

Hardly Famous

I rarely saw my father anymore. After the hurricane shocked the city, millions were displaced, as the water seemed to flush the cultural melting pot across the country. I was forced to temporarily replace my middle school friends, as my family pushed away from the only city I ever knew. My father returned one day to “retrieve all of our belongings”, but we all knew that nothing was left. It would be nearly thirteen years until I saw him again. The day he called was painfully hot, as the sun beamed on the heavily gentrified metropolitan streets. The heat was oppressive and wearying, as the humidity created one large oven out of the city. Older women held black umbrellas high in the sky, as young skateboarders drenched in sweat winded their way through the morning commuters. The city was just refortifying, making its way back to what it once was, and the thought of my father was increasingly fleeting. However, the pain resurfaced as three beeps signaled his reentrance into my life.

Apprehensively, I agreed to what I hoped to be a quick lunch at P.F. Chang’s downtown. The restaurant was decent at best, but being a nationwide chain, it was marked by two massive stone statues of wild horses. The stone erections centered the large entrance between them, and I decided to park my bicycle just behind the bushes that bordered these unnecessary structures. I locked up my bike, and slowly opened the door and approached the hostess.

“How many?” she blurted out in annoyance, only glancing up slightly from her phone.

“I’m meeting somebody. Have you seen a dark haired man in a—“ I stuttered, and stared at my feet, trying not to focus too heavily on her large breasts that threatened to pop out of her black dress shirt at any moment.

“In the back” she interrupted me, simply raised her thumb, as if hitchhiking, and pointed it towards a few booths in the back.

I slid around the hostess counter, and through the elderly couple standing eagerly in the middle of the entrance to the dining room floor and made my way to the back booths. My heart began to pound out of my chest, as I slowly slid my ragged tennis shoes over the maroon carpeting of the restaurant. I finally reached the back tables, and found none occupied by only one man. I looked for almost two full minutes before retracting my hopeful nature and emotion. How could I have been so naïve? Did I really think he would be there for me now? As I swung around to head back towards the entrance, a slurred voice yelled out.

“Ryan, over here!”

I slowly turned to face my father. His hairline had receded profoundly, but he grew the back of his hair long so he could fold it over the top. It was a jet-black pseudo-Trump hairstyle that exemplified his desire to be 20 years younger than he actually was. His face was aged with wrinkles deeply indented on his exposed forehead, and dark circles seemed to perpetually exist beneath his bloodshot eyes. He wore a black dress shirt and a well-fitted black blazer that hugged his shoulders ever so slightly. His stomach protruded beyond the blazer, and forced the buttons on his shirt to work harder than they were meant to. He wore a single gold chain around his neck and a large gold belt buckle with the initials “RKF” that dazzled in the sunlight. Exposed on his wrist was a bright gold Rolex watch with a deep blue face. He had always loved to show his wealth, and I could see little had changed.

With great enthusiasm he belted out again, “Ryan... son, how the hell are ya’?”

I didn't say anything and slowly approached his extended hand, and gave him a firm handshake. We had never hugged, or showed any outward affection for that matter; it just wasn't the type of relationship we had, so this gesture certainly did not bother me. As I came closer to the booth I noticed he wasn't alone. A perky bleach-blonde woman dangerously younger than my father sat in the booth. Her powdery face and skintight tank top forced me to recall the women I spent time with at the club with my friends a few days earlier. She sported diamonds everywhere. Her earrings were the size of grapes, containing remnants of any precious gem you could imagine. Her hands and wrists were adorned with glittering colors, and as she faced me she simply giggled. Another gold-digger I thought, as I slid into the booth, preparing for the awkward encounter.

It was early for a gin and tonic, but I indulged my red-faced father and the giggling ditzy bitch to his left.

“So, how have you been? Anything new going on in your world?” My father continued to slur, and acted as if we had been together only a few days before, not thirteen years ago.

“I just graduated from the local college here, and I am heading off to Costa Rica in June for a service trip with some friends.” I spit the words out quickly, as I tapped my foot underneath the table.

