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My Father Sleepwalks

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Before I shut the car door, I reminded Lester Storms about coming over the next weekend for a cookout I'd been planning. "I'll be there," he said. "Nooner or sooner, right?"

"Right," I said, and then quietly shut the door.

At that point, I was willing to do anything to lift spirits around our place; my dad was in pretty rough shape. Hell, he had been for a while—three years. Plus, our property down by the river was perfect for having people over: a big flat lawn, tall trees, plenty of parking. I had already talked to Hank Storms, my dad's buddy, about slaughtering one of his pigs and bringing it down for the occasion. I even went so far as to visit the Riverside Saloon so I could catch all of my dad's friends in one heap. "Don't be scared to bring a dish," I told them. When Lester and I walked out the door, they lifted their beers from their small tables. They wouldn't.

Walking down our dirt road, I had to be careful not to twist my ankle on rocks or tree roots. The Birch-trees blocked the moonlight from guiding my path, not to mention the few beers Lester had given me. Besides that, I didn't want to wake my father or make him think I was someone else. It's not that he would've been upset about me coming home so late. What the hell did he care? It's just that, if he ever heard noises late at night, he was one of those people who wouldn't hesitate to grab the gun.

As I got closer to the cabin, I could see some coals were still burning in the fire and a stream of smoke was pluming over the river. Plus, I could see my dad's GMC in the driveway. But the thing that struck me as odd, was that the lights were off, all of them. The thing was, ever since my mother had died, my father never left lights off, especially the stained-glass lamp by my mother's chair. It was a ritual of his, so I figured he was gone, off drinking somewhere.

Plodding up the porch steps and walking inside, it was as if I was looking for my father, but at the same time, not.

"Dad," I said. I quietly shut the screened door behind me. But there was no answer.

When I turned on the light, I saw my mother's pink lazy-boy, which had sat untouched for nearly three years, reclined back and its footstool was propped open. Also, her book, *Can't Go Home Again*, was opened near the middle. Right then I knew something was wrong. You see, ever since she'd died, my dad

had gotten to a point where he wouldn't allow anyone to sit in her chair. Then he got to a point where, if anyone did so much as leave a glass next to it, he'd quickly grab it, straighten the chair, and tell me I needed to have a talk with whoever left it there.

"They don't understand, Jeremy," he'd say. But, by seeing it there propped open, I thought maybe he'd gotten over it.

Standing in the living room, I looked to see if anything else was out of place. The fishing poles seemed fine. The television was there.

"Dad," I called again, but again there was no answer, just the humming of the refrigerator rubbing on the kitchen linoleum.

After that, I didn't feel like sleeping. I went outside, grabbed a couple logs from under the porch, a beer from the cooler, and decided to relax awhile.

Sitting there in one of our plastic chairs, I thought of the party and where I would put things. I drank, stared into the hot coals, and watched how the fire consumed everything: a ritual of mine.

I couldn't have been out there more than twenty minutes. I heard a couple of low murmurs coming from the river's edge, and from where I was sitting, I couldn't see what it was. The river was down about six feet below our property, which, over time, had uncovered years of rocks and petrified logs. At first I thought it might have been an animal, or possibly one of my dad's buddies who was drunk, getting sick, and needed a place to stay. That would have explained my mother's chair being propped open. At least *they* wouldn't have known any better.

Whatever it was, I didn't want to startle it. I crept over to the edge quietly. I saw a few beer cans lying on the rocks moving every time the water rippled. Next to them, a man was sitting on the river's edge holding a shotgun, and, looking closer, I saw it was my father. I knew by the checkered welder's hat and the denim jacket which was frayed at the sleeves. There, the moon hung just above the tree-line, and it was glistening off from his face like it did the black water in front of him. He sipped from his can of beer and set it down on a jagged rock, easy like. Then, with his other hand, he slowly stroked the stock of the gun and wiped his face of tears.

