

The rancher is the crowning jewel among the weeds like the castle over a kingdom of overgrown thoughts and outdated ideals. Dad's home. Now just a house.

I approach alone. Carter will have stopped to grab booze on his way from the funeral. I hoped I wouldn't have to enter the house by myself, but now that I'm here, it feels right that I can experience this portal to my childhood without any distractions.

The front walk is barely visible through the grass and weeds, but each unwelcome plant seems somehow familiar. I haven't been here for ten years, but the dandelions and thistles call out to me as though I was making headbands from them only this morning.

I pluck a tall dandelion and roll it between finger and thumb. The sharp scent of its juice transports me further into that other time. I glance up at the door, surprised as I hear the phantom of my father's voice calling out to me.

"Nobody told me a princess was coming to visit today! I would have put underwear on!" Dad's words are so real in my mind I can hear them with my ears. I see him standing in front of the broken screen door in a grease-stained t-shirt from some long-forgotten Baptist church project. His long, matted hair is as neglected as his yard.

I smile in response, but my interaction breaks the illusion, and he's gone.

I try to conjure up an image of Dad before he was forced to retreat to this worn-out building where his own parents had died. I can't remember a man who was groomed and well spoken. In my mind, he had always been a man who cared more about what brand of cigarette he was putting inside his body than how he smelled on the outside. Dad lived off the nutrition of cheap beer and tv dinners. But I had been close enough to see under his layers of grime, and there lived a kind-hearted gentleman and a good father.

A pang went through me. Why had I drifted so far away? My years of absence from this place now became a presence of regret weighing in my stomach. Life had swept me up and carried me away, and I hadn't fought back.

*Honk! Honk!*

Carter's rumbling truck bounces over the lip of the gravel driveway and crunches to a halt behind my car. He hops out and struts towards me, showing off two bottles of liquor.

"An apple-flavored abomination for you and a collection of Zeus's own tears for me," he shows off first a Crown Royale then a Jim Bean bottle. Despite his words, I'm surprised by his thoughtfulness in getting me my favorite liquor.

"Thank you," I say. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Oh, don't be like that," he says. "I could still drop it accidentally before handing it to you."

He doesn't, and I hold it safe in my elbow as we turn toward the house.

"You have keys for this place?" he asks.

"We won't need keys to get in," I say. "But yes, I have them."

I lead the way through the weeds that seem to get closer together as I approach the door as if they are unwilling to welcome new owners into their territory.

"This is what Dad left for us," Carter says. "It really screams *I value you as my children.*"

"It was all he had," I say.

"Certainly nothing he could have done to change that," Carter mumbles. He always blamed Dad for the divorce, even though Dad tried to make things work. Mom is the one who put her foot down and sent him away.

As I push open the door, the nostalgia stops me dead in my tracks. Memories I didn't even know existed flood through me. The smell of Dad's old tv dinners still permeates the house, and I can all but hear the whir of the microwave as it worked tirelessly to feed him, the housewife that, try as it might, couldn't make this rundown rancher a home.

"Gosh, it stinks in here," Carter grumbles. "Can you walk forward so I can get in?"

I move forward and find myself in the kitchen moments later. I didn't feel my feet hitting the ground. My mind is leading the way, telling me that I'll find Dad in the kitchen pulling his latest plastic plate of mashed potatoes, Salisbury steak, and creamed corn out of the microwave.

But no one is there.

I glance again at the microwave. It's ajar. My chest grows heavy as the scene of Dad's death suddenly becomes real to my eyes.

He took his food out of the microwave and shambled into the living room where he lowered himself onto his favorite faded chair, groaning as his legs ached under his weight. He ate his meal alone. Then sat there alone, maybe channel surfing, maybe on Facebook, maybe dozing. Then pain shot through his body as his heart failed him, and he died in that favored, faded chair. Alone.

Carter pushes past me in the doorway, oblivious to my sadness, breaking the spell. He pulls two glasses from the cupboard and pours about six ounces for each of us. I eye mine skeptically as I take it, but Carter shrugs.

"We'll be drinking this much anyway."

We toast to nothing and take loud sips to properly aerate and taste the drinks. I find myself releasing a long, satisfied sigh as my body relaxes with the taste of alcohol even if the poisonous effects haven't taken hold.

