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A Small World

The day we were running away, I spotted a seagull diving straight into the ocean from high in the sky. It was down there a long time. The ferry boat was moving fast and I ran along the scary rope railing, even though the red-faced man in the white cap had yelled at another kid for running. I had to see the gull come back up, because he was taking a chance, just like we were.

I got to the back of the boat, worrying something had happened to the gull. I could still make out tiny ripples spreading outward from where Dad said it 'knifed' into the water. Just then I felt his familiar big hands on my shoulders, heard his rough voice close to my ear against the sound of the engines and the wind.

"Patience, Tommy. He'll come up. And it'll surprise you how far away it'll be from where he went in."

I wanted to believe him but remembered the funny way his face had gotten when we came on board and I'd asked if we were running away. Everything but his voice had said "yes", and all I could think was that he'd never lied to me before.

Mom would have yelled at me for running too, but there was no getting around the fact that both Dad and I were doing lots of things we'd never have done when she was alive. The day he'd caught me pedaling as hard as I could down Dead Man's hill, he hadn't even gotten mad. He'd just said, "Going a little crazy's part of learning to live without her, Tommy...as long as we both survive it."

After the accident, people patted my shoulder, saying time was my best friend. Yet from the moment I saw Joanie put her hand over Dad's at the funeral I knew all those people were liars; time *was* my enemy and Joanie would never *really* be my mom. She wasn't like us at all. At the wedding, Dad's buddy Slim didn't know I was standing behind him when he said, "That little bitch only got Joe to marry her 'cause his guard's down." The mean, sharp cut in Slim's voice made me think Dad had been right about surviving.

When we walked out of the divorce court yesterday, I knew he was. Slim's arm was wrapped around Dad's shoulder as if he needed to be held up. His eyes really bright, Slim declared, "It's a tough price to pay, I know, pal. But the only way to deal with a cancer is to cut it out. Once you get back to work and on your feet, you can fight her for custody."

Listening to the judge inside, I'd decided it was better for Dad that they were divorced, was worth any price, even if it was my having to live with Joanie. Yet the look Dad flashed Slim made me think maybe we wouldn't survive this after all.

I felt that same tightness in my heart and throat today, knew something was up from the minute Dad pulled up where I was sitting at the beach, just staring at the

waves, hating a group of frisbee-tossing kids for the smiles on their faces. Dad tried to act as if everything were normal, waving me over to the Ford, his big smile white and toothy in the car window.

“Hey! I know what will make us feel better, bud. Whaddya say we go over to the fair. How’s that sound?...C’mon, hop in and we’ll make like bakers and get our buns out of here.”

I threw my bike in the back and climbed up into the truck feeling bad for us, but he kept working to brush that away, as if yesterday at the courthouse had never happened. He was talking a blue streak about everything we'd see at the State Fair. He promised me we'd stop on the way so I could get dinosaur fries at Rita's restaurant, tempting me with my favorites, the ones cut out to look like brontosaurus. He always laughs at the way I like to put the ketchup just on their necks and tails. I remembered how much fun we used to have together and felt a little better.

Everyone at Rita's was extra nice to us, like the first time I went in after I'd been so sick with the scarlet fever. Rita put our plates and glasses down lightly, talked to us softly, patted my head as if I might fall into a million little pieces. Even though we laughed when I bit the heads off all my brontosaurus, yesterday hung over our table like a cloud and I was glad to get outside.

Dad and I always liked the same things at the fair; cotton candy first, then over to watch the riders and their sweating, snorting horses in the ring competitions. We'd follow that excitement up with some of Manuel's burritos that we always said

were the best in the world as tears from the green chili ran down our faces. We'd sit and listen to the music for awhile, me always hoping he'd get up and play. Last year, when Ron and Gordo went up on stage, Gordo winked his big wink at Dad, who gave me his a quiet smile and a pat on my shoulder before he loped up on stage and pulled out a harmonica. Mom used to say Dad was born to not stand still for a minute. The same energy that had him tapping a pencil on the kitchen table, chain-smoking his filtered Old Golds, or just pacing the house when he was waiting for her to finish getting dressed, it all disappeared as soon as he put the harp to his lips. I never get tired of hearing him play.

