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My father wore his gray suit and brick colored tie every day for sixty-five years. To church and work, of course, but on Saturdays too. And after he retired, and then when he withered and neared death, he insisted upon wearing it. The ensemble remained remarkably crisp and fresh for most of its life, much like the man himself. He is etched in my memory that way: a towering man in a perfectly tailored suit and tie. Forever calm, calculated, composed. The worst thing you could do, he always told me, was to let your emotions get the best of you. Keep your head on straight, hold onto your marbles, and then you'll be golden.

My Grandmother's selection of sayings predated even my father. Her favorites included "whatever will be, will be," and "hard work is the only true formula for success." Confused, my father couldn't decide whether to declare his success the result of his own hard work or to attribute it to the unalterable hand of God himself.

The Moran women—first my father's two sisters, and eventually me—were inconsequential in my Grandmother's eye. All hope rested with her son, the only man left to carry the family name. But the hand of God—or fate, if you like—served my father one scrawny little girl when all he'd wanted was a pair of sons. Long after my Grandmother died, when it seemed certain that God would not give my father a son, he still spit out her prayer of thanks. He had been taught to thank God for what he was given rather than bemoan what he lacked. Thanking God might bring a son. Every night before dinner, eyes staring dully into his plate, he would recite it: *We give thanks for all your benefits almighty God who lives and reigns forever.* If company was present, he'd slow the words, close his eyes, and add another sentence: *May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.*

My father put himself through college by working as a night janitor. He finished undergrad with few friends and few debts, and went on to obtain his teaching degree. He continued to work as night janitor occasionally while in grad school—his boss was impressed with his thorough, diligent work ethic—but the job remained a secret. He told my mother several decades later at the family Christmas gathering, faulting three dirty martinis for his confession.

After finishing school and marrying, my father bought a house a few feet from Princeton

County Junior High, student enrollment 450. He began working as a student teacher and quickly moved on to a full time history teacher. Two years and several false promises later, I popped out of my mother's loins crying bloody murder. I was a miracle, though not quite the miracle my father had been hoping for. Meanwhile, he was just about head of the history department. By the time I was a wide eyed, perpetually embarrassed junior high school freshman, my father was enjoying his second year as principal of my new school, Princeton County Junior High.

During the fall of my father's second year as principal—a full three months into the school year—parents began calling about the supposedly dilapidated boys' locker room. My father didn't much care about the locker room, but he wanted to leave a legacy.

So he left his legacy: the boy's locker room was renovated in less than three months. And twenty years later, the crappy gym with the beautiful boy's locker room was christened "The Frank Moran Memorial Fitness Facility."

During construction the boys were herded like cattle into an abandoned classroom. Desks were used as lockers. My father tried to placate Mr. Schwartz, our perpetually scowling gym teacher, by promising the locker room would showcase "state-of-the-art technology" and be finished in a jiffy. My father made promises with his trademark accessories: a calm smile, a firm look, a crisp suit, a well-tested cliché.

Mr. Schwartz took my father at his word. That's one thing about my father: he always followed through with his promises. He promised, for example, that he'd buy me a brand new car—bright blue—if I graduated with honors from Cornell. Though he would have kept his word, I never got that car. After I paid money for my long, triangular nose to be broken into something delicate and cute, I dropped out of Cornell and skipped off to New York City. I wanted to be a model slash actress. I had turned pretty—the new nose and an obsessive exercising regimen had transformed me—but a nose and a body don't make a model. I was told all over town that I was a good actress, just not quite what they were looking for. After three months, during which I became depressed and sickly thin, I quit my dream. Never went back to Cornell, though.

My father will tell you, if you ask him, that he succeeded in life because he never quit a dream, because he kept his promises, and because of a fine, gray suit. But more than anything else, he'll say he succeeded because God wished it so.

I thought I'd avoid small town gossip once I escaped to New York City, but my father took to calling with updates, as if to remind me of my roots.

"You remember Jim, don't you, Kristen?" my father's raspy voice asked me over the telephone.

