

### Morning Howl

Outside, the sky was grey and soft like a pigeon's breast. There were no morning sounds, no little murmurs of a day beginning, and the street was silent. A cold front had blown in the night before, slicing its way through the lingering summer, and the sudden chill was startling. George Lyle, with remnants of sleep in his eye, trudged outside to heat up his truck. The cold seeped inside him and spread like ice; after quickly jamming his key in the ignition, he started the heater and shuffled back into the warmth of the little brick house.

He slipped on his red plaid flannel, the one Patty bought him when the drywall he was hauling tore through his old one, and sipped a mug of black coffee. When he leaned back in his chair at the table, he could see Patty getting ready through the opened bathroom door. She had her fluffy auburn hair (dyed for years now) pulled tight in her pink rollers, and she was sponging some makeup on her face. She caught his eye in the mirror; her forehead furrowed, just imperceptible enough that only he would notice. He brought his fingers to his temples and allowed his shoulders to slump.

"Cold outside. Might wanna grab a jacket or something, darling."

"Sure, baby. You mind grabbing my purse for me real quick?" She said. "I think my lipstick's in there."

Using his hands to support his stiff lower back, he stood up from his chair and grabbed her purse from the foot of the bed. After handing the purse to his wife, he leaned his hip against the doorframe as she completed the ritual he never fully understood. He thought about his wife, as he had been doing more often lately. When he met Patty, she was seventeen and dancing at a garage party hosted by one of their friends. She was wearing pedal pushers that hugged her thighs and she had the shiniest hair he'd ever seen. Now that hair had dulled, and her features sagged with the inevitable weight of death. A wattle had formed under her chin, and sometimes he had to repeat himself many times before she fully heard what he said. Still, she was his best friend, and he loved her. That was good enough for him.

When she was done with her makeup, or maybe just disconcerted by his observation, she moved into their bedroom and shimmied into a slip. George could feel that she had something to say, just as he knew the exact way she would pull her pantyhose on, feet first, then rolling them all the way up. He sank onto the bed broken in by the years, and waited.

"George," now she was rifling through her silver jewelry tray on the dresser, the one embedded with Quinn's five year old handprints. "I think you should tell them. Tonight, when they come for dinner."

"Maybe," he said, patting the bed beside him. "Come here, sweetheart. Right here."

Her hands gripped the edge of the old dresser, knuckles whitening slightly. She made her way over to the bed and sat down beside her husband, her frail hand closing tentatively over his calloused one. He slowly brought her hand to his lips, and she smiled faintly. This was all the encouragement he needed; with a wicked grin, he threw her onto the bed and began to tickle her sides. One of her rollers came undone, a curlieue of hair springing out. Her laugh echoed throughout the room, the noise a shock in the tomblike house.

"George, we are getting too damn old for this!" she giggled. They lay side by side on their bed, panting breaths intermingling in the air between them. Both were exerted from the kind of play that would never have phased them years ago. Her laughs slowly subsided, and she lay her hand over his beating heart. The same look, the one he had been attempting to make her forget, once again settled across her familiar features. He attempted to stop it before it took over.

“Patty—“

“You’re dying,” she said. “You’re dying, baby, you’re dying...”

And his wife began to cry, tears leaking into the crevices of her soft cheeks. Her body began to shake, and he wrapped his arms around her and felt her fragile shoulder blades, like broken wings. Nothing would ever feel worse than this. He lightly stroked the side of her face, and wiped underneath her eyes where her tears had blotted her mascara. There were so many things that he wanted to say, but couldn’t; the words grew thick in his mouth, and it was safer just to envelope her with his body and take on her sadness for his own.

Her sobs eventually became little gasps, and she propped herself up on an elbow. “You should probably get going. You’ll be late picking up Quinn.”

She grabbed his face between her hands and kissed him softly. Cheeks pressed together, she whispered, “I love you.” And with that, she left him in their room and shut the door behind her. He lay on the bed, alone, and stared up at the popcorn ceiling Patty wanted him to redo. The framed pictures on the wall of Patty in her wedding dress, cut a little high above the knee in the true spirit of the sixties, and of him looking boyish in a suit looked on at their future. He heard the electric whirring of a blow dryer in the bathroom as Patty began to fluff out her hair. Other than that, and the occasional tick of the clock on the mantelpiece, there were no sounds in their little house. Only he and his ragged breath.

When his doctor told him the pains in his chest, the tiny stabs that took his breath away, were actually cancer, he took the news as if the universe were his boss and this was just another job. *George, here’s the thing. You’ve got stage four lung cancer, and about fifteen months to live. Got it? Yessir, got it boss.*

At least, that’s how he wanted to take it. The truth he kept to himself, tucked away in the innermost compartments of his soul he would allow no one to touch.

He glanced at his watch; 7:45, running a little late. Considering the cold, he pulled on his windbreaker and grabbed two blueberry muffins and the thermoses of coffee Patty had set out, then walked out the door. He was glad that he had thought to warm his truck up when the chilly blasts sliced at his exposed face.

