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AN EPIPHANY

My father takes off his shirt and wipes the sweat from his brow, after planting the roses by the pool in the new Florida home that he built after leaving us stranded in Pine Bluff. He boasts a Gulf Shores tan, but his face is rosy from exertion. His inky curls dangle over his bronzed forehead, and he has not taken the time to rake them back into a pile on top of his head. Even in the stark, directional sunlight he is stunningly handsome and fit. He is the kind of man who exudes confidence and invites envy. He notices his new wife aiming her camera at him. He is caught in the crosshairs of a Carl Zeiss lens. It's too late to pose or change anything, despite his quick reflexes, too late to smile broadly or mask his feelings, for she has snapped the picture.

Forty years later, my stepmother, Roxanne, and I are sitting by the same pool and rose garden. We're going through old pictures of my father, who has just passed away. I had made the long drive to King's Bay and Crystal River to go through dad's things and decide what mementos I wanted to keep. My siblings did not make the trip, but I selected two items: the rose paperweight, a charming heirloom, designed by my father when he worked in his father's glass business, and the old blue bowling ball that reminded me of my happiest memories with dad—maybe I could finally learn to bowl in honor of him. Yet it was the picture that I wanted the most, and when I came to it, I flinched.

What a photo essay. The only snapshot in a stack of a hundred in which he was not life-of-the-party-radiant. Crumpled and dog-eared, to my eye it showed his unseen self and revealed the uncertainty that he must have felt, the troubled glint in his eye, and the tumor of insecurity that he kept buried next to his heart, swaddled in smoldering swaths of septic secrecy.

My grieving stepmother glares at me, pencil-thin furrows lining her puckered brow, sweat-stained strands of greying hair dangling over her eyes. "Why this one?"

"It shows a different side of him. A side he hid."

"What? I don't see that."

"I've never seen this expression in real life. He looks so vulnerable, so lost, the opposite of the way I think of him," I stop to rub my tired eyes and, squinting, to take a closer look.

My stepmother comes so close to me I can feel her breath on my neck. "And you want that?"

"I need that. Now I'm seeing a side of my father I didn't know existed. A part that explains things."

"Explains what?"

The pool filter kicks on, turbulent ripples churning on the water's surface. "Maybe there were things you don't know about." Flipping to a picture of dad shooting baskets on his new Florida driveway made of polished stone pavers, I recall the time when we were playing basketball with some of my middle school friends at a neighborhood park.

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He boasted that he had been a high school all-star, and he would teach us a thing or two about basketball. I was just 12 or 13 and I pushed myself to run faster and jump higher to win his approval. When I put a move on dad, drove the lane and scored, he lowered his shoulder and tackled me under the basket, incensed. My arms and hands were scraped, and my head ached. Lying on my back, moaning, the kids stood around me, staring in astonishment, as blood oozed from my wounds. The basket and backboard seemed to be moving, and my friend's faces were long and distorted. Dizzy, I managed to roll over on my side, as my friends helped me to my feet.

"Leave him alone!" Dad yelled, picking up the basketball. "This is not a game for softies!"

Reluctantly, the kids let go of me. Then I knew I could never show him up, never challenge him, and I knew how to survive: let him win.



I stare into the water, reflecting on the past, and put the pieces of him together. Dad gave up several prestigious sports scholarships to have a family, and he must have harbored resentment for his own unrealized dreams and possessed a need to prove his greatness repeatedly.

Roxanne shakes her head, her lips parted, "What's wrong with you?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"Your father was a great man. Why tear him down?"

"Sure, he was great. But why does my mother still hate him after all these years, and all my siblings, why do they despise him? And why weren't we ever able to get along with the man? Was it always our fault?"



From the lanai, I walk to the far end of the pool, where a statue of the Greek goddess, Athena, graces the entrance steps. I try to imagine my father working in the fading red roses, their petals falling on a smooth expanse of alabaster concrete, where geckos warm themselves and the shallow water ruffles in a burst of breeze. The hot sun simmers on the surface of the water, creating a reflection so bright I shade my eyes. I take one last look at the photo—the photo of a man who had always been complicated, a man who conjured mixed feelings of adoration and fear—and, for the first time, I feel as though I am beginning to understand him.

My stepmother joins me. "You know, your father and I had a good life together. And I can honestly say he was the greatest thing that ever happened to me!"

"I know, and in many ways, he was good to us, too, and I always knew he loved me, but—"

"But what?"

"Have you forgotten all the struggles you had in the beginning, the alcohol, and the abuse? Yes, you helped to tame him, but it was too late for us, for the family. You have no idea what we went through, after he left us for you. We lost our home and barely made ends meet while the two

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of you hightailed it to Florida and built this fine home. So, no, he wasn't always great."

"There's no point in talking to you. You're full of resentment. And you know everything."

"If so, it's a disease I inherited from him." I kneel on one knee by the roses, pick up a fallen but perfect petal and hold it in my open palm. It's delicate, a bit faded, but still beautiful. I realize why he had tried so hard to appear in control, and why everything he touched had to be a shimmering reflection of his superiority, why the flower beds had to be immaculate.



It must have been hard for him to start a family when he was so young and unsure, and to move to a big city up north; so hard to parent us kids when he had no manual to guide him, other than the flawed playbook he had inherited from his parents, who clearly favored his older brother. It must have been a challenge to deal with the temptations of the world, to navigate the bewildering array of problems and crises that life hurled at him, while trying to be a good husband to his young wife, a beautiful, but shy woman, who never wanted to leave the backwoods of Arkansas.

Trying to sort out my feelings, I get to my feet and stand at the edge of the pool to stare into the sparkling crystal depths, down to the blurry diamond etchings on the blue floor. "Dad, now I can see it from your perspective. You were overwhelmed, weren't you? Wounded? You carried unseen scars. And you were hurt because I failed to fulfill the dreams you projected onto me. If only you could have admitted it."

Still cradling the picture in my hand, I study his expression, droplets of sweat smudging the roses, smudging his face, smudging my memory banks. For the first time, I feel genuine empathy for my father. It scares me, but I make a conscious effort to release the past, my feelings of abandonment, and the pent-up anger that knots my heart, as the picture falls into the water, the gentle current of understanding and acceptance bubbling through my body.

I mouth the words I wish I could have said when he was alive, "Dad, it wasn't right the way you treated us, but I'm sorry for not being more tolerant of your mistakes and growing pains. I never gave you a break, did I?"

Roxanne's shadow looms over me. "Just who do you think you're talking to?"

I turn to face her. I see the agony in her face, the grief in her eyes, the streaks of mascara soiling her cheeks. "Myself. Just talking to myself and letting it all go."