"Dad would have liked to know we're both here," I say, the break in my voice as obvious as the smell of cheap food.

"Funeral's over," Carter says. "It's too late to be sad."

"I just wish I'd come to see him."

"If you wanted to see him for you, then I'm sorry you missed your chance, but if you wanted it for his sake..." He shakes his head and takes a large sip, "then don't waste your pity."

"He was all alone after Mom kicked him out."

"It's a life he chose for himself," Carter assures me.

"Just because he chose not to date doesn't mean he deserved..."

"Oh no, he chose to date."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Didn't you guess by now that he was seeing other women?"

The heaviness inside me evaporates, but not in a good way. Shock envelops me, and I become weightless. The sensations of my body disappear.

Do I say anything? I don't know. I speak enough through my expression that Carter responds.

"Oh yea," he sips his drink imperiously. "He was cheating. He slept with at least three women before all was said and done. When Mom finally kicked him out, he tried to get with his latest escapade, but she wouldn't have him. I don't blame her. Who wants a washed-up, faithless, loser?"

"Carter!" My anger surprises me, but how dare he call Dad a loser.

But then, how dare Dad betray Mom...and us. How dare he betray me!

The reason I grew up practically fatherless was because he couldn't say no to a cheap booty call? What kind of a dad would do that to his daughter?

I feel sick and consider dumping my drink, but instead, I impulsively down the whole thing. Carter cheers in approval.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask, at the same time wondering if I even ever wanted to know.

"I thought you would have figured it out by now, what with the way Mom always talked about Tiana and everything."

"Tiana?" I gasp. "Miss Tawny?"

"Oh yea." He sounds so triumphant. As if he's relishing the opportunity to give me the juicy details.

"That's why she stopped coming over, I suppose," I murmur. I still can't feel my feet as I float across the kitchen and pour another glass of liquor. "Why would he do it? Didn't he care about us or Mom at all?"

Carter shrugs. "I mean, I like sex a lot too, but I don't have a family."

The nausea comes back slowly. I look at the glass in my hand, wondering why I poured myself so much. Then I turn from the counter to the door. My brain is on a delay, struggling to process the new information from my eyes as the alcohol takes effect.

"I'll be in the other room," I say and float to the old, faded armchair.

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Curse the automatic alarm of the iPhone.

Actually, I don't know if it's that or Carter's snores that wake me at seven in the morning.

I stumble up from the chair in confusion. Wait, I don't have to go to work. I'm at Dad's house right now. Why do I have a nearly empty bottle of Jim Bean whiskey in my hand?

*Thump!*

I look down at the photo album that's now on the floor with pages bent and splayed. Splayed like the legs of those women Dad chose over his family. I guess I was looking at it yesterday?

I head to the kitchen where I deposit the Jim Bean on the counter and fill myself a glass of water from the tap. Carter is still snoring when I get back to the living room. I groan as I bend to pick up the photo album, and my breath catches as I realize it's my parent's wedding album. Dad kept it?

I flip through the pictures that I probably already saw but don't remember from last night. Mom is beautiful. Dad is roguish. But most importantly, they're both happy.

Joy is the theme on every glossy page. Even when they're not smiling, I can see it in their eyes. Every picture is a testament to what they expected their future to hold: happiness and togetherness.

I seek out the pictures where Dad is looking at Mom. I try to find some hint of his imminent betrayal. Some clue in how he looked at her that he would one day let his eyes stray. But there's nothing. The two of them are united in their promise to stay true and love only each other.

What changed? Did he change? Did Mom change? Did he just get lazy?

I think of Miss Tawny. She was my music teacher and Mom's personal friend. I looked up to her in so many ways. I remember her as family. Apparently, she was a bit too much like family.

My shock from last night is turning fully into anger, and I want to put all the blame on Tiana. I want to hold her at fault for what my dad did wrong.

She and Dad each loved Mom very much. Yet they let their attraction to each other get stronger than that to the point where they mutually agreed to take away what was most dear to her.

Had Mom done something to make them feel like it was justified?

I just wish I knew why.

No. I don't.

