

Everything but Grief

As the doctor strode toward us, I knew my father was dead. His steps were gentle yet firm, like he was steadying himself.

“I’m sorry to inform you that the patient has passed away due to cardiac arrest. I believe he had a history with this disease. You have my sincere condolences.” His words had the perfect mixture of sympathy and strength.

“I have to tell you that if the patient had arrived sooner, it might have been different. But please don’t beat yourself over it.” The sheer sympathy woke me from my stupor.

I killed my father.

My mother and brother instinctively cast a glance in my direction. Their faces were muddled with grief and accusation. A moment later, only the former remained. But I had seen what they now tried to hide.

Throughout the car ride, I focused on the scenery. The towering buildings that once left me in awe wanted to smother me between them. A police siren went off and made me jolt. I frantically looked out the windows and saw the car closing in from behind. I closed my eyes. As the siren grew quieter, I opened them again, to find the car speeding past us to find another culprit.

Entering my bedroom, I wrapped myself in my blanket, as if it could shield me from this terrible reality. Through the streaks of tears and choking sobs, I let the faucet run loose, steeling myself to be consumed by a tsunami.

Before the regret came the logistics. Rent, food, tuition.

Slipping out of the house, I shut the faucet once again.

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As I strolled the streets, every stranger seemed to glare at me. Even an innocent nod of the head seemed to mask a condescending contempt. I quickened my pace. In a few minutes, out of breath, I stood in front of the hospital. My mind didn't bring me here, my heart did.

As the nurse was pulling out my father, I felt like a murderer visiting his victim. I glanced around the morgue, seeing the numerous lockers—each a temporary coffin for its inhabitants until they were prepared for the final one.

"I'll leave you two alone." Click.

When I saw my father's hollow cheeks burrowing into his face, I almost followed after the nurse. He was less a man, more a bundle of skin and bones. He looked like he was sleeping. I pretended he was, just like I remembered him that night—his scrawny chest rising and falling with a certain rhythm.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I should have listened to Mom. I should have been attentive. I should have been responsible. I should have saved you."

I wanted him to momentarily rise, cling me to his chest, forgive me...and I was content if he never woke up again.

My fingernail had torn off, but the spluttering blood was incomparable to the geyser gushing out of the hollow where my arm used to be. Would the spluttering blood ever bother me?

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"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Rickie. That's terrible. If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know." Abdallah said as we broke off the awkward embrace.

The smell of spices wafted through the air as the waiters passed by, perfectly balancing trays of kebabs and tikkas, like they were circus performers.

“Actually, I was wondering if there was a vacancy in your restaurant.”

“You know, the customers will grumble and bicker, but let ’em go to hell. It’s the least I can do for you,” he said. “Is it for your mother or brother?”

“Me.”

“Oh.” He shifted from foot to foot.

“Don’t you go to a college in Texas? Are you planning on working during the summers?” He scratched the stubble on his chin.

“I’ll start today if you want me to.”

We stood there for a moment, the frenzy of the restaurant threatening to sweep us with it. It was almost like a force of nature—a calamity in its own way.

“Son, if you were just some random shmuck, I wouldn’t give a single fuck about what you did with your life. But this way, we’d both be disappointing your father. It’d be like pissing on his grave, you hear me?”

“Fine. I’ll just go somewhere else. I thought you wouldn’t make it hard for me, so I came to you first. Guess I was wrong.” I said, reaching for the door.

As I swung it open, I heard the anticipated shout.

“Alright, alright. Under my nose, you’ll at least be treated right. But you need time to...sort yourself. Then you can start.”

I felt bad, but it had to be done.

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As I got home, my brother was waiting for me on the family couch. It was a wrinkly relic; a husk of its former self. Once upon a time, it was a bright and vibrant red. Now it seemed like it had shed off its skin and shown its true and terrible color.

Dad was thinking of buying a new one.

"You're dropping out? And without even talking it out with me?" *Damn, I didn't think Abdullah was a snitch.* "I didn't think you were this fucking stupid."

"A man has to take responsibility," I said.

He seemed about to broach the topic that was taboo, but caught himself just in time.

"Oh, you're a man now, huh? Have your balls even dropped yet?" He took a pause. "And I'm what exactly, a dickless eunuch?"

"I'm doing this, Alan. Say all you want."

"Fuck you, Rick. Just... fuck you." It felt good to hear.

"I'm sorry, Rickie. I didn't mean it. Believe me. It's just, you're making it harder than it has to be," he pleaded. "Just don't drop out, man. I mean, I can do without a master's."

