Sketch

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When I Woke Up

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Brandon Babcock

“‘I pulled it out so the place wouldn’t burn down,’” Dad shouted from the dining room, sending his voice around the corner, down the hallway, and into the main room of the restaurant. He was loud, but I could barely hear him.

“But how could it burn the place down? It’s just a cord,” I said.

I was sitting at the bar of my grandma’s Maid-Rite, doodling and playing Tic-Tac-Toe against myself. I was winning. It was the only way I could help Dad mop the floors without getting in the way.

“What?!!?” Dad yelled.

We were fifty winding feet away from each other.

“I said, ‘But how could it burn the place down? It’s just a cord,’” I yelled back.

“Hold on. I’ll be up there in a minute. You know I can’t hear you down here.”

He didn’t like me following him around because I’d walk where he just mopped. I paid more attention to the ceiling than the floors. More attention to talking than walking. Instead, I sat, waiting impatiently for the opportunities I had when he could hear me. The dining room was the next to last room to be mopped.

Dad walked back up the hallway and went to work mopping around the bar. I slurped the last of my Coke. We both drank Coke, no ice.

“Okay, now what about the fire, Dad?”

“Let me finish, and I’ll explain it better.”

After mopping, Dad always reviewed the night’s lessons.

“One more, Dad?” I asked turning my empty glass upside down as he shoved the mop head across the last of the red and white tiles.

“Give it here,” he said. He sighed, his twelve-hour work day finally done. He could relax. “I’ll get it.”

Dad tip-toed across the drying floor, trying not to smear the sparkling finish with his boots, retrieving my last refill for the night. With an acrobatic leap, he spun and swung his leg around the end of the bar without spilling a drop. He landed his butt on the first stool, spinning two creaking circles before the old thing came to a stop. I laughed. Dad had taught me about the bearings that helped the stools spin the week before.

“Sounds like those bearings need some grease, Dad,” I said.

“Or I could lose a few pounds.”

“Very funny Dad,” I said dramatically rolling my eyes.

He pulled his cigarettes from his shirt pocket, lit one, and popped a napkin from its holder. I grabbed his pen before he could.

Click, click. Click, click. Click, click. Click, click.
He snagged the pen back. Dad hated that sound. I laughed.
Quickly, in short strokes to make the lines just right and to not tear the napkin, he drew a diagram of the extension cord. It had been wedged between the open supply closet door and its frame.
The diagram was a cross-section view with little electron cartoon characters standing on top of each other at the bottom of a wall that didn’t quite reach the top of the cord. The wall, he explained, was like what was happening to the space where electricity could flow through that part of the cord. The crimping was like someone had built part of a wall in it. The electron guys were electricity trying to jump the wall.
“Okay,” I said taking a break from blowing bubbles in my pop. “So how does that start a fire?”
“Well, if you were one of these guys trying to get through, would you rather climb that 20 foot tall wall or turn around and run 5 miles back the other direction to see if you could find a different way around?”
“Uh.” My standard response. “I guess I’d climb the wall. I can barely run a mile without getting a side stitch.”
“Well, when these guys try to climb that wall and fit through that little space at the top, it makes the cord really hot because the cord isn’t supposed to work that way.”
“And then it catches on fire?”
“The cord is insulated, kinda like our attic. But if it melts through the insulation, the sparks can catch something else on fire, and that’s how it happens.”
“Cool. One more Coke?” I had to try.
“No, it’s getting late. And it’s Friday. You’ve got to bowl in the morning.”
Dad had never refused to answer a question.

It was a weeknight, and I was already in my pajamas. My four-year-old sister Kaylee was in bed. Dad peeked around the corner of my bedroom doorframe and shot me a goofy smile. It was pushing 8:30 p.m., and I was buried in a new episode of Quantum Leap. In my room, the remnants of childhood still decorated the place, but I had moved on to more grown up things. Quantum Leap instead of G.I. Joe. The giant football that used to be my toy box now held baseball cards. I still polished my trophies from tee-ball, but I was playing in the coach pitch league. Dad was my coach. I wouldn’t let my mom sell my Mickey Mouse nightlight, but I hid it when my friends were over. My parents just replaced my bunk beds with a brand new waterbed. Dad built me a new desk to match. He made it with a pull-out drafting table because he knew I loved to draw. His face, weathered beyond its 34 years, was drawn taut, nose wrinkled, clowning. His hair hadn’t turned gray, yet.
“Hey, Dad,” I said, laughing, raising my head from my beanbag. “It’s not bedtime, yet, is it?”

