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LINE OF SIGHT

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I've heard it my whole life, "You have your father's eyes;" but I still don't believe them. So maybe that's why I stand face-to-face with the mirror, playing with the light switch, looking for more than myself, looking for him in those mahogany circles and milky pools as my pupils dilate and contract.

If I stare long enough, keep turning the light on and off, my reflection will muddle. I'll convince myself I'm lost in the likeness, unsure which person is real. It'll be like getting your hair cut, trapped between mirrors on both walls, unsure of which reflection depicts you best. Does he do this when he looks at himself, stare, trying to answer whether the eyes decided his path or if he, himself, chose?

"Don't ever do what your daddy did," my grandmother told me one night as we ate dinner, waiting for my mom to return home from work. I looked at her, fork halfway to my mouth, and, to pacify her, said I wouldn't. She brought the subject up often, demeaned my father when I spoke highly of him. He was the boy who broke her daughter's heart—or the heart my mother used in her early 30s; by her mid-40s it had been reconstructed, pumping blood and oxygen that were "never compatible" with my father—and, in my grandmother's eyes, needed to pay for it.

She spent three hours a day (after school until my mom came home) convincing me of my father's inadequacy. "Your mother would've been great to him." "I don't know why any man would walk away from his son, at that age." "The other one, Karen: worst mistake of his life."

I spent every other weekend at his house, usually watching TV or helping him sort wire-nuts. It was a rare treat, but sometimes my father fed his second wife an excuse for him and me to take an extended drive, almost undoing the amalgamation he'd created. We barely spoke in the car; the local sports radio station filled the cab of his truck with play-by-play of the football, basketball, or baseball game (depending on the height of the sun when he brought me home Sunday night at 6 P.M.). But even though I enjoyed our alone time, my pudgy, freckled cheeks pressed against window, pine trees smearing past, I could never forget my grandmother's ramblings. Her voice stayed in the back of my head, as if I were her second chance. The affair must've hollowed my grandmother, embarrassing her for expecting the first man amongst her little girl's dreams to stick around. But I doubt she ever had much confidence in my father; her admonitions were probably disguised regrets for not telling my mother to find a more stable man, one with a better haircut, a better job, better morals.

No matter how exciting the weekends with my father were, I always saw him a shade darker than he may have been. If he took me to a movie, it was only because his second wife—Karen, the mistake—was nagging him out the door. He only asked me to apprentice his electrical side jobs because my mom had called him, yelling, after he left me alone for eight hours one weekend. But the worst were the days when he'd arrive at my house hours late or call at half past three (the scheduled pick-up time), saying urgent plans came up and he wouldn't be able

to take me. Throughout the days leading up to my next visit I'd map out confrontations, ones in which he'd apologize—not for leaving the family, but me in particular. But when I'd see him again I'd only nod hello, wanting to cry, but knowing if I did I'd have to tell him what's wrong, that I didn't think he loved me, or watch him silently walk away, my wet cheeks confirming that he didn't.

My mom thought it would be fun to look at their high school yearbook; and for the first half-hour it was, seeing who she and my father were at my age. We were lighthearted, mocking the hairstyles of the friends of hers I knew, but her voice strained when she saw the first one: her head tilted back, laughing with my father's arm slung around her neck. That girl was the first of four women my father had slept with in high school, and each successive photograph left my mom slightly bitterer. We chuckled at the first "and her," but the sigh that followed the third one vacuum-sealed the room. My mother froze, staring at a woman she hated not for sleeping with my father (my parents didn't start dating until after college), but for the brevity of their relations, the unknown sentiments. These women didn't have to see my father in wedding photos or framed in their child's bedroom; they forgot him after a failed high school fling.

My mom fanned to the headshots, and I pulled at the page my father stared from. We looked at him for a minute, our family the way we would always be: my mother and I together; my father in sight, but inaccessible. She smiled, a teardrop caught in between her lips, and told me I had his eyes.

"Your mother called," my father said, poking at a burnt slice of London broil on the grill.

"Oh." I nodded.

He looked away, into the coals. "So, are you

gonna, like, throw this up?"