"Jim was that red-headed, troubled fellow"—he stopped to hack directly into the telephone—"who gave us all headaches over at the Junior High? I think he might have graduated with you, even? I suppose it'd be difficult to forget a boy like that."

"Of course I remember him, Papa," I answered, incredulous to think my father might have forgotten. "Are you alright? Maybe you shouldn't be on the phone. The doctor said..."

"The doctor knows nothing. Jim...don't you want to hear about him?"

"Yes, fine. Go on," I answered, defeated. Jim was the last person on earth I wanted to hear about.

"I heard--from a very reliable, distinguished member of the congregation, mind you--that Jim came back to town after fifteen years without any contact with anyone." He paused for dramatic effect and then gave in to another round of coughing. "Heard he looked like a beggar on drugs. I'm talking a real-life hooligan—off the streets and all that. I always knew he'd turn out something awful."

"Who told you this?" I asked, hoping with unreasonable urgency that my father was mistaken.

"Mr. Jones. Mr. Robert E. Jones. Said Jim showed up without a suitcase, wearing sandals in the snow and skin as wrinkled and brown as leather. And to think, the poor chap's not even forty. Can you picture it, Kristen? I tell you, makes me glad at least, that you didn't end up like *that*. Makes you not getting married or having kids seem like small potatoes, no? I tell you."

I sighed quietly, holding the phone away so that my father wouldn't hear. "Papa...I've got to go..."

"Did you get the clipping I sent last week? The top ten Catholic churches in New York City? There're so many, Kris, I'm sure you could find one that interests you. I know you only had one to choose from in Princeton County, but you've got your pick over there—I don't ask much of you, Kristen...I'm getting old, and it would make me very pleased if you'd—"

"Papa, look, I'm sorry, but I'd rather not talk about this right now... I really do have to go...."

Several hours later I was still thinking about Jim and my father. My old man wasn't one to pretend: the incident that took place nearly a quarter century ago—the one that had me shameful and sad in its memory—had actually slipped his mind.

It began innocently, in seventh grade English class. The alphabetical order placed Jim as the only boy amidst a clump of girls. Jim's shock of red hair, tiny beige teeth, and heaps of freckles set him apart in a crowd, and his incessant talking made him the focal point of a room. He was talking as quickly as he could before Mrs. Mingus (or "Mrs. Fungus," as some of us called her), ordered us, in a voice of nasal monotone, to "pipe down and get to work."

"You wouldn't believe the boy's locker room," Jim said, throwing a bouncy ball up and down, up and down as he spoke. Teachers were always telling him to put the darn ball away.

"Man, it's awesome," he went on. "It's like a fancy hotel or something. You'd never even guess about all the stuff we've got in there. The sauna, the whirlpool, the hot tub—it's so cool! Too bad they didn't fix the girl's locker room, too. We've only been in there one day and already—"

"Please. Give me a break," I butt in, crossing my arms in front of me. By now I've learned some of the tricks of the Jim Mahoneys of the world. Truth is, though, they still get me most the time.

"You're a bald-faced liar," I continued.

"What are you talking about? What's a bald face?"

"It's a...a...I don't know...my father says it. That's not the point! You don't have any of

those crazy things in your locker room. Girls aren't suckers, you know."

"You don't know anything. *You* haven't been in there. *I* have. Ha!"

"Mph. I know plenty."

"Why do you think you know? Just cuz your daddy's the principal and he tells you stupid sayings?"

I inhaled an angry, heaving breath as the heat rose to my nose. My nose turned bright red whenever I suffered from discomfort or embarrassment. As if the large, angular centerpiece wasn't conspicuous enough.

"Or maybe it's cuz you're a boy!" Jim the freckle laughed hysterically at himself. The others around him smirked.

This time I spit out the first words I could think of. "You shut up Jim freckleface!"

Jim's face brightened to match his hair, but he recovered with a sneer. "I feel bad for you. You probably have an awful locker room. You're just jealous cuz you want to be a boy. But you'll never get in there. Sucks to be you!"

