

What Was and What Is

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Fiction

I waited for the call for sixteen years. I didn't know when it would come or how it would come, but I knew it would. And because of that call I find myself on the steps of a dilapidated two-story house, I once called home. It looks exactly the same as when I left after graduation, but when I was a child, the house was immaculate. My mother planted violets along the white porch that were a shade of deep purple like veins, and the grass was something of perfection. It was a source of satisfaction for my father. He tended to it as if it was a third child; there was not a spot of yellow in the sea of green, nor was there a straggly, intrusive weed. The house was a matter of pride for my parents like I once was. But now there are weeds sprouting out from the grass, sprouting out from in between cracks in the concrete driveway, unwelcomed and unexpected, just like me.

The steps on the porch creak unnervingly beneath my feet as if they're about to collapse. I imagine the hole would swallow me entirely before widening and engulfing the porch, the front door, the living room, the kitchen, my old bedroom, the entire house. That wouldn't be so bad. But the stairs never give in, not even when I hop on my feet to tempt them.

The door gives way beneath the pressure of my hand, and like a mouth, the house exhales. It smells different than I remember, but I don't have time to dwell on the thought because I'm welcomed by a family friend in a hurry. Isabella greets me in her exhausted, yet soothing voice that always brings me back to when I was a teenager and I lived in this house, which is why I never return her calls.

"She is upstairs," Isabella whispers as if the walls are sleeping and she's trying not to wake them. I'm grateful she doesn't attempt to make small talk with me; she knows I don't want to stay long.

The purpose for my return home lies behind the door at

the top of the stairs. I stand with my hand on the doorknob for minutes that feel like days, but I know the sooner I open the door the sooner I can leave and never come back. The entryway to her room widens, and she falls into view. I find her in a hunched position on the left side of the bed. Her head seems too heavy for her frail neck; it dangles downward, facing her lap. The hair atop her head is thin and ashen. I take a step forward and immediately regret it. The abused, aged floor creaks beneath my foot, and it alarms her. She looks up. Our eyes meet. I'm frozen.

Miranda's face sends me into an uneasy shiver. Her skin is sallow and gray. Her eyes sink deep back into her skull, and she stares at me beneath furrowed brows that make her face fill with more creases than I believed possible, each one shouting accusatory things at me: crow's feet screaming you are to blame, a deep line in her forehead growls look what you've done, wrinkles around her mouth hiss you've killed your own mother. I wonder if the marks she has left on me speak to her, too. I wonder if the scar on my right eyebrow says plainly what kind of mother does that to her own child?

That was a night like other nights, similar in every way except I forgot to lock the cabinet after making myself a meal. Miranda decided to position herself outside of my locked bedroom door for two hours, wailing and pounding her fists and feet on the walls. She was trying to provoke me because an inebriated Miranda always loved a good fight, but I did not respond. Disappointed by her lack of success, she said the only thing she knew would irritate me past the point of rational thinking. She said my brother's name: Jeremy. Without hesitation, I opened the door and charged at her. From behind her back, she produced a kitchen knife from the unlocked cabinet and swung it at my face. A guttural hiss escaped her pale, peeling lips. She intended to seriously wound me, and I could feel it in her stare as it penetrated my flesh. My brow split open immediately. Thick, warm blood seeped from the wound and cascaded down the side of my face, just barely missing my eye. Instinctively I buried her face in the carpet and gained control of the situation. She was smaller and weaker than I was, so I dragged her down the hallway and left her carelessly on the floor

of her bedroom before locking her inside.

In the bathroom, I addressed the severity of my wound while Miranda wept loudly about Warren and Jeremy in her room. That's how I always knew her night was coming to an end. Only in drunken exhaustion would she remember how truly miserable our lives were without them. I shut the sounds of their names out of my mind and focused on the pulsing gash above my eye. I held a thick towel over it for a bit while resting in the empty bathtub with my eyes shut. It was among the most serious injuries she had ever given me, third only to a nasty concussion that left me disoriented and nauseous for days and a second-degree burn on my forearm and foot from a boiling pot of water.

Miranda snorts loudly and clears her throat, and the disgusting sound causes my stomach to leap around my abdomen in retaliation. She ushers me to her bedside with a swift, emotionless hand gesture. I shake my head. The nearest I will go is to the foot of her bed, which is still close enough to the door that I can escape if need be. We wait in uncomfortable silence for minutes. I listen to the sound of Isabella's feet pacing on the kitchen tile on the floor below. She is no doubt anxious about our long-awaited reunion. The tension is broken when my phone rings. We are both startled by the sound.

"Sorry," I say between clenched teeth before silencing my phone and tucking it away.

"Was it Trey?" Miranda asks. Her voice throws me off my guard. It is soft, weak, and lacking hostility. I do not recognize it.

"Yes," I answer quickly.

"How is he?"

"Well."

"What does he do?"

"He is a teacher."

"What does he teach?"

"Physics."

"At what level?"

"At the university."

"And you?"

"I am an artist."

"An artist? You were never good at art." I clench my jaws tight, hoping the words don't roll off of my tongue into the air. You were never good at being a mother, but here we are.

"Is that all? Is this over?" I ask honestly in my indifferent voice she is so accustomed to.

"What about babies? You got any of those yet?"

"No," I lie. I have one child, a son. He is two. He was unexpected and unplanned but celebrated nonetheless.

"Well, you need to do right by Trey and give him a child," she instructs. I cannot take it anymore. I am trembling.

"So, you're about to die, right? Hope you're not leaving this shithole to me."

