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Where Moths and Rust Destroy

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Where Moths and Rust Destroy

The windows of my BMW fogged as I waited outside the hospice, mustering the strength to go inside. My breath's warm moisture coated everything: the dash, the rear-view mirror, the custom leather seats. Wiping my palm over the condensation that collected on the driver's-side window, the glass smeared with water streaks.

How much longer would I wait? Through the smudged window, I stared into the dark lot. A wall of mist rolled in off the sea, unfurling itself in spongy, white sheets as the cool air from the ocean hit the warm air on land.

It was always this way at night along this part of the Southern California coast – Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Ventura – beach towns that were remote enough from Los Angeles to still be affordable. It was mainly agricultural here, the flat plains creating prime farmland. I had grown up here and had fond memories of sitting on the porch in the fog with my father, a newspaper unfolded in his lap, a glass of cheap port in his hand.

"The fog makes me forget," he used to say.

Lately, there were a lot of things I wanted to forget too.

Visiting hours were almost over. It was time to go inside. The home's director said it wouldn't be long now. I needed to ask for my mother's forgiveness, before she was gone.

Switching on the interior light, I cleaned more condensation from the mirror, fixing my hair in its reflection. Grays showed through the blond, even with my hair pulled back. The dark circles under my once bright blue eyes could no longer be hidden beneath any amount of concealer. I wasn't a young girl anymore. At fifty-five, I was middle-aged. My mother was on her deathbed, eighty-three. She had fought bone cancer for the past five years.

Leaving the car, I felt the thick night air against my cheeks. It was as if the mist held onto me, like it was wrapping itself around my shoulders. I shivered as I entered the building, walking through the white-walled corridors, beneath the stark, florescent lighting.

"Hi, Mommy," I said, stepping inside my mother's room. Her nod barely acknowledged me. Her cancer was in its final, painful stages. It hurt to not be received more warmly. Even she knew her days were numbered.

"Is there something I can get for you?" I said, taking a seat on a mauve-colored chair. My left cheek twitched the way it did any time I tried to belie my nerves beneath a façade of false confidence.

"What else could you get for me?" my mother answered. "You went all out, put me in this place to die."

The hospice cost \$8,000 a month. The barb lodged into my skin, but I ignored its prick. "I want to talk about Dad."

"And don't send me any more of that organic fruit," she responded.

I took a deep breath. "I just thought if we talked—"

"You know I can't handle the fibrous stuff."

My hands trembled. "There's something important I want to—"

"Makes me puke, that fruit does! Don't you understand?"

I gritted my jaw. "I want to talk about when Dad died."

"Goddammit! Call the nurse!" My mother yelled at the door. "My back's killing me!"

Reaching for the button, I alerted the staff, only because I knew if I didn't, my mom would never listen. Seconds later, a young woman with dyed red streaks in her long, black hair rushed in. At least I got a moment to recompose.

"I need more pillows," my mother growled.

The nurse nodded but had yet to leave.

"I said more pillows!" my mother said.

The nurse stared at her. Even a staff member with years of experience could still be stunned by the ferocity of her wrath. The girl hastened out of the room. Enraged, I glared at my mother.

"You can't speak to people like that!" I said.

"I can." My mother held her chin high in defiance. "I just did!"

I grasped the chair armrests so tightly, my knuckles were white. "I put you here because I wanted to make things right. I wanted the best for you."

"We both know why you put me here," my mother snapped.

By now the nurse had returned with a couple of down pillows, stuffing them behind my mother's back.

"Ouch!" my mother complained. "You want to break my spine?"

The girl steeled herself to my mother's bile, however, running her palm softly over Mom's shoulder. "All comfy now, no?"

"Ow! You're hurting me," my mother snarled.

I shot a worried look at the nurse. "Maybe just leave us?" I didn't want the girl to weather any more of Mom's anger. I also knew that if my mother used up all her strength, we'd never talk.

"I came here to speak about dad's death," I said once the nurse left, "and this time I want you to listen."

My mother's body stiffened. "So you did."

"I was hoping to ask for your forgiveness."

A cackle flew from my mother's throat. "Ask my forgiveness? You know very well what you did – and you can take that with you to the grave."

I could no longer control the shaking of my limbs. Even my jaw quivered; it was all I could do to force back the tears. My mother was about to die. I needed to hear that she forgave me, that what she said to me the day we buried my father wasn't true. How could I ever forget standing there in the cemetery, beneath that bright sunlight – the light that cloaked everything, concealed nothing – watching the gravediggers lower my father's coffin into the earth? The green grass, just beyond where the soil was piled, sparkled like brilliant emerald shards. "This is your fault," my mother muttered under her breath. "If you would have only used your money to put him in a home, this never would have happened."