Once I thought up a clever response, our teacher was barking at us to open our notebooks and stop our chatting, and at Jim—for the last time—to stop throwing his ball indoors.

I was ready to execute my plan during study hall, the last period of the day. As long as I kept my head on straight and held onto my marbles, I'd be golden.

Step one: ask to use the bathroom pass

An eighth grader wouldn't have needed that first step, but seventh graders weren't allowed to "aimlessly wander the halls" without a pass. My father was very proud of this rule, one of the first he implemented as principal.

My face flushed and my voice quivered when I asked permission. Miraculously, the pass was awarded to me without hesitation. If I had been a religious little girl, I might have muttered "hallelujah" to myself.

Step two: walk to the boy's locker room undetected

Lucky for me there were no gym classes during the last hour of the day, so the locker room was deserted as I walked towards it, bathroom pass trembling in my hands. I looked around real cautiously when I got close to the locker room. The hall was empty. I opened the door and tiptoed inside.

Step three: figure out once and for all if Jim the freckle is a bald faced liar.

I figured it out. Every pore of the room was exposed under screaming florescent lights, so I got a good look.

Each shower had its own glass wall and soap dispenser. The benches were made with polished wood at the bottom and leather cushions at the top. The sinks turned on automatically when I tried them out, and it seemed the toilets did too. Next to the sinks were long-stemmed water fountains shaped like half soup bowls. The whole place smelled like metal and bubble gum. The lockers were sleek, large, and bright blue, just

like my car would have been.

But there was no sauna. No hot tub. No whirlpool. I smiled with the satisfaction of having proved that Jim the freckle was indeed a bald faced liar.

My pride vanished and my plan crumbled right then—right when I heard adult voices. With dread I identified the person behind the smooth voice that uttered every sentence like a question: it was my father. He and his friends were undoubtedly walking towards the locker room.

I hoped—prayed—that my father and whomever he was with would walk right past the locker room. Despite all the religion my father tried to instill in me, I'm an agnostic at best and an atheist most days. The only time I jumble together a prayer is when I'm in a compromising position. Because...well...you never know. I listened, paralyzed, as my father spoke:

"Bill, Jonathan, Lincoln, I think you're going to be very impressed with what we've done to the locker room. This is a renovation the school's needed for some time. And I want to thank the board and each of you for supporting my efforts. Obviously nothing could have happened without your help."

An ancient, crinkly voice responded. "Frank, you're the one who makes things run around here. I just sit around at my desk." Shared laughter. "Well, seriously, though, I see you taking over for me as superintendent when I retire in a few years—that is, if you can ever pry my old bones from the desk!" More laughter. "That's off the record of course. But I know Bill and John and the other board members support it. Now, let's see this new locker room, shall we?"

More words were exchanged, but only a few minutes passed before the group entered the locker room.

There have been three times in my life when the anticipation of a few minutes felt like years. One involved an elaborate dinner of chicken chilaquiles, avocado salad, and seven bean casserole that I prepared for my now ex-fiancé. We were living poorly as young professionals in New York City at the time, and I'd known for three months that he'd been cheating. I tried to play the part of the perfect girlfriend during those three months, showering Charlie with his favorite Mexican meat dishes and lacy lingerie, even though I'm a vegetarian who'd rather wear flannel pajamas to bed. It was over that candlelit dinner, eaten at my house two hours later than we had planned because Charlie "had to work late," that I worked up the courage to confront him about cheating.

I'm not much of a confronter, it turns out. I was very quiet about it. I think I even asked politely, and for once Charlie didn't get on my case about my lack of emotion. We ended our four year relationship five minutes after I asked about *her*. I was still sitting at the dinner table long after he left. I shed a single tear, without sound, before getting back to my cold, spoiled dinner; Josephine Baker wailing in the background. He didn't marry *her*, but he married someone else a few years later and settled in France. Or so my father told me.

Three months after the breakup, I sat listening to my doctor's long monologue that would reveal the result of my cat scan. Dr. Andrews, plump and glowing from her new baby and her doting husband, eased into the results with small talk about family life and how glorious it could be, how pleased she was about my imminent marriage. I nodded and smiled, unable to reveal that the engagement was off—unable even to remove the unwieldy ring from my finger.

