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Darian Dovgan

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THE LAST OF IT

DARIAN DOVGAN

When I pull up to his house, I see the old fish tank sitting empty on the curb.

“Wow,” I say to my boyfriend, Kurt. “I never thought he’d get rid of that thing.”

“It looks so old,” Kurt says.

“It is,” I say.

I drive my mother’s decrepit minivan, the final remnant of the once full nest. It bumps over the cobblestone driveway like it is still familiar. But it’s meant for other roads now.

She was excited when I said I would go, always concerned with that silver cord tying him and I together. Still dipping her fingers in it:

“Oh, I’m so glad,” she said. “You need to see him.” She buzzed through the kitchen, a wound up toy, opening and closing jars, opening and closing cabinets. Her tight-bound fingers stitched in and out of everything.

I nodded because this time, she was right. This time, I did.

“Yeah,” I said. “It will be good for me. Maybe he will be different.”

“I’m sure he will, Honey,” Mom added. “Divorce changes people.”

We wait outside by the garage door because the code is different now and I don’t have the luxury of knowing it. He’s changed all the locks and doorknobs so everything feels an eerie kind of similar. I tell Kurt that he will be out any minute to let us in. But even I’m not sure.

“What kind of fish?” Kurt asks, pointing to the tank.

“First we had glassfish,” I say. “My sisters and I went and we picked them out. You know, the ones they inject all the colors inside of.”

Kurt nods.

“But we didn’t know that back then,” I say. “Otherwise we wouldn’t have bought them. And one big bottom feeder, so we didn’t have to clean the tank. They all had names but I couldn’t remember them now if I wanted to. They died after a few years. Then Dad went out and bought a bunch of cichlids. They weren’t very fun though because they just went at each other all the time. Eventually there were only the two parrotfish and that was all that was left. They were still going, last I was here.”

Fish: the victimless family pet. It wasn’t surprising that fish were what we ended up with. All the talk of puppies, but it never would have worked. It had to be fish. Maybe it was a good thing he was throwing the tank out.

“I’m nervous,” Kurt says. “About meeting your Dad.”

“Don’t be,” I tell him. “It’ll be over quick.”

Soon we are shuffled away into his sleek red car. I let Kurt sit in the front. Partially because I know he should and partially because I don’t want to. Dad turns on the spa music, his go-to track. Maybe he’s more complex than this. But for years now I’ve thought I’ve had him boiled down, condensed into music that only plays on Sirius Radio.

“Who is your favorite president?” Dad asks Kurt. And the questions begin.

I fiddle with my ring. Mom’s old ring; the first one Dad got her. Real sapphires, late eighties sapphires, before they were cooking up gems. It’s cut so I can pull it bigger and squeeze it tighter when I want.

“My third pregnancy I swelled up so much I had to cut it,” she explained to me once. “I just never got around to getting it fixed.”

What does that tell you?

Kurt says George Washington, and I am surprised by his answer. Not because I think he really loves George Washington, but with the cleverness of it all. Politically neutral. Kurt will do just fine.

I think about my favorite president. Abraham Lincoln. Not because of anything he did. But because in third grade a classmate of mine said she kept a piece of his beard inside a plastic baggie in her attic. I liked that.

“What about Abraham Lincoln?” I say. “He was a true patriot.”

Dad doesn’t say anything, but changes the song. And I wonder why I even bothered to ask.

Outside, we merge onto the highway and the palms shift to forest. I don’t know where we’re going. Dad said that for dinner he wanted to treat us. Something different, he said, while grinning like an idiot and staring at Kurt.

After the divorce, Dad got a new girl. A young blonde named Lisa. She drank profusely and

talked about her tits. But she had an autistic son. She always pulled this picture out of her wallet of him with all the waitresses at Hooters.

“Look,” she’d say. “Look! Look! Johnny has his own table there, all the girls love him.”

It was Hooters. But there was something admirable in it, so I couldn’t trash-talk her with Mom in the kitchen those nights when she was drunk.

