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INTO
DISINTEGRATE

1. DEFORESTATION

A year has passed since my wife was turned into a tree. Want to know what's worse? I don't get a damn sniff of sympathy from anyone about it anymore. I mean, sure, when it first happened, I got plenty of cards, I got all the condolences that I could want, if they're what you're supposed to get. Now the best I get out of anyone is, 'Gee, that's too bad, Bill.' It has only been a year, for God's sake, the wound is still fresh! At least bring me over some meals I could freeze. What luck; the whole thing is a rot, I tell you. There's no such thing as damned empathy anymore, no such thing as sympathy neither. None of the pathies mean anything, except maybe apathy, but that never really meant anything in the first place.

All that aside, then they expect me to explain this to my son? What am I supposed to say to the kid? 'I'm terribly sorry, boy, your mother has been turned into a tree and that's about all there is to it. At least you'll get some damn fine shade this summer.' Really? I think that would go down like a fat load of bricks. It'll scar the poor boy, you know? I don't want him growing up afraid to step on a stick or going for a damn bushwalk. I'd rather him just forget the whole thing ever happened, not forget her completely, mind you, just forget the stupid way she went out. I tell you, it would've been so much easier if she'd just got cancer and died like a normal person. No, that wasn't her style; she always had to be a pain in the ass.

I loved her a lot, don't get me wrong, but, Jesus Christ, she was a pain, throwing shade on me for the slightest little inconsistencies, like leaving the kid at the zoo, for example. It happened one time. One time! Not even for an hour, and I never lived it down. Of course he was fine, they have cages at that place for a reason. When I found him, he was sitting on a bench eating choc-mint ice-cream. I'm not even sure how the little bugger got it. I didn't hear the end of that one for months afterwards.

I know I come across like a cranky bastard. I suppose I'm just bitter about what happened, but who wouldn't be? Like I said, it has been a year since it happened and people tip-toe around the subject with me. What? Do they think I've forgotten her? Do they think if they don't go near the subject it'll slip my mind? When a thing like this happens, initially, there's no avoiding it – it's an elephant that'll smash apart any conversation. I couldn't go five minutes without someone bringing it up. I honestly felt it was magnetic, like any topic would inevitably get sucked back down to this fat elephant's gravitational pull and shatter to pieces on its wrinkled grey hide. A year on and I have the opposite problem, everyone pretends like the whole thing never happened. They shy away and sip their drinks and shut their mouths if the conversation moves even slightly in that direction. Suddenly, cloud formations become fascinating or all eyes turn to the ground, deciding to inspect the gradient on a sloped lawn rather than acknowledge what everyone's thinking.

The other week I was at the pub with a few mates from cricket and the word deforestation slipped out of the conversation like some unheralded taboo. I've never seen a group of men go so quiet so quickly. It's like the damn word was jinxed or something, like whoever said it was going to get cut down by the axe of a drunken woodcutter.

'What's with the sudden silence?!' I demanded at the table, trying to keep the mood light and all that. A lot of my time was spent pretending not to notice sudden sombre mood shifts.

'I'm sorry, Bill, that was awful insensitive of me to go and mention a thing like that.' That coming from my old friend Colchis. I tell you, if I'd had a machine gun, I would've machine-gunned the lot of them, starting with that idiot Colchis and his stumpy little sausage fingers.

'No need to bite your tongue on account of me, fellas! How about I get the next round?' I've always found that no matter how low the mood gets

in a pub, a group shout is like an electric shot to the proverbial rectum. I know I said I wanted some sympathy, but do I need to get it at the cost of becoming some kind of leper? Besides, a round of drinks isn't cheap. If anything, they're the ones who should have been shouting me a beer.