Dr. Andrews finally touched my hand from across the table and confirmed my suspicion: breast cancer. I just smiled—a vacant, sad smile—which is about all the emotion I could muster. I assured her, without believing myself, that I'd be okay.

It turned out, I was.

And way before all of that, before the near marriage and the near death, were the few minutes before my father entered the locker room.

I first considered hiding in the showers. But the shower faucets looked suspiciously similar to the sink faucets. Both had automatic sensors. Even if the shower didn't go off, my father might see me through the glass. Another idea was to stand up on one of the bathroom stalls to hide myself. But that wouldn't work either. I might set off the automatic flusher.

There was only one option left that could work. The lockers were big—big enough to fit a scrawny seventh-grader inside. I got ready to squish myself inside. Even if my father or his friends opened a random locker, I reasoned, they wouldn't likely choose the very spot where I was hiding. But I hesitated. What if I couldn't get out once my father and his friends finally left? What if I died in there? Suffocating in the boys' locker room, even to avoid the wrath of my father, was not a price worth paying. I could only imagine what Jim the freckle would say if he heard. In desperation I looked up to the ceiling, wondering if I could climb up there and hang onto one of the light fixtures.

There seemed to be no way out. No escape. And then, just in time, I spotted it.

The Door. I didn't see the brightly colored sign with the words, "emergency exit only – alarm will sound." I only knew that I had to get out of there.

I opened the Door.

The fire alarm went off.

Somehow, amidst the chaos of a fire alarm that is not a drill, I stumbingly made my way to my designated fire alarm spot (seventh graders, last names L – Z). The entire school was collecting in the courtyard. No one noticed as I slipped among my classmates, trying to hide my jacketless body.

Fire engines began screaming in the distance. Trucks pulled into the school complex. Firemen and one firewoman jumped out, florescent outfits and hardhats in place.

Excitement heated away the chill in the air. There'd never been a real fire at the school before, so people were guessing like crazy about what had happened. One guess went like this: a hooligan smoking in the bathroom had inadvertently set off the alarm. I was already in a state of panic, but right then I nearly dropped dead. Because I realized—suddenly and with terror—that I'd lost the bathroom pass during my hasty, ill-fated exit out the fire alarmed door. The pass was labeled "Room 159, Girl's Pass."

An hour passed before the school was finally deemed safe for reentry. Once we were let back inside and preparing to board the bus, two horrid words sounded over the loudspeaker: Kristen Moran. I was ordered to report to the principal's office.

That walk down the hall was one of the longest, most difficult walks of my life. My feet dragged with the weight of what I had done, with the shame that I had caused my father, with the hopeless certainty that he hated me. I wasn't concerned with the logistics of how he had found out. I only knew that he knew. And that I would pay. I was walking

to my execution.

I made it to the waiting area and sat thumbing listlessly through a three month old issue of *Parenting Plus* magazine. It lay on the glass coffee table next to a bowl of crusty caramel candies. The feature articles that month were titled, "Discipline: Why You and Your Kids Need It," and, "Telltale Signs of a Babysitter Gone Bad."

The secretary finally called me in after three men in suits emerged from my father's office.

"*Principal Moran* can see you now, Kristen," the secretary smiled, delighted with herself. My father wouldn't allow me or anyone else to acknowledge our father-daughter relationship when we were within fifty feet of school grounds. He figured the fifty feet rule was reasonable because that's how far away teachers had to be if they wanted to smoke.

I didn't speak as I choked down my fear and opened my father's door. He sat rigid in his office chair, hands in his lap. He looked at me for a few seconds before speaking. "Close the door, Kristen."