Dad stopped eating microwave pizza and started going out. With Mom he never went out. I know what that did to her, amongst other things. What Mom didn’t know was that dating was all about the masks. They come off eventually.

He takes us to a Brazilian restaurant with sixteen-dollar appetizers. Dad orders three of them. Cheesy mariachi music blares out of the speakers. I guess nobody has told them it’s a Mexican thing.

“So what kind of movies do you want to make?” Dad asks Kurt.

I pick around at the cheese plate, rolling grapes into molded dairy. Kurt says he just wants to make movies, good movies. Dad remembers that Kurt is a film guy from a brief phone call we had months ago. Dad doesn’t remember anything else.

They keep talking. The waitress smiles at me sadly from across the room. She’s clearing a table. But even out of earshot, she knows. What woman doesn’t? Picture book girls, maybe. Thin stories with yellowed pages in the school library: Dad cooks dinner, Dad plays ball, Dad loves.

Kurt and Dad order a huge plate of lobster paella, to split.

“Come on,” Dad says. “You love lobster. We can do it for three. You can’t miss out on lobster. You’re on vacation, you’re in Florida.”

The bait is set. Somewhere, sharp silver teeth hide under leaves, at the ready.

I order a pork loin instead. It comes out on a wooden plank, still sizzling off moist clouds of fat, surrounded in a thick of green. Garnishes. I never cared much for arugula, anyway.

“Can I eat that?” I ask and point to a yellow flower placed on top.

The waitress tells me it is a Nasturtium. An edible flower. I’ve never seen anything past hon-eyesuckles.

Dad and Kurt buy a round of drinks. I sit out because I don’t like Scotch. Dad watches Kurt’s new film shorts and I can see he’s adopting him, grooming him to be his number one fan. Every once in a while I catch his eyes. He knows what I’ve told Kurt. He also knows how much it hurts to be disbelieved. Behind his skin panels, I know his plan.

I eat the Nasturtium. It feels like tissue paper on my tongue and tastes like nothing. Dad orders dessert, even though nobody wants it, just because he can. We eat less than half and then sip black

coffee out of thin, bone cups.

After dinner, Dad invites us inside. The house is still tall and white, but the air feels different in its massive emptiness. It smells like bleach. Dad takes Kurt out to the porch to smoke Cuban cigars.

“Smuggled them right out of Mexico,” he says.

“Wow,” Kurt says, “What would have happened if you got caught?”

Dad shrugs and smirks. “Oh you know,” he says.

“When did you go to Mexico?” I ask.

“This summer.”

“Oh,” I say.

He’s wearing the same coal slacks and white button up as usual. Mom used to order them in bulk from an expensive made-for-fancy tailor. He lives his life like this, in black and white, only subsisting in monochromatic. His eyes are more sunken in than I remember, like kalamata olives pushed hard into dough. And his hair, where it’s left, fumes up in wiry white coils. I hope I age better.

In the dining room, the fish tank is gone. The tile is discolored in the place it once sat. All of Mom’s things have vanished too: the antique bronze figurines, blue like the Statue of Liberty, the gold-framed painting of mother with child, the heart shaped cake pans she used to hang on the walls. All that is left is the old piano. But it plays out of tune.

My bedroom isn’t my bedroom anymore. All of my things are marginalized to one corner: the wonky alligator head, the old school photos, and the coconut with the googly eyes. I marvel at how my whole life can fill just one eight by eight tile. The rest has been stripped out and away. Repainted and remodeled. It even has clap-on lights

I go outside with a glass of wine. Dad tells me I have to get my things soon. He is selling the house. I look at the backyard: the sun setting by the old oak, the acres of grapefruit and lime trees. I played there once. I wonder if this will be the last time I ever see it. It doesn’t feel morbid. The place is now just an almost believable backdrop, a painted set with cardboard cutout trees.

“Let me have some of that cigar,” I say. “I want to try it.”

Kurt passes me the cigar and I take a puff. Dad scrunches his eyebrows.