“Nope,” he said. “Not even close. But what do you say....”

Dad always gave me his clown face when we were going to do something fun. It was the same face he had when he told me we were going to Disney World the year before.

“What Dad?”

“What do you say you stop watching TV, and we go bowling?” he asked.

“Yesssss!!!”

I had school the next day, and I never got to stay up later than 9:30 p.m. Bowling would take me well past that mark so I jumped at the chance. Besides helping Dad mop Maid-Rite, bowling is what we did together. Every Saturday, starting with the school year and ending with the first blooms of spring, league bowling kept me entertained. His coaching made me a great bowler, but strikes or none, we always went to Maid-Rite for lunch after I finished. For dinner, Dad made ham and cheese sandwiches, and we’d eat in the living room, watching TV. Every Saturday, it was just Dad and me.

Dad hadn’t even killed the ignition before I ran out of the car toward the bowling alley door. The familiar smell of smoke and fried food ran out as I went in. I grabbed the skeleton key, said hi to Guy, and skipped to Dad’s locker to get our bowling balls. I carried mine, and rolled Dad’s with my feet like a soccer player.

Dad was at the snack counter when I walked back to find out which lane we got.

“You want fries or nachos?” he asked.


“Coke?” he asked.

“No ice!”

“Alright. I’ll bring them. We’re down on 17.”

It was the second game. We were working on getting the ball back to the pocket by moving my feet, re-spotting my delivery, when I met Sharalynn Myers.

“Ronnie!” she said getting my dad’s attention. “Hey.”

I released my ball, twelve pounds rolling down the lane. I turned and saw her standing behind us. Dad was walking toward her, and what she said rang in my head.

Ronnie.

Grandma was the only woman who ever called my dad Ronnie. My mom even called him Ron.

She must have known him from working on her car.
I recognized her.

Sharalynn twirled her shoulder-length rusty brown hair, flipping it behind her as she talked. She made goopy eyes. She primped and prissed. I could tell she was doing something with my dad that she shouldn’t have been. Dad was smiling. He stopped paying attention to the problem with my approach.

I knew her. It was a Saturday morning. She was wearing a cheap white jean skirt. I remembered her fat legs and her cackle of a laugh. I hated the way she talked, and what she talked about was even weirder. She told my dad that she finally got her stove cleaned. Why did my dad need to know about this lady’s stove?

Maybe it was in the car ride home. I know I figured it out before I went to bed. It’s not that there’s a blank spot. There’s silence in the memory. It’s blurry white noise of oceans and electric hum. Car tires and pavement. I’m sure he talked, and I’m sure I answered, but I don’t remember a word. What I do remember is staring at my dad’s work uniform, blue-striped with two patches. I looked at the one with his name on it, slowly tracing the letters with my eyes. R-O-N. Over and over, like practicing. R-O-N.

I was just getting good at cursive.

At home, I got ready for bed. I put my pajamas back on, but it seemed like a different life from the first time I had done it that night. I went to the bathroom and washed my face. It seemed like my face. I put toothpaste on the electric toothbrush I had just got for my birthday. I turned it on, and for a second, I had quiet again.

I heard Mom’s ankles cracking as she walked my direction in the hallway. I tried acting normal. She couldn’t have known. I wasn’t sure I did, but she couldn’t.

“Honey, you need to hurry up and get to bed,” she said as she paused in the doorway. “Dad already let you stay out way later than he should have.”

I think I said okay.

“How did you do?”

I always remembered my scores. Kept them on the kitchen closet door under a sign I drew that said “Brandon’s Wall of Fame.”

I’m pretty sure I didn’t even respond. A thought slapped me in the back of the head. It was the kind of slap that frustrates you, aggravates, that waters your eyes.

I had met my dad’s mistress.

I tried rinsing my mouth again. It was nausea. I tasted the saltiness that always watered up before I got sick. Tears were waiting, but Mom was there again.