I suddenly understood that if I didn't leave now, I would do something I'd regret. "I'm just glad they're treating you well," I said through clenched teeth, standing.

"If that clears your conscience," said my mother.

At least I waited till I got outside the hospice before I burst into tears. "She doesn't know what she's saying," I kept repeating to myself. "She's about to die."

Wasn't there a small place in her heart where her motherly feelings remained? Surely she must still feel something; the cancer couldn't have rotted away every last emotion. I was her daughter, her only child. All I ever wanted was to make her happy – make both my parents happy. Why else had I worked so hard? Why else had I toiled alongside my husband, David, to make something of myself – to become somebody, someone that society admired? I didn't want to be like my parents, poor immigrants from Scotland, who worked hard their whole life but never got anywhere. I wanted the American Dream, and I had achieved it. Didn't that count?

In my mother's eyes it didn't. I hadn't used my new income on my father, and now she'd never let me forget it, even in her death.

I took the coastal route home, even though the fog cancelled out the scenery, the stars. With the heater blasting, my car windows no longer misted. I unrolled all four windows, the salt-laced air rushing in. Even as the cold wind whisked by my ears, I could still hear the brutal crashing of the waves against the shore, one after another, dying, rising up again, dying.

It wasn't long before I found myself in our old neighborhood. Making a right, I halted in front of the house I grew up in. It was the last place my father was seen alive.

The home was small, two bedrooms, with a chipped-paint, blue wood façade. Still, the front porch was inviting. A wooden sign hung in the front of the house. "Sold. In escrow."

A year ago, after I placed my mother in the hospice, I put the house on the market. It wasn't that I wanted the house off my hands. I was honestly loath to let it go. I had so many happy memories there, growing up. Tears filled my eyes as I remembered. The weekends my father used to take me fishing, as my grandfather had done with him... We even had fun, gutting the fish, tossing the bloodied entrails into a white plastic bucket and then admiring the filet we would cook later that afternoon on a small barbecue in the backyard. Back then, my dad was so lucid, so bright. He could have aspired to become more than a handyman, but I couldn't say he didn't do the job well. Dad could fix anything. Still, I came to realize that some of his rich customers ripped him off. They needed him to fasten their large oak doors back to the hinges when the wet had rotted through the wood; to install new and improved appliances when the old electronics rusted over. The older my father got, the easier it became to deceive him. It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact my father was losing his mind. What started as just misplacing the car keys became forgetting what the car keys were and even confusion about how they got into his hand in the first place. Dad stopped grooming himself: brushing his teeth, shaving. My mother tried to convince me he had Alzheimer's; she even took him to the doctor. I wanted to deny it. Putting a name to the disease meant declaring my dad was damaged. I couldn't fathom it.

Then, one night, my father wandered off from home. We didn't find him till three days later, badly beaten. The heaviest blows were to his abdomen. The bleeding wouldn't stop. He died two days later. As I sat before the old house, I trembled with rage – at whoever murdered my father; at the world that sat there and watched; at God; but mostly at myself.

My mother was right. I should have used my money to put him in a home. My parents couldn't afford much on Dad's meager salary. As an independent contractor, he never had good health insurance. By the time my dad was at his worst, David and I had

success with our luxury remodeling business. I had the power – the resources – to change events, and I hadn't used that power. I shuddered as I realized why my mother wouldn't forgive me: I didn't deserve it.

Just as the hospice director predicted, a few days later I received news that my mother had passed. I swallowed hard as I hung up the phone. I had plenty of time to prepare for her death, but now that it was here, I was still shocked.

"I'm just glad it's over," I told David, perhaps a little too quickly. I knew it wasn't a very nice thing to say about one's mother, that I was relieved she was gone, but I couldn't permit myself to break down. I had to stay strong, to plan the funeral, to get on with life.

I must not have looked very good, as David delicately grasped my arm. "You okay?" he said. His fingers grazed the back of my neck, and I felt his rough calluses, the vestiges of the construction work he no longer had to do, but still sometimes did.

"I'm fine," I said, but I was lying. Wetness glimmered on the rims of my eyes. I trained my sight out the large bay window in front of our Spanish-style villa. The fog had rolled in thick, over the mountaintops. This wasn't typical as we weren't near the water. We lived in a town called Agoura Hills, which is inland, down south thirty miles from Oxnard, where I was born. The hills that cradle our home are typically yellow and brown, even at that time of year, the winter, from the lack of rain. As I stared out the window, into the vapor's depths, I searched. What for? I didn't know. Suddenly, I was jolted by the sound of my mother's voice. "It's your fault," she said. It was as if her soul was embodied within the very mist that swirled around our house.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," said David.

