

The Lighthouse

The man's hands shook as he pried open the seal on the envelope. He pulled out several sheets of paper, dense with black writing, and smoothed them onto a small desk stained with white rings along its finish.

The first line of the letter read *Dear Dad*.

I don't actually remember ever calling you dad.

Father? Pops? My old man? None of those ring a bell. I can think of a dozen names that mom called you, but I won't repeat those.

I realized the other day that I hadn't seen you in ten years. That's kind of an anniversary, though I guess anniversaries are supposed to be celebrations. I remembered that I hadn't seen you because I was with my wife, Jess, at her family's Christmas gathering. They are as dysfunctional as we ever were, but they still manage to get together once or twice a year.

Her uncle Tim is a drinker. He's drunk when he walks in a room and drunker when he leaves. We stayed with Jess's parents that night, and not long after we'd excused ourselves, Tim wandered into the guest room where Jess and I slept and started urinating at the foot of the bed. The odor of urine is better than an alarm clock, and we both woke up immediately. I figured it out first because I remembered mom telling me a very similar story once. My wife is a much better person than I and helped Tim find a real bathroom while I sat in bed feeling disgusted. We didn't sleep any more. I told her the story of how you'd wandered into your own room, one you shared with mom, and done nearly the same thing.

Mom told me that story when I was twenty. I'd been just a kid when it happened and never knew. We were talking about whether or not I should drink when I turned 21. She thought it was a bad idea, but wanted me to have the freedom to make my own choices. I eventually decided that it was okay. I figured the risk of inheriting your behavior was slim given how strongly I wanted to be your exact opposite.

I guess I hated you. That word is loaded, especially for something so easy to say. Hate is as much of an emotion as love. I know that I made the decision at some point in my life never to see you again. You'd failed to live up to whatever expectations I had for a father, and hearing that story from mom

was the final push I needed to close a door that had been slowly swinging shut for years. You never physically abandoned us, and seemed to make efforts to see my sisters and I after mom threw you out for the third time, but you left us all the same because at some point you decided that drinking was more important than fatherhood.

The man stopped reading. One trembling hand moved up to scratch at his forearm, where the sleeves of a blue sweatshirt stained with paint were pulled up to the elbow. He continued reading:

That's what I thought ten years ago. I'm thirty now. I've had a lot of time to think about that night and a thousand other things.

Someone told me a mantra the other day, one of those mottos to live by that people like to post on the internet or knit on pillows. This one kind of stuck with me. "You aren't allowed to dislike someone until you know their whole story." At the time, I thought of this in terms of strangers; that you aren't allowed to toss judgments around unless you know something about a person. But I realized that it can apply just as strongly to someone we already know, someone we've known for a week or for a lifetime. I thought of you. I know some things

about you. I know where you grew up, where you went to school, that you'd been laid off from your job when I was too young to know what that meant. I know I started liking the Cardinals because you liked the Cubs. I know you loved to draw and paint.

But the more I thought about what I did know, the more I realized how much I don't know and never thought to ask. I don't know about your first love, or why you never finished college. I never knew what places you'd been to or what you really wanted to do with your life. I don't know a single important memory that you carry with you or that shaped you in some vital way. I know more about the guy who delivers packages to my office than I do about my own father.

The man crossed his arms over the red writing on the chest of his sweatshirt. The shirt had more than paint stains on the chest, and the fabric was stiff.

He read.

There's more though. Jess and I were married just over two years ago. Jess is now unexpectedly pregnant. I know there's no one else I'd rather have children with, but it's still heavy. I held a pretty healthy disdain for marriage until we were married, which I think is common in kids from divorced families, and having kids always seemed like a gamble. But here we are, and my doubts continue to melt away. Most of them.

Sometimes, at certain angles, I look in the mirror

and see you. I think Jess does too, even though she's never met you. I think she sees the specter of you sometimes ghost across my features, and I have this corroding paranoia that it makes her question what we have. I recognize it as paranoia and know it's nothing real, but it's there in my brain. The truth is, the older I get, the more I understand why you might have done what you did. I realize how much alike we are in many ways. Seeing the ghost of you in my own mirror doesn't really surprise me as it once might have.

And then there's the fact that I lied a little earlier in this letter. Jess doesn't have an uncle named Tim. The specter of you occasionally steps into the real world.

Jess is a behavioral psychologist. I met her at random one night in a bar, which if I remember right is how you met mom. I was reading a book about depression. I noticed a beautiful woman a few seats away smiling at me. I've never had the kind of bravado it takes to approach strange women in bars, so thankfully she approached me. She asked me if I liked the book. I said that the research and experience seemed solid, but that the writing could use some work. She laughed and said that she would keep that in mind. She told me her name, and it took me a few moments to realize that it was the name on the cover.

