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Purple Heart
by Darryl Benjamin

We hadn't seen or heard from my father for four months (it takes four months to die from malaria, TB and the Hong Kong Flu). He took everything except his golf clubs and tools when he vanished. My mother threw the golf clubs into the trash. They were worth something, I'm certain.

My mother (tall, slender, shapely) was taking too many sleeping pills. Why shouldn't she? My father had left home for a tart, a home-wrecker, a *shiksa*. Like a train my mother chugged: half-his-age, half-his-age, her eyes bright as beacons, her lips pursed — were those lines there before, I couldn't tell; she poured herself a tall glass of water, the pills arranged like gravestones on the kitchen counter.

“Mom, don't you think. . .?”

But there was no use finishing the sentence. She was off again, her thoughts like cartoon balloons but dark as smoke as she advanced toward her bedroom.

Fish sticks for dinner, spaghetti with butter and salt, the ticking silence.

* * *

My father appeared at the door unexpectedly one Saturday afternoon at about 2 p.m. “I want to take Jake for the night.”

My mother was almost too shocked to speak. “Just like that?”

My father shrugged. “He is my son,” he said.

“He doesn’t want to go,” my mother said. She continued to stand there, arms crossed, attempting to meet my father’s brown eyes. “So,” she said.

He looked at her, then away.

“Jake,” he called into the house.

“I said he doesn’t want to go,” my mother repeated.

“It’s ok, mom, I’ll go,” I said.

She shrugged, defeated, and watched as I packed an overnight bag.

“Do what you want,” she said. “Everybody seems to.” Then she laughed.

“Except me, that is.”

“I’ll call you,” I said as I pecked her on the cheek and shut the door behind me.

When we were alone, my father looked me in the eye. “How you holding up?” He was thirty-eight and fit. His handshake was crushing.

“All right, I guess,” I said. I wanted to ask him where he’d been all those months. But I didn’t.

My father had moved in with Katie, his secretary. We drove to her apartment. I had never met her. She said hello, it was nice to meet me, and disappeared into the kitchen. She looked all right.

Then she brought heaping plates of steaming food and set it before us.

“If Kennedy was alive I bet he’d pull us out instead of escalating,” she said. “It was just bad luck he was killed.”

As she spoke I took mental notes for later review with my mother. She hadn’t asked, but I was sure she’d want a full report:

- ♣ likes to talk about politics
- ♣ seems to know what she’s talking about

- ♣ looks like a teenager
- ♣ has pretty page-boy red hair (note: don't say 'pretty')

I had never seen my father this happy. He was animated, engaging, handsome. He nodded energetically. "The only war worth fighting is defensive. Who cares if the Communists take over some god-forsaken island on the other side of the world? Who wants our kids to die in a god-forsaken rice paddy?"

They talked about a peace rally they planned to attend. Katie was an activist, she liked to be involved.

Then he turned to me. "And you, Jake? What do you think?"

I glared at the plate of food Katie had given me. The rice looked yellow.

"If it's not Uncle Ben's, I won't eat it," I said.

My father was instantly off his wicker chair and at me. Fortunately, I was fleet footed and dodged behind the couch.

"You bastard," my father barked. I feinted to the left, and he fell for it; I darted to the right, then dashed into the first room I could find and locked the door behind me.

"This is what I mean," I heard my father say to Katie. "No respect!"

I heard a crash as a glass or possibly a vase broke. Then my father pounded the door with his fists.

"It's ok, I don't mind, he doesn't have to eat it," Katie said vehemently. "Next time I'll buy what he likes. Not a big deal."

"The hell you will," my father snapped back.

"*Perry*," she said. Her voice clanged with alarm. I made a note:

- ♣ She doesn't know

And then I added:

♣ I have no affection for any particular brand of rice

My father stopped hammering and said through the door, “What in hell is wrong with you? Can’t you even participate in a normal, adult conversation? For crying out loud, grow up.”

I wanted to say: “How can you expect me to eat her rice? She’s only three years older than me! You left us alone you bastard!”