"My mother just died," I said cynically.

My tone was harsh, and I regretted it immediately. David must have understood how I was feeling, though, as he led me to our bedroom, helping me inside the bed. Crawling beneath the covers beside me, he hugged me. We lay like that for hours. David fell asleep, but I couldn't. My mind roamed to all the places I didn't want it to, to all the past events I had tried so long to forget. I thought about the day my father was finally diagnosed. What a shock it was. "Your dad has Alzheimer's," my mother stated over the phone. The way she said it, so cool, so removed... How could she be so calm? She had just proclaimed my father was mad. I would never forget the next time I drove out to see my parents. My dad couldn't even recognize me.

During the weeks that followed my mother's death, the escrow closed. The old family home was finally gone. Everything was gone. I no longer had a reason to return to Oxnard.

Still, one afternoon, I found myself driving northbound, in the town's direction. I had received a call from the new owners. They were renovating the house, and the workers had found something hidden behind a door in the wall at the far end of a closet. It was a sunny day, and, as I drove past the rows of agriculture, I admired the way the light fell upon the plants – alfalfa and strawberries – the smell of the manure heavy in the air. I felt at home here. However, when I stopped in front of the house, my jaw dropped. Only a skeleton of the home was left. Walking to the porch, I was taken aback

by how quickly they had torn it to the frame. That was when I saw it, sitting near the door. I recognized the old trunk immediately. It was my mother's.

"This yours?" A man in blue dungarees asked. He was dressed the same way my father had all the days of my youth.

I trembled. "No, I must have made a mistake."

The man turned to one of his workmen, gesturing to the trunk. "Help me. We'll toss it."

"You're throwing it away?" I said.

"It's not yours, right?" The two men heaved up the trunk and carried it to the curb. Dropping the chest roughly to the cracked sidewalk, they treated it as if it never had an owner. My heart beat in my throat. I thought of my father, the way some murderer pummeled him for the few coins he had in his pocket, never realizing that my dad belonged to somebody: a wife, a daughter. I realized I couldn't just leave my mother's last possession.

"I made a mistake," I said. "I recognize it now. It's mine."

The workers loaded it into the backseat of my BMW. Returning down the 101, I felt like I carried a coffin in the rear. For a moment, I worried I was cursed, that some devil inside the trunk would cause me to veer off the embankment.

David found me in our garage, still seated in the car, a mess of nerves.

"What should we do with it?" he asked.

"Put it in the attic."

David reached inside the car for the trunk's corroded latch. "You don't want to open it first?"

"Are you kidding?"

"I think it's a good idea." He played with the latch till it gave.

"I said don't open it!"

David frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. He left the lid in place, still closed. Marching to the door that led back into the house, he said, "Move it to the attic yourself then." He slammed the door behind him.

It wasn't my intention for my words to come out that way. It was just... opening the trunk... It terrified me. The last thing I wanted was another flood of painful memories.

I found David seated at the kitchen table, his nose in the evening paper. The light from the modern chandelier that hung above the table shone down upon his silvery hair, illuminating the follicles so they looked molten. I stood behind my husband, lightly placing my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just upset."

He put down the paper and looked up at me. I was suddenly struck by how much he had aged, the wrinkles even more marked around his eyes. "I guess you don't ever have to open the trunk if you don't want to."

"Help me move it to the attic?" I said.

Shortly after, David and I heaved the old trunk up through a door in the ceiling of the second storey. Hauling it over the dusty floor, we lowered the trunk into a corner by a small, octagonal window. David's papery skin was splashed red from the effort. I wiped the dust from my palms against my jeans. Peering out the dirty, little cobweb-laced attic window, I could just see the night sky. It was clear, dotted by a trillion stars.

Two weeks later, David and I were invited by our neighbors to an afternoon performance of *Hamlet* in the park. Some students from the local college were performing their interpretation of the play. By the time David and I arrived, most of the town was already there. As we walked past the cordon that separated the section of grass where the audience laid out their picnics, I remarked to myself how handsome David looked, his body as lean as it was thirty years ago, dressed a pair of jeans and a pressed, striped blue shirt.

Our neighbors, the Arnolds, were seated on a blanket near the stage. They were also our employers, in a sense. We recently completed the remodeling of their master bath. It wasn't the first work we did on their grand home. We also built their new guest bedroom and, a few years ago, completely gutted and remodeled their second floor.