“Your teeth are clean,” she said. “Tell your dad good night, and we’ll
come tuck you in. Make sure you thank him for tonight. He didn’t have to do that.”

My dad never cried. But I remembered seeing it happen about three months earlier.

We were riding home from Barry, Illinois after our family reunion and after Dad got a deer for shotgun season. We took separate vehicles there – me and my sister with Mom because Dad left early on his own so he could hunt – but I got to ride home with my dad.

“Brandon,” he said, after a lull in our jabbering, with a tone serious enough to get my attention. He turned down the radio and adjusted his camouflage hat lower on his head.

“I want you to know that if anything bad ever happens to me...” He sniffled and wiped his upper lip on the back of his hand.

“If I ever get in an accident or if I’m ever just not there, I want you to know, okay,” he said. “I want you to know I’ll always love you.”

My dad wiped the first tear I ever saw him shed, and I couldn’t stop myself from crying with him. He was healthy, and it didn’t make sense.

I couldn’t sleep. I was tucked in so tight that it must have been my dad’s work. I couldn’t think of anything but Sharalynn’s face. There was something wrong with her skin, too. It was a rash or something, but it looked like dragon scales. Fire-breathing. Everything was wrong with her. Even all of my second-guessing came to the same conclusion. I hated her. She wanted to take my dad away. An hour must have passed between staring out the door watching Mom’s shadow cast from the living room against the white walls of the hallway and trying to count the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. There weren’t enough. The tears ran down my clenched cheeks into my mouth. My waterbed sloshed underneath me as I rolled to bury my head in my pillow.

I don’t think I prayed because we rarely went to church. I don’t think I knew how. I really don’t think I even knew who God was, but I kept thinking, “Please let me talk to my dad.”

“Brandon, what’s wrong?” my mom asked standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the hallway light.

Standing there, her lacy baby blue nightgown seemed to glow like the stars above my bed did. I know now that many of the problems between my parents were there before my dad’s affair, but then, she looked just as innocent as I was. I loved her so much I couldn’t let her know.

“I’m scared,” I said. “I’m scared, but I don’t know why.”

“I think you just don’t want to go to bed,” she said, predictably disgusted at another sleepless night. I was her snooze cycle, screaming every ten minutes before she ever had a chance to get to sleep.
It was my game, really. I had earaches, leg cramps. You name it, and I imagined it if it got me out of sleeping for five more minutes. Just a year earlier, I finally was told my mom wouldn’t lie with me until I fell asleep. Back then, she would give me three songs to get to sleep. While one song played, I would explain to her every night that when it got quiet — when the song ended — it actually was just a different part of the same song. She must have thought it was cute for awhile. I thought she bought it.

The new bed was their bribe. If I could start getting to sleep on my own, I could get a waterbed.

“No, Mom, I’m scared.”

The bed rocked as I talked.

“Right,” she said. “Get to sleep. You have school tomorrow.”

And she left.

I remember no five minutes of my life better than the next five.

My dad came to the door. Mom must have told him to go talk to me.

“Is there something you want to talk about?” Dad asked. I cried hard before I could answer. Before I even tried to speak, my dad was at my side, rubbing my back.

“Yeah,” I said. “Who was that lady?”

“You don’t have to worry about it, buddy,” he said. “She’s a friend.”

“But why did she talk to you like that?”

My mom’s shadow came back into the frame of the door. My knotted stomach tied tighter. I froze.

“Why can you lay all this out on him, but you can’t say anything to me?” my mom asked.

It took four years for me to realize she was asking that of me. In that mute-the- movie-soundtrack-slow-dramatic-zoom instant, my childhood ended.

Dad’s eyes looked away from me, to the wall.

“Linda, let me handle this,” he said.

She didn’t respond, but I saw her saddened eyes.

“Goodnight son,” she said. “I love you, and we’ll talk about this in the morning.”

She pulled the door shut behind her and left me with my dad.

“Brandon, I want you to know that I love you and that everything is going to be okay.”

“But who was that lady, Dad?”

