

Mano a Mano

My dad's hair was almost gone, but patches of fading black appeared here and there on his oily scalp like vegetation on desert sands. One of his eyes was red where it should be white and it had been that way since I was kid. That, I remembered. I didn't know how his eye got like that—an accident in the shop or some near death experience that I'd probably heard a story about at some point or another—but I knew it had been ugly and pinkish since forever. And, as I glanced in his direction every so often, I realized the hairlessness, along with his bulging red eye, kind of made him look like Gollum. It was not a thought I wanted, but there it was, seared into my mind: my Dad in a cave—pale, wrinkly, and nearly naked—clinging onto a gold ring and hissing *my precious, my precious*.

Stitches lined his left forearm. They were also ugly and pinkish. I avoided looking at them too, instead choosing to inspect Grandma's front yard which was now dry and dead with a single enormous weed erupting from the middle of the lawn. The air smelled of rain and mildew from the damp wooden chairs we sat on, and the wind rustled the many partially broken chimes that hung from the roof. Dad coughed and I looked at him again, quickly with darting eyes like a child watching a horror film.

Sometimes, it was hard to create an image of my father when I wasn't looking at him. When I was younger, he was thinner and taller, and had long black hair and tan skin that was

darker than mine. I always pictured him this way. I think he probably pictured me as I was younger too because when I arrived at my Grandma's house he gave me a soccer ball. I haven't played soccer since I was eleven years old. I pretended I still did for both of our sakes, tossing his gift back and forth between my hands as we sat on the porch.

"How's your brother doing?" Dad asked, his voice lacquered by years of cigarette smoke.

I wasn't angry, just annoyed, and I wanted to say something spiteful, but I knew I couldn't. Not just because he just got out of a psych ward, but because, when I try to insult people, I'm usually the one who ends up crying. I shifted in my seat to face him, looking down to his hands that were resting on his rounded stomach, fumbling with a lighter. His fingers were chalky and split open in a couple places, leaving shiny white scars. I caught sight of his stiches again and became aware of how heavy and muggy everything was. I spoke slowly so I could script my response. It just felt like if I said the wrong words they would spread in the air like a rash on pale skin, infecting the canvas until there was nothing else.

"Adrian's good. He's still boxing, giving Mom a heart attack every day, of course. But, he's getting better at school and everything." I said, tossing the soccer ball with more force than I intended and almost hitting Dad where he sat to the side of me before catching it with my fingertips.

Adrian had to repeat the ninth grade, and he only smoked and got into fights slightly less than last year. But what else was I supposed to tell the guy who just tried to kill himself? He laughed. It was gruff and weak. It sounded more like choking.

"And you, Mandy? How are you?"

I didn't go by Mandy anywhere anymore. I hadn't realized I was gritting my teeth until I took a deep breath, killing the thickness of the August air and all the words stuck inside it. I remembered him yelling that name at my games or whispering it as he tucked me into bed. I started going by "Cheyenne," my middle name, when he left, and then by "Amanda" after we moved.

"I'm fine, Dad. I'm going back to school this semester, and I just got a raise at the grocery store."

I just quit my job, and I had to borrow money from Mom to drive here.

He smiled; it was small but proud, and I felt nauseated about lying to him. His eyes were reflective and watery like he was about to cry. I couldn't remember if it was a side-effect of the Gollum eye or not. In a second of excruciating discomfort and guilt, I looked away from him and back at the centerpiece of the yard—the weed, which was easily the most lively specimen in sight standing about three feet tall with dark green leaves shadowing the other dead plants and ant holes. I cleared my throat.

"And how's everything with you, Dad? How's—"

Before I finished the question, Grandma called from inside the house, "Samuel! Samuel, come inside for a second."

Her words were extended into several syllables and her tone went up and down with a slight twang that probably came from imitating actors in the western movies she said she hated but watched religiously. I could hear the legs of her walker clashing against the tile as she ambled around. I had almost forgotten my Dad could yell and he wasn't just this weak, watered-down, imitation of a person until he replied sounding like tires on gravel.

"What, Ma? What'd you need?"

She didn't reply but I could hear her scoff in the way only old tired ladies can. Dad stood up, rolling his eyes as he did, and I found myself rolling my eyes at him. I wasn't entirely sure why I did; maybe it was the fact that he had changed into a person I didn't know and he just proved he was exactly the same, or maybe it was because I was irritated at how he could be rude to someone who did so much for him.

He climbed up the wooden ramp leading to the front door, and I placed the soccer ball on the ground between our two chairs, standing up to follow him. The paint on the wood was chipped from where Grandma must've dragged her walker. We entered the house, and I smiled at her although she looked sickly and pitiful with skin more wrinkled than not and the tubing of her oxygen tank wrapped around her face and neck. She was sitting in her sand-colored La-Z-Boy that I knew had a permanent Grandma shaped indent because she'd had the same one since I was a baby. The living room seemed to be veiled in a layer of decay like an old photograph—everything muted purple and dull yellow, smelling of dead books and perfume rotting on old clothes—and Grandma smiled back at me until Dad spoke again.

“What, Ma?”

I didn't roll my eyes this time and she didn't scoff. I saw her eyes drift to Dad's arms, and she paused for a moment. I noticed that I was taller than my dad now—this could be due to the five inches I grew in High School or the way he slouched.

“I was just gonna see if you wanted to cook some dinner for you and Mandy, or if you wanted me to call Annie.”

Aunt Annie lived about thirty minutes away. She came over every other day to bring groceries that they didn't need—my father had lost his driver's license from not paying child support—and do dishes and laundry.

“I cook dinner every goddamned night, Mom. Nothing is changing today,” Dad said before walking past her chair and into the hallway that led to the kitchen.

