The Exchange

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Sliding from my seat at the Sunday dinner table, I grabbed the china dessert plates, sticky with pound cake crumbs and tiny melted pools of vanilla ice cream, leaving the English teacups for my mother. Grandpa sat staring, his jawline wrinkles tugging at the corners of his beady eyes. I stacked the dishes in the sink and only the roast beef gravy and ketchup stains remained on the table, a little more at Grandpa’s place than usual.

“Do you want to go home yet?” mother asked gently.

“Anytime you want to take me,” Grandpa replied, pronouncing the words hard behind a strong Scotch brogue and decayed teeth.

“Would you rather rest a minute?” Mom insisted, her kind face anxious for his comfort.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he answered absently, letting the words fade in the silent aftermath of the dinner.

Placing his shaking hands on the table, he slowly lifted himself out of the chair.

“One, two, five,” he groaned, his face a mask of anxiety. His bent form slowly raised. Once he had been well over six feet. Now, his trouser waistline clung to the middle of his chest. With calves turned outward, he shuffled across the carpet, edging toward the piano. Slowly he lowered his body on the needlepoint piano bench. Fumbling for the right keys, he confidently played his favorite hymn, The Old Rugged Cross, that his hands had long ago memorized.

I slouched in our rocking chair, listening as Grandpa continued playing the familiar songs our family always sang when we met for Thanksgiving and Christmas. The chords sank into one another as if Grandpa’s fingers were stuck to the keys. I remember when notes seemed to dance from his hands. He played crisp, firm marches, banging clear sounds, while my sister, brother and I paraded around his living room. And then he softly, gently played his beloved hymns from the old country. We’d stand by his mahogany upright, listening,
watching his hands brush the piano keys, while his face, lined like the
music, soaked in every chord that later he seemed to smile out.
Suddenly, he played a song I had never heard before.

"Grandpa," I asked, "what's the name of that hymn?"

"Oh—eh. I don't know," he replied. "It has no name. I made it up
just now."

"Grandpa, you should write that down. I might want to play your
song someday."

"I'll remember it," he said, pausing for a moment. "You said
you'd play a sonatina for me."

"Are you sure you have time to hear it?" I asked, knowing that he
did, but wanting to get out of it. I had just taken an interest in piano
in the last few years and had taken lessons from a teacher nearby.
Grandpa taught piano lessons for nearly fifty years and had
desperately tried to convert my cousins into pianists, unsuccessfully.
Mom decided not to tell him I was taking lessons from another
teacher. He always philosophized about piano lessons: "No one can
teach you something better than someone who loves you. Besides,
why pay someone else to give piano lessons when I'd give them
for free."

I had heard Grandpa teaching piano students when I stayed with
him. Frustrated students sat at his piano and played their music over
and over again until every note was perfect. Then they practiced
scales and more scales. I didn't want that. I just wanted to be able to
play for enjoyment. Grandpa knew I was trying to play the piano,
but he thought I was teaching myself with some of his telephone
coaching. He listened to me practicing while talking to my mother
on the phone. Then he'd ask to talk to me. "More bass, lots more
bass," he'd comment. Or, "I think you're having trouble with your
fingerings." I still can't understand how he could hear me playing
the piano over the phone when he can barely hear someone talking
right next to him.

I sat down on the piano bench, moving it back and forth, hoping
the action would stir my memory. I couldn't remember what note
the sonatina started on. Grandpa slouched over the piano. His face,
drained of color by his deteriorating liver and poor blood, nearly
matched the white strands of hair that slid across his forehead. We
both were looking down. The ivory keys stared at me like clenched teeth.

"G—that's where it starts," I thought, not letting my mind think of the other notes, hoping they would be there when I needed them. My hands raised, shaking like my grandfather's diabetic ones. The first chord. I played smoothly, my fingers remembering the notes and dynamics, yet feeling as if they never touched the keys. I came to the first repeat, wanting to ignore it as I always did, but knowing Grandpa would notice it, I repeated the section. More notes. More repeats. Finally, the last chord sounded. I couldn't look at Grandpa. At last he broke the silence.

"You will have to carry on the Watt piano playing even if your name is Nyquist. I have some books for you." Startled, I looked at him. Tears crawled from under his frameless bifocals.