His head dropped. He shifted his knees on the carpet and took a deep breath. I sat up and tried to get him to look at me.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow,” he said hugging me, holding me tight so close to my ear he seemed ten times louder than his whisper should have. “I’m sorry, buddy. I love you.”
I don’t remember sleeping, but I remember waking up.
I didn’t hear him. I didn’t smell breakfast.
Dad never left for work before I got up. I walked down the hallway to the
living room, taking hesitant steps, hoping everything was fine. Mom was sitting
on the couch we never used, holding a cup of hot tea. Her eyes had bags under
them. She was staring out the window. She wasn’t moving.
Before I even had a chance to say her name, she saw me out of the cor­
er of her eye. She tried to put on a mask, shuffling to look normal. She almost
spilled her tea. She got up and hugged me, and we cried.
“Mom, what’s going on? Where’s dad? Why isn’t he here?”
Mom always took longer to answer than Dad did.
“Things are going to be different, but we love you, and that’s what you
can’t forget. I love you. Your dad loves you. Kaylee loves you. Your grandmas and
grandpas. Uncle Paul and Gary. Ed. We love you.”
“Grandma got her earlier. I’m so sorry you have to deal with this.”
“But what’s...”
“Your dad will talk to you about all of this after school. He said he wants
to be the one to talk to you.”
The phone rang. Mom answered.
“Honey, it’s Grandma Goodwin. Grandpa’s going to take you to school.
Get dressed, sweetheart. I’ll make you a bowl of cereal. I’m...I love you.”
Mom always took me to school. Grandpa never took me. Mom went into
the kitchen and was fumbling in the cupboards. I could hear her crying again
from my room.

Not a second passed at school when I didn’t think about my dad. My
mom talked to my teachers so they knew what Mom knew, and everyone told me
to try to stop thinking about it, but it was like setting someone’s arm on fire and
telling him not scream. I still didn’t know what really happened. By noon, my
mom, I’m guessing, had a note sent to me saying that my dad would pick me up
from school. Dad never picked me up from school. He had to work until 5 p.m.
He ran errands after that. School got out at 3 p.m. He never picked me up from
school.
He wasn’t there when the last bell rang. It was Mom, instead, looking
even more exhausted than before. She forced smiles and hugs, and she told me
Dad was running late. I was almost sure I would never see him again.
Then he honked.
Four cars back in the line of waiting parents, my dad stuck his head out
of the driver’s side of his ‘79 Camaro, feigning a smile like Mom’s. He waved,
and I left after another tight hug from my mom. They didn’t look at each other.
It worried me, but all I could hope is that dad would tell me everything would be fine. We didn’t actually talk right away. Dad drove to Hardee’s, and we got Cokes, no ice. As we pulled out of the drive-thru, he started asking me about school.

“What you do in math today?”
“We started on pre-algebra. Some gifted thing.”
Dad’s voice soothed me like warm milk to a turbulent stomach
“I didn’t even learn algebra until I was in high school. I don’t even think we had gifted kids back then.”
He was trying to get me to laugh, but I didn’t. We had driven for a half an hour out to the dirt roads, and neither one of us had approached talking about Sharalynn. But I kept seeing her face. I kept hearing her cackle.
Dad parked the car and turned the engine off. He lit a cigarette, and I watched his eyes track a car as it passed, kicking up dust.
“I screwed up son. I screwed up bad,” he said. “All I’ve ever tried to do is what’s best for you kids, but I really screwed up bad.”
My back was hot against the leather seat. The sun was warm.
“I cheated on your mom with Sharalynn,” he said.
I knew the words before he said them.
“She’s my girlfriend.”
It wasn’t any easier to hear. I sipped the last of my Coke.
“But don’t you love Mom?”
He sighed and sank deeper in his seat.
“I wish life were that simple buddy. She is a great mother to you kids, and I’ll never stop loving her for that, but your mom and I haven’t been in love for a long time.”
“This only happened because I was crying,” I said. “I made Mom hate you.”
“This isn’t your fault. No. No. No. This isn’t your fault.”
He exhaled hard and tossed his cigarette out of the window. He tried to talk but stopped. He started again.
“This is my fault, and I’m so sorry,” he said. “I want you to know I’ll never stop loving you. I need you to understand that.”
“I do love you, Dad.”
We hugged and cried. I could feel his heart pounding. He was sweating. Dad didn’t draw any pictures for me that day, but I’ve had to review the lesson a hundred times since.
Life isn’t simple.
Neither is love.