“What?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t expect that of you,” he says. “It’s not ladylike.”

“I don’t care,” I say. “I’m not here for you, my life isn’t about what you think I should or shouldn’t do.”

Dad nudges Kurt.

“She’s got that same little crease as me,” he says. “Right between her eyebrows. Gonna need Botox one day, girls can’t have that.”

He laughs. Kurt laughs. I smoke more of the cigar and get dizzy. Nicotine high. Oxygen deprived.

“This cigar is pretty good,” I say. I am getting cocky. But it doesn’t matter. Kurt nods and squeezes my hand under the table. I don’t squeeze back. His muddy teardrop eyes, drawn tight as a tablecloth, stare past me. Set on Dad. I feel sick. I put the cigar down in its plastic holder.

I wonder if this is how it feels to be starved for a month and forced to watch somebody else eat. My stomach flips over and over. It feels like there are leeches inside me.

I first knew the sensation when I was a child. My sister and I did the same task. We drew a picture. Hers a lion, mine a pig. We knocked on Dad’s office door and he let us in. He spent more time in his office then.

“Look Daddy,” we said. “We drew you pictures.”

Dad said *very nice*. He took both of them. It was a few weeks later when I noticed the lion, taped up on his office wall, and the pig, nowhere to be found.

Mom told me that night how he didn’t mean it, her golden bangles clanking as she stirred a pot of stew, wild curls pushed behind one ear.

“He loves all of you girls equally,” she had said. She always thought she could protect us. Later on, I learned what it was really about. Competition: pitting us against each other, two scorpions in a box. He liked to watch us squirm.

“How is your writing going?” Dad asks.

We pause, eye contact. Humidity closes in around us. We sit for a few moments, rocking, smoking.

“It’s been good,” I say.

“Why don’t you ever show me any of it?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “You just don’t seem like you want to read it.”

“Of course I want to read it,” Dad says. “You know I would love to read it.”

“I guess I could send you some of the things I’ve been working on.”

It is the strange moment. A lull in the natural rhythm, the few seconds where novelty sits at the lip of life. It is the eye of the hurricane, the green before the tornado. That short period where you wonder about the frays in your own brain.

“As long as you don’t write about me,” Dad says, like he is joking. But he doesn’t joke. Not about that.

Dad walks us out before we leave. He tells Kurt it was a pleasure. He says he will watch all the movies he recommended. Then he tells me to work hard, to stay in school. I give him a half-baked hug.

Kurt asked me once before why I hated him. I told him the plain things first: the violence, the lies, the negligence, and the pain. The gritty details. Those soap opera elements to my all-too-real life. Sad stuff, the stuff people scowl at and apologize for, even though they had no hand in it. Then I told him about my sick dreams, my hollowed out hopes. I said, “You can’t possibly understand it. But every time it’s like placing my bets, fingers crossed for the win. Maybe a pat on the head, or just something would make it worth the while.”

Kurt said that he couldn’t understand. He had grown past that many years ago. Kurt didn’t need anybody else.

“You can’t ever grow up living like that,” Kurt had said. “You just keep yourself a five year old, forever waiting to open your presents.”

Kurt and I get into the car. I start the engine. Dad taps on the window so I roll it down for our final words. The post-goodbye goodbye.

“I’ll miss you,” he says.

“You too,” I say.

“That’s a nice ring.”

He points at my little hand wrapped around the steering wheel, pale in the silver island moonlight.

“I got it from a friend,” I tell him. “It’s crazy the kind of stones they’re making with science now.”

Most things in life change. It is the unwritten rule you learn early on. Change. Animals die, people shift, and you grow old. You come to expect it. But some things never change. Memories: the iridescent glassfish, floating through the water like ghosts. And dreams: Ground-dad day, any minute now maybe real father will come out.

Dad waves to me and says to keep in touch. I say I will. I roll up the window.

“So,” Kurt says. “That was your dad.”

“Yeah,” I say. “That was him.”

We drive off, passing the fish tank and the place where my childhood is buried. And that was the last of it.