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This One Thing

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“These here are ten, and these are ten and up.” My father’s new wife Janice—my step-mother—held the two trays of cheap rings over what was left of the salmon and passed the “ten and up” tray to my aunt.

My father dropped his fork.

“These are my newest,” Janice said. “I just got them in.” She produced a smaller tray of rings, set it down in front of me. “Take a look, Adam,” she said. “Maybe there’s a girl back at school you’re thinking of.”

“If I never saw this junk again, I wouldn’t mind,” my dad said, and laughed. He meant it, I thought, but I couldn’t believe he’d said it. My father and Janice had been married since February, when they’d had their “Las Vegas Special”, as my mother called it.

“I mean it,” he said. “I could do without all of this.”

Janice laughed. What else could she do? If it wasn’t funny then maybe it wasn’t a joke. “How about some rings for you to take back to that girl, Adam?” she said.

“What?” I said. I shook my head. “No.”

My dad said, “The girls have a thing against jewelry where he goes to college.”

“It’s not a thing,” I said. “It’s more an awareness of the roles that women play in our society and how the media controls what we think of their image.”

“I like this one,” my aunt said. She was pointing to something with a big white face.

Janice said, “That’s real enamel, you know.”

My father smiled. “*Enamel*, is it?”

Janice popped the ring out of its holder and presented it. “I can give this to you for wholesale,” she said. “Ten dollars. That’s a good deal, really. It’s more than fair.” She put both her hands out on the table. There was a ring on almost every finger.

My mother never wore much jewelry. She lived in Cambridge now, by herself, and always wanted me to come over.

“But choose a few to think about,” Janice said. “Here, let me show you more product.”

My aunt picked at the tray of rings.

“What do you think of this one?” Janice said. “Wouldn’t it look great with that zirconia you’re wearing?”

My dad started coughing like he had a fishbone stuck in his throat. “Oh, this,” said my aunt, raising her hand to a pendant passed down from my grandmother. “This is diamond.”

My father stood and excused himself. “You kids can handle the shopping club without me.” My father looked at me and then he nodded at Janice. I started clearing my place.

“Have I showed you the clocks that play sounds from a different national park every hour?” Janice said.

In the kitchen, my father stood bent over with his hands on the sink. “Are you all right?” I asked.

He stood up. The lights were off, but sunlight came in through the windows on the other side of the room. It shone onto the table where we ate our breakfasts, most of the meals that didn’t involve company.

“I’m O.K.,” he said. “It’s just— It’s been a long day.”

“Did you have enough to eat?” I asked.

“Did I?” he said, putting his hands on his stomach.

For dinner we’d had poached salmon, grilled vegetables on the side. Everyone commented on how good it was, including my father, but it wasn’t. It was store-bought. Janice bought food ready-made from a big supermarket out by the highway. Our dinner had come in metal trays that she popped into the oven and then spooned onto platters that had once held my real mother’s real cooking.

“I don’t know how she does it,” my father said. “Your step-mother. All that cooking.”

I turned to face the windows. The light on the table was pale, broken into boxes by the window frames. The side of the kitchen where we stood—where the sink faced the stove and the cabinets—held shadows in the afternoon quiet.

“She just had some new flowers put in,” my father said. He started toward the door. “When I was outside earlier, I thought I could smell them.”

We went outside and he pointed to the three even rows of lilies. “Aren’t those nice?”

“They look good,” I said. “Who planted them?”

“I don’t know. She has someone who comes in.” My father walked back toward the house and put his foot on the bottom step.

“I took some pretty cool classes this semester,” I said.

A soft breeze came through the yard. Our shadows were long, bending up the house toward the windows.

“That must have been nice.”

“They were hard.”

I wanted to talk to him, tell him things about what I’d learned, ask him things; there was a lot I wondered about, places I wasn’t supposed to mention: Atlantic City and Foxwood’s, JuJu’s and the Alley Cat. My mother had told me these names over the phone but I wanted to hear from my father what he’d been doing. I wanted to know why he married this woman, where he found her.

“What’s been going on with you?” I said.

“Larry!” Janice called, from inside. She called his name, and my father started talking about the lilies, but Janice kept yelling, getting closer. He was saying how a man had planted in the garden for a whole morning: how he’d planted the lilies, where he put them, how many rows. We could hear her in the kitchen. I pretended I didn’t, that I was listening to my father.

Then, when her face was at the door and she could see us, my father stopped talking. “Where did you go?” Janice said.

“We came outside.”

I said, “I thought we could smell the flowers.”

“Go back inside, Janice,” he said.

Then it was quiet. Janice watched us through the screen, the house dark behind her. Her face looked pale, her head too big for her shoulders, like it was ready to fall off at any moment. She had on dark glasses that made her eyes look deep-set inside their sockets. Her hair shot out at all angles, like a kindergarten drawing of the sun.

My father stood still, looking down at the welcome mat at the bottom of our front stairs.

I counted three breaths as she stood in the doorway. Then she was gone and the door was just dark.

My father put one hand in his pocket and started jangling something. He leaned the other hand on his knee. I could feel him studying my face.