Instantly Miranda begins laughing. She raises a feeble hand to her waist and retrieves a white napkin. She holds it to her mouth where it catches small pools of blood. It takes her a minute or two to cease coughing. I can hear Isabella pacing at the bottom of the stairs worrying about the health of her patient.

"You can take anything you want from this shithole," she begins in a raspy voice. "Just don't touch Jeremy's things."

"Excuse me? I locked Jeremy's room ages ago so you couldn't ruin it with your disgusting drunken fingers."

"He was my son!"

"And he was my brother. I'm taking his things home with me."

"You won't."

"I will."

"I've been in there you know," she says with a wicked smile that reveals her missing teeth. There's one or two more gone in the front since I last saw her. Her words trigger anger in my body. I can feel it awakening in the pit of my stomach, reaching into my throat, clawing its way up in an attempt to escape, but I've kept it subdued for sixteen years.

My feet find their way to Jeremy's room. It is no longer locked like it was when I left. I expect the room to be in disarray, but it isn't. Drunken stupors haven't ruined this shrine to my baby brother. Dust clings to the top of his toys and books like I cling to the memory of him: his dimpled, freckled cheeks, his deep

blue eyes like Miranda's once were, his dirty blonde curls. Before I know it I'm sinking to the floor beneath the weight of it all, plummeting back to 23 years ago when I was 11 and Jeremy was seven.

My parents drove separately to our evening soccer games every Tuesday and Friday. Miranda took Jeremy and me from our house to the soccer fields, and Dad met us there after his shift at the hospital ended. They never missed our games. I chose to drive home from the game with her while Jeremy drove home with Dad. After a night of playing soccer, we would celebrate at home with bowls of mint chocolate chip ice cream, but we didn't that night because a man unceremoniously plowed their car off the road, sending them into a narrow ditch. Warren, my father, died instantly. Jeremy died two days later in the same hospital where he was born. That careless man left Miranda and me to endlessly mourn the destruction of our family for the rest of our days. A once caring and gentle mother turned to alcohol and bitterness. I fled with Trey the moment I graduated high school.

The memories have me ill, and I stumble back to Miranda's room on uneasy feet. "You didn't ruin his room," I begin.

"No, I did not."

"Why did you go in there?"

"For this," Miranda reveals a book she used to read to Jeremy and me: *The Hungry Caterpillar*.

"But why?" I wonder aloud.

"Because I am a mother who has lost both of my children, and this brings me comfort," she confesses. Her candor is alarming and causes me great discomfort and confusion. After some time has passed, she asks, "Will you look at this with me?"

"Sure," I agree, though my insides are screaming otherwise. I hold it above her lap and flip through the pages in silence. About halfway through the book, the flip of a page causes a photo to fall onto Miranda's lap. We both gaze at it in confusion.

"I did not put that there," Miranda admits. "I've never actually opened the book until now."

"Why?"

"It didn't feel right to read it by myself," she whispers, her voice mirroring her strength.

"Do you think Jeremy put the photo in here?" I wonder. She shrugs her bony shoulders and gestures for me to pick up the photo. I hold it in between us. It feels fragile between my fingers, and I'm terrified of tarnishing it. In the picture, Jeremy and I are centered between our parents. In front of us, there's a large stone tortoise. "When was this?"

"Your tenth birthday. We spent it at the zoo, don't you remember?"

"No, I don't," I admit.

"Renny, I want you to keep all of Jeremy's things. And mine and your father's, if you want them," Miranda says. I nod wordlessly. She pushes the photo in my hand toward me.

I sit by her bedside for a half hour or so as she grows wheezier. Her eyes are shut tight, and she's unresponsive. Isabella doesn't think she will make it through the night. My fingers still tightly clench the photograph of the blissful family that once was. I reach into my pocket, pull out my phone, and compare my family photo with Warren, Jeremy, and Miranda to the one with Trey and our son taken a few weeks ago at his second birthday party. In our backyard, he sits poised jubilantly on Trey's lap while I spoon-feed him a small bite of cake. The happy family that once was now is again, and I have to tell her.

"Miranda," I call after Isabella has left the room. "Miranda," I repeat. She does not hear me. I continue to say her name until I'm pleading, but she does not respond. I lower my face to hers and whisper beside her ear, "Mom, Trey and I have a son. His name is Jeremy Warren Powell, and he just turned two." I pull away from her frigid cheek, my voice cracking and my hands trembling. I look at her wrinkled, pallid face and see she is smiling. It's faint, but she is smiling.

It's a two-hour drive home, and halfway through the drive, I get a call from Trey. He tells me Isabella called. My mother died just after I left. I tell Trey to kiss Jeremy for me and not to wait up, but I know he will anyway.

At home, I retrieve a black frame and put the photo from our family trip to the zoo on my tenth birthday in it. "Is that you?" Trey asks while wrapping one arm around my side.

"Yes, and that's my dad. That's Jeremy. And that's my mom."

"Where should we put it, Renny?" he questions, holding the framed photo in his hands for a closer inspection.

"I know the perfect place," I admit. I retrieve it from his fingers and cross the room to a bookshelf. On the third shelf is a framed photo from Jeremy's second birthday, and I place my childhood family photo beside it. Trey kisses my temple and tells me he loves me before going off to carry in boxes from the trunk of the car; I've brought Jeremy's things home with me. On the top of the first box, Trey retrieves is *The Hungry Caterpillar*. It belongs on the third shelf, and tomorrow I'll sit and read it with my son just as my mother had done for me. But for now, it can sit behind my two family photos of what was and what is.