At that point, I may have been dismissing what was actually going on, but either way, I didn't want him to know that I'd seen him. I crept back to the house without a sound or turn of a light, just praying to god that I didn't hear a gunshot.

When I woke up that morning my father was sitting in a lawn chair by the river. In fact, I don't think he slept, but the shotgun was back in its place, and my mother's book and her chair were set right again as if no one had touched them.

Outside, the dark mass of the Muskegon River moved steady. Every

once in a while, a group of tubers would float by all tied together with a cooler lagging not far behind. The sound of empty aluminum cans being shuffled through ice and plastic and the distant laughter of young people echoed all around us. Those were the sounds of summer I enjoyed the most. I saw my father crack open a beer, staring at the willow trees, the river, and all that passed in front of him.

When I pulled up a chair, another set of tubers were floating past. They saw us sitting there like immovable benchmarks—me in my blue jeans and Metallica t-shirt, my father in his spotted welders hat and denim jacket.

They raised their beers to us. A few of them whooped and whistled. One teenage girl even went so far as to rip open her pink bikini top to show off her small misshapen breasts, a nice gesture. I followed suit by lifting my can high and yelling, “What’s wrong with the rest of you?” They laughed and I laughed back. Then, looking over to my father, I saw him give a short tip of his can. He ripped some threads from the sleeve of his denim jacket. I rapped him on the shoulder. “How do you like that?” I asked, but he just sat there with his chin dipped down.

“Nothin’ I ain’t seen before,” he said.

That’s how we sat for more than an hour, with the wind blowing the leaves above us and our rope swing just kind of dangling there in calm silence, just drinking.

After the wind and the heat of the midday seemed to settle the traffic in front of us, my father pulled out a lighter and a small glass pipe from deep inside his denim jacket. He hit it, passed it to me and started talking.

“Long stakes,” my father said. “Metal ones.”

I hit the pipe and stayed quiet. Besides, I didn’t want to ask him what the hell he was talking about, because I’d heard my father talk like that before, big ideas and even crazier ways to go about them. But the worst part was, he’d always gone through with them. There were the porch shutters which we’d fashioned from antique doors. The neighbors, Julie and Ron—the rich ones that won the Christmas light competition every year—thought we were crazy when they saw us cutting old doors in half.

“Doors?” they’d asked. “For shutters?”

There was also the skylight made from stained glass my dad got from a Catholic Church, baby Jesus and a dove flying over a manger. We had one just like it when my mother lived with us that had broken during the winter, and my father had to raise hell with the preacher to get a replacement. We could see them leaned against a lawnmower by the maintenance shed whenever we drove past the church, and one day, we ended up going back. My father flailed his arms, said something about God and preservation, right there in the church

parking lot. I think the preacher gave it to us just to get us the hell out of there.

However, there were good things we did as well. There was the horseshoe pit which we'd made out of railroad ties and a couple pieces of rebar. There was also the porch which was kind of the showpiece of the cabin. We made it out of red cedar, and my father always liked to say that it was my mother's idea—gives off a good smell—the cedar, that is.

To think about it now, whenever we finished a project or, for that matter, whenever my dad didn't think I was listening; I'd catch him talking to himself. He'd look at the finished product, press his lips together and talk under his breath. He'd say something like "How do like that, ma?" or, "The old boy's done good this time, huh Cari?" and then he'd step back with a daydreaming look in his eyes, wishing maybe, one day, she'd come walking down that road again to see all he'd done for her. But all those years it was all I could do not to sit up and shout, "But God doesn't work like that." Even though I never did.

Sitting there next to the river, he just kept talking about the next project he had in mind.

"I figure we get about thirty metal pipes," he said. "Maybe forty. We'll plunge them down about a foot into the shoreline—straight down." He bent his wrist and pointed to the ground with his index finger. Then he lifted his beer can in the other, looked at the space between it and the river and said, "About twelve feet long or so." He closed one eye. "Maybe thirteen."