You have to understand about my father: he dropped bombs on the Germans from a Flying Tiger. Once the Krauts knocked out an engine and he crash-landed in England. They gave him a Purple Heart. If he hadn’t survived, I’d never have been born. He’s a tough old bird. I’d never been able to stand up to him.

* * *

I realized I’d locked myself into the master bedroom. There was an expensive cherry wood dresser, highly polished, with an eight by ten of my father and Katie. They stood by my father’s Piper Cub, a single-engine plane. The sky was milky and overcast, the color of oatmeal. In the picture Katie looked at my father, who was gazing at something off in the distance, out of sight. She really was pretty: hair fine as silk, freckles as light as raindrops. The only flaw was her nose, which was upturned. I made a note of it. I could hear my mother’s voice: *How could he?*

A four-posted king size bed was pushed up against the wall. The bed was expertly made, the sandy-colored sheets and mossy green blanket as serene as a pond on a windless day.

I tested the bed, which was firm and unyielding. I remembered my father suffered from sciatica. The bed was doubtless therapeutic. There were two sets of bay windows.

My father loved feeling elevated, above it all; once he explained it was the only time he felt happy.

There was no bay to look out over from the thirty-fourth floor, just Yonkers. I noted two antique night stands on either side of the bed with tall, gracefully curved lacquered wooden legs and thick marble tops, red and brown veined patterns threading the surface like the trails of water skeeters. I didn't recognize any of the furniture. Was it hers or was it new?

I spread-eagled across the bed face down and pretended to swim the Australian Crawl. I am a lousy swimmer. One arm over my head, then the other, occasionally raising my head for a breath of air. I heard weighty footsteps as my father returned to the door.

"Jake, open up." His voice was calm but commanding. I recognized the effort he put into presenting an even tone. Bottling his rage only escalated it. I didn't reply. A year before he had broken a vase over my head: seven stitches. I decided to keep the door closed.

"If you don't open the fucking door right now I'll take the hinges off and then your head," he yelled. He had a New York accent. My father had a degree in engineering. Pulled himself through night school while he worked days delivering bread: by the bootstraps. He would have no problem unhinging the door.

"Your tools are at home," I told him. I was surprised by my audacity. The locked door had given me courage. His tools — which he inherited from his father — were left behind. A circular saw, a band saw, a hacksaw. Sanders and polishers.

Shortly after he left I ventured into the basement. I pulled the chain on the single light bulb that barely illuminated the room. It smelled of mold and moisture and my father's sweat. Once my father showed me the Purple Heart medal he received in World War II. He kept it in a cheap tin box along with assorted trinkets. I folded the Purple Heart in half using his vice. It bent easily as if it was made of rubber. I slipped it in my pocket. I still had it in my pocket.

I heard my father retreat from the door and yank open kitchen drawers. The contents rattled like maracas. I imagined him finding: a spatula, a knife, a can opener. Then I heard him say "Shit" and he said to Katie, "I'll be back in a minute. I'm going to the hardware store."

"Why don't you sit down and cool off," Katie said. "Why are you making such a scene?" I pressed my ear to the door. "He's only seventeen, for god's sakes," she said.

There was a long pause and then my father said slowly, as if he could barely control himself, "If that little bastard thinks he can get the best of me, he's got another thing coming."

And then I heard the outside door open and slam shut with such force I jerked involuntarily. My heart thumped and my hands trembled.

I had failed at everything he tried to teach me: manners, the piano, math. I never could say "chock-litt" or "toe-mah-toe" like an Englishman, like his father. Instead I said *chalk-clitt* and *toe-may-ter*, like a New Yorker. Like a Brooklynite, and why not? My father and I were both born there.

* * *

“Jake?” Katie knocked at the door. I didn’t reply. Instead, I pushed the bed against the door. It was heavier than I thought and had to brace my feet against a wall and drive the bed with my back, grunting. My sneakers left two black silhouettes on the wall. I tried to rub them off with my hand but it smudged.

“What are you doing, Jake?”

The bed lurched and then settled in front of the door.

“Jake,” she said softly, “I know you’re used to Uncle Ben’s rice. I’m sorry I didn’t know. I promise I’ll. . .”

