imagine a group of women screaming for me, David Lee Roth. I am him.

Then it's my turn and I take the stage and cue the music man with the point of my finger. The guitar and the drums blast through the speakers and together create a Van Halen tune called Panama, a song about a paradise. Just before the lip sync begins, just before I make and break dreams, I look around the audience until I see my mother's shimmering eyes right beside Terry's dark, fallen face, all that disappointment I'm so happy to see, and I smile and point at my mother and wink and say, *This is for Babette!* This voice isn't entirely my own. I'm channeling the man himself. And then, in that small moment of silence just before David's voice begins, I hear through the guitar and the drums the faint suggestion of a girlish giggle, no doubt from the mouth of my delighted mother. I search again for her face, I find it, and then I begin.