

Prodigal Mother

In the deepest recesses of my heart, old memories are stored like forbidden Polaroids: my fifth birthday party (princess-themed), playing in a sand pit with some other grimy grade-schoolers, finger-painting in a bright classroom. A smiling blonde woman haunts the most intentionally forgotten of these images...brushing each other's hair, giggling while we eat ice cream, reading story books on a faded blue couch.

Then, the blonde-haired woman appears in darker illustration...leaning over an unfamiliar car, grinning at a strange man... muffled shouts from a nearby room, then the unmistakable sound of sobs; and finally, a heavy brown door slamming shut, the roar of a baby-blue Volkswagen's engine, a curly-haired man and I sneaking glances out the window, stifling anguish.

And now, five years later, the blonde woman sits across from me on a faded blue couch, her hands folded awkwardly in her lap, an uncertain smile unnaturally stretched across her face. A person may observe that woman and I bear striking resemblance; a fool may infer us to be mother and daughter.

The curly-haired man, aged much too soon, sits next to me, tense. My father is polishing his shotgun, but we both know it's just for show. The sharpest of eyes may have been able to see the pain behind his hard expression, as if he had known this alien woman once before, but his memories are as deeply masked as mine.

In almost comic obviousness, Pamela is incapable of understanding just how deeply she's hurt the ones who loved her most.

A long silence elapses.

She lets out a tiny cough. "Nice weather?" She phrases the statement as a question. Her eyes ask something else. "Been having a lot of these days over the past few years," my dad replies flatly, answering. The words sound foreign and harsh.

Pamela's eyes drop to the carpet, letting his implications assault her. "The stain is gone," she half-smiles.

"Apparently Richard is, too," my dad says. His blatancy unnerves me.

Tears are welling up in Miriam's eyes. "I ... I'm so sorry," she begins, her voice breaking. She never did make it on Broadway. "I know I've f-failed," she sniffs, forcing her voice to break. "I d-don't expect anything from you."

"Then what are you doing here?" my dad asks, speaking for both of us. The feelings I've pushed away for ten years unsettle me.

"I ... thought, maybe..."

My father waits for her to finish. She falters.

"I just...it just... all fell apart." She waits, seeing if we will accept these half-formed sentences as an appropriate replacement for five years of loneliness.

We don't.

"We were just kids ourselves," The clock chimes. She blows her nose dramatically.

My father appears calm, but his eyes are on fire. "We were," he offered, tight-lipped. "You, however, still are." He's weighing something in his mind. I can only guess.

They sit.

Pamela's eyes accost us, searching. "Dan...I...say something. Please," she begs.

I can see my father's decisions forming now. Lose control, let her win. Keep a cool head, regret the unsaid.

"Dan." Weighted silence.

"DAN." It's an unmistakable order.

And that's where he loses it.

"Five years, Pamela." His hands, coiled in his lap, ball themselves into fists. "Five years of abandonment. Separation. Irreconcilable differences. Five years of whatever fancy name you want to stick on it and you and you still have the audacity to bark at me like I'm still your domestic whim."

He sighs, and swears incredulously. She already knows what he wants to say, but doesn't stop him.

"Why are you here?" he asks. "We both know you got bored of playing house with us. I hope you didn't leave your fancy car and fancy boyfriend too far. You decided where you belonged five years ago, and it's never been on this old blue couch."

She's shocked, I know, and he's won. She turns her watery eyes to mine.

"Jules?" she asks. I recognize her plea: the troubled swineherd asking for forgiveness; the return of the prodigal mother.

I stare.

I think of what I could tell her: of five years of pain and secrets, of awkward mothers-day questions and embarrassing trips to Kroger's for Kotex.

I stare.

The clock ticks.

My mind begins to store fresh memories in those hidden bowels... a blonde haired woman walking to a heavy brown door; a curly haired man, stone-faced, watching her go; the roar of a baby-blue Volkswagen's engine-and then, two figures locked in strong embrace, tears flowing of freedom.