One Day, When Mom is Dead

The father took them to Hooters again. His son slunk low in his chair, picking at the edges of the table. Lacquer collected underneath his fingernails.

Right after a basketball game too, the whole 8th grade team. A few younger siblings tagged along also, sisters and brothers, joining the tradition of cramming themselves like sardines in the back of a too-small truck in order to be shuttled down the slushy, freezing highway to a certain respected establishment.

Entering the gleaming, neon building, Lucas’ head was a ticking clock face, nervously glancing about, never settling, always unsure of what to do or where to stand. The smell of fried food, the sound of wrestling playing loudly above the bar, blue puffer coat sticking to his arms, the waitresses. He glanced over to the sisters with a greasy, guilty feeling, but the sisters, like most everyone else, didn’t seem to care. To them, the women were just women, fluorescent orange booty shorts and all, their bodies reminiscent of boring statues in museums or mothers or maybe even themselves, nothing more. Lucas might have thought the same were it not for his father.

There was hardly a time when his father wasn’t laughing, and if he wasn’t laughing, he was silent. He didn’t laugh at home very often though, maybe because the rest of his family didn’t join in with as much vigor. They didn’t know how.

He was laughing now, joking with another man (he *always* knew someone) before the waitress arrived, preferring to “be conversational” (that’s what his grandma said) rather than corral so many gelding children as they shouted and rammed around and tracked snow everywhere and pushed each other into chairs. His father was laughing with the other man, Lucas had no idea who he was, about the situation, the dragging of a whole junior basketball team and then some to Hooters “as a gag”. Lucas kept picking at the table. He might demolish the whole thing given enough time. *Last time, we went to Rainforest Cafe.*

The food was good, the service fine. His father purposely ordered something with innuendo so he could make a joke. The waitress laughed, the same laugh as all the other waitresses. The father stuck one thick elbow into the thin ribs of the boy, Trent, sitting next to him, telling him to laugh. He did. One of the sisters, hardly nine, asked what the joke meant. Now Trent laughed for real. Lucas’ father did too, but he always laughed for real. He never lied. He couldn’t.

However, as his father took a huge bite of chicken breast, Lucas found himself relaxing. He turned to friends:

“I think I’m going out for soccer!”

“I just watched a show about soccer.”

“Really? My older sister plays soccer.”

“My brother used to, now he works at Cummings.”

“Cool! My dad works there. He says—”

“I just got the newest FIFA installment and--”

“Mine works there too!”

“Hey, Lucas!”

Lucas turned, falling silent. His dad was leaning forward, elbows on the table, greasy hands loosely holding a stained napkin. One side of his face was filled with food, like a chipmunk or wad of chewing tobacco, the other side pulled up past a stubbly chin. He was grinning.

The restaurant was loud, lots of clinking glasses, murmuring conversations, opening and closing doors wielding gusts of bitterly cold, artificially salty January air that distracted and annoyed and made the restaurant even louder, yet Lucas heard his father’s baritone voice so clearly from across the oceans-long table:

“Trent here says you’ve got a little crush! That true?”

Of course it was. Everybody knew. She was here, right here, and everyone knew. Well, not the little kids and sisters, not officially anyway, but even they probably knew. Lucas felt the restaurant grow louder, heard the waitresses singing something a few tables over to an embarrassed patron, heard the scrape of silverware against porcelain plate, heard the cars outside barreling down the highway, heard his nails digging past lacquer and into pulp.

Fateful seconds in between stimulus and fired synapses passed, the only thing in his head a jumbled collection of *“don’t look over don’t look over don’t look no no no no no”*

So, despite being keenly aware of his teammates' undisciplined eyes glancing over to where Valerie sat, each silently, *loudly* wondering if Lucas himself would blow his own cover, the respondent instead wrenched his head in the opposite direction and beheld *Trent* who at least had the decency to blanch when fixed under Lucas’ bug-eyed stare. If ever there was a time when violence seemed reasonable, it was now, but Lucas was sitting at the other end of the table in a public place surrounded by teammates closely watching the first-ever instance of touchless strangulation.

Lucas’ mouth was dry, mind blank, body painfully underdeveloped or he would have simply thrown himself out the nearest window into oncoming traffic. Thankfully, at the very least, his dad hadn’t seemed to notice his friends' darting eyes, choosing instead to focus everything on the Joke.

Lucas still hadn’t said anything. He had to say something. How many seconds had passed? Five? Twenty? Didn’t matter—it had been too long. Oh, if she didn’t know then she sure knew now.

