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BEHOLD, ALL THINGS ARE BECOME NEW

by David Harlen Brooks

My groomsmen from the EMT crew smirked. I butchered “Get Me to the Church on Time” whistling off tune and louder than needed—trying to steady my hands and distract myself while wrestling a satin strip of cloth into a bow tie.

“Tyler, it’s morning—you’re already at the church.”

“Aargh.” I yanked the tie, cracked my knuckles, and dove into the task again. The Florida sun seemed to penetrate the church walls despite the air conditioning.

“Don’t choke yourself, man.” He chuckled as he adjusted his cummerbund.

Another snapped his suspenders. “Anyone coming from back home?”

I turned away and started whistling again—until the door to the Sunday school classroom-turned-dressing room burst open.

“Tyler!”

Bryce, my best msn, filled the doorway, his face swelling like a puffer fish. The calmness he displayed during a call delivering a crowning baby on a sidewalk—gone.

I stopped.

“Someone here says he’s your dad.” He glanced left. “He’s asking to talk to you.”

I cocked my head and stared at Bryce.

“Speak English, bro. What are you talking about?”

He blinked slowly, lips pressed together, as if waiting for me to catch up.”

When I did, my life rewound all the way back to cigarette burns and bruises. I tore at the uncooperative tie and crumpled it in my hands.

“My father wasn’t a dad. Just a wanna-be-boxer in need of a punching bag.”

Bryce knew my history. His wistful smile seemed to ask what I intended to do.

I shoved my hands into my trouser’s pockets, tie balled inside, and stewed.

“He’s drunk, isn’t he?”

But how’d he make the trip from Illinois?

Bryce glanced left again. “Seems calm and collected.”

That’d be a first.

An expletive escaped my lips. The groomsmen traded furtive looks, but I offered no apology.

If he’s drunk, Bryce and the guys can cart him off for good. But I couldn’t allow a showstopper in front of Julie or her family.

Trickles of sweat worked their way into the cracked terrain of old scars dotting my back. I reached over my shoulder to scratch as far as I could.

If I agree, he’ll worm his way back into my life.

My watch read five minutes until marching time. I clenched my jaw and swallowed another expletive.

Bryce looked over again. My father stood outside the door, within hearing range of our exchange. At least he knew I didn't appreciate his inopportune intrusion.

Bryce turned to me. "And?"

"No!"

He stepped inside. "Buddy …"

He lowered his voice and rested a hand on my shoulder. I resisted the urge to shake it off.

"… I can only imagine what you're feeling, but … might you reconsider?"

"Eight years ago, he dumped me off on a county road."

Bryce wore a pinched smile.

"Well … if only to be free—so it's not hanging over your big day?"

"I got freedom when I hitched here after graduation. He's not taking that away—especially today."

Bryce withdrew his hand.

I closed my eyes and rocked on my heels.

"It's up to you, Buddy."

"Yes, it is!"

I popped my jaw and ran a hand through freshly cut hair. My armpits grew clammy.

Bryce pressed further. "Sure?"

I glared at him.

"Whose side are you on, best man?"

His eyes squinted as he only uttered, "Buddy …."

I looked down and studied the crack in the floor. What if he'd changed? My fists unclenched a finger at a time and the pounding in my head eased.

"Oh alright! But just five minutes."

The guys grabbed their jackets, some pulling them on, others slinging them over their shoulders. Each head whipped to the side upon exiting.

Confirmed. The man who made me—but never raised me—stood, slouched, or loomed just steps away. I turned my back on the open door and yanked the tie from my pocket. My fingers fumbled—not with a strip of cloth, but with a past I couldn't straighten.

#

Bryce slapped my shoulder. "I'm just outside if you need anything."

I nodded through the temporary mirror, hanging where a picture of the Good Shepherd used to watch over the room. Now it reflected something else.

Rubber soles squeaked on the floor followed by the metallic click of the door. Then the man appeared in the mirror—wrinkled traveling clothes, hands twisting, mouth opening, then shutting again.

Thank God I'm not like this worthless bum.

But his speechlessness caught me off guard. Liquor had always loosened his violent tongue.

Drunk? Maybe not.

I scanned his frame for a bulge—just in case he had a hidden flask. Nothing. He'd thinned. His glassy eyes looked clearer. His face, more tan than its usual strawberry red. And I'd gained several inches on him over the years. If he tried anything, I could take him.