Ever since the Arnolds moved in across the street, we became "fast friends," if that was what you could call it. I wasn't particularly fond of the couple. I remember the first time Cassie Arnold came strutting across the street, dressed in a pair of too-tight tennis shorts, showing off her long, suntanned legs. "Bonjour, new neighbors," she said. I had to stifle a snicker. Could anybody be that fake?

Today, when Cassie saw David and me, her eyes lit up. "Bonjour, neighbors," she called out, her namesake greeting. She was dressed in a pair of designer skinny jeans and an expensive peasant blouse, still fashion-conscious, even at fifty. I instantly wished I would have worn something finer than the white sundress I had on. It was always this way with the Arnolds: I was glad we were nothing like them, but something always made me envious.

"Hi, there," said Ted in a booming voice. He always spoke in a way that meant he wanted to be heard. He was a surgeon at the local hospital, but he was buff and tall enough to have been a pro football player.

Cassie passed over two flutes of champagne. "To a couple of artists...." She kissed the tips of her French-manicured nails as if she hailed from Tuscany instead of the suburbs of Southern California.

Why did the Arnolds make me so uncomfortable? I always felt like we were forced to accept their invitations, or they wouldn't contract us for more work. David was loath to let me forget our continued business with the Arnolds helped us pay the mortgage on our own large house.

Perhaps our relationship with the Arnolds reminded me too much of my father's dealings with his former clients. Dad always worked so hard, but never came out any better. I thought back to all the times David lowered our rates for the Arnolds. Weren't we worth full price?

My father's generosity, combined with the slow, deteriorating effects of his Alzheimer's, meant my parents were never able to pull themselves out of debt. And so it had fallen on me to pay for a home for my dad, and I hadn't done it. At least I had done right by my mother to place her in the best hospice in the area, even if she never appreciated it.

A wave of sadness rushed over me as we sat on the green, waiting for the play to begin. I didn't want to think of the past, but I couldn't stop obsessing about it.

Suddenly, there was a commotion a couple of blankets over. I looked up and saw a homeless man had wandered into the area that had been cordoned off. It wasn't typical to see transients here, so far from the city. Cassie instantly got on her phone.

“Hello, this is the police? I’d like to make a complaint,” she said. “There’s an indigent in the park.” When she noticed me staring at her, she cupped the phone. “Don’t worry. The police will be here any minute.”

“He isn’t bothering anyone,” I said. The man was neither drinking nor causing problems. I could feel David’s eyes boring into me, willing me to shut up.

“He’s bothering me,” Cassie said. “He’s interrupting the show.”

Ted must have also been eager for his wife to give up her civil vigilance. “Babe,” he said, offering her salad with sashimi. “Your fish will go bad if you don’t eat it.”

But Cassie even ignored her husband’s authoritative tone. “Homeless people bring problems,” she said, “drugs.”

David might let Cassie Arnold lord over him, but I wouldn’t. I stood and walked toward the homeless man, the eyes of all our neighbors on me. Reaching into my purse, I withdrew two twenties. “Sir,” I said. “The police will be here soon. You can get a bus, buy yourself something to eat.”

The man’s clothes were soiled, worn. He wouldn’t accept the money. He just stared back at me dumbly. Again I offered the cash, but he wouldn’t take it.

Hot tears flooded my eyes when I saw the blankness in his look. He was just like my father, those hours he wandered the streets before he was killed.

By now, the police had arrived. They approached, Cassie in tow.

“I want this man arrested for trespassing,” she said without even acknowledging me.

The policemen nodded, stepping toward the man.

“Couldn’t you just take him to a shelter?” I said.

“We don’t have the authority,” the younger cop said, grabbing the man by the arm.

“You don’t have the authority?” I laughed. “You’re the police!”

David had also neared our group. “Stephanie,” he said softly, “let’s go sit back down.”

I wouldn’t let myself be redirected though. “You two are supposed to protect and serve society!” I told the cops.

“Ma’am,” said the older policeman, taking a step toward me.

“Don’t touch me!” I growled.

People were talking. Everyone around us whispered. “Stephanie...” David repeated.

“Okay,” I said, finally capitulating, shooting one last glare at Cassie. “We’ll leave.”

I watched the police usher the man off. Racing to the parking lot, I let David chase behind me.

“You want to ruin our relationship with our best clients?” he called out.

“Yes,” I said.

Reaching our car, my hand shook so much I could hardly get the key in the door. As I fumbled with the lock, David grabbed my shoulders. “She had nothing to do with your father’s death, understand?”

