

I can't remember the last time I had a cigarette. I think it was around 1987, when I was sitting at a bar with my 21-year-old brother and his friends trying to look cool, even though I was really just an 18-year-old punk with a fake ID.

Nonetheless, I found myself inhaling the toxic smoke as I stood in my screened-in back porch. As much as I hated to admit it, the stupid little bastard calmed me. I could feel its smoky fingers scratching at my windpipe and clawing at the inside of my lungs, but somehow, I felt less tense. It was about time, I suppose.

The phone started to ring, but I didn't answer it. I didn't have anything to say to anyone. I flicked the ashes of my receding cigarette onto the carpet as the phone clicked over to the answering machine.

Dan!

I sighed, pressing my thumb and forefinger into my eyes.

You're really beginning to piss me off, Dan. Jesus Christ, you say you want custody of your daughter, and you can't even come pick her up when you're supposed to?

Her voice was like pins in my eardrums. I put the cigarette to my lips again.

Where the hell are you anyway, Dan? You're probably just sitting next to the phone listening to me bitch because you're too much of a pussy to answer the phone.

I exhaled quickly, a stream of smoke blowing through my nose. She had that part right.

I'm keeping Leah this weekend. You can have her next weekend, if you decide to be a responsible adult for once. Asshole. There was a click, and then a beep.

I dropped the cigarette butt onto the carpet and ground it in with my toe angrily. The way she talked about our daughter, my daughter, like she was some kind of possession. *You can have her next weekend.* What was she, a lawnmower that I needed to borrow?

But she was right. I should have been picking Leah up. But I just needed some time to... get myself together.

*

"Lighten up, man! It's Motley Crue!! Can you at least try to enjoy yourself?" Paul was never one for pep talks. It was the winter of 1993, and a concert was the last thing I wanted to be dragged to.

“I don’t see why I have to go,” I mumbled, adjusting the leather jacket Paul forced on me. “And I don’t see why I have to wear this jacket.” Paul smiled his signature crooked grin and smacked my back.

“You look good, Dan. Come on; forget about Emily for the night. Just enjoy yourself, alright?”

I sighed. Emily. As in, the girl who just dumped me to “focus on her career.” The girl I was in love with. The reason I would rather be at home getting shit-faced in front of my TV than going to some concert wearing a stiff leather jacket.

“Whatever you say, man,” I said. He smacked my back again, grinning.

The minute we stepped foot in that place, he was off. “I’ll go get us a couple of beers!” he shouted over the noise before disappearing into the crowd. I stood against a railing while I waited for him. It had to have been about half an hour before I realized that he wouldn’t be coming back. I shook my head as I went to go buy my own beer instead.

“Hi,” I heard from behind me. I turned around to a girl, close to my age, smiling. “You dropped this,” she said, holding out a wallet. My hands flew to my pockets, feeling the worn spot where my wallet should have been.

“Oh, wow,” I said, taking it from her. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” she smiled. I smiled a little, too. She was pretty. Her hair was kind of brown and kind of blonde, and she had a little birthmark above her lip that moved when she talked. She finished her beer, wiping off the corner of her mouth with her thumb and tossing the empty cup in the trash can next to us. I hesitated for a second, trying to decide if I should keep talking to her. She hesitated too, nodding at me before turning to leave.

“Hey!” I said quickly. “Can I... buy you a drink?” She turned back, smiling again.

“Sure!” she said, brushing her brown-blond hair out of her face and sticking out her hand. “I’m Hannah. I like your jacket, by the way.” I shook her hand.

“I’m Dan.” I inspected my arm as we shook hands. “The jacket... my friend made me wear it,” I said with a grin. “I actually hate it.” She covered her mouth with her hand, laughing.

“Okay, good, because it’s awful.” We both laughed as I stripped off the jacket and tossed it in the trash can.

*

It had been so long since Leah was at my house. My house showed that. The furniture was stained with God knows what, the wallpaper was peeling, and the refrigerator was stocked with some olives and beer.

I didn't even know where to start. How did you make a house suitable for an eleven-year-old girl? I had to clean, that was for sure. I had to buy some food, and probably some toys. What did eleven-year-olds like? Were they still into Barbies, or was that too eight-years-old? Did she like makeup? No, she was too young for makeup. Wasn't she? It was all so overwhelming. I ran my hand through my graying hair and sighed, pulling out another cigarette and sticking it between my lips

"I'll be a chain-smoker in no time," I mumbled, lighting it and inhaling deeply.

*

Her parents didn't like me. I met them a month after we started dating. She warned me ahead of time.

"They're... really strict," Hannah said as she led me to her parents' front door. "Don't take offense if they're... not as nice as you're used to."

"It's fine," I said, knocking on their front door. "It'll be fine." I kissed her, covering her unsure lips with mine.

"Well isn't that charming," a sarcastic voice cut the moment short. I hadn't realized that her dad had answered the door. His bushy mustache failed to cover his grimace.