Backing up out of the driveway, he called his granddaughter to let her know he was on his way. He took her to school every morning, since her mother, Beth, had just started a new job as manager at the café across the street and always worked mornings. Quinn didn’t like taking the bus, as the nearest stop was quite a walk from their apartment complex, so George volunteered to take her when he could.

Something was buzzing in his brain, trying to squirm its way to the front of his mind. He tried to push the thought away, but still it persisted in shattering his early morning calm.

The memory came, despite everything. He was sitting on the living room sofa across from Patty, who was draped over her recliner underneath a worn quilt. She had a notepad in front of her, and was scribbling away at a grocery list. He took in the peace of her position, and relished this moment of domestic tranquility. But in the end, he knew he could not pretend

“Patty? I got to tell you something.”

Glancing over the top of her notepad, she noticed the unnatural position George was in. She sat up. “What’s wrong, George?”

The words came out of him, but they clawed up his throat and tore reluctantly out of his mouth, and he kept bleeding long after they were spoken. As he spoke, Patty kept silent, but George could almost feel the cavernous nothingness opening between them. She didn’t say a word, until George told her the hardest thing.

“Refusing treatment? What the hell does that mean?”

“I... We don’t have the money, Patty. And I’m scared. Scared of fading to nothing. A man has got to have some dignity.”

“I don’t know what to say to you,” she said, hands sifting through her hair. “You’re a selfish son of a bitch, George. I need you, I need you...”

The remembered sounds of his wife’s words ghosted through his ears, so George flipped through his radio stations until he found an old country song he knew. Turning the music up to drown out the buzzing, he hummed along with Patsy Cline as he pulled into Quinn’s apartment complex.

*I stop to see a weepin' willow  
Cryin' on his pillow  
Maybe he's cryin' for me  
And as the skies turn gloomy  
Night winds whisper to me  
I'm lonesome as I can be*

He parked in front of her building, and rubbed at the bridge between his eyes. He flipped open his cell phone, pulling his glasses out of the pocket on his flannel to see the numbers. Dialing Quinn’s number, he glanced up at her apartment as he waited for her to answer.

“Hey Grandpa!”

“Good morning sweetie. I’m waiting outside for you, come on when you’re ready.”

“Umm, okay. The thing is, actually, I can’t find my other shoe? And I just have to like print something real quick. Just give me a minute. I’ll be right out, mmkay?”

“Alrighty, just don’t take too long. It’s already a little after eight.”

“Okay, be right out!”

Waiting in the parking lot, he absentmindedly drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Quinn would probably be wearing a dress today. She had the last few days, and knowing that it was unlikely that either she or her mother had checked the weather report, he shook off his windbreaker and placed it over her still cold leather seat. She confirmed his prediction when she bounded out the front door, wild red hair in frizzy disarray, trying simultaneously to pull on a boot while she locked the front door behind her.

Reaching over, he unlocked the passenger door and she clambered in, nose already pink from the cold. She reached for the thermos of coffee she already knew would be there and cradled it to her, absorbing what she could of the warmth. He began to drive in the direction of her school, and she checked her makeup in the rearview mirror.

“Brought some muffins. Grandma made them this morning, they’re fresh.”

“Oh, thanks Grandpa.”

In silence, the two rode together down the bleary morning rode. Many sleepy cars, sluggish from interrupted dreams, were beginning to hum their way to work or school. Yawns spread from driver to driver as the prospect of another day loomed large. Quinn took out two earbuds from her purse and stuck them in her little seashell ears. Tinny music pervaded the small space of the truck, a little too energetic and peppy to be tolerated this early.

He said, “Say, why don’t you take those out? I thought we could talk for a bit, before you go to school.”

She complied, but still glanced at the bright screen of the device. “Umm, sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. How’s school going? You liking it so far?”

“I mean, I guess. Sometimes math is hard, but umm, I’m doing pretty good in social science. And I have lunch with Macy now, which is good, because before that I only had lunch with Sophie but now Sophie is dating Mark, so we don’t like her, and I didn’t have anyone to sit with, but now...”

He smiled softly to himself as the familiar cadence of his granddaughter’s voice, the uplifting of the end of every statement, the slight twang she tried to deny, washed over him. Glancing over at her freckled face, at the nose everyone swore she got from him, he felt a weight in his stomach. Would he get to see her graduate? Or even turn sixteen? Who would listen to her pleasant jibber-jabber, the music he loved as much as any song? The words hovered in his mouth: *I’m dying, Quinn*. But it wasn’t time to say them yet. It wasn’t time.

By the time they reached the high school, the roads were clogged as parents waited in line to drop their children off and the older students attempted to make their way to their parking spots. The cars were barely inching forward; something was blocking the side of the road, and cars were trying to change lanes. He muttered under his breath, *Jesus, if these sons of bitches would just learn to drive...*

Finally, another car made space for him to switch lanes, and he edged his way over. It was then that Quinn saw what was causing the holdup, and she pressed her hands against the glass of the window.

