

Where It All Started

Flash Fiction

***an excerpt from a manuscript**

The tears that stained my moonlight skin lost all masculinity the moment I slipped out of my dead mother's womb. United by death, my absent father died after a Shiloh Sharp blew his head off in his one-bedroom apartment moments before they came to break down his door and finish him off themselves. Now it was all coming back.

I stood on the cracked sidewalk with almost empty pockets, except for a one-hundred-dollar bill. My black tank absorbed the sun, dried my tears, and recharged my body with its warmth. A kiss. A slow, deceitful kiss that could leave a burn if left in it for too long. My grandpa hated anything soft and loved explosives. No tabby kittens or deep-colored sunflowers. No baby ducks trailing behind their mother or lily pads shading the fish and pollinating the ponds. Just makeshift bombs he'd build and set off once a month behind their farm that had no animals. That wasn't a farm then. Just depression.

I knew softness irritated him. Yet my grandma balanced him out by secretly feeding the stray cats on the wrap-around porch. Since my grandpa never left the house and stayed in the basement making detonators, she would often be out in the town or crocheting on the porch with the cats.

"Them cats are tough on the outside, tender on the inside," she'd say as she adjusted her big, round glasses that rested on the bridge of her nose.

"Like a coconut," I'd answer.

"Now those," she'd wag her finger, "those are tough cookies. You can't pet a coconut under its chin. They just don't budge."

I laughed.

“Coconuts don’t have chins, grandma.”

She smiled and pinched my cheek.

“But you do sugar cube. Sugar, sugar, sugar,” she sang.

She was the only sweet and soft thing my grandpa loved. Like a folktale, she carried her long, grey hair on her tough shoulders, and brought every plant to life with her humming of Chopin’s Preludes. When she wasn’t humming, she was playing her Steinway piano, built from a warm Brazilian Rosewood that radiated throughout their home.

“Sales get you far in life,” she said as she patted the timber.

Meanwhile, Grandpa always hid his true emotions finer than a glass box.

“Quit playing that damn wood,” he’d say. The next day, I’d find him tuning the strings on that damn wood.

“Don’t ever stop playing, grandma.”

“As long as these keys sing, so do I.”

I had a place to stay, and that was all that mattered. The day I moved in, she gifted me a pilot’s hat. Grandpa had found a chest out in the field with memorabilia and trinkets, presumably from a plane crash. Though neither the pilot nor the plane was ever found. Only the chest that lay rooted to the earth, almost as if it were an offering. Grandpa later blew up the chest along with anything else he could find—including half-decayed apples, a rabbit’s skull, the town newspaper except for the crossword sections, and rocks.

For my birthday, she had gifted me the Benjamin in my pocket. That was the day they also converted their farm into a quilt farm. It rested behind their house, and they made what they could out of it, plus retirement. She found ways to fill her day past the brim with her errands to

the yarn store shop down the road that her dear friend Mary-Jane owned. Whenever my grandma would stop by, she never had to ask about which yarn was best or the sizes or which colors were available. She just knew.

She mainly went there to catch up with Mary-Jane before going home to crochet for the evening.

She would always say, “We ain’t keepin’ up with the world but maybe that’s ‘cus the world ain’t slowin’ down for us.”

If her life were through images, it would be film stills of solitude and simplicity with a bunch of minimalism. I would name the collection “Dust” and then try my very best to become it. First, to be consumed by it, then to become it. It seemed simple enough, yet impossible to do.

I always liked that about her—the slowness of her life, yet filled with so much color.

“Quilts can go anywhere,” she’d say, “on the bed, in the car, anywhere I say. The facts are butter, but the beauty is the honey.”

“I love butter.”

“You can have both. Cake and eat it too. Most people ain’t think like that, but without butter there is no cake.”

“And what about the honey?”

“You gotta eat your cake before you can taste it.”

“Grandma, what’re you smokin’?”

She laughed and waved me away. I expected her to say something about the bliss of the morning or the dove’s love, but she just smiled and looked entranced by the world’s beauty.

The one-hundred-dollar bill I had was utterly useless to me right now since I had been stripped of everything by a thief just a few moments before you got here to know some parts of

me. But more importantly, I needed my phone to call Frank. I should've called him sooner, but I had intended to see him on my way over. He was the only one I knew who was always equipped with pocket change, especially for a Benjamin. But I couldn't get to him without my phone. I didn't know how. In one swift motion, I had become stranded and now felt empty.

I'd usually see Frank once a month every Sunday, when everyone was resting in their big recliners or bringing their twelve kids to church. I'd start at dawn and walk the 6 miles it took to get to his house, though sometimes he'd have me meet him at Calcoah beach. Then we'd walk around the beach town, and he'd give me a piece of his change to spend on whatever I wanted. Once he asked me about my collection of books.

"How many books can you have?"

I told him I didn't read all of them.

"Then what do you do with them?"

I told him I drew on the edges of the book, rarely dipping my pen into the inner pages except to leave crass notes that stemmed from immediate thought. The outer drawings were pretty, and if I had read the book and liked it, I'd paint instead of sketch. Then sell them.

"If you ever find Salinger's novel, I'll pay you two Benjamin's for it," he said.

"Two?!"

"You can buy that mansion on Calcoah coast."

"Only if you come with."

A wide grin crossed his face, "You've got one heck of a deal, son."

Now, ahead of me was the cracked pavement and a vague sense of where the thief had gone. I chewed on the inside of my cheek and thought about what to do. He was most likely long gone, so it would be no use to hunt him down. There was almost a thrilling effect that came with

the sense of independence from technology, as though I was no longer as dependent as I was with my phone or GPS. I decided I needed to find Frank, though. The bill was still rendered useless without his pocket change. I didn't think it was difficult to find him, since I could recall the first eight digits of his number from memory. There were just two more.

I walked along the pavement and hummed the digits. Prairie dropseed and fescue poked out from the concrete cracks and lapped up the droplets of sunlight. Old Victorian homes devoured the surrounding gravel and dust yards. Some had rickety fences while others had overgrown shrubbery. It all seemed shared, in a sense, as though everyone shared everything together. The lawns, the beaten-up Volvo cars, the warped wooden doors, the street lamps covered in spider webs and moths.

After much reflection, I came across Frank's house. His house was one of my favorites. An 1865 Tennessee-Victorian with a wrap-around porch and balcony. Dead leaves covered the area where a lawn would be, and the cream-colored paint on the exterior had been weathered down by beach mist and storm seasons.

I glanced at his house. The lights were off. No movement throughout the house caught my eye. I looked around to see if anyone was out walking their dog or taking their kids out to play. Not a soul in sight. The world felt abandoned and such opportunity felt abundant. The wooden boards creaked as I stepped up the front stairs. The house seemed to breathe again.

A phone hung on the wall in the hallway. I called out for Frank and received the silence of the home back. The receiver felt heavy in my hand as I picked it up. I pressed the digits one and two before hearing a long ring. Then a husky voice came from the other side.

"Hello?"

He had just woken up.