Leaning back and coming up with his most grandiose idea yet, he said, "That'll make it so we don't have to worry about erosion so much. Damn river's been threatening to steal our land ever since me and your mom bought this place. Besides, she'd like that idea." He drank, looked in my direction. "How about it?"

Any other time I wouldn't have said anything, but I was getting to the point where I couldn't stand to see it go on much longer.

"Dad," I said. "You can't hold nothing back like that—not nature, anyhow. What's going to happen is what's going to happen," I held back for a moment. "Why don't we build a boat dock or something? You know, get in the river. How long's it been since you been in the river?"

He took a drink and snickered with no intention of answering. I paused and pointed under the porch. "We got all them damn tubes don't we?" I asked. "They ain't been touched in *years*. Just rotting under there!"

Again, he stayed quiet, almost deaf. He polished off his beer, threw the can and said, "Whadda ya say? I'll go pick them up from Hank's and we'll go at it?"

I didn't acknowledge him. I looked across the river and saw the constant rippling of green water over a wavering log. After all, what could I say? I knew at

some point in time he'd come rattling down that dirt road with a truckload of long metal pipes clanging in the back of the GMC. He'd have one hand on a beer and the other on the steering wheel, not to mention that flat look on his face like it angered him just to be alive.

After that, it would be my job to see that everything got done while he pointed and hurled empty beer cans against the tree. Sure, he'd help, but in a way that made it uncomfortable just to be around him.

He took my silence as a yes, fixed his welders hat to his black head of hair and said, "Well that settles it."

The legs on his plastic chair bent as he got up. The truck turned over, and after a cloud of dust and a few grumbles from the old engine faded into the distance, I stood up, looked over the ruts in the river bank, and enjoyed the natural quiet while it lasted.

About two hours later, the grumble of the truck returned along with the hollow rattle of metal pipes in its bed. I met my dad in the driveway with my work boots on and an old, black t-shirt. I pulled my gloves on, ready to work.

The pipes were thick, probably torn out of the ground from some ancient, underground plumbing system—country plumbing which had probably been sitting in Hank Storms' scrap heap for years.

My father closed the truck door and snapped a beer. He finished it in about two or three swallows. After that we laid the pipes down one by one with their ends poking out over the river, wherever we thought they were supposed to go.

I stuck one foot into the river and the other on the muddy bank for balance. Pollen stood motionless over the glossy river like suspended snowflakes in thick, humid air. Every once in a while, the buzzing of June bugs sounded above us. My father stood near my shoulders in the grass and lowered the pipe ends down to me. I held the first pipe sturdy with both hands as my father turned his hat around and began pounding the tops with long strokes from a sledgehammer. Then, once the pipes were deep enough, he'd hand the sledgehammer down to me so I could finish the job pounding, slipping, and doing everything in my power to keep from flinching when the heavy metal hammer hit hardened steel.

The first one went easy, but afterward, each one grew more stubborn as sweat clung to our skin like the pinching of sand or needles.

"Hit the son of a bitch!" my father said, leaned over on his knees. I hit again and again, growing angrier and angrier.

"Hit it!" he yelled.

A lump began to form in my chest, and then my throat. It cut off the air and burned my vocal cords. I swung and missed. I rested.

“What the fuck?” my father said. “That thing’s kicking your ass!” He smirked then, but I wasn’t laughing.

I started back up and my father began to pace, beer in hand. I swung and I swung, all the while imagining that, if I hit it hard enough, it would be the end of all this and we could get on with our lives.

Pang! Pang! I hit the thing gnashing my teeth. It wouldn’t budge, but I hit it anyway. My father began hopping on one foot, lifted his arms out doing a drunken rain dance. He stumbled back and the burning in my throat caused me to take a couple of dry swallows. From the corner of my eye I saw him wind up like a pitcher. With his beer can half empty, he flung it and it hit me in the head. My head rang. I leaned against the hammer in the muck.