In the garden there were pink lilies and red ones in nice even rows leading up toward the house. Over by the fence, my father had put in one of those wooden ducks on a pole, the kind with wings that spin in the wind.

“So tell me about your first year of college,” he said.

“It was good,” I said. I wanted to tell him everything I’d learned in Professor Thompson’s class on 20th Century thought, how everything had seemed so clear-cut the way he explained what was wrong with our country, how it was all due to the hegemonic powers of the media.

“Did you learn anything?” he said.

“I had a great class where we learned about society, and about how the media manipulates us.”

“Did Janice tell you about her winning streak in Las Vegas?” My father asked.

“Or our trip to Alaska?”

“No,” I said. I shook my head and he started talking to me about their flight to Vancouver and their cruise up the Pacific Corridor to the Glacier National Land Trust. He said they’d seen ice floes hanging huge as buildings and frozen turquoise ponds. As he started in about Fairbanks, I heard Janice clomping through the kitchen. She came out onto the porch with her hands raised.

“Larry, she’s buying the rings in there,” she said. “She really likes them!” Her mouth opened wide when she talked and I could see she was excited. She pointed to the rings on her fingers. “I gave her one like this for ten but the one like this I had to ask fifteen for.”

My father shook his head. “You don’t charge my sister, Janice. Those should be gifts,” he said. “Our gifts to her, Janice.”

“But Larry,” she said. “It’s *like* I’m not even charging her.”

My father shook his head. “No, Janice.”

“But those are good deals,” she said. “The same prices I paid.”

My father brought his hand up and pointed back to the house. “You go back in there—” He started to say something else, but then Janice tilted her head, just slightly, looking at him. She looked at him, and then she looked at his hand, the outstretched finger. I heard a car drive by. My father lowered his arm, put his hand in his pocket.

I turned away from the house and walked onto the lawn, toward the garage. The grass was still wet from my father running the sprinkler and I could see the water making dark spots on my sneakers. I put my hands on the back of a folding chair. The backside of the garage was a blank slate of concrete now. All through high school, the garage had been one big cube of green leaves—this side a wall of concrete covered with ivy—but

then last summer my father had had it stripped clean. He said the vines were tearing apart the garage.

“Are *you* going to pay me for those rings?” Janice said, behind me. “Or are you going to say you will now but then try to start a whole other argument about it later?”

Around the base of the garage the gardener’s ivy-killer had burned away the grass, and it had not grown back: a yellow strip stretched onto the lawn for maybe a foot of ruined, destroyed grass. Perhaps nothing would ever grow back there.

“Janice,” my father said. I turned around in time to see him close his eyes and pass his hand over his face. “For me,” he said, “Right now. Can you just do this one thing?”

Then Janice was quiet and I heard the wind blow through the backyard and the wings on my father’s wooden duck start to spinning. They sounded like a kid’s bike with cards in the spokes of the tires.

It seemed as if something sorry passed between them, and then Janice nodded and started up the stairs again, her shoes striking the hollow wood as she went.

My father produced a pack of cigarettes and started slapping it against his palm. He came onto the lawn to stand next to me.

“So tell me more about school,” he said, taking out a cigarette.

I turned to look at him. It had been a long time since I’d seen my father smoking. I couldn’t remember the last time. With the cigarette in his mouth, my father looked like someone I didn’t know. In the way he was dressed he resembled my father, he stood the same way: hands on his waist and pants pulled up over his hips. But this was somebody

different, someone who haggled over prices with this woman, Janice, someone who had shown up in a house where my father had once lived.

“I thought I learned a lot this year in my classes,” I said. “Toward the end I thought I had it all figured out.”

He nodded, took another drag.

“I got good grades.”

My father’s eyes were dull, with something going on behind them that didn’t involve me, this lawn, or our garden.

I turned back to the garage, trying to remember anything from Professor Thompson’s lectures to tell my father: how the media was ruining our lives, or who wrote our book about the destructive nature of television, but I couldn’t think. The garage wall had marks on it, like tan-lines, left behind from where the ivy had attached itself. They angled across the wall in odd patterns, making jagged lines without any order.

“I have to go inside,” I said. “I think there’s something I need to go look at.”

My father nodded. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and waved toward the house. “I’ll just stay out here for a few minutes,” he said.

I went inside and up the back stairs to my room, and closed the door. Janice was still talking in the dining room, but with the door closed I couldn’t hear her words, just sounds. I could see my father through the window, still standing on the lawn, smoking his cigarette. He looked up at our house, but I don’t think he could see in.

On my desk, the textbooks I’d brought back from college stood in a stack. I sat down in front of them, read the titles along the spines. They seemed like things from a foreign place now, a place where there’d never been a time when I rode on my father’s

shoulders, or we did abdominal exercises together in the hall. But here they were in my old room, on a desk next to my old life-sized poster of Kevin McHale. He stood with a stupid grin, holding a little, lunch-room-sized carton of milk, looking like an idiot, framed by my old NFL wallpaper. I could smell my father's cigarette smoke coming in through the window.

I closed the blinds.