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HIM WITH HIS FANCY WAYS

HLEFT US ON A MORNING when the sky was black, after a hard storm had caused the tenement roof to leak again. You had placed a bucket in the bedroom to hold the rainwater and he kicked it over. Or so you told me. I was five years old. I heard this story many times. After the telling your sisters would murmur: *and she just a wee thing herself. With a five year old bairn and a new baby coming.* It was a boy. But he never saw his son.

The new baby screamed, then only days later was silent. The priest talked of blessings and God's will but you never spoke of it. When I asked what happened to my brother you answered simply: *he died.* And would say no more.

I imagine my father never knew.

Even during the pregnancy you worked in the tire factory near our street and came home too tired to play with a child who wanted only to chatter and hear stories. Your belly so big then, you were too exhausted to make anything but cheese and bread for our tea. In minutes you would fall fast asleep in the chair, your mouth dropping open. Still a pretty woman — the prettiest they said in the town. You'd been a delicate young girl, skin as pink and warm as a rosebud. But you were so thin, even pregnant, with tiny hands and feet, legs so long and white.

I leaned against your legs, taking off the one dress on my dolly, then

replacing it. Over and over. Waiting for you to wake, to talk to me. Wondering where my daddy was, who used to be home a lot, who often had time to talk.

“No job good enough for him,” said Auntie Lily, your sister. “Him and his fancy ways.”

After he left, his absence marked every milestone. I remember the hearse carrying my grandmother. I was six years old in new shoes that pinched, and a velvet dress that was too hot under a July sun. I wanted my daddy. The whispers I heard frightened me. He was in the pub, drunk as a monkey. I didn’t know what that meant.

I didn’t cry when I saw my grandmother in her casket. She had been placed carefully, arms folded across her chest, hair curling improbably around a face that was rouged and distorted. A middle-aged woman with waxy skin, red cheeks, smiling a strange smile.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

I held your hand and I looked for him, as you did. They said he would come. *Say what you will*, the women whispered, *he loved his mother*. But he was not in the church. I remember (or did I dream it?) a man far down the path to the church, walking fast away, in a gray suit, the pants too short, black socks, the back of the head so familiar and thinking — *is that my daddy looking funny in wrong clothes?* and nudging you to see — *Mama, look* and watched your face turn white.

Wheesht, you said.

Through the years of school, as we made do with cast-off clothes and scraped together meals, you listened to my stories about my teachers and classes and nodded and would sometimes say:

You’re like your father, yes. He was clever.

This did not seem like praise to me. These were things I had been given at random, a lucky gene lottery, like his blue eyes. So from this man who left us after a hard storm, I learned from you that I had been given an aptitude for languages, a love of poetry. And remembered sitting on his knee as he held an old book and his voice so quiet, reading words I couldn’t understand that sounded like music.

Secretly, shamefully, I wondered if he knew of these things I had inherited. If he watched me somewhere, followed me from school, pri-

vately talked to teachers and knew that I was third in French that year, that I'd won a special prize for Latin.

As I grew older I wanted to know more, asked more, but you would never speak of him. I had to imagine why he left, where he was, looked hard at you as you slept after your double shift, thinking—*he did not love her, then. Or me. Why?*

The prettiest woman in the town, yet so shy you undressed behind the screen near the old white sink, boiling up water to scrub yourself before bed, no matter how tired you were. Emerging in a long nightgown, your beautiful hair brushed one hundred strokes. We lived in one room for ten years and I never saw you naked.

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Women in the neighborhood would visit for a cup of tea, sitting around the kitchen table, cackling their loud laughs, talking of medical problems or men. The good men and the bad. The good ones *never missed a shift, never looked at another woman, never raised a hand to her*. Once in a while they would add “a wee dram” to their tea and giggle and make jokes then laugh at your blushing face.

You would stand quickly, your face so pink, bustle to make more tea.

And they would laugh louder.

“She doesn’t understand the jokes,” Lily said. “They make no sense to her.”

One day, early in my teens and raging with fury and confusion, I said to Lily, “She never tells me anything. Why did he leave? Doesn’t she know?”

Lily looked at me steadily for a minute.

“A new woman,” she said.

I felt the shock hit my stomach. A powerful nausea rising upwards into my throat.

“He left her for another woman?”

“Well, no. Not just like that. But there was a woman he liked.”

"Who was she? What was she like?"

"Not a pretty one," she said. "Square face. Tall. Nothing to compare with your mama."

And that night I asked you straight.

"What was she like?" I asked loudly, brutally. "That woman my father liked?"

You were too tired to argue with the teeming fury that marked my teen years.

"I don't know," you said, so quietly. "I met her just the once. At the Labor Party meeting. She talked a lot. She had the opinions of a man."

Then you stood, picked up your towel and your soap and went into the wee bath place to wash yourself before bed.

THE OPINIONS OF A MAN? Was that it, then? Was it political talk that made a man leave a gentle woman who loved him and a five-year-old who wanted only to sit on his knees, pretend to read the newspaper with him? Did I imagine that? Yet I have a tactile memory of the rough wool of his jacket, I can smell the Craven A tobacco, see the beer at his elbow, always in a straight glass.

"Did my father smoke Craven A tobacco?" I asked Lily once. She stared at me, then laughed.

"Yes. Always."

"And drink beer in a straight glass?"

"Yes, he did. He said it improved the taste. So fussy he was."

"What did he read to me?"

"Oh, everything. Books, the paper, pamphlets from the Labour Party before he delivered them."

"He delivered political pamphlets?"

"Just around the neighborhood. He'd take you with him sometimes. You don't remember that?"

“No.”

Lily told me before I left home for college that he had married again. He had two daughters. And for a while the pain vanished and I felt only anger. I entertained fantasies of his violent death. Or I imagined terrible injury and a deathbed scene where he would beg for forgiveness. It seemed unjust that he should have a normal family and we should have only each other.

After your death, when I stood with my own husband and two children beside me, I looked for him again. He would surely come to say goodbye. And heard in my head your voice whispering—*he left a long time ago. He said goodbye after a hard storm.*

At your flat we packed away your few belongings and I found there the magazines, hidden under the bed: lurid romances with brightly colored covers. The women had tremulous parted lips and waited to be kissed by heroes who looked vaguely like Clark Gable. What dreams were these? That he would return? Some other prince would walk across the misty moor and take you in his arms. But he was your prince, wasn't he? He was the only prince you ever wanted.

Today, I pick up a letter from Lily and inside, cut out from a newspaper in another town, is his obituary. I read it carefully. No fancy ways are described here. Such an ordinary, uneventful life. Such an ordinary man. I read the obituary aloud, hoping somehow you can hear it.