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Palshaw

English IV

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High as a Kite

The phone rings and rings. Just before it goes to voicemail, my mom picks up.

“Hi sweetie, hold on let me call you in a minute. He’s dying right now.”

“Okay.” Hanging up the phone, I sit for a moment, stunned.

*How is she holding it together? I’m not.* My hands shake as I put my phone down. I get up off the faded pink velvet couch, discarding the dark blue down comforter I’ve been wrapped in for the last hour.

The linoleum of the kitchen floor creaks under my bare feet. *What am I doing?* My phone buzzes and I rush back to the couch to see my mom calling again. A picture flashes on the screen with her caller ID; she sits in a chair holding the head of my dad’s big black dog, her face screwed up into a ridiculous expression. I see the laughter in her eyes and imagine her now, tired eyes, brown hair peppered with silver, shoulders slumped with grief.

“Hey,” I squeak.

“Hi sweetheart. You called right as he passed away.” I hear the sadness in her voice, and my aunt sobs in the background. “Hold on let me step outside.”

The background noise quiets, “Are you ok?”

“I said my goodbyes.”

“That’s good.” My voice breaks but I’m not crying yet. Trying my best to hold it together I tell my mom I’ll let her go. My phone hits my foot as it falls.

*The open kitchen bustled with activity. Somewhere a child screamed in delight. The smells of burnt coffee, various pies, and turkey filled the air. There were people everywhere. They streamed in and out giving greetings and hugs as we worked. Dancing around a group of my cousins sipping Martinelli's, masher in hand, I moved toward the giant steaming pot filled with lumps of starch. A hand on my shoulder startled me and I turned, only to be enveloped in a giant hug. Stale cigarette smoke and booze washed over me and stung my eyes. The glasses strung around his neck dug into my face. I held my breath and hoped he'd let me go soon.*

*When he finally released me I gasped air silently and stared up into the eyes of my uncle Chris. When he started talking, I knew he was drunk. His words slurred just slightly and he had to steady himself on the counter. Instantly, my kitchen duties were done and my sole purpose was to keep Judith from finding out he showed up drunk again.*

*Abandoning my potatoes, I lead him out onto the spacious patio surrounded by luscious green vines and trees. He took a seat and started rambling about some screenplay he wrote. I stood by the door, nodding and pretending to listen intently.*

*Judith gave my mom an earful later, but at least I kept him from making a scene.*

I don't feel anything. Somehow I end up on the ground, leaning up against the couch. Numb with loss. The lofty living room seems to grow as I shrink, like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

I reach for my phone. I can't breathe. I call Anna.

“Hey Lu? What’s up?”

I reach for words but they don’t come. All I can do is sob into the phone.

“Lu, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

I lean forward, pulling my knees up and putting head between them. I catch my breath enough to say, “He’s gone. My uncle’s gone.”

“Oh Lu.” She has so much pity in her voice. I can almost see the look on her face. Her eyebrows would pull together, and she would bite the inside of her lip, pushing her small, dainty hands into her mousey brown hair.

I just sit there, on the floor, and cry.

She lets me.

“I wish I could just drive over and give you a hug and make it all better.” She starts to get a little choked up.

I pull my myself together enough to ask, “What are you doing right now?”

“Hanging out with some friends.”

“I should let you go.”

“If you need to talk, or just cry you know I’m here for you.”

“I know.”

“Call me later okay?”

I say okay even though I know I won’t. I don’t need to drag her down.

I sit on the floor, the edge of the couch digging into my back as tears dry on my face. My teeth chatter audibly. I think I’m cold but the shivers running through my body don’t come with goosebumps.

The house feels so empty. None of the lights are on and the heat's off. If I didn't know any better I'd think it was empty.

*I listened to my mom's muffled voice and pacing footsteps, took another bite of pancake, and put my head down on the cold hard slab of dark granite that dominates the center of our warm kitchen. Closing my eyes and chewing slowly, I listened to my dad's lean fingers on his keyboard letting the one sided conversation going on in the background be drowned out.*

*"Lucy can I borrow you for a minute!" She called out from the bedroom.*

*My eyes flew open and I hopped off the stool, letting my fork drop with a clatter onto the plate. I jogged down the hallway, feet padding on the red runner.*

*She was standing in the entryway to the room. Beckoning me over, she held the phone to her chest. She looked stressed--Chris had been drinking again--her thick brown hair falling out of the braid she had it in. She had bags under her eyes and more sun spots than I remember. She told me softly how she needed me to tell her that we needed to go, loudly, so she could get off the phone.*

*I did it and she says into the phone, "Look, Chris, I really need to go," and hung up.*

Picture after picture, happy smiling kids. Flipping through mindlessly, drifting in thought, I stop at one image in particular. The weight of the picture with its white frame and distorted color, feels familiar. In the picture, three girls squish together taking up the entire photograph. With tongues stuck straight out, the laughter radiates from the image.

The girl on the left has dark hair and wears a party hat. The girl on the right wears large round glasses and clings tightly to the other girls. The one in the middle is the spitting image of me, mischievous smile and all.

Beneath this image is a pile of at least a dozen more. Two tall blonde girls stretch out on a bed. A bleach blonde with tan skin and a carefree smile. A beautiful man and a young girl. The pictures go on and on.

I look down the table at the boxes and boxes. Thousands of negatives and prints.

“He was prolific.” My mom says as she walks into the dining room of the airbnb we’re staying in.

“I had no idea he was a photographer.”

“He dabbled when he went to film school in New York.” She takes a seat next to me. Setting down a mug of tea I eagerly wrap my hands around.

“I wish I could have talked to him about his work.”

“ I wish you could have know him when he wasn’t drinking.” She picks up the print of a busy street in New Orleans. A woman stands dead center with a headdress with five foot feathers towering over her. “He had an amazing eye.”

Pulling another box toward me, I open the lid and beginning to rummage through it.

My mom pauses as she pulls out a picture of Chris and one of his boyfriends. “He was so beautiful. It’s such a shame he felt he had to drown himself in alcohol.”

I lean over to rest my head on her shoulder and we sit there rummaging through box after box of photographs.