I sometimes wonder if part of her attraction to me is clinical. She works every day with men and women just like me,

and like you, trying to help them find a solution. I know she loves me, but how much of that is the thrill of having a lifelong project to work on? Is that sustainable in what should be a loving relationship? Again, that paranoia can be like a poison, and so I try not to dwell on it.

Regardless, she's been the kind of support for me that I wish mom had been for you, even if that is asking too much of someone. At least Jess knew what was wrong with me going in. I'm not letting you off the hook completely, but I know that you didn't have someone like Jess in your life, and that growing up you had a family that was at times toxic. I'm learning more and more that problems aren't just signs of individual weakness, but often of collective missteps. I have the foundation to heal, if not to thrive, that you never had.

The man stopped reading and pulled a bottle to his lips. His hands were shaking more now than when he'd started, but as he swallowed they calmed. His chin and neck were covered in a layer of dirty salt and pepper hair, the skin tight. His lips were chapped. His nose long and prominent, but marbled with broken veins visible above and around the nostrils. On the wall behind him was a painting, above an lumpy mattress. He set his drink down on the empty envelope,

All this is simply to say that I understand why you'd

feel a need to drown yourself; why facing reality might seem like too much. I remember watching Jeopardy! with you when I was a kid, listening to you answer question after question, faster and more accurately than any contestant I'd ever seen. I never had any doubt that you were the smartest person I knew (until I met Jess). I think you probably still are. I've read more books than I could count at this point in my life, but I haven't even scratched the surface of what you've read. I think intelligence can be a curse, like your brain won't rest and give you a minute to breathe before it's on to the next tangled and infinite process. Some, like Jess, know how to manage this chaos. Some never find their peace.

I have an image in my mind of a painting you did once. It was on one of the walls in our old house, at least until you left. I think I'm remembering it right, and when I think about it now, in the context of all that's happened, I feel like I almost understand it.

The painting was of a yellow-coated figure, on a boat at sea and looking towards a tall lighthouse atop a cliff. The vantage point rested behind him and his arm shielded his head. The air around him was dark, with sprays of water coming at him from every side, and venomous clouds surrounding the entire scene. I remember thinking at the time that it was weird that the man wasn't in the lighthouse itself. Why was he outside,

looking in? What would happen if the light went out while he was out there in the storm?

It makes more sense now, and I wonder that no one saw it then. That was a great painting, dad. I hope you still have it. There, I wrote dad, and it felt completely natural. I suppose that is what I called you. Funny that I would forget something like that.

Jacob

The man set the letter down and stared at the signature for a long time. He turned his head to look behind him at the painting hanging over the bed. The lines around his eyes tightened briefly, blue eyes like frozen water through dingy glass. His unkempt hair was the same salt and pepper color as that on his face.

The painting, the back of a man in a yellow rainsuit, hand held up to his head and nasty clouds surrounding him. He stood in a boat, rain pouring and water splashing. The cliffside in front of him reared up out of the ground, dwarfing the lighthouse keeper and his tiny boat but far away.

The man stood up, slowly, his back hunched as he used the chair for support. He stood tall, though in that high-ceilinged room he was simply a man. He walked towards the

painting, weaving slightly around the room and kicking his way through discarded books, until he was standing just in front of the wall, a foot away from the canvas. He squinted, and brought a hand up to the area on the painting above the cliff.

There was a lighthouse painted there, but there were details that Jacob had forgotten, or had never noticed. Several of the windows were broken, and the huge light no longer shone in the darkness. Water pooled in spots inside the room, mingling with papers and clothing. There was a painting on the back wall, and a figure standing in front of it. The details were only visible from very close to the painting, and done in such microcosm that Jacob may never have seen them. He'd not been tall when the man had painted this one.

There was one thing he could never figure out, not while he was painting or after. He didn't know who was in the yellow raincoat. Whoever it was, they were the focal point of the entire work. They claimed the bottom third of space, and yellow was the only true color in the scene. The way the figure held its hand up felt familiar, but the man's head was bleary.

He looked away, to other paintings on the walls of the massive, circular room. There were dozens of them, and in each one there stood a figure with its back to the viewer, holding up a hand to shield themselves from something. In one, it was a man charging the figure on horseback, a lance leading the way. In another, fire consumed a tall, brick building, and

the figure was so close that the clothing on their forearms was smoldering. Another shaded themselves from a raging sun in the desert. Another held up an arm to block out the sight of a woman, fallen and lifeless on the ground. Each painting could have been stacked on the other and the figures would always line up, their arms thrust up to deny what their eyes would see.

He'd never shown any of these to anyone, aside from the first of them, that of the lighthouse. He never would. He sat on the edge of the bed, finished the bottle in his hand, and laid down to sleep as a storm raged outside his windows.