

Catch Up

When she pulled into the parking lot of the Denny's, she felt as brittle as the sun-scorched weeds that sprouted up from the cracks in the asphalt. Waves of heat blurred her vision as she slowed into the parking spot. She cut the engine. Her head sunk into the steering wheel, forehead sticking to hot, worn leather. *This was it*, she thought, *this was the last step*. As she got out of the car, she felt a familiar stiffness in her legs. She stretched through the ache as she lengthened her stride toward the restaurant door. Her breath deepening and her chest rising. She mustered a confidence in her stride as her back straightened. She grabbed the door handle with conviction, opening the door to a gust of bacon grease and burnt coffee.

She found him there, right where she knew he'd be. She thought of how the booth accommodated him like a worn shoe- the imprint of his form in the vinyl cushion. He looked up from his paper, nodding in acknowledgement. She made her way to the booth and sat across from him, swallowed up in the oversized upholstery. She always felt so small in that booth... or maybe it was that she felt small next to him. She never was enough, never lived up or filled the mold he set for her.

Her shoulders sagged, her fortitude faltering. This was going to be hard. She knew it would be. She wasn't ready to confront him and spill her truth. As the waitress greeted her and confirmed her order, she turned and asked, "Anything good in there, Pop?"

"Same old, same old," he grunted. "That preppy coach they got don't know how to run a defense. The team will never make it to state at this rate. I swear they may not even end with a winning season. What a joke."

She nodded along as he berated the coach, the refs, the team that just couldn't get their pathetic act together. As he ranted on she heard a high whistling in her ears, like a steaming kettle. The painful piercing continued until- at last- he had said his piece. The waitress brought their food- a Veggie Omelette for her and a Lumberjack Slam for him. She carefully unfolded the napkin on her lap and sipped from her water glass, ice long melted and condensation dripping down its sides like the sweat from the edges of her brow.

As he pounded the ketchup bottle over his eggs, it mimicked the violent thumping in her chest. He shoveled a heaping scoop of the watery eggs into his mouth, the red sauce spilling from the corner of his mouth. She winced, inhaled and told him, "I got the scholarship, Pop. And, I am going to take it. I am going to write for the university paper. They are going to take care of all the financial stuff. I'm going to leave at the end of summer."

He choked on his eggs, spittle and curd-like debris flying across the table. His face reddened and he scoffed, "Is that so? Well, good luck with that. Good luck... Good luck seeing how long you can last out there. You've always acted like what I've given you and we've got here isn't good enough for you. I think you'll be in for a rude awakening when those university folks find out where you came from and who you are...but, go then anyway. When the wheels fall off, you better watch out because I may not be around here to welcome you back. But, go on ahead. Good luck."

She knew it would go over like this. But this was what she had to do, her only hope of escaping this oppressive heat, this stifling town, the weight of her father. "I will miss you, Pop. You can come to my visit any time, and I would like to come home for the holidays. Maybe we can even go to a football game together sometime."

He rolled his eyes and brought the newspaper back up over his line of vision. The conversation was over. She pushed around the remnants of her meal, sorting the veggie bits into neatly divided piles until her plate looked like a clock face. Tomatoes at 3 o'clock, spinach at 6 o'clock, mushrooms at 9 o'clock and bell peppers at 12. This, she could control. This, she could manipulate into order from chaos.

She took a sip of her lukewarm coffee, swallowing back the bitterness. Like pressing a bruise, she leaned into the harsh, acrid taste. She continued to sip, her determined gaze fixed at the newsprint wall her dad erected between them. If only the intensity of her laser focus could burn through to the man on the other side, warm his affection to her and accept her for who she was. But, he had never opened his heart or his eyes to the reality of her. Her childhood petrified him in every way. When she wanted to play with dolls instead of balls, his fears hardened him. When she wore in heels instead of cleats, his terror turned him to stone. She took one last sip, now just the dregs. She pressed the gritty grounds to the roof of her mouth, swallowed, and held her chin high.

She'd done what she came to do. While she'd lost hope of making her father proud long ago, she still held a sliver of hope for his acceptance. Today was not the day.

"Well, Pop, I am going to head out," she resigned. "I love you, Pop."

Her words were delicate and true. Her father remained a motionless brick bulwark. She peeled her legs from the seat like ripping off a Band-Aid. It was done. She left the restaurant and paused beside her car, face upturned to the sun. As its rays painted her in light and warmth, she knew she would be OK. Maybe he would come around... probably not... but she couldn't wait for him. And so, she set off- onward and upward- in just the right direction.