“Hit the Goddamn thing!” he slurred. He leaned his face toward mine, damn near spitting. I grabbed the hammer in one hand near the head. I lunged up the muddy bank. When I pulled my feet out of the muck he flinched, and with a simple push of my forearm he hit the ground, ass first.

“Do it, you pussy,” he spat.

I stomped in the grass at him, hammer in hand, but didn’t swing. He put his arm up to cover himself and kicked at my knees. I flinched.

There we stayed glaring at each other until I thumped the hammer down next to him and said, “Finish it yourself!”

When I turned around he began to sit up. “Pussy,” he said.

Lying in bed that night I woke up to the sound of my father, sledgehammer in hand, pounding the hollow stakes deep into the shore. At first it started slow. The panging rhythm of metal on metal reverberated in my heart as I imagined him lifting the hammer high above his head and then down again. Pang!—Pang! The rhythm began to pick up. I put some shoes on, went to the kitchen and pulled the flannel curtain open a crack so I could see him. He must have thrown about five logs onto the fire because the flames were whipping tall and I could see his shadow in the tree above it, dark and pounding down. I watched him slip on the wet rocks, but he kept at it. Every stroke was like a stake being driven deeper into his heart, just where I knew he wanted it.

When the hammer head hit the tops of the hollow stakes I flinched. Holding back earth and nature, he swung furiously again, and again, and again. Pang! Pang! Pang! After about ten furious strokes he slipped again, drunk, and the weight of the hammer being flung over his head pulled him backward into the river. The water poured over him, engulfed him. Dead limbs broke beneath him. I ran out and slid in the mud to where I could get into the river. While he splashed his hands on top of the water, I turned him over and yanked him out by the collar of his jacket, now knee deep myself. I tried to tug him over the bank

by the fire. He pushed my arm away. “Just leave me!” he said. “Just leave me!”

I stormed back toward the cabin, giving up, leaving him wallowing in the dirt. But he called my name just before I got to the house. “Jeremy!” he moaned. “Jeremy!” I stopped without turning around.

“Yea,” I said, and waited for a moment.

“Help me up,” he said. “I need help up.”

I went back and chose my steps on a few select rocks. I found him lying with his head propped up from the mud. The collar on his jacket was still wrinkled from where I’d tugged him from the river.

He whispered groggily. “I need help up.” I hoisted him underneath his arm. He held on to me, caught his footing and stumbled on the edge of the muddy embankment.

I plopped him in a plastic chair next to the fire-pit. The fire rolled smooth while I took his shoes and socks off and placed them on the warm cinder-blocks that surrounded the flames. I sat across from him. With the orange fire between us, I just looked at him leaning there pitiful and drunk. His black hair matted to his forehead and every once in a while water would drip from a point in his bangs. The denim jacket he wore was crunched between him and the chair. A sudden burst of tears caused his lip to quiver, and holding his fingers tight against his watering eyes he let go, lifted his head and spoke in a drunken wavering voice.

“What am I worth?” he said. “Huh?”

Part of me thought he deserved it, this pitiful state he was in, but another part of me felt connected to him—so much so I couldn’t tell him how I felt. There were times, soon after my mother’s death, that he and I sat in the house like silent prisoners mourning everything we had done wrong, and even things we hadn’t. The chair of my mother’s sat in the corner looking over us, and sometimes, if we thought hard enough, we would swear it had rocked as if someone had just left the room and would be back before it stood still again.

My father and I didn’t talk then. And we didn’t talk now. No amount of inner emotion could cause us to, and as I sat there watching him huddled over in his own hands, my emotion stood on a cliff, but would not jump.

He sniffled and coughed. The light from the fire between us lit our faces a dull red and the heat moved the crisping leaves above us like a slow wind.

“I mean, really, huh?” he said. “What the fuck am I worth?” He was so drunk he could barely form words and his tone was as if he was asking me, my mother, and himself all at once.