But the tie still refused to cooperate.

"Why couldn't the shop have clip-ons?"

Through the mirror, it looked as if his eyes roamed over me.

I spoke. My back toward him. "You aren't dying, are you?"

He sighed and shook his head.

I shrugged and pulled the tie loose and started again. "Thought maybe you came to make peace so you could get your ticket to heaven."

"It doesn't work that way."

"Yeah, I know. Didn't think you did. Okay … Good … I guess."

I chewed the inside of my lip. The mirror lacked another face.

"So where's Mom?"

I resolved not to look away first when our eyes met.

"Passed away. Two years ago. Heart."

Umph. I lost an inch or two with his reply. And as if a little devil sat on my shoulder, it whispered into my ear. "When you walked away, you left your mom as well. Must've been painful for her—losing you."

I dug my fingers into the seam of my pants, until convinced my voice wouldn't betray me in front of this man.

"So, how'd you find out about the wedding?"

He pulled a folded invitation from his pocket.

This time I faced him.

“I never sent that. How’d you get it?”

“Does it matter?”

I huffed and turned back to the mirror, muttering under my breath as I wrangled with the tie.

After another round of silence, he cleared his throat.

“I’ve been sober for a year and a half.”

The slow and loud clap of my hands echoed against the tiled floor and painted cinder block walls.

“Woo-hoo! Did you do that routine ‘Hi, my name’s Ralph? I’m an alcoholic’?”

His back stiffened.

“Too bad you didn’t fix your problem in time for Mom to see it. Could’ve made her life easier.”

I watched to see if I hit the target?

He grimaced. I waited for a sudden lunge like that night before my graduation. But his eyes glanced down then returned to meet mine. “You’re right. But I’ve learned I can’t change the past.”

“Yeah, I know. I wear your sins on my back.”

At his furrowed brows, I unbuttoned my shirt slow and deliberate, exposing the round puckered scars his cigarettes had left. Tiny brands of his fury.

His hand slipped to his lips followed by a gasp.

“I’m so sorry!”

I stood a moment longer, back bare, before re-buttoning my shirt. I grabbed the tie and tried again, more flustered with each failed attempt.

A hesitant gentleness crept into his voice. “I’m here to ruin your wedding. Can I help?”

I balled up the tie and hurled it at the children’s table.

“Aren’t you the good father suddenly.”

He took my verbal jousting without fists or a growl. His stance disarmed me.

He shook his head. “Too absorbed in my pain back then.”

I let loose a derisive laugh.

“Right. So, I should throw my arms open and receive you and your paltry sorry.”

The old horse lowered his head.

“Look. My career is established, and I’m marrying a wonderful woman. I did it without you. I don’t need your help.”

He nodded as if he understood.

“I see that … on the outside. A Florida tan, some muscle, soon to have a wife. But … how are you inside?”

His logic lost me. My cheek twitched. I stepped forward and, inches from him, thrust the crooked finger he’d once wrenched. “Who are you to lecture me?”

As he stepped back, I leaned forward.

“I had surrogates along the way—but I needed you.”

His head bounced like one of those bobble-headed dogs in the rear car window. He opened his mouth, but I cut him off.

“The last time you rushed me, I told myself, ‘This craziness stops now.’”

A trace of awareness flickered across his expression.

"I looked you in the eye and said, 'Don't ever touch me again.' Then I looked at Mother's knife set. You did too."

"You said, 'Aw, you ain't worth it,' and walked away."

I brushed my nose with the back of my hand.

"That hurt more than these scars."

I grasped the back of the teacher's chair, unbalanced by the torrent of emotion spewing, raw and unfiltered. Nothing like the sterile versions I'd shared with Julie and Bryce.

"I hid a duffle bag in the school bushes the next day—then thumbed my way to Florida after I got my piece of paper."

I spun around, snatched the tie off the table, and gave it another shot. I'd stand at that altar on my own without his help.

Through the mirror, his eyes seemed to sort his mind for something else to say.

"So, why'd you come?"

"To ask your forgiveness."

I tossed my hands into the air.

"Great timing! You had six years—and picked today. Now I've got all the things you did and didn't do jumbled in my head right before I step in front of a hundred people."

"And Julie's probably wondering what happened. Oh my gosh, Julie!" I looked at my watch and slapped my forehead.