“Shut up, just shut up,” I yelled angrily. My voice sounded shrill and harsh.

She paused for a long moment. I hadn’t expected it to come out so fiercely. I only wanted her to know that what she said didn’t matter.

According to my father, she’d gone to the best schools. Scored perfect grades on her SATs in High School, and skipped any number of grades. She already had a degree from college, but I can’t remember in what. She was smart and pretty and young, and that’s the reason my father left. Sunday mornings they often went to church at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. I couldn’t imagine my father in a church, even if the chamber music was as beautiful as he claimed.

“Jake, I’m sorry I hurt you,” Katie said. She was at the door, I could hear the soft thump of her body. She had a Southern drawl. Georgia. Her voice was caressing, her accent sweet and musical.

“Do you want to call your mother?” Katie asked. I noticed a white Princess phone on one of the night stands.

“My mother’s dead,” I said. “She killed herself with sleeping pills.”

Katie crooned, “That’s not true, Jake, your father saw her this morning when he picked you up.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I know you’re upset. I’d call your mother myself but she won’t speak to me.”

I sat on the bed. Tears fell. I tried to stifle my sobs, but she could hear them anyway.

She slid a key into the door and the lock turned. I had forgotten the door turned outward. Blocking it was useless.

Katie stared at me and for the first time I noticed she wore a lavender blouse and a light green miniskirt. She smiled. “You didn’t think I was going to give him the key when he was in a state like that, did you?” she asked with a conspirational glint in her eye. I didn’t rise from the bed. I rubbed my palms into my eyes. She took off her shoes and climbed over the bed, then plunked down next to me.

I made a note:

♣ nimble

She said, “He means well. He just doesn’t know how to show his emotions.” She put an arm around me. I could smell her neck, warm and fragrant. I rested my head against her shoulder.

All the times my mother tried to defend me: “He’s a sissy,” my father would say, “look at the way he hides behind your skirt.” I felt the same shame then, always a woman to comfort me.

The frustration and fear I’d felt for the last four months melted inside me. She held me tightly with one arm and rocked gently. “It’s all right, it’s all right,” she cooed.

I surrendered to her with a rush of giddy pleasure, for a moment losing my bearings. Then I heard the key in the outside door.

“Now you behave,” she said, and released me. She retraced her steps across the abyss of the bed.

My father and Katie had a heated exchange of whispers and to my surprise he laid his bag of tools down and retreated to the living room, out of sight. I had no idea what she said to him. And I didn’t care: I had never felt so good — deliciously good.

I walked into the living room. My father was seated on the couch, staring out the bay windows. I watched him from an overstuffed blue chair.

He began to speak without looking at me.

“One day you’ll learn to fly, Jake. You’re young now, you’re living in a different time. You’re still a teenager, you think you have it all figured out. When I was a child, my father threw me overboard into a lake and told me to swim. I was stunned. I kept thinking, what if I sink? Would he even bother to rescue me? I swam, Jake, and I’ve been swimming ever since. I’m not sure you can understand this, but my life has been one long adrenalin rush. If I ever stop running I’ll die. I’m sorry I left you and your mother so suddenly. I never meant to cause you sorrow or pain. But I can’t allow myself to stop long enough to think about it because I might explode. I’m like a volcano, waiting to erupt.”

“Come on, Dad,” I said, “you can’t believe you’re permanently messed up because Grandpa chucked you in the water when you were a kid. Besides, I’m not interested in flying.”

Normally, he would have smacked me for talking that way to him. What he did was far worse: he nodded.

“I’ve seen terrible things people do to each other. I helped liberate the camps. It was a nightmare. Rotting corpses heaped twelve feet high. Mostly Jews. I decided two things in the war, Jake. The first was never to buy anything made by the Germans. They’re a foul and filthy race. The second is never to trust anyone except myself. And I’m afraid you got the bad end of it.”

“Dad,” I said. But I didn’t know what else to say.

Katie watched us from across the room, a cigarette in her hand. I thought my father couldn’t stand anyone who smoked. He was a reformed smoker.

“It’s no use, Jake,” he said. “I’m never going to change.”

* * *

My report to my mother was brief: *He seems happy.*