

Nameless

Fried chicken. Buttery, salty, and spicy scents greeted my nose as I walked out of the bedroom. Another reason I loved having my children and grandchildren come visit: Beth's cooking. Without having a special occasion, Beth usually just gets whatever artificial shit she finds in the frozen foods section. Lord, how I tried to convince that woman that being in my company for the rest of our lives was a 'special occasion,' only to find that after every failed attempt, she would make sure my frozen meal was still half-way frozen.

A smile weaseled its way across my face at the memory. She certainly is a handful, but I haven't regretted marrying her one moment in these fifty-three years of being a husband.

Rounding the corner to the kitchen, I saw my wife standing in front of the clicking stove, surrounded by the delicious smell of my favorite fried food. I stealthily inched up behind her and quickly placed my hands around her waist. She rewarded me with an 'eep' and whacked me with the white spatula. The excitement was well worth the pain.

"Stump Daniel Oakley, what am I going to do with you?" Bethel grumbled as she pulled my arms off of her and rearranged her stained apron. "Thirty years ago it was sweet, but now, you could give an old woman a heart attack!"

Sensing the opportune moment for testing to see if I retained my charm in my old age, I countered with, "An old woman, perhaps. My darling, young, beautiful wife? Impossible." If that blush was anything to go by, I still got it.

"Stump! How am I supposed to work with you sweet talking me left and right?" Beth questioned as she swatted me with the spatula again.

“Well,” I started and tactfully put my arms around her again, “you could take a break and me and you could relax a bit.”

Beth seemed to consider my offer as she leaned into my arms and I thought luck was going my way. However, she merely ‘hmped,’ shouted out a callous, “You are a devil! Go bother someone else,” and shoved me from the kitchen.

Chuckling, I regained what little dignity I had left and sauntered into the den to watch some good old college football.

The married life. You got to love it.



“Shhh,” Beth was whispering while she rubbed soothing circles on my back. I was truly blessed with the world’s most wonderful woman, but even that knowledge could not console me now.

A sob exploded from my chest as Beth continued comforting me. It used to be hard to allow her to see me break down in the beginning of our marriage. Now, I relished in the comfort that being with another human during a moment of stress could bring.

“Silvy’s dead.” I breathed lightly after the sobs had quieted.

Beth’s hand stopped rubbing and she sat next to me on the bed. She gently took my hand and laced our fingers together before speaking quietly. “Yes, but isn’t it better for her to be gone then for her to remain here completely lost?”

“No,” I responded without hesitation. I still couldn’t believe my sister was dead.

My beloved older sister was dead. The one I used to look up to was dead. She was the one who taught me how to deal with my first beating, the one who helped me pass math, the one who set me up with Bethel, the one who helped me deal with being a grandfather. She was dead.

“Yes,” Beth continued and looked at me with pity, “It is better for her to go, Stump. That wasn’t Silvy anymore. It was just a hollow shell of the woman she used to be. She died a long time ago.”

I hated being pitied.

“Is this how it’s going to be?” I shouted as I tore my hand from her grasp and sprung from the bed. “At the first sign of forgetting, are you going to go away from me, Bethel?” I looked into her eyes, making sure I had her attention before continuing. “And it will happen to me Beth. I cannot run away from it. It will happen to me as it happened to my grandfather, and my mother, and now Silvy.

“Will you pronounce me ‘hollow’ and desert me when I forget where I placed something? Will you distance yourself when I need you the most in my life? Will you neglect your vows and abandon me to this onslaught of despair?”

I saw tears start to form in her eyes and she gently shook her head no.

This isn’t what I wanted; I didn’t want to hurt her.

“I’m scared Beth,” I cried as I sat back down next to her and smothered her in my embrace. “I don’t want to forget you. God, I love you so much! I don’t want to forget you or the wonderful kids we’ve had and the grandkids too. I couldn’t survive without you.” I pulled her tighter against my chest and could hear the quiet sobs and feel her moist tears on my shirt.

“The wor—“ I swallowed, “The worst part is I don’t want to act like Silvy did before she was completely lost. Do you remember how she thought she hated me? She couldn’t remember who I was and she began to believe I was someone she despised. She wouldn’t even let me visit her anymore!” I had to gulp for air before voicing my worst fear.

“What if do that to you? What if I hurt you in that way?” I choked, burying my face in her grey hair. “What If I forget you and then hate you? I could never forgive myself.”

Beth was still crying into my shirt as I cried into her hair until we could both calm down. Eventually Beth gently pulled away and re-laced our hands together. “I will never abandon you Stump. No matter how you treat me or if you can’t remember who I am. I will always be by your side; I will always love you,” she whispered to me and graced me with her beautiful smile.

“Promise me Beth,” I whispered back, craving the reassurance that I wouldn’t have to go through this alone.

She took my face in her aged hands so I was looking directly into her eyes and she muttered with such conviction that I knew she would never leave me. “I promise.”



Damn. Damn it all to hell.

“Where are those damned little things?” I growled, overturning the flowers on the table that Bethel fixed up real nice for the family. The little daisies inside it went flying

across the floor and settled into a messy pile of clutter next to the arch. This is how it always happens. Every damn time we need to get somewhere, she always has to lose something and I always have to waste my time and find it. How can I find it, I don't know what the woman does with her stuff!

I could hear Bethel outside, chatting with the neighbors. Damn her. And damn the neighbors as well. Why can't she look for it? Jesus! She just had to get those blasted little glass doves for Madeline-Rose and her *charming fiancé*. It's only a wedding! Who wants doves on their wedding day? I didn't even think about anything but the wedding night on my day.