"Sorry sir," I said politely, sticking out my hand. "I'm Dan." He glared at my hand and cleared his throat before turning and walking back into the house. My hand slowly dropped as I looked at Hannah. She shrugged.

"Sorry," she whispered.

I spent the night with my teeth biting down on my tongue so I wouldn't say how I felt. It wasn't easy. Two hours of questioning me. I felt like I was in court.

"Tell me you have a college degree, son," her father said, leaning on his elbows and staring at me. I slowly shook my head.

"No sir," I said. "I started working at the garage part-time when I was sixteen, and they offered me a full-time position when I graduated high school." Both of Hannah's parents dropped their forks and looked at each other.

“Well that’s no good,” her mother said, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “No good at all.” I looked at Hannah. She kept her eyes fixed on her plate. I threw my fork down.

“I don’t need people to tell me what to do,” I said, standing up. “I have my own parents for that.” They stared at me, stunned.

“Excuse me, but you are a guest in our home! That is no way to talk to us!” her mother gasped.

“We invited you here. No one’s forcing you to stay!” her father stated smugly. I saw Hannah out of the corner of my eye, picking at her thumbnail and looking at her plate.

“Come on, Hannah,” I said. “We’re leaving.” She didn’t look up. I nudged her. “Hannah, let’s go!” She didn’t move. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her up. “Now!” I lead her outside and slammed the door behind me.

*

Men aren’t big grocery shoppers. I discovered that as the automatic doors of the supermarket opened and hundreds of women hurried along the aisles. I didn’t even know where to start. It was so overwhelming. I stood in the entrance like an idiot, just looking around.

“Excuse me,” I heard. I turned to a small old lady behind me with a huge shopping cart, waiting for me to move so she could get past.

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I stepped aside. I watched her push her cart, determined, and decided that she looked like she knew what she was doing. I followed her discreetly into the produce section, watching as she inspected a bundle of bananas. I walked past them. Kids didn’t like bananas.

I found myself wandering into the snack aisle, and I filled a cart with sugary junk food. I figured it would work. I mean, kids liked junk food... right?

I pushed my cart to a register and stood in line for a few minutes.

“Sir?” the cashier said to me when I finally reached the front. “This is the express checkout line. You can only have twelve items or less.”

“Oh...” I said, eyeing my cart. “I guess I’m a little off.” She smiled sympathetically at me and flipped off the light at her register.

“I’ll check you out anyway,” she said. “I’m about to go on break.”

She scanned the items and I started to place them in plastic bags, not sure if I was supposed to do that or if it was her job.

“Your total comes out to \$157.97,” she said when she finished. My heart sank.

“You’re kidding me!” I said. “All I bought was junk food!”

“All food is expensive these days, sir,” she said. I shook my head as I handed over my credit card.

*

I went out to my mailbox and forced the rusted door open. I grabbed the few pieces of mail and flipped through them as I walked back up to our house. The electric bill, the phone bill, a letter for Hannah, a letter for Hannah, a letter for Hannah... I stopped, examining each of the brightly-colored envelopes addressed to Hannah, and my heart sank. Letters to Hannah. March 16th. Hannah’s birthday.

I sped into the house, hoping I could scrape something together before she got back from the store. I dug around for something, anything, to make it look like I hadn’t forgotten. I pulled out a small peanut butter cookie that I found in the drawer and stuck the nub of an old birthday candle in it. I heard her pull up the driveway, and I lit the candle with a match.

“Happy birthday!” I yelled excitedly as she walked in the front door. I held out the pathetic little cookie, and she examined it with a frown.

“Dan,” she said, looking up at me. Daggers. Daggers sprung from her eyes and penetrated my face. “I’m allergic to peanuts.” My heart dropped again as she licked her fingers and pinched out the flame of the candle.

“I can’t believe you forgot my birthday,” she mumbled as she brushed passed me, entered her bedroom, and slammed the door shut.

*

I really did try to clean. I coughed as I dusted off the mantle and the stupid dust particles stirred from their original places and settled elsewhere. There really wasn’t a point to it all, I decided. I rearranged my furniture in the most welcoming way possible, put some flowers from the backyard in a mug, and plopped them on the coffee table. It was sort of homey, in a poor artist’s apartment kind of way. At least, that’s what I told myself.

I put Leah’s school picture in an old frame that I found and placed it on the mantle. The single dimple in her left cheek mimicked my own. She looked so cute and happy in the picture. I wondered if she would feel that way with me.

I pictured her walking into the house and crinkling her nose. Turning on the TV and ignoring me the whole time. Calling her mother every night and complaining about how stupid and old and boring her father was. I pictured the worst.

I couldn't let that happen. I needed her in my life; she needed me in her life. We would do stuff together, go to the park or go shopping or do whatever eleven-year-old girls liked to do. She would stay in my life, I decided. She would stay in my life for good.

*

"I'm pregnant." The words hit me like a hammer to the throat.

