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Mud

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Mud

That day I had my back turned trying to get an ottoman through the front door, so I didn't see the flower-patterned sofa slip and knock Mark, my dad, to the ground. Probably everyone's grandma had that same couch: hard cushions, oversized arms, and a petal-and-leaf print that looked more like pot-pourri than spring foliage. It had pinned Mark right on top of a stinging nettle which was, until that moment, two feet tall and about the only green thing on the lawn.

The sound of snapping was what pulled my attention to the front yard. Mark had gone down hard not twenty paces from his blue-and-rust pickup. Air hissed through his partial dentures as the red of blood-filled capillaries bloomed in his unshaven cheeks, trying hard not to yell or scream obscenities, which wasn't like him at all. Every time he visited home, he hoped that Molly would be visiting her folks across the street in that sun-bleached green house and he hated the thought of being unimpressive around her. He had said she was a lawyer on the East Coast or something sophisticated like that. I figured she was something laughable like an actor because he's always falling short of his dreams and face-planting instead. Or landing on a stinging nettle.

Mark only had enough leverage to keep the weight of the sofa off his leg. His brother, my Uncle Steven, grunted under the weight of his end of the couch while sweat dripped down his face like melting ice. They used to run a moving company out of Pine Bluff, about fifty miles south of Little Rock, back when they wore sleeveless shirts to show off tanned and bulging muscles. This was back when they had tans. And muscles. And a truck worthy of a moving job.

Steven turned to me, glaring against the sunlight, and jerked his head toward the couch, "Seriously?!"

Years later, the three of us did a lot of talking, passing around a shot glass that said, '*IF FOUND, PLEASE REFILL*,' and a bottle of something that Jack Daniel's red-headed stepson made. Through the evening, a yellow sun became red as it sank lower in the sky, the bottle became lighter as the whiskey level dropped, and expressions became solemn. We all talked a lot that night. And again, another night. We've talked about the day with the sofa more times than I can recall. Putting it all together. They revealed to me that their volunteering was about more than clearing their dead mother's house and saving money by not hiring movers. It was mostly because it had been so damn long since they had moved somebody.

Scrawny, lanky, twenty-seven, and built-for-the-AV-club me left the otoman in the doorway and ran over to help. My eyes avoided theirs as I looked for a place to put my hands, but I wasn't nearly fast enough.

Steven, having absolutely no patience, yelled again, "Just get under it, boy!"

The tiny nettles were digging into Mark's leg. Every time he tried to gain more leverage his calf pressed harder into the green leaves. Flecks of spit glistened in the air, propelled by the sharper hiss of his breathing. Everybody in my family always wore the wrong clothes for an occasion. While I had come to help after work and still wore my uniform, which included jeans, Mark wore cargo shorts even though he knew better. He had put them on that morning knowing how ridiculous his mother thought that many pockets looked. As a kid he used to collect things in his pockets: shoestrings, crayon stubs, an occasional dangly earring. When he got older, he collected souvenirs from every move, a small stolen token of remembrance. The first day that we drank and talked he told me that he wore his shorts that day because he hoped to collect something at Grandma's house.

Luckily for Mark, the only broken leg was on the couch. Unluckily for me, the decorative front skirt made it impossible for me to see where my hands were grabbing and as I lifted, my right-hand forefinger caught on a broken nail. Steven and Mark used the momentum from my mediocre lift to flip the couch over onto its back. Without realizing it, Steven had dropped his end over a burrow in which a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, number two on America's list of most deadly snakes, had taken refuge from the midday sun. Steven ran over to the pickup's tailgate and retrieved a small remainder of duct tape, the same stuff that held his muffler and door handle in place. He pulled a length of tape free, knelt down by Mark and laid it along the back of his left calf. Steven pinched a corner of the heavy tape, squeezed so that it stuck to his thumb for better grip.

Mark looked at him, glared at the flat plant, and said, "Do it."

It wasn't the first time they had performed some sort of back-alley triage; there had been several cuts, gashes, sprains, and even a concussion. Mark

had once made a splint for Steven's forearm out of the broken chair that had caused the injury and the jagged splint pushed four splinters into his flesh.

When Steven yanked what turned out to be Gorilla tape, it removed as much skin as nettles. Mark punched at the earth, as dry and hard as he ever was. Tiny beads of toxin had been seeping through the needles into his calf, the swelling had begun to form large lumps. He squeezed his eyes closed, hit the ground a second time, and pushed the spent air from his lungs.

Mark held out his hand for help getting up. Steven dropped the tape on the couch and grabbed onto one of Mark's hands. They turned to me as though two heads of the same creature, glaring because I wasn't keeping up. I held up my hand, bloodied from the couch. One of them shook his head, the other looked at the ground, and up went Mark without my help.

"Get me a cup of water or something," Mark said to either of us. Steven went to his truck a second time and retrieved a bottle of water. Mark crouched down and poured water onto the dirt. "Right. Of course. Friggin' hot as hell out here." He clawed at the ground with fingernails to loosen dirt which he put into the bottle to make mud. Mark squeezed out a handful, dropped the bottle, and spread the wet earth around his calf as thick as he could.

The pair of them strode past me looking straight ahead toward the front door. I'm not as strong as they were at my age and it disappointed both of them. I wanted to think that they were just being hard on me. Mark had tried to toughen me up like his dad had done to him. When I was nine, I fell off my bike and a red line of blood dripped from my knee to my white sock. I asked for a band-aid, and that's when Mark told me that Mom was leaving. I knew those things weren't related; they fought all the time. But it meant that she wasn't there to comfort me and my bleeding knee. It meant she wouldn't be there the next time I fell. It meant that I hadn't done enough good things to keep her around. It meant that I would never ride my stupid Schwinn again.

