

His Little Girl

“Robin, you have to stop fighting us,” Officer Greenwood gave him a hard stare and kept an open palm, ready to fight if he acted up again. Robin Myers was bloody but not freshly so. Most of it crusted around his beard making it strawberry blonde and obscuring his towheaded nature. The cuts didn’t matter. All that mattered was his absent wife, absent daughter, and shitty parenting skills. He sat in a wooden chair that screeched when he drew breath but still somehow held against his struggling. His hands were chained in cuffs at his sides and there was a frigid draft seeping through the windows that were cracked like a gingerbread house two minutes after frosting.

“Why were you in the cabin, Robin?” Greenwood seemed distraught, annoyed. They’d been sitting there for hours. Greenwood interrogating and Robin alternating between staring out the frosty window and trying to pull his hands free. He didn’t intend to hurt anyone or himself. The cabin called to him, sang to him. The necessity to once again be nestled within its wooden walls was all consuming.

Annie, eight. “Daddy, did mom have red hair?” Annie asked him these questions a lot when she was young. She’d be sitting on the living room floor, grouping her toys by preference. All the dolls were furthest from her in what she called her “burn pile”. She never actually damaged them but always pretended to sacrifice them to whatever entity eight year olds

worshipped. He remembered Annie that way, sitting on the floor challenging him. She often collected grasshoppers at dinner time, running inside with a glass jar full and listening to their music.

Officer Greenwood tapped his black pen loudly, forcing Robin to the present. It seemed like Greenwood was speaking. His mouth moved but the words meant nothing. They only filled Robin's ears with cotton.

Robin's whole point in visiting was to get away to a place he and Annie visited. It was private information. To the police department, he was a hiker with poor social skills or maybe a homeless man. It didn't matter as long as Bear Mountain police let him go soon. His pet needed tending. She'd be getting hungry soon.

"Look, it's really quiet around here in the winter time. Sometimes we get calls about hikers that need rescue but that's about it. Most people are trying to get out of the cold but you didn't want to be taken out. My men said you fought," Greenwood tried to look into his eyes. Robin was familiar with the tactic. It was easier to break people this way because it was like a pissing contest. The government had trained Robin well but none of that mattered now. His brain was an onion, all the layers pulled back like unwanted wallpaper.

Annie, eleven. She was running after the sunset, red hair flying behind her like a torch and freckles appearing like constellations along the bridge of her nose. The field was knee height and the grass was brown, it hadn't rained in weeks. Robin was running away from Annie,

backwards as fast as he could because it made her laugh. She'd say "Dad, stop! You can run way faster than me! It's not fair," but she beamed at him, throwing handfuls of grass and declaring that this was a new rule. If she hit him, she won.

Officer Greenwood stirred his coffee, watching the white cream eclipse the black and swirl around the spoon, falling back to stillness. Robin stared out the window, seeming to blink less than normal. Every frame of falling snow burned into his consciousness. Robin looked for comradery in the flurries. They were his family now. And his pet, Perla.

Officer Greenwood's gesticulations almost broke Robin out of his silent reverie. He must've been telling a story but Robin didn't have time for Greenwood's protect and defend nonsense. Robin had trespassed in the cabin, true. The summer camp's grounds were closed during the winter and only for private use during all other times. He liked the cabin though. Maybe if he'd raised his little girl there, in a small house, he could've kept an eye on her. She wouldn't have spent so much time roaming the unfrequented halls or with a halfwit nanny, slowly growing to despise him.

Robin shouldn't have worked so much. He obsessed. "Just one more hour, Annie. Then we'll go to the park. We can play catch." She'd give him a nod, sometimes accompanied by a smile. As the excuses grew more frequent, she asked less and he still said no. Robin still said no even though he could've just gone for thirty minutes or ten. Maybe then, Annie wouldn't have left. Maybe she would've stayed and he could've tried to be a real father.

Greenwood couldn't possibly understand. He just sat there, with his stupid little perfect family photo framed on his desk. Four gleaming faces. They were both men of the law; maybe Greenwood's family secretly hated him for working long hours and forgetting his daughter's soccer game where she made the winning goal. This gave Robin a fleeting sense of comfort; he couldn't be the worst father in the world. Misery loves company. To Robin's dismay, there was a spark in Greenwood's eyes. He was about to reveal something actually worth telling and Robin knew what it was. It was something that would get through the fluff in his ears.

“So look, I'm sure you heard about what happened at the cabin you've been staying in. You know something, don't you? Out of all the cabins, you chose the *same* one by the lake. Why? It is the shabbiest cabin, which is clearly visible from the outside and just as hard to break and enter as all the others.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “Did you know Annie?”

Robin's jaw clenched. Everyone in town knew about Annie. It was all over the news and in the paper but his being there wasn't about Annie. It couldn't be. She'd been gone for two years. They'd declared it a cold case, she wasn't coming back. He only wanted to be in that cabin because it was furthest away from the others and the most hidden. He only wanted to be in that cabin because it was close to the frozen lake. Robin wanted to be in that cabin because . . . there was a strand of her blazing hair caught in a splinter of wood.

The cabin was cold, it was about nine degrees outside most of the time, and Robin had been there for most of the winter. No one came by but then again, he didn't expect them to. He looked around and on all of the bed frames, under the floorboards, and in the cracks of the

ceiling. He knew every curve and splinter of the structure. There had to be more of her, the glasses she always lost or a piece of her favorite plaid shirt, snagged on a nail.