He had to speak, to end this stupid, awful stand-off or he might never be able to show his face at school again, much less in front of Valerie.

His father was staring at him, chewing his food, ready to swallow.

*Say something cool. Please, God, just let me say something cool. Just this once, please let me say something,* anything *cool.*

“Nuh-uh!”

*Shit.*

His father laughed, and for once, Lucas could understand why. He would’ve laughed too at something so pitchy and pleading and disastrously lame. How was Valerie reacting? He clearly just lied to cover up telling the truth-- what was she doing? If only he could look over, but then his father would follow his eyes like a bloodhound and in a second, Lucas’ life would be unbearable. *Trent, you piece of shit.*

*“Ooooooh!”* Jeered the chorusing team as his father laughed, but only those near the end of the table. Those on the other end, by Lucas, found laughter quickly dying in their wobbly throats at the sight of Lucas’ vaporizing stare. Instead, they busied themselves with shifting uncomfortably in their seats, picking their noses, and kicking slightly dangling feet against distressed table legs.

Far, far away, Trent looked down and picked a nail against the table, almost as if praying for forgiveness from an *extremely* unforgiving god, but immediately snapped his head up with a strangled *“Guh!”* as another meaty elbow found contact with his inches-thick chest.

“C’mon!” said Lucas’ guffawing father. “Don’t be like that! Nothing to be embarrassed about!” He continued, delighted by the sound of his own voice, and the group dutifully laughed again, but the prolonged sight of Lucas sitting shell-shocked at the end of the table seemed to have sobered them slightly, not that his father noticed.

“So?” He said, leaning back, wiping his greasy face, reveling in the hilarity of the situation, with the low stakes of such a silly little event, with how *funny* it was that they were here, right now, at this stupid Hooters, all these damn kids surrounding him, his son looking close to vomiting over such a trivial matter as a *crush.*

Lucas’ fingers dug into the table, blood rushed through his ears, armpits exploded with sweat, ruining the shirt he thought might impress Valerie because he bought it with his own money. She was always talking about paying for things with your own money. She wore her hair in lots of long, thin braids most of the time. Sometimes her mom would tie in beads and shells, sometimes they were plain, sometimes more complicated, but they were always very carefully put together, and usually featured pink. She liked pink. She didn’t care that her friends thought it was for kids. She was Alvin’s younger sister by a year, and Lucas wished he knew what she was doing right now. Was she trading incredulous glances with her friends? Laughing at his stupid, squeaky voice, a full octave higher than his father’s? Or was she turning her attention to that father in question, wondering what’s going to happen next? Wondering who he was talking about? Did she know? Did she care? Lucas hoped she cared.

“Which one?”

For a moment, the sound of his father’s smug, mirthful voice didn’t quite pierce through the red fog of fear so Lucas just stared, slightly boggled-eyed, at nothing in particular, waiting for the waitresses to join forces and bludgeon his dad to death. But when that didn’t happen, Lucas realized, in a sudden, bewildering moment of clarity, that his dad wasn’t talking about Valerie. He was talking about the *waitresses.*

Lucas’ mind sputtered, belched exhaust, came to a sudden, shuddering halt. The *waitresses?* What? Desperately, he prayed for a moment of peace to sort through whatever just happened, but his dad was still talking, totally unaware of how uncomfortably quiet the table had become. Only the sisters, the younger ones at least, seemed unworried about whatever stupidity they’d found themselves in, quietly continuing their conversation about school or ponies or whatever. Lucas envied them. Their ability to ignore the waitresses, his father, even their brothers—their ability to be in elementary school. The older ones mumbled quietly, trying to not be heard. Valerie’s voice was absent amidst the murmur. Was that good? Was that bad? Was his dad still speaking? Oh, *God* he was.

“C’mon boy, don’t be shy! Which is it? God knows I’ve had my eye on one or two!”

Trent, being defense rather than offense, failed to dodge yet another well-meaning jab to the ribs and choked on a piece of chicken. Good.

“Um…” stammered Lucas, unsure of what to do. Should he lie? What would Valerie thi—

“C’mon! I know you’ve been checking a few out! ‘Aint no shame in it!”