It sickened me to hear those words come out of my mouth. Was I supposed to act like he had been there? Was I supposed to pretend like he hadn't left my mother, and three siblings stranded and penniless? I hadn't told my hard-working mother, who had pushed all four of her children through the education system alone, that I was having this lunch. My drink couldn't come fast enough.

“Wonderful! You look great, son. You're really startin' to fill out into a handsome young man. Must be my great genes, don't ya' think Jess?” He pushed his elbow slightly into the arm of his young date, who simply smiled and continued to stir her olives around her dirty martini glass.

My father tapped his fingers on the table, realizing he was going to have to do most of the talking. “Well, LA has been nice... if you were wonderin'. Business is great and Jess and I here are thinkin' bout tying the knot soon. What'd you think about that, huh?”

I shook my head slightly and flipped the page to my menu, “That's great. Really great for you both.”

He took another sip from his scotch and engaged again, “How are your brothers? Assumin' they're all outta school now since you jus' finished”

I cracked a little now as my body began to swell with resentment, “Yeah, they're all done. Not that you really care.”

As soon as my drink hit the table, I swooped it up and drank its entirety before calling the waitress over to order one more. I listened to my father spill out what my mother always called his “façade of ingenuity” for a while.

The conversation went along like this for about fifteen minutes, or for five gin and tonics.

“Woah there Ry’, a few more of those and Jess and I’ll be carryin’ you out of here.” He laughed after this snarky remark.

“Oh, so now you’re worried about me all of a sudden?” I snapped uncharacteristically, and with deep sarcasm.

Gin makes me angry. It always has, and maybe I subconsciously decided to order it because I was angry. I really hated him right now. I felt heat rising from my feet, and through my stomach and my neck began to itch. I rubbed my throat intensely as I watched my father in silence.

“I knew this would come up. You know I feel terrible about not being there for you and your brothers these past few years, but I didn’t love your mother anymore. It was the only way to make myself happy, and ya’ do care about my happiness don’t you?” He slid his glass in circles on the table, watching the scotch move like waves.

“Are you kidding me? I mean are you fucking kidding me?” I was yelling now. “No I don’t care about your happiness, and I don’t care about anything that you do. I just care that you hurt my family. I don’t know why the hell I even came here to begin with.” My words began to hurt my own heart, as I thought about my mother.

People from the surrounding tables were staring, and I think “Jess” was starting to get slightly uncomfortable. My father looked hurt, but I knew he didn’t really care. The liquor perpetually flowing through his bloodstream, and the gold accessorizing his ridiculously age-inappropriate outfit blinded him. I glanced around the restaurant angrily, and then right into the yellowing eyes of my father.

He opened his mouth and softly began, “You have every right to be—“

“Save it. Don’t call me again.” I harshly interrupted him.

I put my hands on the table, and stood up. I was surprised with myself. I had always been calm and collected when it came to things regarding my father. My mother would bring him up every now and again, but only to reinforce that my brothers I didn’t want to be anything like him. I was too young to understand then, but it all made sense now.

He didn't try to stop me, so I stumbled my way through the tables and past the oblivious hostess. I burst open the door, and the humidity smacked me in the face. The sun beat down on me as I stood still in between those stone structures. I felt uncomfortably hot as I pulled at my shirt trying to keep it from sticking to my perspiring body. My heart was beating fast, and I wanted to cry. After my eyes assimilated themselves with the unbearable sunlight, I stopped squinting and looked around at the parking lot. In the VIP valet parking spots, a glistening black Range Rover stared at me. From the rearview mirror, I noticed a crystalline swan hanging. As my eyes rolled over the hood of the car, I noticed the license plate that spelled out "FAMOUS". I grabbed my bike and walked it over to where the car was parked, and laid it against the side. I stared for a while before pulling my fist back, and punching directly through the passenger window.

I stepped back, ignoring the pain in my hand, and straightened my bike. I mounted myself on to the seat and began to ride away. I made it only a few yards before I halted, and began to weep. Through my cries I could see the blood spilling from my knuckles onto the blacktop of the parking lot. When I was younger, I could hear my mom throughout the days and nights, crying behind her locked door. She would emerge rarely, only to dig through the pill cabinet and then return to her lament. It didn't make sense to me then, but it certainly did now.