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Wake

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Wake

Harold Brock got news of his father's death on a Wednesday afternoon. Within an hour he had told the secretary to cancel his classes for the week and told his landlord to watch his cat. These were the only two people that he told. They were both very sympathetic. If you saw Harold on the street, you’d think that he was a broadly handsome man with piercing eyes and close cropped hair above the brow, chin and cheeks set into a dark granite complexion. If you looked real close you’d see that he had a scar above his left eye from the time his older brother Walter had shot him with a pellet gun. If you looked even closer you’d see that Harold was a divorced insomniac with a mild addiction to Nyquil and a strong, unshakeable belief in Bigfoot.

His lab was located in a forgotten wing in the decrepit education building. He was sandwiched between the advisors office and closets of buckets of stagnant mop water. In the summer, the sickly sweet smell would swell and creep into the office and the whole room would smell like sour milk. His office had been switched from the sleek science building because he had lost his research funding due to a disagreement with a Dr. Morale, the head of the anthropology department. His new office was large but decrepit, about thirty feet by twenty, and in it he had a videotape collection that covered the west wall, an impressive collection of plaster footprints, and a forest of microscopes, tweezers, beakers, and chemicals. Against the east wall a small cot was folded up like an ironing board.

The office doubled as a dark room; he had chemical baths that sat on the back tables. Here, amongst beakers and chemicals, his students could find him, often late into the night, sifting through the photographs and plaster casts. More often than not, though, the students left Harold to his work.

That Friday evening his ex-wife called. The first thing she said to him was, “When were you planning on telling me about your father?”

“How long have you known?” he said.

“Your mother called me last night.”

“She called you?” he said.

“Yeah. I wanted to give you a chance to tell me yourself. You’ve always been a coward, Harold.”

“Look, Sharon, I appreciate the sympathy, but this is something I’d rather do alone.”

“Bullshit. Harold, this has nothing to do with you. I’m booking a flight to Minneapolis.”

Harold protested, and Sharon offered to pay for the flight. She found a sitter for her dog, cancelled her business meetings, and by Friday night Harold was crammed onto Flight 716 Seattle to Minneapolis next to a woman that he didn’t love anymore. He sat with his face to the window, the huge emptiness outside his window rolling past. He felt
claustrophobic. He went into the bathroom and took the last few swigs from a bottle of Nyquil, hoping maybe he’d be able to fall asleep on the flight. The cabin lights were out, the west coast curled up under the plane like a dog, and the plane cruised through the sky with Zen-like patience somewhere between time zones.

Sharon dozed lightly and left a puddle of drool on Harold’s arm. An hour later she woke, stretched, and said, “So. Harold. How’s the Bigfoot business these days?” She balanced each word on the end of her tongue.

“Sharon, this is a five hour flight.”

“I asked a simple question.”

“The Bigfoot business is fine. How’s the real estate business?” Harold said.

Sharon snorted. She was a failed real estate agent with jet-black hair and bad luck. She was a darkly beautiful woman, exotic, even, but between her money troubles over the last year she had forgotten this at some point. Harold forgot, too. He would have been surprised now to hear that once, when he was much younger, he floated on air for three days because he’d gotten her phone number.

Sharon still dressed as a real estate agent, everywhere she went. She wore nice black suits, always, no matter the occasion, and she was always business-casual, always, especially when she talked, walked, ate, drank, cried, fell, fucked.

“The real-estate business is fine,” she said. “Have you landed the big tenure position?” A broad, cruel smile spread across her face. “Oh, don’t worry, Harold. I’m sure this year is the year.”

“Nice, Sharon, real nice. My father is in his final resting place and you’re kicking me in the balls,” he said.

This was somewhere over Boise.

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Harold’s insomnia that night was worse than most. Sharon had taken Harold’s room, at his mother’s insistence. Harold’s dead father occupied the guest bedroom, which left Harold on the fold-out bed in the living room. The fold out bed was a range of uneven springs and jutting bars, and he’d finished off the bottle of Nyquil on the flight.