He stands solid and frozen in front of the microphone, nothing moving but his hands shifting the harp, cupping it tightly one minute, then one hand flailing fast to make the tones quaver and all his usual motion pours out in a stream of notes that has a funny way of making time seem slower or not moving at all. Last year a lady next to me nudged her husband and said, "Wow. How does he get all that emotion from that teeny little thing?" and I just about burst, I was so proud of him.

This year it was hot, a perfect day for the fair and we did all our usual stuff but it was like we were just running down a checklist of things we had to do, not really having much fun. Afterwards, Dad took me over to the inflatable moonwalk and he was the only dad who kicked off his cowboy boots and jumped in there to play with all us kids. They don't say it when I'm around, but I know some of my friends think his black eyepatch makes him scary, that and all the bad talk about how Mom died and he lost an eye, but all I could see, watching him hooting and bouncing in

there was how much he loves me.

But then I saw that even more strongly yesterday, out on the courthouse steps with Joanie waving a piece of paper in Dad's face, her sister Carol trying to hold her back. Sheriff Ray had to come over growling, "Now, don't make me hurt you in front of the boy, Ray. She's got the law behind her, even if it is blinder than you are."

It took Slim, Carl and T-Bone to keep Dad from me. Sheriff Ray's hands on my shoulders were like iron clamps. I wondered why no one could see what I did; a bright connection between me and my father, like the taffy at the state fair when they stretch and twist it into long, thin ropes right at the breaking point. A big vein popped out on Dad's neck, his face got all blotchy red, but worst of all was the look in his eyes. I'd seen it once before in my dog Arrow's face when his leg got caught in a heavy hunk of wire. I was so mad and scared that my stomach hurt all the way back to Joanie's. My eyes stung, my body ached, I was cried out and just seeing Joanie made me feel sick, so I went on into bed without a word to her or Carol. Joanie called out to be sure to say my bed time prayers with a funny sharp laugh that made me sure she knew exactly what I'd be praying for.

I woke up smelling cigarette smoke, needing to pee and wanting a drink of water. I walked down the hall, feeling the dustballs on my bare feet. Warm yellow light spilled out the kitchen doorway along with their voices, soft but not soft, like adults always talk when there's kids supposed to be asleep. Peeking around the corner, I could tell from the full ashtrays they'd sat there talking and smoking since

I went to bed.

Just then Carol said, in what she calls her I'm-the-big-sister voice, "I'm tellin' you Joanie, you're playin' with fire takin' Joe's kid from him. It'd be different if Tommy was yours. You're just out to twist the knife, as if Joe hasn't gone through enough."

Joanie's voice had this dull edge that made me shrink back against the wall.

"Don't give me that crap about what poor Joe's gone through. I hear that enough from everybody else. He promised me a lot and didn't deliver one goddamned thing. Said he was over losing her, not mentioning that she drove them into that tree, drunk as a skunk. Said he was getting a raise at the garage and looking to buy the old Sharpson house by August. Next thing I know, it's goddamned October, and he hasn't worked a day in four months. The few times he can get it up, he calls out *her* name." She laughed and I felt like when Dad shoves ice cubes down the back of my shirt.

"It was *easy* to get him declared unfit. You don't know what it was like living with him! To have him go for days all quiet, like some kind of damn zombie and then all of a sudden you walk in and he's sitting at the kitchen table with tears running down his face."

I understood how much the sight of him crying could upset a person. I'd seen it plenty after we lost Mom. When I'd asked him if his eye hurt, he'd fixed me with his one bloodshot eye and said, "No buddy. My heart."

He'd draw me to him and hug me hard, and I always I felt like I was inside one

of those little crystal balls with the tiny buildings and the fake snow that flies when you shake that small world up so it explodes. But I was having plenty of nights when I cried myself to sleep, holding Arrow close with one arm and Mom's picture with the other. I just finally came to figure that it didn't matter how old you were, the only way to get through some things was to cry. I wondered why Joanie didn't know such a big thing when I did. Her voice had grown sharper, complaining.

“And her stone cold since April! I still can't figure it out. What kind of man is that to have? Christ, she cost him an *eye!*”

Joanie sighed deep then, and it was as if something had been released from the house, like throwing the windows open after a thunderstorm passes by. I heard ice tinkle in a glass, followed by the faint glug of a bottle being poured. When she spoke again, she sounded entirely different; not mean or angry, just tired.