I closed the door. I searched his face, desperate to find a sign that I wouldn't be whisked off to Siberia or wherever bad people were sent. I followed the lines on his forehead, the crinkles that formed at the sides of his eyes. They pointed to the way he frowned and to the shape of his head, but they provided no answers. I surveyed the old bookshelf behind him. He had placed on prominent display a collection of classic novels; a sturdy, wooden cross; a framed picture of my mother, father, and I; and a new, laminated shot of me standing alone in a meadow. The photographer had made me look like a five-year-old princess with candy pink cheeks and a leering grin. I hated that picture. Now it hangs in my parent's guest room, next to my mother's collection of porcelain dolls.

"Well," he started. "Well. This has been..."

I couldn't take it. I couldn't let him go on. I wrenched the words out.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I did it I just wanted to see what the locker room was like and then you were coming and the door was right there and if I had known it would sound the alarm I never would have done it and it was just a stupid mistake and I know you hate me now and—"

"Stop it! Kristen! What the—" He composed himself and continued in a deeper, slower voice. "Kristen? What are you saying?"

I had been so intent upon getting it out that I hadn't realized my eyes were clenched shut until just then, once I finished. I opened my eyes cautiously and saw my father's incredulous expression.

"Kristen, what are you saying?" he repeated.

His eyes bore into me like twin drills. I couldn't bear to look at him. Those large, frosty blue eyes told me: he hadn't known I'd been the culprit. "I...I..."

"Go on. Stop this stuttering. Just, please speak, for goodness sake."

Heat crept up his neck, rising to his face, moving into his ears, making them as red as apples. His voice was cool and steady.

"I mean...I just... I thought...thought about looking...in the...the locker room, that's all..."

"I see." All the color drained from my father's face and collected in his ears; all the color drained from my face and collected in my nose. He continued shuffling papers.

"That's...that's...Christ, Kirsten, have you no sense?" He cleared his throat and lowered his voice, shuffling all the more urgently as he spoke. "Christ. Well, what's done is done, isn't it. I would have expected more from my own daughter...I mean I do...I expect more from you, for goodness sake. I suppose that goes to show...you should hope for the best and expect the worst."

"Wh...what? Do...does this mean you hate me?"

"*Hate* has nothing to do with this, Kristen. This involves a lot of things, but it does not involve hate. Let's not get emotional and worked up. We're going to deal with this rationally."

I was confused. My father hardly looked at me. His ears were bright red; his face pale as a cloud.

We heard a cautious knock on the door, and then the secretary twisted her head inside. The rest of her was so well hidden behind the door that she looked like a bodiless alien. I enjoyed imagining the secretary that way, but only for as long as I forgot about my dreadful predicament.

"Principal Moran? Sorry to interrupt, but your wife just called. Said she got the message."

"Fine, Jeanie. That's fine." My father walked to the other side of his desk and stood a few inches in front of me, hovering. Dangerously close. He looked at Jeanie. "Just give us another minute, please?"

"Sure thing. Sorry to...to disturb." The head disappeared but then stuck itself back in again. "You know the superintendent and board members are waiting outside, don't you? I mean...I just wanted to be sure you knew, is all..."

My father smiled through clenched lips. "Fine. Thank you. Just tell them I'll be out in another minute?" He motioned to his door, signaling that he wanted it closed.

The head obliged with a nod and quietly closed the door.

"Papa...I'm sorry..."

"We're not going to talk about this now." My father's words sounded eerily mechanical. He walked back to the other side of his desk and continued shifting papers around, more slowly this time. "I called you in here because your mother wasn't answering the phone, and goodness knows she doesn't check the answering machine. No matter how many times I implore that she listen to the messages when she's been out, she just doesn't listen..." He shook his head. "Regardless: you heard, she got the message. The message was to expect three more for dinner. And for you to be on your best behavior. And Kristen, I don't want you changing into sweatpants before dinner, for goodness sake." He looked my overalls and plaid shirt up and down with disgust. "What are you wearing right now, in fact? It's time for you to stop dressing like a boy. You're old enough to have some sense."

"Okay, Papa...I'll do whatever you say and—"

"Kristen. Stop it. You're not to speak of what happened. Just go home and change for dinner."

"I'm sorry—"

"We will speak about this tonight, after dinner. Don't mention it—to anyone, mother included—until after we speak tonight. Understood?" He finally looked up at me.