He was surprised to see that his mother had kept his room the same, with baseball trim around the ceiling, blue wallpaper and trophies on the dresser. Harold remembered staring at the trophies in the dark at the tender age of fourteen, wondering what it meant to have them. He wondered if Sharon was staring at them right now. The house was heavy with the sort of silence that only death can bring.

Around three he gave up on sleep and began working on his statement for the funeral under the dim light of a desk lamp. When his father had died, he couldn’t think of anything to say. By the time kids were up
progress. He hadn’t slept in two days.

“How’d you sleep on the couch?” his mother asked him.

“Just fine.”

“You don’t look fine. Maybe you should see the doctor.”

“Ma, I don’t need to see the doctor. I’m just under a little stress right now.”

“We all are, honey.”

His mother cracked several eggs into a pan and by then the sun was up and most of his relatives were coming into the kitchen. His brother Walter and his wife were in the pantry now with their kids. Uncle Jim and Aunt Edna were still in their matching flannel pajamas. There were several other people in the living room that Harold recognized, though he didn’t remember their names, and their children dashed recklessly from room to room. Two children plowed into Sharon, fell down, laughed, and sprung around her as she walked into the kitchen.

“Oh, I’m glad you’re awake,” Mrs. Brock said. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yes, thank you for the hospitality, Mrs. Brock,” Sharon said.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure. I’m just glad to see you and Harold back in the same room again.”

“If Dad were alive, she wouldn’t be here,” Harold said.

“If I weren’t here, you wouldn’t have come at all,” Sharon said.

“Sharon, don’t start,” Harold said.

“You tell your mother about the conference yet?” she said.

“Sharon--”

“Conference?” Mrs. Brock asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harold said.

“Harold, are you going to a conference?” she asked again.

“Ma, I said don’t worry about it. I’m here.”

“You’re not going to a conference,” his mother said. “You can pretend like you give a damn about your family for one weekend.”

Harold shrank back. His mother never swore. “Mom, we can talk about this later--”

“--You’re just as stubborn as your father. Sharon, you know that’s where he gets it from. The Brock men are a stubborn lot. You should thank the Lord you were never around to see a fight. Harold never did get along with his father. They would push and shove and cuss at one another and there was nothing I could do about it.”

His mother rapidly cut potato slices the size of silver dollars.

“What are you studying out West?” Uncle Jim said.

“Evolutionary biology, with an emphasis on primatology.”

“Say what now?”

“I study the process of evolution. I’ve finished my PhD and I’ve been trying to convince the board to accept my degree in Cryptozoology.”

“Cryptozo-whatsit?” Jim said.

“Cryptozoology. The scientific search for mythological animals.”
"You mean, Loch Ness, Bigfoot, the boogie man?"
"Yeah, something like that," Harold said.
"So what does a Cryptozo-whatsit do?" Jim said.
"It depends. I spend the school year in my lab looking at videos and casts when I'm not teaching. Then I spend summers camping in the Cascade mountains, looking for Bigfoot."
"Find him yet?" Jim said.
"We're looking."
"What does the university think of all this?"
"They're not entirely pleased. The director has been trying to fire me now for six years."
"Yeah?"
"Yep. He almost got me, until I sold my book to a publisher. Then the university started to put pressure on him to keep me around."
"No kidding? You didn't tell me that you had a book in the works. What's it called?"
"'The Science of Sasquatch,'" Harry said.
"Well, I'll be," Uncle Jim said. "My nephew, the writer. Huh."
Jim chewed at his sausage with admiration. "I'd bet your father is beaming down right now."
Walter stepped into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "Yeah, he's real proud," his brother said, peering between jars of mayonnaise and green olives.
"Hi Walter," Harold said.
"You remember the time Dad saw Harold on channel forty-two?" he said. "Harold was up there on the screen, talking about Bigfoot. You should've seen it, Uncle Jim. One of the guys at the shop gets wind of it and suddenly they're all calling Dad 'Sasquatch Sammy.'"
"Fuck off, Walter," Harold said.
"Whoa, slow down," Walter said. "I don't understand professor speak."
"Harold Stanwood Brock, you watch your language," his mother said. "There are children around. And Walter, knock it off. Now sit down and eat your breakfast, both of you. I made some venison to go with your eggs and toast."
"Ma, I don't like venison," Harold said.
"Sit down and eat. I know this vegan thing is big on the west coast, but you're back in Minnesota now. Just look at you. You're falling apart."
"I was never a vegan, Ma."
"Well when your father died he left me with about two hundred pounds of deer meat from the hunting season and I'll be darned if it goes to waste. Gosh, that's about all I eat. Venison stew, venison cutlets, venison roast, venison burgers." While she talked she ran from one end of the kitchen to the other, setting down forks and plates. She had set an extra spot at the table.
Sharon was still silent. She excused herself and stepped out behind the garage for a smoke.