*What’s happening dad, why are you doing this to me. At Rainforest Cafe, there was a giant gorilla.*

Before his father’s mouth could open again to spew forth another tirade of insanity and good humor, Lucas took evasive action:

“HER!” He shouted, louder than intended, pointing at the first waitress passing by. She was tall, at least 5 ’11, with long brown hair and light brown skin, legs shining beneath skimpy, bright orange shorts, hoisting two full platters of food over her shoulders, a gleaming smile plastered to her well-kempt face. Alvin rolled his eyes.

His dad laughed again, big and bawdy and attention-seeking; Lucas wondered if he ever actually thought anything was funny.

“Good eye son! *Very* good eye! Let’s call her over!”

“No, dad—”

But those few fervent, pleading words were caught in the riptide, drowned in a second. Trent looked away, shoved his face full of baked potato.

*“Hey! Can we get a waitress over here?”* He had to shout multiple times to be heard over the dinner rush, by which point the whole team was either pretending to not exist or pretending to find this as amusing as their ride did. When finally a waitress did appear, bright smile unable to conceal a furrow of exhaustion and distaste, it was someone else, an exceptionally thin blonde with about a dozen piercings up both ears. This would not do. Valerie scratched her head.

Slumped in his chair, a motionless Lucas stared wide-eyed at the floor, watching little rivulets of pollution-filled water make oily puddles beneath his sneakers. Passively, like a man in a coma, he listened to his father call, with great pomp and circumstance, the correct waitress over, slip a twenty into her unmanicured, wiry hand, and laugh louder than he’d ever laughed before as she agreed to take “Just one!” photo with a sullen 13-year-old boy whose red face might have been confused for embarrassment, but it was anger. Pure, unadulterated anger.

The dinner went by quickly after that, and Lucas looked at Valerie. He knew his dad wouldn’t be watching anymore. She laughed with her friend, kicked Alvin underneath the table.

She didn’t look over once.

When dinner was eaten and the bill paid, they all crawled like clowns into the truck again, girls in front, boys in back, and were dropped off, one by one, until only Lucas and his father remained.

The car was silent except for the radio, the only thing that seemed to be enjoying itself. Lucas looked at his father through the rear-view mirror, at his thin, wobbly neck and thick shoulders, barrel chest sunken in from weight-loss, brown polo now stained with grease. And his pale blue eyes, crinkled slightly, as though a joke was lying just in wait, on the tip of his tongue, ready for launch, waiting for a better audience.

“Mom smokes.” Lucas said.

The truck swerved slightly as Lucas’ father jumped, spooked by the suddenness. Lucas had never seen his dad look off-guard and didn’t expect it to involve so much eye-bugging, but he didn’t let it stop him.

“She’s probably going to die first. Between the two of you I mean.”

A deep, leaden silence hit the car, so oppressive even the radio stopped having fun and switched to an obnoxiously loud auto parts commercial. Promptly, Lucas’ dad snapped it off with a sharp *thwap!*

*“What on earth do you—”* he flammably began, but Lucas cut him off.

“When she dies, I won’t have any reason to talk to you. One day, when mom’s dead, I won’t visit you. Because I’m not your friend.”

It was the harshest thing a 13-year-old could say, and even as his father’s face and neck turned red and blotchy and angry words crested the surface, accompanying the duo for the rest of the ride home, Lucas knew he meant it.

Staring out the window, idly hearing his father’s screeching through a long, echoing tunnel, Lucas imagined Valerie running alongside the car, dodging trees and fence posts, bounding past boulders with deer-like agility, grim but elated, staring straight ahead, only momentarily breaking concentration to turn and wave. She was grinning, exhilarated, face streaked with sweat, wearing a bandana made from a pair of fluorescent orange shorts, meticulously arranged braids secured away from her face as she vaulted over plasticades and oncoming cars, legs pumping beneath her, never losing track, never stumbling.

As they arrived home, Everett turned to his son, ready to continue the tirade, but Lucas was laughing, leaping from the car faster than Everett could catch his collar.

As the front door slammed behind his son, Everett stayed in the idling car, breathing heavily, and turned to watch gleaming zippers of light fly across the highway, exhaust spinning out into oblivion. He watched swirling snow mingle with the sharp shine of headlights as the hazy image of a woman too old to be wearing shorts like *that* floated across his vision. She quietly chuckled, cigarette held between yellowed fingers, one glinting with the shine of a wedding band, unafraid to stand in the middle of the road while cars streamed around her like salmon in a river, apparently deaf to the sounds of Everett’s continued shouts as he slammed the car door and walked to the house, gray breath billowing through the gaps in her teeth.