He stepped toward me.

"I hopped on a bus as soon as I heard. Just got in this morning."

I'm supposed to believe this?

"I didn't know where you lived or worked. Figured this church address my only chance to find you."

Just his luck. I wouldn't have met him without Bryce's prodding.

I crossed my arms. "And you thought we'd all live happily ever after." My voice modulated in stage theatrics.

He raised his chin. "I didn't want you to bring my junk into your marriage."

I held up my hand.

"Whoa! Now you're suddenly an expert on marriage."

Prickly heat caused my shirt to cling to my back, aggravating the itch all the more. I shook the tie at him.

"Listen!" My throat grew rawer with each word. "Julie and I got all the counseling we needed from the minister."

Father took it all without flinching, but his shoulders sagged. I lowered my indignant voice, expecting Bryce—or whoever else stood outside—to barrel through the door any moment.

Scorn, rage, and sadness sloshed inside me.

"Do you know how hard it is to go through life with no one in your corner?"

He straightened.

"You aren't the first to skip home." A sigh escaped him. "And you won't be the last." He shook his head and looked me in the eye.

I leaned in. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

He dragged out a breath before beginning. "My father . . . "

Blood throbbed in my temples as I listened to a story much like my own. I knew squat about this man, whose image seemed to morph into mine. I gritted my teeth and kicked a table leg, which sent it skidding across the floor.

“Then how could you do the same things to me?”

He shook his head and shrugged. An infinity loop had trapped us both. But somewhere along the line, he’d found an off-ramp.

#

Tired of fighting the tie, I fingered a cufflink until he spoke again.

“If you don’t mind, how’d you and Julie meet?”

I turned to the window. Beyond the parking lot stretched a blacktop road beneath a canopy of Live Oak trees laced with moss.

I touched the window and drew a deep breath.

“We’ll … I’d planned to spend that first Christmas at Bryce’s parents’ place in Georgia. But backed out. Didn’t feel the Christmas cheer—especially around strangers.”

He nodded.

“On Christmas Eve, I checked out the window decorations around town. Julie worked at a cafe where the crew hung out. Figured I’d grab a bite.”

My father’s head tilted, as if taking in every word.

“A sign said they’d close after lunch, so I asked her to join me. Once we were out and about, we spotted an arcade and shot baskets for stuffed prizes. She missed hers and wore the cutest pout.”

The memory further loosened my tongue.

“When I made my shots, I asked which prize she’d have picked. She said the koala bear instead of a teddy. Naturally, I turned to the operator and asked for it.

“He winked.”

“She squealed when I handed it to her—swaying and hugging it. My heart did a hop, skip, and jump, and I wished, right then, that I were that koala bear.”

I continued staring out the window.

“She started healing something in me I didn’t know remained broken.”

I turned. A smile warmed my father’s face. But I couldn’t warm up to the man. I pointed at him. “Hey, don’t think you can soften me up by getting me talking.”

I’d tie my own tie. I didn’t need his approval either.

#

Bryce’s knock interrupted.

“Julie asked me to give you this.” He held out a note.

I groaned. Thirty minutes had passed. She must be angry.

I took the folded paper but looked at Bryce for a clue before opening it.

He shrugged. “I didn’t read it, Buddy. Honest.”

I hesitated. The slip of paper shook in my hand.

My Dear Koala,

Bryce told me that your father arrived. I can imagine the shock. Take the time you need. He's still your father. Maybe this will free you. We've waited six years. A few more minutes is worth it.

I exhaled and held the paper steady.

The word freedom kept popping up today. What did everyone know that I didn't?

I reread the note, dabbing at my nose, fully aware of the jewel I'd found in her.

When I looked at Bryce, a flicker of relief seemed to pass over his face when I didn't have a melt down. Yet for only a moment. Something unsettled appeared.

"One other thing."

"Now what?" I huffed.

"The guests are getting antsy."

I glared at my father.

"Some are whispering Julie's calling off the wedding because of another woman."

I whipped around to face my father. "This is all your fault!"

Bryce stepped between us.

My father closed his eyes. "I didn't mean any trouble."

"Well, you just naturally do."

When Bryce placed a hand on my shoulder, I pulled away. Only the note in my hand grounded me.

Bryce waited. "What do you want me to say?"

A ticking clock seemed to grow louder—impatient for an answer.