"Okay," I whispered, nearly crumpling into myself, biting my lip to keep from crying.

"Kristen!" My father's voice rose just slightly. He quieted down and continued. "This is not a catastrophe. Get those tears out of your eyes. You're too emotional. Just like your mother."

"I'm sorry—"

"For goodness sake stop saying you're sorry. Just...please... Get yourself together. You are to be smiling when you walk out of here. " He stared at me for a long time. I squirmed under his gaze, eyes downward and hands moving rapidly at my sides.

"You've really disappointed me, Kristen."

I wiped my eyes and sniffled. I took a deep breath and faked a smile.

"That's all. You're dismissed."

I wanted more time to compose myself, but the desire was trumped by a need to get away from my father as quickly as possible. I smiled at everyone who pretending not to look at me as I exited his office. I learned from my father, that afternoon and many more after, how to be "the lady of muted emotion," a name Charlie used during our most troubled times. Fake a smile, speak politely, cook a good meal, and keep from crying. I was a good actress, even back then. New York City missed out.

I managed to make it through the long dinner with the important looking men, dreading with every bite the impending confrontation with my father. I hardly looked at him during dinner. Not even to pass the potatoes.

I was sitting on my bed, thinking about what belongings I'd choose if I was forced to fit everything into my single brown suitcase at a moment's notice, when my father knocked on my bedroom door. He opened it without waiting for my response. He stood there silently, staring at me.

"Hi," I finally muttered, anxious to say anything that would break the silence.

"Hello, Kris." My father's face was blank, his words quiet.

"So..."

"So."

"So, do I have to leave? What...what's the punishment? Let's hear it. I'm ready."

"What do *you* think the punishment should be?"

I wasn't expecting this from him. I searched for the right answer.

"How about...how about you yell at me like crazy and...and don't let me go to the movies for eight months!" I answered finally.

A smile crept into my father's eyes before he resumed his stony, blank expression. He'd given it away, though: I'd said the right thing, somehow.

"What do you think would be a worse punishment: me grounding you for a month or reporting this incident to your teachers and your classmates?"

I was thrilled with the prospect that my teachers and classmates might not have to know. And my father's calm, easy tone had me euphoric. I wanted to answer casually and slowly. But I couldn't; I blurted out a response.

"So much worse for everyone to know. So much worse!" I looked up at my father searchingly, hoping I'd answered correctly again.

"I see. And why, pray tell, is that?"

I was ready with this answer. "Because they'd hate me! And they'd laugh at me." Thinking about this, about all of them, made me nearly start to cry again.

"I see." He paused and looked at me, moving his bottom lip as if swishing water. "Don't start crying again. Let's be rational for a minute, okay?"

Without really understanding, I nodded earnestly.

"Okay. Kristen, who have you told about this?"

"Told? No one! Only you. No one else, I promise."

"No one else? For certain? Not your mother, even?"

"Not Mama! No one else!"

After some time, I succeeded in assuring my father that not only had I kept mum about the locker room incident, but also about some of the juiciest secrets in the entire history of the fifth grade. I told him to ask my best friend, Ella Sofidofillis, if he needed proof. Ella had told me some pretty secret stuff. My father and I agreed we wouldn't tell anyone about my role in the fire alarm disaster. He was about to leave my bedroom—he was even smiling—when he saw my brow furrow suddenly.

It was right then that I remembered.

"What is it? Who did you tell?" My father, who'd hardly raised his voice when I admitted my guilt in his office, spoke so loudly I jumped in surprise.

"No one. I told no one, but—"

"No 'buts!' Either you told someone or you didn't. Who did you tell? Answer me!" His voice shook at the edges. His forehead was sliced down the middle with a sharp, angry crease. The fold was so deep it seemed to touch his skull.

"Um, it's just that—well—I—I left the bathroom pass in the locker room!" I sputtered out the words that would convict me and looked guiltily at my father. "Anyone could

find it. Then they'd know I was in there. And maybe they'd take a guess about what had happened and—"

My father's voice changed immediately; his forehead smoothed. "That's enough."