"Do you want to go home yet?" interrupted my mother.

"Yeah," he mumbled, standing up and stooping over again to kiss me on the mouth as he always did. I'd always hated it. He kissed so slobbery and had bad breath. When I was younger, I always tried to sneak out of his house without a good-bye kiss or turn my face so he'd kiss my cheek. Today I didn't mind. I pulled his head toward me and kissed him again. On the mouth.

He picked up his hat, warped with stains and dents. His hand tilted it on his head.

"I love you. You're a dear girl," he said as he turned and headed for the front door where the step wasn't so steep. He paused there an instant, then turned back to me and with a twinkle announced, "Your grace notes were a little long."
"Mother! Mother!" I saw my daughter charge through milk bottles, old raggy coats, and kittens on the porch and push the sagging screen door open.

"Yea?" I smiled watching her prance about breaking her self-made, "ladylike" rules.

"I'm a runner-up for homecoming queen! I can't believe it!"

Homecoming queen. Stumbling out of the woods, shouting for seeing a raccoon family, discovering a new mushroom, arranging an ecology program, I could understand. But she had come home entranced by the prospect of becoming homecoming queen!

"And I've just GOT to find a beautiful dress to wear! I'll buy more lipstick, perfume, and nailpolish!"

Boring. Again I was listening to someone talk about cosmetics. But this time it was my daughter.

"That's nice, Tamarra." I could feel the old plastic smile creep onto my face to hide boredom. I hadn't pulled that smile out since high school. And now I was bringing it out for my daughter.

"I've just GOT to tell, Cindy!" Tamarra bounced upstairs over the debris of shoes, clothes, tennis rackets. I watched her artificially curly hair leap from her back to the top of her head like a slinky. I had to smile a semi-bitter smile—but still an attached smile.

We had moved here when her father died; just one year ago, I can't help feeling it was fortunate Jim died—I miss him—nothing would replace the hollow underwater feeling I had now, but this new Tamarra wouldn't understand. She would worry about what her friends would think. Her friends. Such peculiar people ...

"Mother!" Tamarra charged into my thoughts, scattering them across the room. "Cindy's having a party Friday! Can I go?"

Parties. Maybe I could still relate with her ... Maybe we still had something in common ... the Castle, a broken down building far from the world's traffic. Walking past it through fields, feeling the air
breathe autumn on your face, gathering dead wood for the fire, finding a place with trees nearby. Pulling a log out of the woods for Fire’s home. Encircling the heat, talking and laughing by the semi dark camp. Drinking wine, vodka, beer. The scent of marijuana flowing past or stopping to talk individually. As the party dissolves, staggering about picking up assorted bottles and finding orphan ones to adopt temporarily.

Tamarra, misinterpreting my silence, added, 
“Don’t worry; Cindy’s parents will be there.”

“Oh . . . you’re having it at her house?” The Castle dissolved into the birthday parties I had always detested.

“Of course! . . . ,” she laughed. “Oh don’t worry . . . I’d never go to some hang-out or . . . or something . . . can I go?”

I looked at her eager, bright eyed expression, like a small girl wanting to see caged animals.

“Sure.” I could feel a sigh coming and grabbed it back, just before it hit surface. She bubbled again and hopped upstairs to tell Cindy.

Friday rained an assortment of colorful leaves all about me. My eyes read hazy as I mopped my face in the leaves and rolled about with the kittens, all with fiery standing fur and brilliant eyes.

The sun claimed this my day of contemplation, but I had a lot to do before the Wildlife Preservation meeting. Dragging myself up with this thought, I started toward the house . . . the glistening sweet pond beckoned me . . . rolling my jeans, I accepted, doing the jig with the ducks. And I laughed for another hour . . .

“Mother! . . . I’m home!” She barged onto the back porch and on seeing me wallowing on the muddy bank squealed, “Mother! People will see! Have you no dignity? How can you act like a common slut or something?”

Hiding my surprise at her sudden, or seemingly sudden, change of ideas, I calmly shook the mud off, pulled my jeans legs down, brushed the leaves from my hair and asked,

“What—exactly—is a ‘slut’?”