Colchis is the one who brought me the card when it first happened. On the front was cursive writing in a gilded gold spray, reading: 'Condolences for your loss.' Inside, he'd written a quote from some old book that I hadn't read and don't care about. I've forgotten what it said and I didn't bother to read it. I'd have to find the card if you wanted to know. I think it's in the bin. I'd found the whole card misleading anyway. I hadn't lost her, in fact, I knew exactly where she was. I walk past her every day when I leave the house.

The house is the other thing: of course I thought about selling it, but the boy likes it a lot and I couldn't just up and leave her like that. What if the next owners decided that the side veranda needs to come out a couple of metres and have her cleared off the lawn? I sleep on my left side with the curtains open; she's the first thing I see when I wake in the morning. The boy sleeps in there with me most nights, he doesn't like sleeping alone, and to be honest with you, neither do I. Three bedrooms and only one gets used now. If I was smart, I'd downsize, but I'm not claiming to be smart.

I got rid of the old queen-size bed not long after it happened and replaced it with two singles. Sometimes, on windy nights we can hear her out there and he'll come over and slide in next to me. I don't mind, and again, I don't blame the kid, although he'll shake like a leaf until he falls back to sleep.

'How's the kid going?' Colchis asked me, still at the pub.

'The kid's fine, he's better than me most of the time.' I said this because it was true. Without Daphne, I used to get manic about things and she always pulled me back down to earth. She was the most grounded person I ever met. The kid is the same. I find it a strange quality in someone so young. He's always ready to calm me down. I swear his head is so level you could play snooker on top of it. He's like her in that way and that's fine with me, I couldn't imagine putting up with a child too much like me.

'How is she? Have you had any more... incidents?' Even my old mate Colchis was a bastard like that, tip-toeing around in conversation, like he

was afraid of breaking something. Ever heard of the phrase ‘walking on egg shells’? By ‘incidents’ he was referring to the stint of vandalism that went on for about a week. Some teenagers from over by the mountain heard about what happened and started daring each other to come into my yard, like it was some kind of haunted house. First I found out about it was the next morning, when I noticed something carved into the trunk on my way past. They carved some rubbish, right on in there. I was properly cranky about it, as you could probably imagine.

I stayed up the next few nights and tried to catch them in the act, but I always fell asleep before they’d come. I ended up enlisting the kid’s help. I got him to stay up with me and we kept each other awake. Finally, I saw one of the little buggers creeping in and I bolted out the house after him with bare feet. He ran back around the corner on the next street, I caught him, but any others with him must have got away. I jumped on him and damned near broke the lad’s arm off. I was furious but I regretted it right away. I called an ambulance and sat there with him until they came. Not a bad kid, all things said and done. He’s planning on studying architecture at university next year. Even took me breaking his arm with good grace.

When the ambulance arrived, he told them that he’d fallen into the gutter because the streetlight was out and that I’d come to help. The paramedics questioned me about the bloodstain on the gutter but that was from where I’d cut my foot in the chase. They patched my foot up for me before heading off and telling me not to leave the house without shoes. Like I was going to listen to that pair.

‘Did you get them?’ the boy asked me when I returned to the house.

‘Yeah, I got one,’ I replied, taking him back up the stairs.

‘Is your foot okay?’

‘Yeah, cut it on some glass.’

That was all he said about that. Good kid, knows when to keep his mouth shut.

Unlike Colchis, who followed his question about the ‘incident’ with another one about ‘how I’m going’. Look, I appreciate the concern but I’m just fine, and if I wasn’t, what’s a question like that supposed to do to make me feel any better, anyway? He’s got a good heart though, Colchis, so I can forgive him for asking so many stupid questions all the time. There are a lot of people like that, feeling like they gotta fill the air with nonsense questions.

‘Work’s gone down the dunny,’ I replied to his stupid question with an equally stupid answer. ‘I’d be surprised if I could save up ten bucks by Christmas, but it’s good to be out on the pitch again, even if I can’t score a run to save my life.’

‘That’s good, Billy’ he said, laying a hand on my shoulder. ‘It’s really good to have you back.’

He’s a good bloke, Colchis.