

Dirty Laundry

by Kerri Feyen

Our tiny living room is where he spends all of his time, parked on his backside in front of the oversized console television. The walls are dirty, a yellowing beige color, stained from the tar of last twenty years worth of cigarettes. I wonder if the walls were actually white beneath the tar. The stale smell of tobacco in a tightly packaged menthol cylinder sticks to everything in the house, including my skin and hair. The shag carpet used to be fluffy and bright orange once upon a time; now it is rust colored and matted down at the narrow entrance to the room.

Lying like a pile of dirty laundry, he is passed out cold again. His half drunk glass—the ice almost completely melted—sits on the end table next to his chair. His chair was off limits to us—not that we had much choice—he was rarely out of it these days. The light brown La-Z-Boy has a darker chocolate brown afghan tossed haphazardly over the back. Every now and then he would pull the afghan down to warm his dying legs.

He stirs, smacking his dry lips, dying for another taste of the sweet liquid even in his dreams. The delivery guy from the Cap n' Cork dropped off another couple cases of liquor that morning. It was sitting in the garage among piles of garbage, discarded tools and a snowmobile that hadn't been ridden in all my fourteen years. I know that as soon as he wakes up, I get to play bartender again. Mixing drinks is the only thing I can do to help. He appears to be in pain a lot now. He is refusing to go back to the hospital. The doctors gave him the bad news about three years ago. The disease will eat at his system until he is left in a wheelchair and then dependant on others. I don't know what his debilitation is called. Mom just whispers the letters M. and S.; the people she tells nod and feel sorry for us. It must be universal grown-up code because everyone seems to understand.

It's 4:53 p.m. according the dimly lit green numbers on the front of the VCR. A commercial for Colgate comes on louder than the show I had been watching. He wakes up now. He groans and shifts in the chair, making it groan, too. He sees me sitting on the gold-flowered couch across the room. I am curled in a ball, I am hungry, but there isn't anything to eat. I silently hope he doesn't ask me to make dinner. I have no desire to scrounge around the kitchen, where I saw a mouse last night. I glance at his glass and roll my eyes; he sees me looking.

"Freshen my drink, will ya'," he mumbles. Expecting nothing more, nothing less, I get up and grab the glass off the table. The sides of the glass are wet with condensation; it has left a big wet ring on the table. A coaster could have saved the top of that table about two hundred drinks ago. I don't think we even owned a coaster anyway.

"What do you want?" I ask. There are about ten different concoctions I know how to make off the top of my head.

"It's seven, I think. Wait, let me taste it," he says. I hand him back the glass and he takes a taste of the diluted liquid. He drains the glass, gazes at the empty bottom and hands it back to me nodding. I refill his glass with ice and four fingers of Windsor. The smell is so strong I can taste it. That drink seems to be his favorite choice these days. I wonder if it keeps him numb the best. He slurs his words all the time now and can't seem to stay up on his feet. I bet it's the M and S thing.

"Hungry?" I say, flopping back on the couch. He shakes his head no. I stare at him while he methodically presses the up button on the remote to find something else on TV. He looks old to me. I don't really know what he used to look like anymore. He is losing his hair on top and it's starting to gray around his ears.

His hair and beard haven't been trimmed in months, probably haven't been washed in days. He fell in the shower last week, and now he doesn't want to take one. Mom washed his hair in the sink on Saturday, but it's Friday now. He is also starting to lose weight. He is tall and thin. His cheeks look like they are sucked in to make a fish face, but his lips are not doing the funny kiss thing. He picks up his silver Zippo and taps a long white stick out of the crinkled package. He is holding the cigarette between his yellow stained fingers; I hear the zip of the lighter and I smell the familiar scent of the burning tobacco. His jeans are dirty and torn at the knee. His white shirt is not really white. It's dingy-grey and washed so many times it is paper thin. When I do laundry, I can hold his shirts up to the light and see through some of them.

Mom will be home soon and I will off duty. I think I will ask if I can spend the night at Donna's. I will do anything to get out of the house.

In retrospect, I can easily say the life I was forced to live made me the strong person I am today. My father could have lived a lot longer with treatments, but he chose to drink and die instead. To this day, I still consider his death a suicide, and in my opinion, it is a coward's way out. That specific period in time makes me appreciate that people are merely all they permit themselves to be. My father didn't allow himself to be anything.

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