Tamarra blushed, giggled and replied, “You know . . . a . . . a woman who doesn’t save herself for marriage . . . a woman who isn’t clean . . . I didn’t really mean you were one . . . it’s just . . . well . . . embarrassing to see you sitting in the middle of a mud puddle with
dogs, cats and ducks . . . Cindy’s mother would never dare do some-
thing like that!”

Anger blazed through my wet, numbed body, but logic (where it
came from I’ll never know) told me to stay down.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not Cindy’s mother . . . you did similar things
yourself before . . . before we came here.”

One mistake. I said it like an accusation.

“I know, but I was young . . . I mean, things are different now.”

“Why?”

“It just is . . . it’s . . .” She turned around, hesitated and picked up
Delilia—the cat she had barely talked to after six months of living
here. “Can I go to Cindy’s early?”

“Yea.” This time I allowed myself to sigh, but waited till I was far
enough into the thicket before releasing it completely. I then went
to check on the wounded squirrel. As I quietly moved toward her,
she raised her soft brownish red head, and calmly, with trusting eyes,
watched me gently examine her wounded paw. I was right. We would
have to say goodbye soon—probably tomorrow.

I sat with her, stroking her soft, but still coarse, fur, and watched
the sun disappear behind the earth.

Tamarra was already eating dinner when I came in. I hauled out an
apple, some brown bread and cheese, adding a glass of wine.

“Want some?”

“No thanks . . . Cindy said she is afraid some of the boys will bring
alcohol—or, even worse, marijuana or some other drug.”

“What makes her think that?”

“Well, she used to be friends with this guy John . . . but then he
started getting into all sorts of trouble . . . and he’s coming.”

“Then why did she ask him?”

“Well, he trapped her in the hall . . . she always tries to avoid him
but she banged into him in the hall and so she . . . well, she couldn’t
very well not ask him . . . could she?”

“Hummm . . . what will they do to him if he does bring some-
thing?” Here it comes.

“Don’t worry . . . they’ll probably just make him leave.”

Relief devoured most of my tension. I finished eating, and started
the formula for the motherless puppy I had found.
"Yuck! . . . this story's disgusting!" Tammarra flung her magazine across the table, turned away from it and sat scowling.
"What's wrong with it? . . . What's it about?"
"A girl who acts like a little whore—and doesn't get married or ANYthing!"
"Oh."
"I mean she lived with men!"
"Humm."
"Did people really do that back then? And smoke marijuana illegally and drink before they were 18?"
"Yeah." Where is she getting this? What is she leading up to? . . . maybe I can divert her. "What do you think about marriage, Tammarra?"
"Oh! It would be wonderful! Cindy has been looking in catalogs at all the dresses . . . she's going to let me borrow them."
Thinking I succeeded in maneuvering her thoughts, I went to feed puppy. He had long, wiggley fur, and a tail almost as big as his body. He laughingly hobble-limped forward and slurped his formula all over his white freckled nose.
"Mother!"
Sweet puppy, I'll call you Jim."
"Yeah?"
"What does a marriage license say? . . . Could I see yours?"
Jim started choking, giving me an excuse for delay. But it wasn't long enough.
"Well . . . Tell me where it is and I'll get it myself."
"Tammarra, I . . . " I what?
"Yea? . . . . . . Where is it?"
"I don't . . . I don't have one—I never did." If she had been ignorant until this point, my silence filled her in.
"Oh, mother!"
"You need to remember . . . we loved you just as much—maybe more—than married people."
"All my friends parents are married."
"Cindy's mother is divorced."
"But when she had Cindy she was married."
"And now she's divorced."
Jim stopped chewing my sweatshirt, and curled up in my lap for sleep.

"I'll be back by twelve."

"Right."

I opened my eyes to the morning moon and rain clouds. On missing the bluejay's yell, I glanced at the clock—4:17.

I put on my blue flannel, elephant decorated dress, found my shawl, ignored shoes and crept out to see the squirrel.

As I lifted the cage door, she jerked awake, sending a clatter throughout the woods. Reluctantly I stepped aside. She looked at me, comparing me to the opened cage and darkened thicket. She leaped out onto the dewy grass, and hobbled over to the edge of the woods. With coarse fur sending waves down her spine, she turned back. Her eyes glittered at me and blinked. My cold body was warmed by it, and the sun overtook the rain.