

The Inheritance

- Present day

I've spent years trying to figure out who was worse — Verm or BJ.

BJ hit me.
Verm watched.

BJ made me bleed.
Verm made me believe I deserved it.

But the truth is more complicated than the pain. Because BJ did love me. In his own warped, wounded way — he stayed. Even after Velma abandoned me in adulthood, BJ was still there. He was never soft, never tender, but there was a consistency in his presence that I didn't fully understand until I was grown. We may never have a real relationship — not one built on vulnerability or trust — but I am grateful for the lessons.

He taught me right from wrong. And more than that, he taught me to *stand* for what was right — even if it cost me. Even when it hurt. Even when no one stood beside me. I'll never forgive *how* he taught those lessons. The fists. The fear. The nights I flinched at footsteps. But I understand that they shaped me. Sharpened me.

I wouldn't be a survivor — or a protector — if I hadn't first, learned to survive *him*.

Even in the middle of the storm, he was showing me how to endure. How to fight. How to read danger. How to respond. In his own broken way, he was giving me tools. And maybe Velma was right when she slurred it out through tears and cheap whiskey: "You can survive anything." Because I did.

As for Verm — I don't think I hate her anymore.

I think I pity her. The joy my daughters give me — the way they light up when I walk into the room, the way they reach, for me when they're hurt, the way I feel when I hold them and know they are safe — that's a joy Verm will never know.

She spent her life trying to outrun herself. Drowning in a bottle. Blaming everyone else for her pain. And the worst part is, she will never experience the empowerment of lifting someone *out* of the mud instead of dragging them down into it.

My entire childhood was a campaign to make her smile. A war fought just to feel wanted. So much wasted effort trying to make her *want me*. See me. Be proud of me. But you know what? I don't feel as bad about it as I used to. Because in chasing her approval, I ran farther

than she could ever have imagined. I became more than she could ever have hoped to be. And now, when I look back at her, I don't see a monster. I see a woman who never found herself. Who never healed. Who will live out her days lost, alone, and aching for a kind of love she'll never understand.

I don't hate her. I mourn her. That's the difference.

BJ showed me how to fight. Velma showed me who not to become. And both taught me the most powerful truth I carry: That we don't have to become what raised us. I drew the line. I stood in the doorway. I broke the chain. And I turned every wound into a weapon for good.

That's how you end an inheritance.

When Verm left she told BJ, maliciously, and maybe in her head, righteously that she was the glue that held the family together. There was a time in my life where I would've bought that. Verm was the glue in her head, but for me she is just another patient, that inhaled a little too much glue. She was a patient coding through life and I did what I was supposed to do; I dropped her off at the ER she built for herself. I'm not a doctor, saving her was never my responsibility. I am a medic that only needed to keep her breathing long enough to transport her. When I finally transferred patient care I realized I was never treating her, I was surviving her.

Things get blurry with time like traffic lights in the rearview mirror. It's cliché, but the metaphor is brilliant here. We only have one direction so, something is always behind us getting blurry. When we look back, we only see these big, bright, billboards. We see the lights in primary colors because the detail bleeds together and the finer details matter less. Don't lose sight of what's coming up though. You don't need every detail of the fast-food joint you just passed to be able to recognize another franchise on the horizon. The sign has a shape that you recognize before you clearly see it. The lighting and color palette of the structure signal to your mind what is in front of you long before you are close enough to read the signage. You have a feeling that you trust before you know if you are right.

It has been several months since my parents finalized their divorce, and over 20 years of construction on a family built out of ghosts and survival. In that time, I have made choices that I am able to admit I am proud of. I have done things I would've never believed I could do, right up until I did them. Some, very few, may be surprised by this, but Verm was not the glue. Verm was rock concert noise echoing in a nursing ward. She enjoyed waking up the children and then leaving them to scream and fend for themselves.

I ended up escaping to BJ's house when I was fighting for myself. The hatred of that man kept me alive for so long. This time was different; it was admiration that drove my heels one step at a time. He wasn't home when I got there. I wasn't planning to go there to see him or anyone. I just needed something stable. What I got was more than stability. I was demonstrated healing by the man I once lived only to defeat. We walked for a mile or two as I read some of the memoir to him. I felt connected. I felt seen. I don't know if safe would be

appropriate, but he was present and vulnerable. He holds so much regret and shame for the past. What is crazy is how unrecognizable he was. The man who had raised my now looked older but felt more alive than ever. A man forged in silence was sharing stories of how he introduced himself to new people and had met more people in the past week than I could count.

I ended an inheritance. He chose to create a new one and I'm damn proud of him for it.