I looked back at Grandma and she appeared even more depressing than before, studying the TV remote on her lap with eyes so small they were nearly closed. Droplets of moisture beaded on her cheeks. I chose to believe it was sweat. She must’ve felt my stare because she coaxed a smile to her face with trembling lips and met my gaze.

“Why don’t you go help him fix supper? He’s missed you bunches, you know?” Grandma said. I moved the muscles in my face to form what I hoped resembled a smile before nodding. I didn’t understand how he could miss me. He didn’t call or visit—he could have sent a goddamned handwritten letter for all I cared.

“Yeah, Grandma. I know. I’ve missed everyone too,” I said. While walking around the rocker and oxygen tank, I placed my hand on her shoulder for a moment. Her person felt saggy, like a deflated balloon.

The dining room was full of wedding photographs and old CDs coated in dust and was connected to the kitchen, only separated by frayed brown carpet ebbing into smoky linoleum. Everything in the kitchen was the same as I remembered except archaic in a way—the hanging fruit basket filled with empty plastic packages and the rose table cloth, that normally covered the kitchen table, wadded in a ball, replaced by bills from hospitals and sticky notes choked by my Aunt’s scrawl. One of the chairs still had two pale stripes from where I used to hang my soccer bag while waiting for Grandma to take me to practice. It was an artifact from a happier time.

My dad breathed through his mouth in quiet heaves like the trip to the kitchen robbed him of his energy. He stood at the counter spreading masa into corn husks. The dough seemed fragile and innocent when handled by his beaten hands, and the dull anger that had made home in my

intestines long ago began slithering to my throat. *You can't treat Grandma like this. You can't treat me like this*, I thought.

“You’re using too much dough,” I said, biting the inside of my cheek. He flicked his eyes up at me; he wore a smile that didn’t reach the rest of his face and his jaw was tense.

“Too much dough? Your mom must’ve been the one to teach you to make tamales,” he said—his words polished with malice I wasn’t expecting.

I gritted my teeth and tied my hair back, the elastic band making a light snap on my scalp. Smoke rose from a pot sitting on the stove, and chopped tomatoes that had wrinkled and left a dried red stain guarded a cutting board on the counter. My tennis shoes produced small, whispered squeaks as I made my way to the counter. He didn’t look up as I took a corn husk from his pile of finished tamales.

“She had to, didn’t she? Who else was going to cook when she worked nights?” I said. My voice turned ugly and bitter like the rotting front yard. “I mean, she really could have taught Adrian instead. Everyone knows how kindergarten is, you learn to read and then it’s off to adulthood.”

I could feel the masa building under my fingernails as I thinned with excess force. I wanted to vomit or throw something or cry. The steam from the pot was bloating the room, turning it hot and making the smell of the dough more overpowering. My father brushed his hand over the stiches on his wrist but was staring at the mixing bowl like he was part of a showdown.

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“Mandy,” he said. The ugliness, the rotting was spreading to my chest and finger tips. My body felt restless like it would fall and decay right here if it didn’t move.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” he said. It made sense why our hair, which once shared the same color, didn’t anymore.

“You didn’t know what else to do,” I said. I didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t hurt him more. I wasn’t sure I cared anymore. “Visiting wasn’t an option? Calling wasn’t an option? Did you also forget how to use a phone when you forgot how to be a dad?”

There was a pressure behind my eyes but I didn’t push it back like I would usually. I just let the tears fall; they were cold against my flaring cheeks. I didn’t look at him. It felt like I would never be able to again.

He began with a stutter. “I didn’t want it to be like this. When it all happened, I just felt so helpless.” It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. Everything I ever wanted to say to him was poisoning me.

“You felt helpless? We were on our own, Dad. We worried everyday about how to make ends meet. Mom had to get a second job and then a third. Adrian always asked why he couldn’t have friends over. Of course, Mom was too embarrassed to tell him it was because our house was too messy and she didn’t have the energy to clean it. I had to quit soccer, Dad. I haven’t played in nine years, but how the hell would you know that?”

Sweat built at my hairline. Everything was silent for a moment but then there was an alarm, sounding muffled and weak. Dad turned around with more momentum than I thought he possessed. I used my sleeve to wipe the mixture of moisture from my face and took a deep breath before pivoting to face him. He was standing over the stove pressing buttons with quivering hands. The pot of chile and shredded meat had boiled over in my soliloquy and the liquid sizzled against the stove.

“I’m sorry,” he said. It was barely intelligible. “I know what I did and I can’t stand it. I don’t know how to live with myself. And I don’t know how to make it better.”

Clenching and unclenching my fists, I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, my father was looking at the ceiling. I used to try to find shapes in its textured paint when I was younger. His eyes were redder than before. He spoke again.

“I regret every day. I let you and your brother go. I can’t even speak to your Grandma without being so angry about how I got here, in her house, unemployed, at forty-four years old.” He became louder. “I can’t even kill myself correctly for Christ’s sake. I want to change but I don’t know how.”

He was facing me now. When I didn’t say anything, he sighed and his eyebrows came together. Grabbing the pot with both hands, he went back to the counter. His slouch seemed more drastic. I followed him, going to my side and taking more masa from the mixing bowl. I felt him watching me as I spread the dough.

“You know, Dad. Sometimes I feel helpless too. I just quit my job because it makes me miserable, and I haven’t even thought of going to school because I don’t know what to do with my life.”

He pinched some of the masa from the tamale he was making and put it back in the bowl, beginning to make it thinner like mine. It was small and apprehensive but the effort made me smile. I didn’t let him see it.

“I know you’ll figure it out. You’re so strong,” he paused, “and you know how to make tamales too, Mandy.”

I laughed. I felt calm. Like a plant feels after it bares the storm.

“Dad, I go by Amanda now.”