It's not hunger that makes me finally put the album down; it's a stomachache, one most likely brought on by hunger. I open the fridge without much hope. A wall of eight tv dinner boxes greets me. Here is Dad's preparation for a future that never came. Perhaps it was his only plan or hope as he looked into that future. Perhaps he was relieved to finally succumb to his weak and aching heart.

I choose the one on top: lasagna with mashed potatoes and carrots.

I carry it to the microwave, but I have to stop, bite my lip, and squeeze my eyes shut. Why is this the thing that hurts the most?

The microwave door is still open.

It's such a small and human thing. It's so much a part of my memories of him. One of the last things his hands touched. Can I undo his final work?

The lump in my throat turns bitter. Dad doesn't deserve to be remembered with fondness. He chose his path. He wove his own fate into the tapestry, and then he had to live it out. Why should I pity or honor him?

I yank the plastic tray from the cardboard, place it in the microwave, and slam the door closed. Good riddance, Dad. Good riddance to the way I thought you loved me. You couldn't have loved me and ruined my mother's life at the same time.

Was it all a lie? The way you called me princess, laughed at my jokes, worked with me on outside projects. You couldn't have loved me like that while also destroying my family.

Could you?

A few minutes later, I carry my steaming breakfast into the living room and sink into the faded armchair. I unconsciously followed Dad's exact steps. What does that say about me? How easily could I fall into every other rut he dug for himself? What if I'm exactly like him?

I wouldn't. I would never do what he did.

As I peel back the plastic covering, the smell of the dinner permeates the air even stronger than before. It's a scent strong enough to call Dad's ghost. It feels strange, but I wish it would materialize and explain that Dad does love me and he's sorry for the mistakes he made.

But could he really be sorry if he had three affairs? It seems to me that he demonstrated what a dirtbag he was, then went about proving it. Why should I try to forgive him or love him for that?

Because I do love him. Or I love who I thought he was. I loved him because I didn't know who he really was. Is it possible he was the man I remember and the one Carter remembers in one? Could he have been a loving father but also a father who made terrible decisions? Could he have loved me as much as I thought he did, while also giving Mom the finger?

"What's that stink?" Carter mumbles.

I slowly chew my first bite of lasagna. It's a relief to be rescued from my spiraling thoughts.

Carter sits up, smacking his lips. I can only imagine that the carpet he slept face first on has claimed territory in his mouth the same as it has on his textured cheek.

"What's for breakfast?"

"That stink," I say, raising my second bite to him in greeting.

"That's yum," he says sarcastically. "What do we have to drink?"

I shake my head. "No."

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When I finish eating, I spend several hours outside weeding, leaving Carter to his own devices in the house. His constant complaints about headaches and the smell were not helping me process things. But now I feel like I've sweat it out. The shock has become a dull ache. The anger has mellowed. I'm able to look back and wonder why without feeling sick from disgust. I feel the betrayal. I feel the loss of the dad I loved twofold, once through his death, the other through the knowledge of his evil.

There are moments when I wish Carter never told me, but it is best that I know. Whether Dad is the man I thought he was or not, he is gone. But Mom is still here. And it's best for her if I can finally understand what she went through as a wife and mother, just trying to care for herself and her family in the best way she could.

I don't bother brushing dirt off myself before I go inside. This place is a home for dirt if not people. But when open the door, I can hardly walk through the living room because of all the stuff that Carter has piled there.

"Everything here belongs to us now," he pre-emptively answers my query. "Take what you want."

I'm not prepared to clear out a whole house today. I need to head out soon so I'll be ready to work tomorrow. "I am not going through this today," I tell him.

"Your choice," Carter says. "I'm going to pick whatever I want and load as much of it as I can into my truck. So, if there's anything you want, claim it now."

"There's nothing..." but I stop. Perhaps there is one thing I want. One piece of the Dad I remember. One place where he'll always live on, even if that is as a simple, grimy man who built more of a future with tv dinners than with his children.

Because despite who he was and despite every flaw, I loved him. I know he loved me. And I want to remember that. "I'll just take one thing," I say.

Carter trails behind me as I walk into the kitchen, unplug the microwave, and carry it out to my car.

Even if the father I knew was even less substantial than the ghost that refuses to haunt this house, the smell of Dad's old microwave will bring him back to me whenever I feel alone.