I shook my head. "Okay. Here it is."

My voice climbed with each sentence.

"Tell them the truth. My father showed up. We haven't seen each other in years. And we need to settle some issues. Let them feast on that all they want—but not on some rumor about another woman."

I looked at my father. "I won't have Julie and my story muddied."

Bryce tapped my shoulder. "Got it. Will do."

I rubbed my head, trying to gather my thoughts. Julie's note still in hand, the word freedom echoing. I stepped again to the window. Funny how a road could look like freedom or regret.

"What did you mean earlier—about your mess and my marriage?"

My father's voice turned tentative.

"From what I've learned … we often repeat the offenses we judge in someone else."

He paused, searching my eyes.

"Sometimes it's worse."

I looked at the street again.

"You think …that could be me?"

When he started to reply, I held out a hand and shook my head.

"Oh, my …."

My voice cracked.

"I think I already have."

My father's sympathetic eyes coaxed me to say what I'd never admitted to even Bryce.

I flipped around the teacher's cold metal chair and crash-landed into it.

“Julie was overly bubbly one day. Talking on and on and on. My head spun from cramming for my certification. I slammed the table—knocking over a glass. It shattered on the floor, and I snapped, ‘Can’t you shush up for once?’”

“But what I said next really got to her. ‘Women don’t talk more than men—they just repeat the same thing ten different ways.”

I looked at my father, daring to meet his condemnation. Instead, he nodded slowly. For once, we stood on level ground.

“Her face changed like a mood ring—from shock, to confusion, to sadness, to ice. It was the first time I’d ever exploded at her.”

My father rested his head on his closed hand.

“Maybe hitchhiking to Florida was just a change of scenery. I brought you with me.”

He nodded.

“Oh, I apologized. Bought her flowers. Complimented her every chance I got. I promised it would never happen again. We tiptoed around it. I even prayed for distractions—anything to take our minds off it. She forgave me—eventually. But the carefree love we shared changed. Like we’d gained the knowledge of good and evil.”

I lowered my head.

“I’d told her about us before. She’d seen my scars. Maybe that helped her let go of some of the hurt.”

I looked up at him.

“How could I have done that, Dad?”

#

It started with a tickle in my nose. Then my eyes watered. My body rocked in the cold chair. A long moan grew into a wail.

His footsteps and a draft of air circled me. Thick hands pressed gently into my shoulders.

“Just let it out, son.”

Son?

I leaned into this unfamiliar gentleness. Tears I’d tried to stanch trickled then flowed.

“Don’t hold it in, son.”

There. He’d said it again.

What power a simple word held.

I squeezed my eyes tighter, afraid of opening them, lest the present should vanish like an interrupted dream.

“That’s why I came. To drain the poison from killing your love for each other. Forgive me, Son. If not for me—then for your sakes.”

“I want to … Dad.” My voice cracking. “But I don’t know how. Help me!”

His hands took hold of me and raised me to my feet. I turned, facing him.

“How?”

“Just like Julie forgave you. It’s a choice. Forgive me—and you’ll be free.”

I reached and grasped him in a bear hug, sobbing into his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Son.”

His breath warmed my neck with no trace of whiskey or cigarettes. His tears rolled inside my collar. As I exhaled, I released a jumble of pictures in my mind.

“I’m making a sticky mess on your shirt.”

“Never mind.”

When we parted he still held me by both shoulders. We looked into each other’s eyes and traded nervous laughs, unsure of the new ground upon which we stood.

“I forgive you, Dad.”

Now his tears flowed harder. When his tears dried, he reached for the tie that had fallen to the floor and dangled it before me. I nodded and raised my collar as he slipped the tie around my neck.

“These are a little tricky.”

I laughed.

“There.”

I looked in the mirror. Tie in place, and my father behind me. And the clock beyond his shoulder.

At least Julie understands.

“Dad?”

He wiped his eyes.

“There’s an empty seat at the front of the church. Please sit with the parents.”

His mouth opened.

“Oh, Son!”

“Join us. Please.”

“Are you sure? I don’t deserve the honor.”

“You don’t owe me anything now.”

“But I’m not even dressed right.”

“This isn’t a bridal magazine shoot. Come just as you are.”

A smile displaced his surprise but turned wary when I started whistling again. We laughed.

I touched Julie's note in my pocket.

"Let's go! I'm getting married!"