

“I Was Never Loved Enough”

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She sits bedside, wearing a tousled wig, with sweat-wet crescent curls pasted to her forehead. She’s skin and skeleton, most of her weight despair.

“Dying’s hard doctor, so many bad memories, and no time to make new ones.” Her words are slow and flat, with a rattle of phlegm. “But memories are what we make them, and time changes how we see them.”

“I agree,” I say. “Time stretches memories to fit our needs.”

“But some memories never change, they’re as you remember them. My family didn’t have anything, just tough times and ugliness. And that’s the truth.”

She dips a washcloth in a basin of water and wets her parched lips. I watch as she wipes the crusted skin. Her face catches my attention. It’s pale and empty, with hollow, dinner plate eyes framed by glass-like bones.

“All us women got married young and birthed babies, that was our job, and once the babies were big enough, we’d work the register at the truck stop, or flip burgers at some grease pit, or waitress at the Waffle House, or housekeep at the Holiday Inn. But the uppity-ups—the football players, the cheerleaders, the rich kids—they went off to the big cities and college, but I’m not certain their lives were any different than ours.”

She pulls a photo from her purse and hands it to me. There’s a tall young man leaning on a ’57 Chevy coupe, shirt sleeves folded tight on his biceps, a cigarette skewering a smug smile. I lay the photo on the arm of her chair.

“Who is he?” I ask.

“My ex-husband—hell, he was barely an ex, we weren’t even married a year, but we had a little boy, Timmy, he was stillborn.” She picks up the photo and traces the outline of his body with her finger. “You can see he was handsome as all get out, muscles in all the right places, hair slicked back with Brylcreem, but mean and angry, always had one hand open and the other in a fist, ready to hit. I was attracted to those kinds of men, but most of them died young. Even my ex, he died when he was 29.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to lose a baby and a husband so young.”

“It’s okay, life doesn’t promise you anything. But doctor, the thing I hated most was, I was never loved enough, not even by my mother. My whole life I’ve been searching for love.”

She pulls another photo from her purse and holds it in her hand, staring. She motions for me to look. A slim teenaged woman dressed in high heels, a pillbox hat, and a plain, one-piece dress from the mid-1940s poses with her right arm cocked on her right hip. Her hair is blonde and long, placed in a high ponytail, exposing a soft, unblemished face with dark lipstick.

“That’s my mother just before she got married. She was 16, my father was 33.”

“That’s a big age difference.”

“It’s too big a difference,” she says, solemnly.

“Do you have a photo of your father?”

“No!” Her voice lifts and her face flushes, so I let time collapse. After a few moments, she settles. “I think my mother married young because she wanted out of the house, told me her father beat her. I think he did other things too.” She pauses, then clenches her fingers so tight the veins on the backs of her hands bulge like blue estuaries. Her lips tremble. “Doctor, may I tell you something I’ve never told anybody other than my mother?”

My palms grow damp. “Yes, please.”

“My father...” She stops. “My father...”

“If you’d rather not...”

“No, I need to tell you, it’ll just take some time because I’ve been lying to myself my whole life.” A tear trickles down her cheek, then a storm of tears. “My father raped me.”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” I blurt.

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"Not once, but over and over. I told my mother, but she said they were just bad dreams. I told her they weren't. She pulled me into the bathroom and hugged me. 'Honey,' she said, 'it's best you don't ever say this again.' And I didn't, because I was scared. My father said if I told anybody, he'd take me away and I'd never see my mother again."

I heave a heavy breath, and ask if I can hug her. She nods. I bend over the chair and hold her, carefully, so as not to frighten her, or rouse hurtful memories. Her childhood was a time of horrific torment, something no child should have to endure; even worse, the one person who should have protected her did not.

"Finally, when I was 14, I stood up to my father and told him I'd call the police if he ever touched me again, and that I had a gun—which I really didn't—and that I'd use it. That was the end of it." She looks to the window and closes her eyes. "I've never been able to love since my father raped me, and believe me, I've tried and tried, one man after another, one bed after another, even a woman or two. Because all I wanted was to be loved, but I never was, I was never loved enough."

My shoulders slump. I feel so helpless. I want to tell her I love her, to let her have love before she dies, but I do not, for my feelings are not love, at least not the love she wants, and more important, the love she needs. Besides, she'd sense the duplicity of my words. Instead, I ask if she wants to see a therapist or chaplain; she declines.

"Doctor, the best thing you can do for me is to never forget my story, for it's the story of so many women who were abused and raped as children, and like me, never did anything about it. In fact, most never told anyone." She shakes her head,

sadly. "Children, they don't have any power, they can't change anything. All they can do is take the rage, take the abuse. They're nothing but victims, suffering in silence. You become numb, because you don't want to feel anything, but then, when you get older, the pain fills your heart like a shard of glass. And you can't get rid of it, because nothing's ever really gone."

I listen, humbled and wordless. A woman repeatedly raped as a child by her father, with only days of life and an eternity of death, shared her story with me, a man.

"My mother always said life gives us lessons, but doctor, there aren't any lessons in rape."

I sit with her for an hour, then leave as she slips into a deep slumber. I visit her every day for the next week, talking, listening, sitting. Finally, on a cold and cloudy November morning powdered with snow, she dies, alone, save a nurse sitting bedside holding her hand—still having never been loved enough.

All names and certain details have been changed to protect individual privacies.

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