I pried his hands from my body.

“What happened was a tragedy. Your father was very sick, but he wasn’t homeless.”

I finally got the car open and slid into the driver's seat. I was too upset to be moved by David's logic, even if it was true.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in silence. By evening, the tension still hadn't dissipated. It was time for bed. I lay beneath the covers, just staring at the ceiling. At some point, David climbed in beside me. He tried to hug me, but I rolled away from him. I wasn't going to forgive him so quickly for not standing up for me at the park.

But as the hours bled by, I asked myself: Why did I get so upset? My father wasn't homeless. He just had Alzheimer's.

I finally realized I wasn't going to get any sleep, so I got out of bed and went downstairs. Seated at the kitchen table, I stared out the sliding-glass window. A haze of mist hung eerily over the swimming pool.

I was startled by a sudden scratching at the glass door. It was just a raccoon, scavenging through the dry food I left outside for the cats. I typically brought the food back in at night, but, with all the upset of the afternoon, I had forgotten. I slid open the door, which sent the raccoon scampering. Bending down, I grabbed the food bowl.

When I stood back up again, I noticed a shape floating over the pool's surface. My breath caught in my throat, and I nearly fell backward. It was my mother, dressed in the same light-blue hospital gown she must have died in, suspended, wrapped in the blanket of the fog.

I rushed back inside the house, slamming the door behind me. I clenched shut my eyes. When I opened them again, I looked back at the pool. My mother's apparition had disappeared.

"I don't believe it," I told myself. "I'm just imagining it." I sat with my head in my hands. My stomach was tight, in knots. I wasn't just terrified by the image I had seen, I was horrified by the specter that I was going mad, just like my father.

"I won't let her haunt me like this," I said out-loud. Suddenly, I was bolting up the stairs to the second storey, halting below the attic door. I pulled the door open, lowering the ladder. A second later, I was standing on the dusty attic floor. The trunk was in the corner, just as we left it. The moonlight now shone in through the small pane of dirty glass, illuminating the trunk under its dreamy gaze as if it were a dusky spotlight. Tears stained my face as I moved toward the chest. Kneeling before it, I opened its rusted latch, raising the lid.

At first I didn't understand what happened. I couldn't see a thing, just white. I felt the feathery-soft wings fluttering against my face, skimming my shoulders, my arms. There must have been a hundred of them – moths. The delicate insects flew out of the trunk like billowing confetti.

Even if my mother hadn't lined the trunk with mothballs, still the moths could not have survived in that dry darkness all that time, laying their eggs, giving birth to larva, the pupa forming and then the metamorphosis of the moths.

There was only one way to describe it: It was a gift from God.

By now, only a few of the milk-colored moths still fluttered about the mildewed air. My fingers gingerly brushed the contents of the top layer of the open trunk. It was the white crinoline dress that my mother wore on the day of her wedding to my father. The moths had devoured it. Only shreds were left. I dug deeper, uncovering the hand-embroidered tablecloths and napkins my grandmother painstakingly sewed while she

was still alive, which we only used on special occasions. They were also moth-eaten, the fibers clinging together by a few weak threads.

There was something else beneath the linens. It was woven, a blanket. I withdrew the old throw. It was the red blanket my mother knit by hand during the evenings of my eighth year.

I remembered watching her knit the blanket for weeks. How I coveted it. My mother told me it wasn't for me, but for my grandmother. When my ninth birthday came, though, a few months later, she gave it to me. The knitted wool was still intact. For some reason, the moths hadn't touched it.

Dropping my face to the blanket, I felt its softness, its comfort. I was crying now, so hard it felt like I hadn't cried in years. David must have climbed up the attic ladder without me noticing because I heard his gentle breathing behind me.

"I never meant for my father to suffer," I said. "I would have gladly spent millions if I thought a home was best for him, but I didn't. I didn't want him to change. I wanted everything to stay the same, for Dad to remain the same strong person he'd always been my whole childhood. I wanted him in his real home, where I grew up."

David knelt to hug me. His arms were so strong, warm. The attic wasn't insulated, and I could now feel the chill that had settled into the air.

"Let's go back downstairs," he said. "It's warmer there."

I replaced the blanket in the trunk and lowered the lid. David led me back down to the house through the attic door.

Lara Sterling is a fiction writer from Los Angeles. She has a B.A. in History from UCLA and formerly worked as a journalist for various magazines, such as *Playboy*. This fall 2012, she will begin pursuing her MFA in Fiction at Otis College of Art and Design.