"Harold, go talk to her," his mother said.
"Ma, stop it."
"Go talk to her. She loved your father."

Harold sighed but realized that fighting with his mother was useless. He stepped lightly out into the September night. He could see Sharon at the end of the garage, silhouetted against a street lamp and wreathed in a pale cloud of smoke. Her silhouette was beautiful and mysterious, like a stranger in the night. He slowly walked up to her and said, "Mind if I join you?"

She carelessly cast a cigarette in his direction.
"You doing okay?" he said.
"Yeah."

They stood side by side in the solemn night, both searching for the words that hung somewhere in the vast, uncrossable, empty space between them. The silence hung heavy like the full moon in the sky. Harold thought about when he and Sharon were young things, when they used to get drunk off of one another's company and talk all night. What happened, he wondered.

"Do you miss him?" Harold said.
"Who?"
"My father."
"Sure," she said. "Don't you?"
"I don't know," he said, carefully. "I feel like I should."
"Your father was a good man."
"And I was a good son."
"Harold, the man in there is dead. If you were a good son, then you'd say goodbye to your father."

"Sharon, can I tell you something I've never told you before?"

Harold could see the lines around her eyes soften a little.
"Do you remember how I went camping out west with my father when I was younger?" he said.

She nodded.
"I woke up early one morning before my father got up. I got out of the tent and grabbed a fishing pole and a hunter's knife. In my head, I thought that if I caught and cooked a fish before he woke up, maybe he wouldn't feel so bad about taking me with him instead of Walter. Problem is I've never caught a fish in my life. So I've got my line in the water and Mt. Adam is off in the distance when I feel this cold prickling sensation on the back of my neck. The birds are all quiet, and I feel like something is watching me, but I can't hear anything. I start to call out for my dad, thinking maybe he'd snuck up behind me, but I get no response. Then I catch scent of this smell—I can't even tell you what, maybe something like
rotting meat, but worse. That's when I see this... thing. I can't explain it. All my years as a scientist and I still can't explain it. Whatever it was, it was huge, and tall, and walked on two feet. I could feel its footsteps. I wanted to run but my feet were rooted to the spot. It turns its massive head and looks me in the eye, and I look it in the eye, and for a second we stand there, looking across this huge uncrossable gulf, across a million years of evolution. We are both terrified, I can see it in its eyes, and it can see it in mine. And then it bolts. Before I can even move, it bolts and is over the next hill and out of sight. 'God,' I thought, 'it's so fast.'

"And then I bolt. I wanted to follow it into the woods but I was too scared. I've spent the last twenty years wishing I'd gone back into the woods.

"So I get back to camp and my father had built a small fire. 'Where were you?' he says to me. "I was out of breath, but I tried to tell him what I saw, and he says, 'Where's the fishing pole?' "I'd dropped the fishing pole. I didn't even know. But that's all he could ask. Where's the fishing pole..."

"Harold, it's time to forget about all that," she said.

Harold nodded, stamped out the cigarette, and went inside. Blaine was telling Mrs. Brock a story, more so with his hands than with his words, about the time Sam had told a foreman to go to hell. Harold could see grateful tears in his mother's eyes.

