Chinese Lullaby

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My father was always the strongest, the smartest, the kindest--the super hero of my world. He could do no wrong. I remember wanting to be just like him--wanting to emulate him. I followed him everywhere I possibly could; my loyalties and admiration knew no boundaries. I wanted him to teach me everything there was to know--I wanted to be as smart as he was. I wanted to be like my father.

When I was young, my father presented me with a Chinese music doll from his travels in Taiwan. The doll resembled that of traditional Chinese opera, constructed of iridescent silk. The body was swathed in a vibrant, jewel-toned kimono embroidered with gold stitching so intricate it was difficult to even fathom the possibility that human hands crafted it. On the doll’s lap sat a delicate wooden instrument reminiscent of a dulcimer, the strings made of thin steel wires. The doll’s face was white, pure. Each feature was delicately painted, creating an almost authentic and realistic expression--and being a child, the doll could not have seemed more alive. The doll sat upon a pedestal, and when you twisted the bottom, a sweet Chinese lullaby chimed. I would listen to that lullaby over and over and over. The music was as soft and delicate--the doll seeming to be plucking the steel strings in accordance with the oriental tune. Sometimes I was afraid I might break the music by how frequently I wound the bottom.

Something changes in our perspectives as we join the eternal struggle of adolescents for independence. We begin to realize our parents’ faults, and from there we discover that they are simply human, perfectly capable of making the same mistakes that we, their children, are capable of making. No longer are they the strongest, the smartest, the kindest. This awareness evokes the want to be seen as an equal in the eyes of our parents--to be shown the same decency and respect they would give any other adult.

I was huddled in the corner, my head resting against the door. Dark enveloped the room, leeching out all color. The only light came from shattered fragments of moonlight through the tree branches outside my window. Shadows from the tree branches crept over the darkest corners, veining out in all directions. It was late--it had to have been well past midnight, and I shouldn’t have been up. But all I could hear was yelling. I didn’t need to strain to hear what was being said.

“Who do you think you are?”
“How dare you embarrass me like that.”
Insults and insinuations.
“You swear, you make smart ass comments, and you never want to be intimate when I want to.”
“And here you are trying to point out my faults when they’re your own.”

Shallow sobs came from the other room. My mother was crying. It was my fault this was happening. My fault my father was verbally ripping my mother apart. It was the first time I stood up to him. To his drinking. I prayed my younger brother and sister wouldn’t wake to hear.

Spooked from God knows what, my cat jumped from my shelf, knocked over my fish bowl, and spilled the rank water over everything in close proximity. The doll was ruined. The once beautiful white silk face was now stained and uglied, and the colors of the kimono ran together. I desperately tried to clean off the stains--hand shaking with distress as I scrubbed and dabbed at the silk in vain. There was nothing that could be done. I twisted the bottom and listened to the lullaby--it hadn’t changed.

Out to dinner. It was supposed to be like any other family get together (we were visiting some relatives in Iowa City for the weekend while I toured the campus). We were at a Japanese steakhouse--my mom, a couple of our relatives, me, and my father. The lights were dim; steam from the cooking stations clouded the room. Strangers jostled each other at the bar--impatience riding on them. It would have been a great night. If it wasn’t for the alcohol. He just never stopped. I could see a change take place as his eyes gradually unfocused and crossed while his lids became a heavily drooping cloak. A drunken fog seemed to envelope his body--he quickly became uncoordinated and sloppy. Every time he brought the fork to his mouth, his food didn’t make it any further from the plate than his lap, and his hands flopped around like inanimate pieces of meat, knocking over drinks, spilling them left and right. Inhibition stole away any sense of decency he might have had--but I certainly had enough embarrassment for the both of us. Within a span of several drinks, we became the enemy--my father the victim. He started raving, exclaiming that we were all against him like a regular schizophrenic--calling us lewd and disrespectful.

Unable to handle his “victimization” any longer, he said, “I hope you have fun, Laura.” And with not even a shred of dignity, dismissed himself and stumbled out into the dark streets of Iowa. My uncle ran out after him.
I had never felt so abandoned. My father just walked out and left me without even a second thought--and now he was drunkenly wandering the streets with no place to go, not even a clue of where to go. A part of me wanted him to get arrested or spend the night in some stranger’s front yard. I wanted him to finally learn a lesson. But for some reason I can’t explain, I drove off after him.

My eyes frantically searched the sparsely illuminated street. Searching for any sign of uncoordinated movement in the bushes, or a motionless mound lying face first on the sidewalk. After awhile, I found him arrogantly strolling along the sidewalk with my uncle, flailing his arms about in a spastic fashion, yelling obscene remarks--they were heading towards a McDonald’s. I slowed and pulled into the parking lot. I was mad at my father for what he was doing--for what he was putting my mom and me through. It was like none of what we felt mattered to him. And at that moment he could have cared less for anyone but himself--the world revolved around him, and his drunken stupor obscured everything else, blinding him from reality.

I parked and unlocked the car door. Somehow, my father managed to flop into the backseat.

Then leaning forward, he said, “Thanks for leaving me, Laura.”

Anger burned through my body--shame, embarrassment, and disappointment fanning the flames. Fuck you. I was done.

It was my first and last summer home from college. I was going through everything that had accumulated on the walls and shelves of what used to be my room--my sister was already drawing out the plans for its renovation. I was fine with it--the room no longer felt familiar, but foreign. It had become a refuge for me over the years--a place to which I could escape when things got bad. But I didn’t need that anymore. Not since going off to college made me realize that I was a strong, independent woman, whom no one would deter from achieving what I wanted out of life. As the morning sun peeked through the curtains, the light reflected off the glass of the picture frames already packed away into boxes. I removed remaining pictures and awards from the walls and shelves, and carefully placed them in a cardboard box that once held Corona, along with my graduation cap and medals. Some things I set aside for my sister -- things I knew she would probably want. Other things, things I no longer had a use for, went in the trash. I picked up the doll from one of my shelves. The silk was still stained from all those years before. I twisted the bottom and listened to the lullaby one last time--then I threw it away.