I forced a laugh, staring at the grass clipping trails at my feet. Shaking my head, I told him I wouldn't.

"Good . . . because it's bad."

"I know."

I crossed my arms tightly and he forked the charred meat from the grill to a plate, all the while thinking of something more to say. I pitied him, his inability to generate words that he even felt would comfort; instead he'd rather stay quiet, more confident in the din of rustling branches and metal-on-china to tell me I'd be okay.

Most likely, it was my candor that muted him. I imagine he rehearsed a speech for weeks, planning to ask me, as he did, to help him at the grill, the only place we could really be alone. He had probably foreseen himself as the hero, massaging my shoulders as I cried on his, saying I loved him; but that possibility was beyond us. So maybe it was regret that kept him quiet: for living five minutes away but never accepting dinner invitations ("Could I have stopped him?" he must've thought.); for pinching the loose fat of my stomach when I stretched my arms at his dinner table, asking if I still ran.

But after a few minutes it was our silence that plagued him. He took a step towards the house, plate in-hand, but turned around to place it on the shelf of the barbeque. "I just don't want you to die," he said, hugging me with one arm over my shoulder and the other snaking beneath my armpit. But I didn't return the action; I stood still, my ribs contracting as he squeezed me tighter, leaving me more and more surprised.

"And Bob took me in," my father said, curling his lips into his mouth, delaying the tears. I'd seen my father emotional before, usually during

movies, when the main characters reunite with their families after two hours of struggle. But this was different. He was the main character, telling a story devoid of repentant hugs and rolling credits.

The adoption obscured my father's genetics. He must've shared physical characteristics with his biological father, but as the youngest of four boys, attending his second funeral at age 10, he has to rely on his older brother's teenage memories to tell him if he really does have his biological father's nose or eyes.

That could've been all he really wanted, an older version of himself to watch age, to know what to expect. But aging would be a surprise; he'd never know if his Adam's Apple should hide, or if it was his own fault, the product of sedentary Sundays and six-packs. He'd forever be that 10-year-old boy too young to know if he was exhibiting inherited traits, only kicking grass as the priest spoke highly of the deceased.

I thought of him after kissing her, told myself his eyes were what made me think she was prettier than my girlfriend. The brown rings we share are, after all, always looking for something better, a different sample, as if girls were wines at a tasting. But staring into the mirror, the black of my eyes fattening like a tick with only a sliver of sunlight illuminating the room, I lose the resemblance. He may have given me the physical characteristics, but he didn't tell me to use them on passing girls, undress them, picture their heads tilting while kissing their necks, my hand, meanwhile, tangled with my girlfriend's.

My biological grandfather was lucky; to him my father would always be an innocent 10-year-old. He'd never know the man my father grew up to be, never have to critique him for failed marriages or partially-earned degrees. My father watched

my personality drift from what he once knew it as, becoming a confection to his own. In only a single adolescence I went from the son who bantered endlessly about Yankees trades to the guy who used words he needed in Layman's terms. We've become father and son by blood only, two people who just so happen to have similar eyes and tastes for infidelity.

But twenty years in, we're stuck together, interconnected whether our characteristics mesh or not. Though it's not "father-son" necessarily bonding us; it's our guilt. He isn't the man his childhood envisioned and won't ever be the father he promised to be when he became one. But maybe he could've been Atticus Finch had I not asked him for so much as a child, had I not cried so often when he denied me presents.

And even though he's apologized before—during car rides that I've spent with my head limp in the seat belt, silent and distant—for any faults he may've left me with, I've never been able to tell him it's okay. I know none of my mistakes were because of him, but the words stick to the back of my tongue; there's something about another man's confession, especially your father's, that makes you want to hear it again, as if by the seventh or eighth time you'll be content with it and grant superficial forgiveness. But the mercy was given years ago; I'm just waiting for something unique from his admission, something where he not only tells me my errors are because of him, but convinces me.

I flick the light on; my pupils shrinking into themselves, scared of the fluorescence, but I keep staring at myself, seeing less and less of him. With a quick brush down the wall, the room is dark, and the stains on my eyes expand, searching for an identity within the shaded reflection. ❖