

Word count: 1,400

### A Father and a Daughter

"Dad, no, you shouldn't wear it this way. Let me try," said the woman standing next to an old gentleman in his mid-sixties. He was wearing a stylish new suit, which, with the help of his daughter, lent a vibrant air about him. He had not experienced a sensation like it for many years. "Hold still while I go around the neck," she said carefully avoiding the spots on the right side of his neck that she knew still caused him pain from an operation a few years back. The light in his small bedroom, which was stuffed with books and old clothes, was not bright enough for her to see through the shadows. This forced her to feel the fabric in order to arrange it better.

With careful intensity that would have gained approval of the most successful designer in the fashion industry, she had gone over every detail of his outfit. Her beautiful blonde hair and elegant frame complimented by a mien, which she knew from the number of times she had been asked for dates by handsome young men, was attractive enough to grab attention; she knew how important appearances were. But more importantly, she knew what a good person for some lucky woman her father would be. In fact, it was she who introduced his date to her. "She will be great for you, dad. Don't worry," she had said more than once (he had often forgotten many things she said these days). And then she had said, "You've got to remember to treat her like a lady. Don't forget that we won't just fall for a guy because he dresses nice and looks as handsome as you."

"Your mother did," he answered with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes," she said unable to contain her mirth (which her father shared with her), "but she was special, wasn't she dad? She could see you and know you before even talking to you. I used to hear her tell me about that—more times than you can imagine." And then he just sank back into the small brown chair next to his bed and fell into a lethargic reverie. It would be a mistake, she realized, to continue talking about her mother, one who he longed for but could never meet again.

From the start of the "project"—as she lovingly referred to it, she had been worried about his confidence. One of his first protests was that he was too old. "I can't be dating, not at this age. And what would your mother say?" These had been expected. She had easy answers ready. As a lawyer at a corporate law firm in downtown Manhattan, she had always been able to prefer a defense for any case. "Look at all of these celebrities that are older than you and still dating," was her first response. "I know that mother would have been OK with this. You know that? She would have approved warmly," she answered to the second. And the truth was she believed it.

But it was harder to answer his doubts when he said, "Kate, I'm just *too* tired." What could she say to that? She knew that this came from a complex set of reasons from within him and could not be so easily disregarded. The truth was, she felt, that this was his real objection. He just didn't feel like it. He was, she thought, falsely content in his isolation; his dark, drab apartment that had never had the look of vigor or the virility. She remembered the passion for life from the man who, during her childhood, came home every day with a smile on his face no matter what happened.

"You know she's too young for me," he said when she was nearly finished checking the right side of his outfit. His voice had cracked and she knew that he was sad again. She said

nothing in response. Instead, she continued to adjust the dark fabric of his clothing, making sure it was balanced right on both sides.

She smoothed her hands on his back the way she used to when she was a little girl. Sometimes after doing that, he would begin crying because he missed his wife. "You still have me," she would say in a soft voice over and over. "You still have me." But she didn't say that this time for fear that it would remind him of those days.

She, too, was affected. Luckily, his back had been turned. Before he could notice, she also was able to remove the tear that had formed so uselessly on the wings of her eyes.

It was just after six-thirty; the date was set for seven-thirty. She knew that he was making another attempt to get out of it. She shared the anxiety he felt as she closed her hands around his slender arms. How awful it was to feel those once-powerful limbs be reduced to mere slender straps that dangled loosely at his sides.

Her heart beat faster. She had to do the final touches to his hair. Already she could see that a few hairs were out of place. "Relax", an inner voice said. "She won't notice." But that did nothing to calm her. She wanted the best for her father and to do that, she reasoned, she would have to make his appearance top-notch.

And then it was time. Before going out the door, he looked at her once more. With the first traces of excitement in a long time, he was really brightening up. Already, she thought, he had shed a decade. His eyebrows no longer drooped so much (at least that was her opinion). His shoulders, once majestic pillars that formed the bulwark to secure his pride and rectitude, no longer slouched inward. The eyes which used to scold her with such fire when she came home late as a child no longer seemed the oppressed ovals which were crushed through years of lonely nights spent quietly on his sofa musty from the sticky summers. Her happiness for him affected him in the tenderest way. He paused as he turned around to give her a kiss on her forehead. It was the first overt sign of affection that he gave her in a long while.

"Do you really think, my dear, that your mother would approve?" His whole visage waited eagerly for her nod. She believed that he would not take a further step unless she gave him her assent.

She reflected on how her mother, even when her daughter was young, used to give her every opportunity to think for herself. "Mother, I can't undo my laces, they're too tight," she had said one evening, when it got dark and her shoes were dirty from the mud. "Try again, Katie dear," her mother would say. She would try until she fixed them, and that would be that. She believed

that if her mother were there right now, she would not want her daughter to look to her to find the answers.

"Yes, I do," she said more solemnly than she wanted. She remembered then, how she used to ask him advice on her boyfriends just to please him (she usually followed her own instinct, anyway, no matter what he said). She knew that he wanted to have some part in her life. That he doted on her as much as a father could with as few words as possible was well known to her. How quickly their roles had reversed.

He nodded and then moved to go outside. The wind had picked up. His whole body sifted slightly, following it through the sanctuary of long valleys that ran around the oppressive heights of the mountains near the town.

He did not look back until after he started the car. She knew he would not want to look to her for guidance anymore; he wanted to continue on his own. Perhaps he was embarrassed for receiving her consent at all, but the smile and wave were genuine, she perceived.

After he left, she wept for a long time. A relief tinged with a strange loss swept through her as though she were giving up a cherished pet to a trusted friend.

But when she moved towards her room, it was gladness which won her over. And she lay in her bed that night sharing the happiness which she was sure that he felt.

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