“Oh, Carol. I was never as cute as her, or as smart. It was no contest. When they got married, I told myself that was that. I'd get on with my life and quit mooning over Joe Newton. But something went out of me when he walked away with her, without so much as giving me the time of day. Then, you know what they say about shit happening. Believe me, it only takes being laid off at the plant plus a couple boyfriends who think a woman's a punching bag as much as anything else, and one day you wake up to find yourself trapped in a small town where everyone knows you too damn well. Suddenly, you're ready to do whatever it takes so that you don't wind up alone. I admit it. I was *glad* when she died. How often do you get a second chance in this life?”

She barked out a laugh then and I felt the hair raising on my neck, looked down to see the white downy hairs on my arm sticking almost straight up. I felt as if my Mom was standing right there next to me. Joanie's voice reached me like in a dream.

"But who would have guessed that she ruined him for me; forever. He's just a shell of the guy I used to dream about at night. The worst of it is that every time I look at Tommy, all I see is her. He's got her eyes, hair, even that damned graceful way of moving." I heard the bottle clink against glass again, and Carole said, "Hey. Go easy, now."

Joanie's voice grew thin then, tight and angry. "The least I deserve for my heartache is the kid's child support. I can feed him and still have enough for my bar tab and a new dress, and not just one from Kmart, either. He's easy enough to take care of during Summer. Maybe when I get far enough ahead, I'll let Joe have him back. Let him drive Tommy to school and cub scouts and whatever the hell else. He's going to learn no man fucks with Joanie Robbins. Go talk to him about playing with fire."

I stood there, feeling the blood rush out of my face, noticed my fingertips were cold, my hands kind of tingly. I saw myself running into the kitchen, grabbing one of the big knives from the wooden block on the counter and putting her out of our lives forever. Silence hung in the air so loudly I thought sure they'd hear my breathing. Finally, Carol said, "Hey kiddo...why are you doing this to yourself?"

Joanie sniffled and in a voice like a little girl, said, "I just...I guess I only wanted

to hang onto a little piece of Joe for awhile, no matter how much it kills me.”

I turned and tiptoed back to my room where I laid awake ‘til the sky began to lighten outside. I remembered when everything was just right, Mom or Dad would suddenly look at each other and one of them would say, "Great minds think alike, eh?"

That's why it hurt so much when we left the fair early and I started asking what was up. I don't know why Dad wouldn't tell me what we were doing on the ferryboat. After the courthouse steps, how could he not know that he'd never have to treat me like a little kid again? Though this might bring Sheriff Ray around again, I'd already figured out it was worth anything...even leaving poor ol' Arrow behind to be rescued later. That was another thing I wanted to ask him, about saving Arrow once we got wherever we were going.

It all pounded in me, like the ferry hull against the waves. I quivered from the vibrations shooting up through my legs, standing on the bouncing metal plates at the back of the boat. The engines and the wind together were the sound of what I was feeling, so loud and hard and fast that they filled me from the bottoms of my feet to the top of my head. It seemed like they could go out of control at any second. The water was flying by and we were getting farther and farther away from where the seagull disappeared. I had to squint my eyes and concentrate to keep focused on the spot. All of a sudden, it was so important that I see that bird come up again.

Just then white and grey broke the water and my heart jumped with the seagull. I could make out a glittering, twisty, wriggling shape in his mouth, and it

was easy to tell how hard it was to hold onto the fish and lift above the waves. The big white wings beat hard in the air. I *was* surprised at how far away he was from where I saw him dive in. I was feeling better that Dad was right about that, just as the fish leapt out of the bird's mouth. I watched it, a black shape with shiny beads of water spinning out as it pitched down into the ocean. Feeling bad for the bird, I heard a noise and I realized that behind me, Dad was clapping and cheering for the *fish..*

We went inside out of the wind and sat down facing each other in the padded booths. The still air and muffled engine sounds made it another world. He looked at me and said, "What's wrong, sport? Not how you thought it would turn out?" and all I could think to say was, "Dad, do you think we'll ever have great minds again?"