"That's not even the problem, Al. You're on a scholarship and I'm not. Now, you tell me what makes more sense."

"We'll take care of it, don't worry. Don't we always?"

"It's...different now."

He sighed, his face growing old beyond his years. Wrinkles seemed to appear out of thin air.

"I just can't let you do that, Rickie. Please understand."

"Why?"

“A man has to take responsibility,” he said

We couldn't help but share a smile.

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My mother seldom left her room for the first few days. Al would take dinner to her room, and we both quietly sat down at the dinner table to eat. Just the two of us. It was almost like she didn't exist. It was easier for me that way.

Still, the two empty chairs were the souvenirs of my sin.

One night, she descended the stairs as if nothing had happened. Like it was just a normal day in the household. She had a similar spring to her step. A similar wide smile on her face. But it wasn't the same.

She glided to the dinner table, gently pushed away her own chair, and sat on my father's.

“So when are you both going back to college?”

“Mom, it's only been a few days. We can't leave you alone.” Al said.

“I took care of you both for 18 years. You think I can't take care of myself?”

I wished I could disappear into thin air, hoping she wouldn't acknowledge me, but could I bear to lose both parents?

She focused on me. “How are you doing, love?”

“Fine.” I croaked out.

Then she turned to Al, marking the end of our conversation.

“I'm taking a Job at Abdullah's.” She said with a firm voice.

“We’ll talk about it later. I also have something to tell you.” Al muttered.

We ate dinner.

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I woke up to the scent of thick spices. I felt like I had woken up in Abdullah’s shop, but I realized I was in my own house. As I descended the stairs, I could almost picture my father hunched over the mounds of chicken, sprinkling them with just the right amount of spices. He was an artist then. Dad had learnt it from Abdullah once, then it had become a family tradition.

Descending the stairs, I clung to the hope that I’d returned to those simpler times. Instead, I found my mother laboriously imitating the practice she had observed for years.

Soon Alan also came out, his face mirroring my own. We both sat down, looking at our mother mincing the chicken and rolling the kebabs into shape.

In those insignificant moments, we miss our loved ones the most.

Mom put forward a plate with a mountain of chicken kebab. “Try them.”

We put them in our mouth expecting the familiar entourage of spice and flavor. But it seemed our mother had forgotten to add the flavor. We both scrambled for anything to quench the fire in our mouths. As our eyes lay on the singular cup of milk, we were no longer brothers—it was survival of the fittest.

We both leaped toward the elixir of life, shoving and striking the other to satiate our need.

With a final shove, I knocked him aside, and my hand finally touched the serene condensation on the glass. Before I could even lift the glass to my quivering lips, I was tackled by a savage animal. We were wrestling on the ground like we used to when we were

kids, and he still had an upper hand. Soon, he had me in a chokehold, and I yielded. The sting of defeat was cut short by a crackling laughter.

The culprit was none other than my mother, with hands on her knees, pointing at the spilled glass of milk beside our wrestling arena. By now, the spice had lost its stronghold on us, and we were almost civil again. Albert joined in as well. Their laugh was so contagious that without my will, we all laughed until new and welcomed tears ran down our faces. As the laughter trickled down, they both moved to clean the mess we'd made. I sat there smiling.

Perhaps these tears could erase the marks left by the previous ones.

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I don't think I would have gone to the funeral if not for that ray of hope.

The faces were normal. They were gloomy, yes, but we were at a funeral, so that *was* normal. None of them seemed to glare at me like I was a culprit of the most heinous crime. Because maybe I wasn't.

People started paying respect to my father's open casket. He wanted it this way—to be able to see all his loved ones, one last time, before becoming one with nature. He almost made it seem serene. He had a way with words.

I chose to be the last. It felt fitting: I was the last one he saw before he died; I should be the last one before he was buried as well. I walked to my father, lying there ever so calmly. His hands folded in a gentle grip. A piece of candy in the front pocket of his tuxedo. He wanted the bugs to enjoy a bit of sugar if they got bored with his scrawny body. I smiled, taking his familiar hand in mine and instantly dropped it.

It was so cold. *Of course, it was.* No blood coursed through the veins of this sweet man. *This was a mere carcass of the man I once knew so dearly. He was no longer here and was never going to be...Because of me.*

I realized then that there was a boundary that I had crossed. Beyond which all acts are unforgivable for eternity because some acts are just that—unforgivable. Neither will another forgive you. Nor will you, yourself. God, due to his divine compassion, might. But a man is not divine. Nor is his compassion. Mine certainly isn't.

For the first time, I mourned my father's death.