“Grandpa, stop! Oh my God, stop, stop!”

In shock, he moved his hand to change gears, but she had already unlocked her door and stumbled out in a panic. He could do nothing but put his truck in park as the other drivers honked at this new interruption. Gesturing frantically, he pleaded with his granddaughter to get back in the damn truck. But she didn’t hear him; she was kneeling over something he couldn’t see, lost to him and the frustrated drivers around her.

The lane to his left was back to back with cars, so he carefully edged his door open and slid out of the truck. Striding over to Quinn, he raised his hand in feeble apology to the gaping woman behind him with her hand fastened securely to her horn.

“What the hell, Quinn, people are waiting on us to—“

But his words stopped in his throat as he saw that Quinn was hovering over a smear of blood on the pavement, a mass of gray fur writhing beside it. She looked up at her grandfather, brown eyes pleading. “Grandpa, we have to help him. Please?”

The cat had clearly been hit by a car; it could barely move, and its eyes were muddied with pain. He knelt down beside Quinn; the two could easily have been in prayer. He had never seen an animal more afraid; afraid of the pain, afraid of the unfamiliar humans, and afraid, perhaps, of the instinctual knowledge that this was the end. A sound, a drowning, gurgling mew made its agonizing way through the cat’s mouth and scraped around in their ears. He couldn’t understand why, but that sound, the way it reverberated through him, filled him with a cold rage, mocking the chill of the wind on his face. He hesitantly touched the animal with a finger, trying not to cause it any more pain.

He sighed. “Back’s broken.”

“Let’s take him to the vet then, they can fix him and we’ll take him home.”

“Now, you know me or your momma ain’t going to be able to afford that. Vet’s costly.”

“I know, but—“

“Quinn, the damn thing’s got a broken back. It won’t walk, never again.”

Tears were threatening to break free of the threshold of Quinn’s eyes; she bit her lip and placed her hand on George’s arm.

“Please, Grandpa? I can give him a good home, I’ll take real good care of him...”

“Damnit, Quinn, it’s near dead already. It’s just a goddamn animal, it’s just meat. We ain’t taking an animal off the streets. He’s dying and we just got to let him. Just come on, let’s get you to school.”

“But—“

“I said come on now!” He grabbed her arm and hoisted her off the street. Her lips were quivering, and she violently pulled her arm away. She marched back to the truck and gathered her things together. Her hand was on the door handle when she turned around, looked George in the face, and said, “I hate you.”

The sound of the door slamming behind her yet again made no impression at all as he stood, alone, in the emptying road. The back of his granddaughter’s shivering figure began to recede as she marched her way to school, never looking back. From somewhere far away, he heard the clang of the first period bell ring, and the buzzing chaos of a thousand students finding their way to class. Then, quiet. Just he and the fading memory of the cat’s soft, gray fur.

In a daze, he crawled into the warm truck to escape the merciless wind. Closing the door behind him, he vaguely remembered that he was parked in the middle of the road, and wondered whether he should move along. But there were no other cars on the road; all the kids had been dropped off, the adults were at work, and everyone was in their proper place. His eyes focused on the oppressive, gray blanket of a sky.

Later on, he would once again kneel by the cat, and pet him softly behind his ears, away from the matted blood. His whispered murmurings would calm the cat, at least enough for George to wrap him up in his warm windbreaker. The cat would purr, momentarily distracted from the pain by the welcome warmth.

Then, George would drive his way home one-handed, carefully cradling the animal next to his stomach. Leaving the cat in his truck, he would grab a large cardboard box, and fill it with quilts, placing it in the backyard, behind the shed. He would come back for the cat, nestling it carefully in the box. It would be just barely conscious.

Why was he doing this? He wouldn’t know. All he could feel was that he loved that cat, wanted it to die, to cradle it, to stop the overwhelming sense of fear that rose like bile.

The pains in his lungs would begin again, and no songs, no amount of distraction, could take them away.

Going back inside, he would open his bedside table drawer. He would reach under the stacks of bills, and grasp his hands around the cold, metal handle of his daddy’s pistol. He would make his way back to the backyard in a dreamlike haze.

Patty’s panicked inquiries would not reach into his frantic brain. She would run after him as he stumbled into the backyard.

His pistol would click into place. He would point it at the cat, hands shaking. The cat’s dingy, golden eyes would meet his.

And then George would pull the trigger. Patty would tentatively place a hand on his shoulder, and he would feel the gulf between them collapse at last.

But for now, George allowed himself to sink back into the worn leather seat of his truck. He gazed at the V of geese flying overhead, and let his neck relax and head loll onto the seat. He didn’t fight the tears that began to fall, one by one, on time-weathered cheeks. And he howled, a hopeless, frightened sound that nobody was around to hear.