"Hey Stump," I heard Bethel sigh from the front hallway, "Stump, just forget it. I know you can't remember where you put them, and if we don't leave now, we're gonna miss our last grandbaby walking down that Concord aisle." I guess she was done talking to the neighbors. I can't blame her. Sue and Tony were the most—

Wait. *I* can't remember where *I* placed them?

"Goddamn it, Beth. I never even saw those damned doves! I only knew about them 'cause you wouldn't shut up about how darling they were over dinner for the past three days. I sure as hell didn't lose them. If their lost, it's your own damn fault."

My furious gaze sought out Bethel's pitying eyes. Pity. The one emotion I hate. The one emotion that I despise, detest, abhor. And this is the glance I get from the woman that is supposed to love me? I'm not crazy or senile. Seventy-six doesn't mean I am a mental patient now for Christ sakes.

And yet, those eyes never changed. "Stump, I didn't mean anything by it," she breathed along in that ever-patient tone of hers. Her pitying eyes still held mine in a tight

gaze, suffocating me. I needed to escape them.

“Of course you didn’t. Just trying to ‘help me out’ right? Just shut it Beth. I don’t need your pity. Don’t you dare patronize me, woman. I know damned well what I remember and I know I never saw your stupid little glass pieces of shit!” I raved, the heat of my hatred apparently burning her as she flinched at my words. Good. I’m sick of her attitude. She needs to remember who did the marrying and who was married.

Bethel’s body slackened against the worn frame of the arch. Little tears collected in the corners of her eyes, trembling, trying to trace the contours of her aged face. Finally one broke free and ran down that sunken and saggy cheek I used to love. It was a long journey down until it finally fell under the weight of her chin and smacked into the hardwood floors.

“I’m sorry, darling. You’re right, you didn’t forget anything. It’s my fault. Let’s just go sweetie,” she whispered, hardly containing the undertone of suffering escaping into her meek voice. She wiped her tears, spread a smile on her face, and grabbed my calloused hand, leading me to our old Ford truck.

I felt a twinge of sadness. I didn’t mean to be so harsh, but sometimes she just irritates the shit out of me. And it was her fault about the doves. I just want my old woman back, not this condescending nuisance of a hag. Is that really too much to ask for?

Ol’ Toby sputtered to life and I grasped Bethel’s hand as we made our way to the church, all thoughts of doves and arguments gone for the time being. The only thing heard the whole trip was the quiet putt putt putt of the decaying engine.



“I don’t know her Beth! I’ve never seen this woman in my entire life!” I declared, running a finger across the bridge of my nose, trying to get rid of this headache she gave me from all her nagging.

“Goddamn it Stump! You know her! How can you not recognize your own flesh and blood?” Beth screeched, thrusting the redheaded woman with the bouncing curls in my direction again. The carrot top didn’t even look up at me, just kept her eyes on the floor. Her shoulders were slumped and she looked like a weak little girl rather than a woman. I wouldn’t be related to such a weak person like this girl.

“Look at me,” I commanded carrot top. I didn’t actually believe Bethel for a second, but I’d just do about anything to stop her yakking. And as carrot top’s head lifted and her eyes met mine, I felt something. It was almost like a little chord of memory was being plucked at in the back of my head.

Thrum

She had a small, pert nose that might have been beautiful on a round face, but it just looked awkward and wrong on carrot’s square shaped face.

Thrum

Her lips, which once might have been full, were thin and flimsy and contrasted with her large, almond shaped eyes.

Thrum

Her green eyes.

Thrum

My eyes.

Thrum thrum thrum

“Dear God!” A cry tore itself from my throat as I latched onto my baby girl. I could feel my little June shutter with emotional exhaustion and her tears were leaking profusely from her beautiful, big eyes.

How could I forget her? How could I forget my daughter? This was my June. *My* June! And I’d forgotten her just like that.

“Lord,” I choked, releasing tears from my eyes that beat down on June’s fiery hair, as if extinguishing its flames, “Lord! What is happening to me?” I clutched onto her with all my might. I was probably hurting her as my hands tried to melt into her subdued shoulders. I could feel Beth cling on from behind and her pitiful wails resounded off the ancient walls.



My body was in so much pain. Every breath rattled throughout my hollow chest, ripping out my muscles as it barreled about my body.

Everything hurts too much. What was the point in living? I had no one. I was all alone. The people here, they just smile and never answer any of my questions. They feed me, clean me, care for me, but they never talk to me.

Who am I? I don't know anything. I feel almost as if I am a captive in some kind of war. The others though, the others are even worse off than I.

"Hey Stump, you have a visitor," a Negro called from the heavy wooden door. I can't believe they have those people here. Perhaps I have died and this is hell, if those vermin are running around.

It ushered in an old woman. She was an ugly old hag, with thin, grey hair and sunken cheeks. Her body was frail and thin, like she would break in half at any moment.

She started to approach my bed, but the glare I sent her stopped her before I had to see her ugly face even closer.

"I'm sorry, Stump," she choked out, "I'm sorry, but it's too hard. I can't do it any longer."

What was she talking about? Do what any longer?

"This is good-bye. I'm sorry, but I didn't know it would be like this when I made that promise to you. It's too *hard*," she cried as tears ran down her face.

What? What the hell is going on?

She sucked in a deep breath of air before whispering, "I'm breaking my promise."

A promise? What the hell? "What are you mumbling about, you crazy woman?"

Get out you damned thing,” I growled, hoping that she’d take the hint and leave me to my quiet. She did. But not before she glanced at me and locked her old eyes on me.

And there was something in her eyes. Something I didn’t like and didn’t understand.

Thrum

Pity.