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THE SWAY OF CEILING FANS

BY ETHAN JOELLA

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In the interval of my junior and senior years in college, I met my stepmother. As I pulled up to my father's lake house where I hadn't been in ages, I saw her on the porch, watering the geraniums and plumping up the seat cushions. She waved to me as if she knew me already. Or wanted to know me.

I grabbed my bag and stretched, thumping the car door shut. "Hey," I said.

She smiled and tiptoed down the stairs. "Oh, Henry, it's so good to meet you." She gripped the side of my arm as though she were about to hug me but dropped back and offered me her hand. "I'm Jane."

I had known she was a bit younger than my father (mid-forties compared with his late fifties), but I never envisioned her so girlish. Slender and tall, she had long dark hair in a ponytail and smooth hands. She walked like a high school cheerleader and went around barefoot. She offered to take my bag from me, but I shrugged.

"Then come inside and have something to drink," she said.

I hadn't expected to like her.

"Dad at work?" I said as we entered the cottage. The shades were pulled, and a cool breeze circulated from the sway of the ceiling fans. My mother had always said she wanted ceiling fans, but my father called them pointless. I scowled at the shadows they created across the hardwood floor.

"But of course." She slipped the refrigerator door open and grabbed a foggy jug. "Sun tea okay?"

"Fine." I plopped the bag down and pulled out one of the counter stools.

She sighed. "And he said the hours would get less once Memorial Day came, but that flashed by like an eclipse."

"Yeah, he was the same with my—" I stopped. "Work's always been a thing of his."

She smiled and handed me a glass, a lemon wedge plunked on top. “Oh well, who needs him?” She poured herself a glass and clinked ours together. “Cheers.”

Afterward, I wandered around the house, noticing the myriad changes: bookcases painted, the living room wallpapered, bathroom remodeled, new dining room set, different carpeting, different books and board games (still sealed and unused). Different everything. Even my room and my sister’s now looked like the vacant bedrooms from a catalogue’s pages. Was it that easy to erase your past? Why hadn’t my father just sold the damned house and started fresh? The only thing that had remained was the pair of hurricane lamps my mother had bought for the fireplace mantel.

I thought of my mother then, at home and alone, still sad and offended after five years. My stomach dropped. It was wrong for me to be there, seeing my dad’s new life and wife. Almost endorsing it all; denouncing my mother’s pain. But she had said, “You should go and see him. Spend a weekend there. He’s still your father.” I looked at the photograph of my father and Jane that sat on the mantel beside one of the hurricane lamps. They were on a cruise ship somewhere, tan and happy, the wind from the ocean blowing their hair. Carefree twenty-five year old honeymooners. I hated them both then and realized why my sister had declined our father’s invitation.

“Ugh,” I said.

“I’m not fond of that picture either,” Jane said. I flinched. “But your father loved it. Paid thirty dollars for that frame even.”

I turned around and stared at her. “Tell my dad I had to go.”

“You just got here. At least stay around for dinner, spend the night.” Her teeth were straight and white. “You haven’t even jumped in the lake yet.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to. It’s wrong for me to be here, and besides, it’s not your lake.”

She looked hurt, but she just shrugged. “Maybe not.”

“Sorry.” I looked at the floor and walked away, locking myself in my impersonal catalogue room.

When I woke from my snooze, it was almost noon. I stretched and walked out, no sign of Jane. I noticed the cruise photograph again but this time I focused on Jane, not my father. She was nice enough, beautiful, seemingly intelligent. Had she done anything to hurt me? It’s not like she’d been my father’s mistress or divorce lawyer. Still, she felt like an accessory, and I maintained a level of disgust. Did the two of them think I should toast their marriage and applaud my father’s good taste?

I walked to the kitchen to look for something I could eat when I saw a note on the table: Henry, I’m outside. There’s lunchmeat in the refrigerator and bread in the big drawer. Please make yourself something and don’t worry about leaving a mess. —Jane Any friend of mine who had a stepmother always told stories about how spiteful she was, how she always did her best to make the friend feel uncomfortable, unwanted. And now I had Jane, my father’s wife of almost a year, who was reaching out for me and wanting to win me over. But I had no idea about her—her intentions, motivations, true self.

I saw my mother watching every move I made, and I tried to make her proud.

But I was hungry, so I grabbed some roast beef and Swiss cheese and bread, squirted some

Dijon mustard (another item my father always deemed a waste of money) on top, and ate. I held my left hand underneath to catch the crumbs as I walked around the kitchen and gulped it down. I poured some more iced tea and looked out the window.

There she lay by the lake. Donning an elegant black bathing suit and Jackie O. sunglasses. Her skin was just the right shade of tan, and every so often she flexed her toes. The water in front of her was calm and dappled with sunlight. She and the lake looked like a soft drink commercial.

The house was getting hot, despite the effort of the ceiling fans, so I decided to take a quick plunge into the lake. Even if I had to be around her. (Was she all that bad?)

I pulled on my bathing suit, grabbed the towel out of my bag and headed out. She didn't stir as I moved toward her, so I said, "Hey."

She lowered her glasses. "Oh, hello. I must've dozed for a second."

I gave her half a smile and noticed what a perfect figure she had. "It's pretty hot. Figured I'd take a jump in."

She winked and I noticed her staring at me. "I thought you'd want to." She paused. "This sounds strange, but did you ever realize you have the same exact feet as your father?"

I looked down. "No."

"You do. Exactly the same." She must have noticed my frown. "It's not a bad thing."

I shrugged. "Says who." I jumped into the water. "God, it's cold."

She stood up and skimmed her toes across the water. "You get used to it."

"I know. My mom used to always say, Put your mind on something when you first jump in—like a movie or video game. Then by the time you're done thinking about that, you're already used to the water." I dunked my head under again and slicked my hair back. "We used to come here every summer until Labor Day. The four of us."

Jane waded in. "So I'm guessing it's weird as hell to be here with a new gal's presence all over. My dad got remarried when I was twelve, and it took until college till I could even look at his new wife without wanting to strangle her. She had her own kids though, which was worse."

I nodded. "I don't want to strangle you."

"You're right. It is cold." She shivered and then dunked her head. "By the time it warms up, it's Thanksgiving."

"Yeah." I treaded the water and looked into her brown eyes. "It's not you."

"I know, but still. I'm sorry for any pain you've had to feel. And your sister...And your mother, too."

I heaved a sigh. "Don't worry about it. It's just the little things, like seeing the ceiling fans. My mom always asked for ceiling fans and he said no."

She nodded, absently stroking her arms in the water. "I never asked."

“He just gave ‘em to you. Figures.”

“No, I just went ahead and got them all. Same thing with expensive soap and sheets. Even Dijon mustard, for God’s sake.”

“Then that’s the difference between you and her.” I swam to the edge of the lake and pulled myself out. “And that’s why she’s sad.”

Jane nodded, treading in the water like a teenager at camp, the sun in her eyes. “This really is a lovely place.”

“I’ve missed it.” I dried off and headed for the house. “You’ll tell my dad I had to run, then?”

“Of course.” She swam backward and forward, the ease of an Olympic swimmer. “But only if you promise to come back.”

“Maybe some day.” The freshly cut grass stuck to my wet feet. I turned back around. “I think I’ll take the hurricane lamps, okay?”

“They’re yours,” Jane said, her ponytail slipping out of its hold.

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