"What? What's enough?" I answered, confused.

He sighed heavily. "Just listen. Did your teacher remember to ask for the pass back?"

"No...it was pretty nutso in there with the...the...alarm..." I looked up with shame at my father before finishing. "So yeah, I bet she forgot and she doesn't know nothing about it—"

"Anything. She doesn't know anything. You're sure she doesn't know?"

"I mean, 'anything.' Yes, I'm sure about it."

"As long as you didn't tell anyone what happened—that's what matters the most right now. This is the last time I'm going to ask you, Kristen..."

"I didn't tell, but—"

"Then fine. It's done then. You didn't tell and you will not tell, under any circumstances. In the mean time, are you going to bring this up again?"

"No! No, Papa. But the pass—"

"Don't worry about the pass. I'll take care of it."

And, true to his word as always, my father took care of it. When I got to school the next morning, the pass was tucked neatly into its usual holder.

Later that day, Jim the freckle was called down to the principal's office. This was nothing new. Jim was always in trouble for something or other. I didn't much care until I heard rumblings that he'd set off the fire alarm. Apparently he'd snuck out of his last period class right before the alarm went off. And no one saw him again until five minutes after it sounded.

I spotted Jim at his locker a half hour after he'd been called down to the principal's office.

His eyes were pink and angry; the scowl on his face brought out his unsightly chin dimple. Whenever he was mad like that, folks usually left him alone and just talked about him secretly. But I couldn't leave him alone. After agonizing about whether or not I should confront the sad looking kid, I gathered enough courage to make my way over to him. I hovered for a minute as I tried and failed to speak.

"What do you want, Daddy's girl?" He asked, whipping his head to look at me with disgust.

I jumped with surprise and glared at Jim. After a few seconds of fumbling to form words, I finally spoke. "What...what'd you get in trouble for this time?"

"None of your business!"

"It wasn't the fire alarm, was it?" I spoke quietly, hopefully.

"I'm not saying what it was."

"Because I believe you that you didn't do it—"

"You can believe whatever you want. I don't give a dang. I told you I'm not saying. Leave me alone!"

Jim the freckle made a big show of throwing a comic book into his backpack and slamming his locker shut. He huffed away from me without a second glance.

Jim didn't come into school the next three days. On the fourth day, Friday, he entered English class sullen and withdrawn. People whispered that he'd been suspended, but no one found out for sure. Jim's face got red and freckly when people asked where he'd been. He refused to answer any questions.

My father never mentioned the locker room incident after that night in my bedroom. He never grounded or yelled at me, and he didn't even flinch when I worked up the courage, a full two months later, to ask for movie money. I kept my word too: I never told anyone—not my mother or my best friend.

A part of me always wanted to ask my father about Jim, but I was afraid to hear the wrong answer. If I didn't ask, then I could convince myself that Jim hadn't been blamed, and I could justify keeping the secret. Asking would have made my father angry, and that was out of the question. I couldn't face his disapproval all over again. Not to satisfy all the uncertainty and curiosity in the world. Not to prevent the framing of an innocent bystander, either.

Let's be honest: the incident with Jim does not quite compare to breast cancer or a broken heart. Still, it changed me, and I'd like to think it changed my father too. But who am I kidding: he doesn't even remember, for goodness sake. He spends a lifetime spouting religion and virtue, when, deep down, he's just another corruptible mortal.

I shouldn't fault him, though. Everyone, all the adults I've ever met, have glimpses of that hidden somewhere. We're all walking imperfections; we're all looking out for ourselves most of the time. And maybe that's the thing. Maybe that's what separates Gods from Men.

Alyssa Kagel attended Wesleyan University as an undergraduate, where she studied creative writing under Paula Sharp and obtained a degree in Environmental Science. She has published in *Electricity Journal*, *Geothermal Bulletin*, *Renewable Energy Access*, and has assisted in the publication of several scientific and policy documents. She works for the Geothermal Energy Association in Washington, DC.

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