

CLEANING OUT MY FATHER'S GARAGE

by

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That fucking motorcycle—three thousand dollars of metal, rubber and plastic: a used minivan my mother never drove; a trip to Disneyland we never took. A blue 1979 Honda Goldwing leaning precariously on its kickstand, dripping a puddle of oil onto a flattened cardboard box. 1979—the year my best friend's father coached my soccer team; the year my father bought a brand new Honda Goldwing, stopped cutting his hair, and disappeared on weekends. A red-and-black leather Marlboro jacket thrown over the handlebars; the prize from a thousand proofs of purchase. It feels rough in my hands and smells of oil and spray paint, of the air and sagebrush between here and Palo Alto, of the way chemotherapy drugs eke out through pores.

A toolbox heaping with spanners, wrenches, gaskets, and spark plugs waits nearby—grimy with oil and my father's smudged fingerprints. A dog-eared manual lays open on the floor to a chapter titled "Troubleshooting." Notes are scribbled in the margins—the firing order of cylinders, the proper gap for spark plugs, the recommended viscosity of oil. My father could never seem to remember how old I was. He put seven candles on my cake when I turned nine years old. My mother quickly stabbed two more into the frosting, deeper and straighter than the others, before she thought I'd noticed.

There, where other fathers would have kept a box of photos—the ones of father and son shielding eyes from the summer sun at the ballpark, of father and son smiling on a fishing trip

with arms slapped around shoulders, of father and son with backwards ball caps watching the big game from the sofa—is a box of souvenirs from motorcycle trips. A miniature spoon with *Idaho* etched in the handle. A shot glass from Waldo Lake—Oregon's second largest. A handful of white plastic poker chips from the Silver Dollar Casino in Reno.

A calendar on the wall turned to April; the blonde clutching at her short skirt as a breeze pulls it teasingly upward. A Harley-Davidson poster, neatly framed, under glass. Tools on pegboard delicately outlined with black magic marker: C-clamps, breaker bars, a timing light. Plenty of bare wall where the family picture we gave him for Father's Day could have hung, or the picture of a motorcycle I drew for him in seventh grade, or a pair of fishing rods rigged for a weekend trip.

Surely this is another box of parts: brake lines, fuel filters, carburetor points. It's so carefully taped closed, so carefully tucked away on a high shelf, so carefully packed that it is surprisingly heavy coming down in my arms. My high school yearbook. I thought I'd lost it. And there's that drawing of a motorcycle, folded cleanly and tucked inside a clear plastic sheet. The newspaper from that day my fifth grade class was on the front page. Two copies. No, three. And there are all the merit badges from Scout camp, the sash, even the neckerchief. There's the leather wallet from my *leatherworking* badge; there are the rivets in it that no other Scout's wallet had. My father's rivet gun must be in one of these boxes. And here are three pinewood derby cars: wooden blocks with the sharp corners sanded off and painted red, black, green; cock-eyed black plastic wheels.

Another box. My cleats from youth soccer; clean with laces tied. My jersey from youth basketball. Three-years' worth of report cards from back when I got mostly As. An essay I

wrote in junior high called “About My Family,” the paragraph about my father worn as if a finger had traced across the sloppy cursive letters over and over again.

Why did he save my 6th grade essay on Lewis and Clark? Why is my crude drawing of a cartoon turtle from the back of Boy’s Life magazine in here? Why the clip-on tie my mother made me wear to church on Christmas and Easter?

The lawn mower. The fertilizer spreader. A nest of garden hoses. A case of hornet spray. The wheelchair. The hospital bed.

There is the carpet we pulled up from the basement—a blue shag rolled up and lying over a stack of boxes in a way that suggests it might conceal a body inside. No labels on these boxes. Old masking tape falls from their sides, the glue failing from years of just holding on. Here is my father’s basketball jersey. I recognize it from the old black-and-white photographs, his hair dark and plastic-looking, his eyes bright and eager. Here are his old military uniforms, smelling musty and folded so long I fear they’ll crack as I spread them out on the concrete floor. They are dark blue like the last suit he wore. Still wears. Here, in the bottom of the box, faded blue fuzzy cases with military medals inside. I have never seen these—not in photos, not in display cases, not in stories told in hushed voices around the dinner table.

Here is an old notebook with poems inside. Honest-to-God poems from his high school English class. 1965. His handwriting—young and deliberate: *The Open Road*, *The Things I Dream*, *When I See the World*.

A box of trophies and ribbons. A little golden sprinter atop a blocky wooden base; the gold leaf rubbed off the top of his head leaving a bald spot like my father’s—like mine. A plaque with his name embossed in fancy letters. No hint of what it was for. A second place

ribbon for the fifty-yard dash. A certificate of appreciation for participating in a speech competition in 1963.

That motorcycle. Plastic saddlebags molded to look like leather. Corroded fenders spray-painted with chrome paint. It leans on its kickstand like it is tired, ready to lie down for awhile. The impression of my father's ass is imbedded in the cracking foam seat.

How many miles to Palo Alto from here?

Can a person still buy a shot glass with a picture of Waldo Lake?

Is the Silver Dollar still open in Reno?

If I were to turn the key, would this old motorcycle run?