"You're what?" I spat. She just looked down. I watched as she covered her mouth, trying to prevent a cry from escaping her lips. I suddenly felt resentment towards her. How dare she get pregnant? In the back of my mind I knew it was just as much my fault as hers, but I couldn't bring myself to blame anyone but her.

"We can't afford a child, Hannah," I said quietly. She didn't say anything for a while.

"I know," she finally said. "But what are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

*

I woke up on the floor of my living room. I sat up, stretching, as I looked at the rain pounding on my windows. Ever since I was a kid I liked sleeping on the floor. I think it came from the tornado warnings we used to have, when my family would sleep on the floor in the basement to be safe. There was something calming about all of us being together like that. I knew that I would be okay, even if a tornado ripped through our house, because I was with my family.

I wondered if I would continue this tradition with Leah. We could set up a little tent in the basement and roast marshmallows over a candle and wait for the storm to pass. Then I remembered the safety I felt with my family and realized I hadn't seen Leah in years. I couldn't imagine her feeling the same sense of security with me.

*

She was so tiny. Six pounds, eleven ounces. Barely bigger than my two hands together. She stretched her tiny fingers out and I held them in mine. Her nose was bright red as she recovered from her recent crying fit. I looked down at my daughter, and I willed myself to hate her. I couldn't.

Reality—my lack of money, our lack of space, our lack of family support—disappeared as I stared at her fragile, newly born body. As much as I needed to send her away, put her up for adoption, anything, I couldn't. She was just so beautiful.

*

The phone rang again. The ringing pissed me off. I grabbed the phone off the receiver and huffed a quick, "Hello?"

"Oh, so you decided to answer this time?" Her voice caused a throbbing pain between my eyebrows. I started to massage it with my thumb.

"I wasn't home when you called yesterday," I lied. "Sorry."

"Dan," Hannah sighed, pausing for a second. "I don't know if this is a good idea."

"Don't back out on me now, Hannah," I said. "Leah needs her father in her life."

"You're a mess," she said quietly. "Are you sure you can handle this?" I looked around my house that I had so badly tried to clean up. It was still pathetic. I stared at the picture of Leah that sat on my mantle, and I took a deep breath.

"Bring her over later," I said sternly before hanging up the phone.

*

Leah was only four-years-old. The dimple in her left cheek disappeared as her smile turned into a frown.

"Where are you going, daddy?" she said innocently, looking up at me. I patted her head.

"I have to go away, Leah," I said, trying to steady my shaking voice.

"But why?" she asked. I couldn't even look at her.

"Because mommy and I decided it'd be better if I did." Hannah stood a few feet from us, leaning against the wall.

"Mommy?" Leah said, turning to her. Hannah nodded.

"Daddy has to go now," she said flatly. I squatted down and pulled Leah into a hug.

"When will you come back?" she asked. I took a second to steady my voice again.

"I don't know, Leah."

*

It was agonizing to wait. There was so much that I could have been doing—cleaning up more, trying to make food, anything—but I didn't. I just sat on my couch and stared at the TV that wasn't on.

You're a mess. Her voice rang in my head. *Are you sure you can handle this?*

I knew I could handle it. At least, I thought that I could. Maybe I couldn't.

I picked up Leah's picture off the mantle and studied it. She was so innocent. I touched the dimple on my left cheek as I studied the one on hers. We were so alike, but we were so different. She wasn't a screw-up like me.

I pictured what it would be like if she were here. I'd still be working at the car garage, I'd still be struggling to keep the house tidy, and I'd still be a mess. I pictured how she would feel being around her messed up father. I suddenly felt bad for her.

She didn't deserve to be in such bad company. She deserved the world. She was my daughter. My own blood. She deserved better than me.

I quickly ran to the phone and dialed the numbers. The last ring was just started to fade when a rushed voice answered.

"We're about to leave now. Dear Lord, give me a break, Dan!" Hannah said angrily. I took a deep breath and pressed my fingers into my eyes.

"I don't want you to bring her," I said.

"Why, are you drunk? Did you find something better to do? This is so typical of you. Always backing out on your responsibilities," she snapped.

"She doesn't deserve to be stuck living with me," I said. "She deserves to be with you. You're a good mom, Hannah." She was silent for a while.

"Are you sure?" she finally said quietly. "I know how much she means to you."

"I'm no good for her," I said. "It'd be better for her if she stayed with you. Permanently." All I could hear was breathing. No words, just breathing.

"It used to be so good, Dan," she said. "What happened?" I couldn't think of an answer. I knew there wasn't an answer. I didn't say anything.

"Thank you," she broke the silence. "Call me if you need me." And then she hung up.

I let the phone linger at my ear for a few seconds until the dial tone forced me to hang up. I shuffled out onto my porch and stood at the window. I pulled a cigarette out of the carton on the table and stuck it between my lips. I lit the end, sucking in deeply and letting the toxins fill the emptiness I felt.

"Chain smoker," I mumbled. "It was only a matter of time."