The others listened to Blaine tell his stories for another hour. Blaine's voice grew hoarse and the whiskey clouded his memory, and soon he sat hunched at the table in fitful, taciturn drunkenness. The others grew silent, too, and Walter was the first to leave the table. Aunt Edna and Uncle Jim were next. Blaine followed fifteen minutes later, crashing his enormous bulk into the pinstriped sofa, and finally Sharon shuffled off without saying a word. By five in the morning Harold and his mother sat silently across from one another. They had run out of things to say. The sun swelled under the horizon and the birds were awake and telling stories in their secret language.

"Ma, go to bed. You're killing yourself," he said.
"It's not much longer till sunrise," she said.
"Seriously. I'll stand guard. I need a moment alone with the old man anyway."

Mrs. Brock was too tired to object. She flashed a weary half-smile and stood up.
"When are you leaving town?" she said.
"The convention is tomorrow."
"You're going?" she said.
"I have to."
She nodded. "You sure do take after your father." She kissed his forehead and slipped off into the night.

Now that the others had gone to sleep Harold could feel the
emptiness of death enter into the room again. He watched the candles burn themselves down to insignificant stubs. The silence was awkward, even more awkward than the drive to Washington. Death, Harold thought, the most awkward of all silences. He sat only three feet from the corpse, but the distance between Harold and his father was even more uncrossable now than when the man was alive.

"You know," he said, "Mom's right. You really were a stubborn bastard."

Harold uncovered Blaine's whiskey from under the table. He took a few swigs.

"I'm going to a convention tomorrow," he said. He laughed at himself. He'd never talked to a corpse before. "You can't make fun of me for my conventions anymore."

In the silence of the early dawn Harold's thoughts went back to the eulogy. He still hadn't found anything to say. Harold pulled out his notepad to try again and pushed a silent pen to silent paper. He sifted through memories of his father.

"What do you want me to say at your funeral tonight?" he said.

The corpse didn't answer. A slight breeze picked up and swung the window shut with a forceful bang. He thought about his mother's superstition, about leaving a window open to let the soul out, and he went to open the window. He stopped himself. "What am I doing?" he said aloud. "I'm a scientist."

He threw the pad of paper onto the workbench and resigned himself to watching the sun come up. As it rose over the trees, the sunlight crept up along the concrete floor and touched Sam's corpse. One candle still held its vigil from the night, though it seemed pitiful in the slanting sunlight. Outside, the air shook off its cold autumn chill.

"Superstition be damned," Harold said. He stepped over to the window and propped it open with a two-by-four. The gentle September wind flowed through his hair and snuffed out the candle. The birds sang and insects buzzed in lazy circles and Harold watched this street from a scene in his childhood come back to life. Adults clutched coffee to their chests in their harried shuffles to their cars, children played and tumbled as they waited for the bus, and now and then an early morning jogger trotted past. Harold felt the room lighten and his body relax. For the first time in years, Harold felt tired.

When the coroner came an hour later, the family said their goodbyes to Sammy Brock. Edna, Jim, Walter and Blaine each took their turn kissing the dead man's clean shaved cheeks. Sharon still couldn't bring herself to look in the man's face but had grown less afraid of the body and now ventured a timid 'see ya'. The two pallbearers had come back and carried a coffin into the garage and placed Harold into the box, then shut the lid and loaded it into the back of the Hurst. Harold watched the vehicle pull away, standing in the street and watching until the car reached the end of the street and rounded the corner.
He watched for some time more. He watched other cars go down the street and round the corner, and wondered where they were heading. Standing there in the September sun, amongst the trees and the cars and the houses, his father's life was a fond, distant memory. Harold could feel the words buzzing in his head, and he crept off quickly into the guest bedroom, away from the galloping children and his crying mother, and he began to write.

He started this way:

"The world seems small next to your father. No matter how old I get, this doesn't change. The world still seems small next to a giant like Sam Brock.

"Death doesn't change this feeling. It only transforms it, into something else."

Jacob Frye