Robin liked Perla. She was like Annie, only not. He couldn't possibly hurt Perla, not the way he'd hurt Annie. They both had the same red hair, but Perla's was softer. And Perla would never run away, she was content to stay in the same corner, in the same spot staring at him . . . even though the cabin was barren and freezing. Perla did smell a little funny and she didn't really know how to play catch but that was okay because Robin hardly cared enough to throw anymore.

Robin remembered the day he woke up and Annie was gone, a note on top of his slippers, the first thing he'd reach for. "Dad, you knew this would happen. You forgot I exist. You're so caught up in your work, I'm not sure you remember what I look like. And also, NEWS FLASH, I didn't want a fucking tablet for Christmas. I just wanted to have dinner with you. I bet you didn't even notice I grew two inches or painted over the growth chart in the door jamb. I painted it black, Dad. Black! There is not a single inch of black paint in this house and you didn't see. I'm going to look for mom. I hope she loves me the way you didn't. Don't worry, I made my bed."

Robin had been amused at this little detail, at first. He'd always encouraged her to make the bed because he was convinced that the way the bed was made was the way the day would go. Then he read the letter again, and again, and again. Annie wasn't in her room, under the bed, in the kitchen, in the yard, or in her favorite park. She wasn't hiding in the treehouse or doing her

homework on the porch. If a missing fourteen year old would've been one of his cases, he'd probably give Annie a little more attention than usual, grateful his kid wasn't missing.

Annie, thirteen. She was going through puberty and sometimes cried randomly about really stupid things like when her two favorite characters didn't get together in a book. Her originally freckled face was now dotted with "imperfections." Robin remembered something she'd said one rare night when they sat together at the table. "Dad, did you know that we are all made of stardust?" He looked at her, confused as to the context. When he didn't respond, she started to cry saying he didn't understand. He asked his female coworkers if this behavior was normal. Most of them said he shouldn't worry at all and he didn't until he woke up finding the brisk beat of his heart to be the only music in the house.

Officer Greenwood was staring at him, his brown eyes thirsting for words or emotion. Robin couldn't quite put his finger on Greenwood's nature. He seemed patient but his endgame was unclear. He might need to lock Robin up to meet some quota. Greenwood took a deep breath.

"Look, I've been trying to be as nice and patient as I can, but if you want me to just lock you up . . . I can do that too. I've been trying to find a reason to overlook your breaking and entering. We don't like jailing people unnecessarily." Greenwood scratched his head, exasperated but seemed prepared to fulfill his promise. Robin wanted to ask Greenwood for

parenting advice, some shred of counsel about how he could've been better, done better. Greenwood took a deep breath, turning to his computer and typing something, probably processing Robin's papers. And then, a flicker of recognition, like when you run into someone you haven't seen in years on purpose.

"You look like him and well, her actually. We've been looking for you. Trying to tell you about what happened. I understand why you disappeared. You must've done it through pretending to be Robin Myers, huh? And growing that beard so no one would know you're Asher Brooks. I won't charge you on anything, consider this an official pardon. I'm sorry for your—" Robin held up his hand then, asking for silence with silence. Officer Greenwood swallowed, trying to be gentle, starting his sentence again.

Robin couldn't be Asher Brooks. That man was an asshole. That man forgot his daughter's birthday and how old she was. He got her a mandarin orange cake as an apology and she hated oranges. Annie was so angry that day. She didn't even yell at him or cry. She simply turned on her heel and went upstairs. That was the last time he saw her and she was walking away, like always.

"You must be looking for answers. She was definitely here and a very clever girl. She must've learned from you." Greenwood paused, tentatively assessing the situation, not wanting to upset the already disturbed man. Robin refused their evidence before, wouldn't even listen or

open the folder. Then he'd quit his job, adopted an alias, moved, and avoided all forms of news for a year.

Greenwood, being a man of justice felt it was his obligation to help Robin let his daughter go. She'd run off and would never be coming back. "I'm not saying this to hurt you but it's going to. You need to know what happened or you'll keep looking forever. I've seen it happen. Please, listen," Greenwood interlaced his fingers and continued "Annie was collecting firewood, as evidenced by the small pile next to the lake. She saw something out not a foot further and the snow was so dense. She couldn't tell where the lake started. On January fifteenth, a hiker saw her pink coat frozen into the ice." Greenwood took a breath. "We found her underneath it."

It seemed so calculated. Robin had done it too many times before, delivering bad news. The deep breath that made it seem like the words were hard to get out. The interlaced fingers as a "nervous habit". It was all to appear submissive, to give off the impression of being not a threat.

Robin bit his lip so hard it looked like it would bleed. Greenwood continued "We also found something, something maybe intended for you. You can't keep it because it's evidence but I can let you read it." This was it, the moment he'd been looking forward to for so long. A piece of Annie that would prove she never fell into the lake at all. She was warm somewhere, wrapped in blankets reading Moby Dick and sipping hot chocolate made with milk, not water.

Greenwood slid it across the table to him, a small and wrinkled piece of paper, probably from one of the journals Annie had collected since childhood. It just looked like a normal entry. Something she used to get her feelings out on paper. He'd read all her journals after she left. The things she wrote were not nice. He paused. Reading this ended everything, he couldn't pretend anymore. It was three sentences long and taking a deep breath, Robin braced for impact.

"I'm going to start the long journey home tomorrow. I want it to be enough. I want to be enough." That was it. All the parts left of her. Robin's hand gripped the arm rest so hard, he left indentations where his fingers had been.

"We think she planned to leave the next day. Her backpack was packed and this was in a notebook toward the back." The silence that followed was short lived and awkward. Greenwood spoke.

"Is there anything else I can do?" Greenwood was onto his next step of delivering bad news, locking eyes and asking to help. There was nothing to be helped.

Robin Myers was fine.