“I got this place,” he shrugged. “But what the fuck is that? Huh?—nothin’.” He paused, straightened what he could of himself.

“I’m sorry, JJ. I really am.”

At the time, I couldn't believe he actually said it. He leaned back and almost fell. He looked up to the dark sky and the smoke pluming through the trees.

"Fucking years, man!" He pushed out a few more words between air and liquor. "She was so pretty, JJ. A good person. God, she was good."

He hurled a twig toward the river and almost put himself in the fire. "And I'm a fucking drunk."

With my elbows on my knees, I didn't know what to say. I had a sudden urge to hug him. I didn't. A log dropped in the fire. I set him up straight and fixed his coat, pulling it down around him. Standing behind him, I squeezed his shoulders hard, pinching the wet denim of his jacket. I pressed my lips together. I loosened up. Holding it all inside, I held his shoulders and used them to lean over him.

"It's just gotta be fixed," I said. "That's all there is to it." He went to pat my hand and missed. We both looked at the glowing of the fire. Our staring faces flashed in the flames. "It's just gotta be fixed," I said.

After that I let my hand slide off his shoulder. He stayed there staring at the fire with a wet lip protruding out. Some grass was sprouting at the edge of the bank. I went over to it, sat in it, and leaned my arms over my legs which were caked in mud.

A few tiny sticks lay broken next to me. One by one I threw them into the river. They bubbled, plopped back up, and I watched them float down. Behind me, my dad let out a slow chuckle under his breath.

"What the hell's wrong with the rest of you?" he said.

Turning around, I saw a moist smile gleam across his face and his scruffy chin plastered to his chest. We made eye contact, sort of. I turned away, smiled, and threw another stick into the water.

"I heard you," he said breathing heavy. "Get in the river, you said." He paused, slurring his words and joggling his head around. My back stayed turned. Letting out as much air from his lungs as he could, he howled, "What the hell's wrong with the rest of you?" The sound of his voice bounced from the trunks of trees and made a slight echo down river. He quieted, paused. I watched a slow current wrap around a mossy stump. He stared into the fire and said to himself, "Just rotting under there."

By the time Saturday rolled around, Hank Storms showed up early bouncing down our dirt road with his half-barrel cooker knocking and bouncing on ruts and stony divots, dust flying in puffs. I remember waking up to the smell of roasted pork. My dad was standing next to it in the grass, beer in hand, while he watched Hank inject the sizzling beast with barbecue and other

secret sauces.

It was near one o'clock when cars began piling in, all different colors and shapes in symmetrical lines next to the grass by the horseshoe pits. There was Hank Storms' brother, Lester, a thin guy who smoked cigarettes and always wore a cowboy hat. Lisa Fairchild was also there, and her six kids. Even a few tubers had come off the river after my dad waved for them to come up and eat some food, pretty girls in bathing suits, mostly. Some I knew and some I didn't. Either way, there were about fifty people eating from picnic tables, playing horseshoes and sitting around a daytime campfire. Every time a clang of a horseshoe filled the air people would whoop and holler. Eddie Jones, the lone black man who befriended my father some years back, convincingly won the majority of the games with ringers and leaners. Nothing could stop him, not even the occasional goose from a wandering Lisa Fairchild.

About an hour into the party, Lester Storms stood by his car and filled our flattened tubes with a portable air compressor. He rolled them out one by one. I put on my camouflage shorts and about five of us decided to float down the river with the other tubers that had stopped on their way to the bridge. Then I saw my father throw a tube into the river. It plopped in next to me. He held on tight to one of the stakes we had driven in deep. He kept balance with a beer can held out over the river. With delicate toes he got in, sat down. The rubber burped. He switched his beer to the other hand, felt the cool water, let it drip, and then tilted his head back to gaze at the sun and the overhanging trees. Holding his arms out to the heavens, he said to me, "Just think, JJ—some day," He took a drink and smiled "—some day, this will all be yours."