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Red Herring

by Paula Eglevsky

Three months after his wife died of breast cancer Daniel Logan sat in the front pew of St. Michael's Church with a piercing hangover. It was Easter. His daughters wore strawberry-colored dresses with white sweaters and patent leather shoes. He wore an identical colored pair of pants with a white button-down shirt. His wife, Jeanette, had planned the outfit before she passed on and he looked ridiculous in it, but the girls were thrilled. They got a kick out of anything that embarrassed their father.

April, the youngest, was four and Natalia was seven. Natalia would remember her mother before the illness, unlike April who would only recall her in snippets Jeanette's protruding veins, her egg-shaped head, and the clear, plastic tubes in her nose. Parishioners in St. Michael's Church watched the trio. Daniel could feel their eyes on his back, sending him sympathetic glances. They were sorry for what happened to Jeanette yet glad cancer hadn't affected their families.

Natalia stared at her father. He had a far away look in his eyes. She began to fidget nervously. April grew bored. She rose and wandered towards the altar. Natalia grabbed April's wrist. "Get back," she hissed.

"Let go," April squirmed.

Daniel stood, scooping April up into his arms. "Listen to your sister," he said. And that was that; he put her down. Their father defined them with his passing words. *Listen to your sister*. Natalia became the responsible daughter and April the flighty one. It would be that way for the rest of their lives.

"When I pass on," Jeanette often said. She used the phrase "passed on" as opposed to "passed away" because it was more hopeful. Death was an adventure. Like the rickety carnival rides which twisted and twirled, spun and dropped. Jeanette would be waiting for her children when the ride was done. She would not be waiting for Daniel. Everyone knew about the affairs and Daniel never apologized for them. They started after her diagnosis. Therapy said it was his way of coping with Jeanette's illness. They both knew that was bullshit.

Jeanette's coworker died of the same type of breast cancer (stage three, double negative) a few years before. While doing research for her illness Jeanette found her coworker's postings on an online cancer group. She sat before the computer screen and cried tears which never ended. Daniel left the house that night and slept with a woman whose name he could not recall, but he remembered she smelled of Ivory soap.

His construction business kept Daniel on jobsites and away most of the day. He couldn't stand being at the house anymore. Jeanette would lie in their bed and quote from the bible. She became obsessed with the King James Version and would read Psalm 23; The Lord is my Shepherd, over and over again. Because the chemotherapy drugs caused memory loss, she couldn't recite the whole passage; only sections and she rearranged their order.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil... Thou art with me... Forever." Jeanette stared at Daniel, challenging him with her eyes. "I want this on those cards. I don't know what they're called – the ones you get with a picture on one side and passage on the other. Prayer cards," she said.

Daniel's need to feel alive overpowered him. It grew the more Jeanette fought her cancer and faded. He spent less and less time at home, especially after she passed. The woman who was a wife, mother and daughter was gone, like the

forsythia which adorned the altar in church. Daniel could still see their pop of sunshine-yellow after they had left St. Michael's that morning. The moon was out now, silent and observant above their Cape Cod style house.

"If anything happens," he told Natalia, "run next door to the Johnsons."

"But it's Easter!" she exclaimed, still in her strawberry-colored dress. Daniel looked at Natalia, and then turned to his other daughter.

"Remember," he told April, "your sister knows what's best for you." April pouted her lips but nodded at her father. She held a hollow, chocolate bunny with gold wrapping in her hand. Living this way was better than having Child Protective Services involved, Daniel reasoned. "I love you girls," he said. Daniel smiled as he left, jingling his car keys, sweet as music to his ears.

He disappeared to the Red Herring at night. Daniel loved its dark velvet couches, brick walls, and votive candles on every square table. The Red Herring was a comedy club outside of Baltimore, near the old train tracks. All walks of life passed through its doors. Comedians waited outside until it was their turn on stage. They smoked on the sidewalk, grinding their cigarette butts into the pavement, rehearsing their routines. Most joked about their miseries, being overweight, balding, dating, marriage and divorce. Comedy was the tip of a depressing iceberg.

Daniel sat, performance after performance, enthralled. The drinks were strong and jokes were bad. Tuesdays were open-mic. He often took the stage, drunk. It was terrible. Just like the first time he had sex; awkward and forgettable. Daniel let himself go after getting married, like most men – too many buttermilk pancakes on Sunday mornings, too many naps after lunchtime. He could get into shape with some training at the gym, only he learned that in comedy the least attractive man becomes an Adonis on stage. Girls who would never look his way otherwise imagined themselves, albeit briefly, with him; college-aged girls with sparkle lip gloss, older women with pearl necklaces, Puerto Rican, Southern, with wedding rings and without.

After that evening's show he went to the 24-hour diner and sat with the other amateur comedians, reminiscing about the performance. "You're funny," people said, slapping him on the back. Daniel nodded, drinking his warm \$2 beer and eating twice-fried chicken. "Man, you weren't funny at all," others remarked. He shrugged. That was the beauty of stand-up comedy. Daniel performed anyway, despite the comments, to sighs. Boos. Sometimes laughs.

It was about fear, the unknown. What would happen when he got on stage? He wasn't sure. But he knew he wasn't the type of man who read fairytales at bedtime – *Jack & the Beanstalk*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Princess & the Pea*. He forgot about his daughters at home, his wife's ashes underneath the bed, and the bible she read on his nightstand. Penance and redemption, which Jeanette had hoped, were just wastes of his time. Daniel decided to grow a goatee.

Paula Eglevsky is a graduate of Southampton College, Long Island University where she obtained her Masters of Arts degree in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in various newspapers, magazines and literary journals such as *The East Hampton Star*, *East End Elements*, *Proteus Literary Magazine*, and *The South Pacific Times*. In her debut collection of poems entitled *Ladder of Starlight*, Eglevsky created haikus with a uniquely rich style and elegance. Ms. Eglevsky is the granddaughter of ballet legends Andre Eglevsky and Leda Anchutina. She currently teaches English and writing courses at Suffolk County Community College in New York.

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