The front door slammed shut and I heard Steven yell something about useless waste. The ottoman lay to the side of the door, leaning up against the house. I wrapped the bottom of my shirt around my finger, my blood creating a Rorschach blot on the dark blue fabric. I had to stop the bleeding—keep it all in.

The sun and heat outside Grandma's house were too oppressive to willingly stand around. The small breeze I heard rattling in the leaves of the tree across the street didn't provide any reprieve. At least that's where I thought the rattling came from.

Inside the house portraits hung crooked on Grandma's yellow papered walls and down the cramped hall. When I was six or seven, I counted all of them. I never cared much about who was in the frames, because most of them

were complete strangers to me. Probably second cousins once removed, great step-uncles, and so on. Grandma's collection, Mark said once.

The living room smelled of musty furniture, and dust motes glinted in sunbeams. The worn cushion of a love seat made almost a U shape. A rocker missing three spindles eyed me suspiciously, threatening to break if I stood too near. After fifteen years of being away, that room held no more memory for me than a sepia photo, browning at the edges from overexposure, chemical bonds breaking down, and everything wilting.

The piano bench waited patiently as though longing for company. Small lines of light bled in through the blinds and laid across the smooth surface of the bench's wood and on the piano's top and front boards, mimicking the white and black of the keys beneath the felt cloth. "Keys need to breathe," Grandma had said. "Never close the fallboard, that's the keyboard cover."

I felt myself moving slowly, as though wading through water toward the bench. A board creaked beneath my left foot. It squeaked when my weight shifted back to my right. The small wheels curved and smooth legs were nestled into the carpet's beige, green, and red of a flower motif—burrowed, as my toes might have done when the carpet was new.

I heard Mark grunt from the bathroom. They had used hydrogen peroxide which bubbled on his leg where Steven's tape trick had left raw flesh. I know now that Mark blamed me for it being so bad. I know that at that moment he held as much contempt for my many failures as he did for the nettles.

The bench groaned lightly under my weight. With age, everything creaks and groans and all we can hope for is that nothing cracks or breaks. Things that break generally become two broken things, neither of which is of any use. Like the leg that broke off of the potpourri couch which covered an angry snake in the front yard. Like Steven's arm for the seven months after a doctor finally pulled the slivers out of the infected forearm. Like my parents, and Mark and me, and the display board I kicked down when I stapled my finger because all I wanted to do was fix something and it was the only reason I had taken a job at Home Depot in the first place. Things break—I had grown to understand this well. That is simply their nature; that's just what happens. As I let my weight settle, the bench did not break.

That corner of the room smelled faintly of perfume and mints diffused into the wood. I'll never be convinced that grandmothers don't all smell of mints and floral perfume. We would sit at the piano bench when I was only up to her elbow. She would show me the inside of the piano, and we would watch the action of the hammers as I leaned on a dozen keys at once; a ruckus of disharmonic tones spilled from the soundboard every time. She would poke my ribs as though they were the keys and take tremendous joy in, as she said, "The sweet notes of laughter resounding from your soundboard."

I knew the keys were clean and shiny beneath the felt. Grandma always wiped them down on Sundays. My right hand still holding the reddened hem of my shirt, I took the corner of the keyboard cover between the fingers of my left hand and held it, peeling back the cloth so that I could touch the keys, hear their sound, and play something other than the disharmonic tones I used to create.

“Don’t get too attached to that thing!” Steven spat, scaring the hell out of me. I spun around toward the hall, gasping. If I had one of Grandma’s mints in my mouth, I would have choked on it. Mark stared at me. Steven stared past me. “That damn piano isn’t going anywhere. I’m not moving it. Probably weighs a goddamn ton and is worth a hundred dollars at best.”

Mark opened his jaw wide like an anxious mutt; a silent yawn, or maybe a stretch to ease tension brought on by clenching. He took a deep breath and put a placid smile on his face. He stared right at me, the way he did when I was a kid, when I had done something wrong. My finger had slipped from the hem of my shirt and threatened to bleed again. The felt cloth in my left hand hung to the floor.

That look he always gave me forced guilt or shame whether or not I had really done anything wrong. I always thought there was something mean about it when I was a child, or if not mean, maybe evil. Age changes everything, and I saw something honest instead. His eyes didn’t provoke guilt or shame, but truth. The discomfort of being stared at made my eyes do what they always did in these moments—avoid his gaze. Instead, I looked past him to the wall and a few of Grandma’s pictures.

A young girl whose eyes were the same color as Mark’s stared back at me. Her eyes were kinder and framed in red-rimmed glasses. She wore a knitted sweater of unfortunate pastels; her hair was curled and defying gravity. It came out of me before I knew the question was forming, “Who is she?”

Mark knew without looking which photograph was behind him, and he could read my expression. His face turned stone for just a second and flashed back to the smile. “Your Aunt. Joan.”

On weekends when I stayed with Grandma and counted those photos, I somehow never really looked at the faces. On holidays, when the whole family gathered, Aunt Joan wasn’t in attendance. On projects with a family tree, she was never mentioned.

Steven cut in before I could pursue, “Went missing on the night of her senior prom. Her and her boyfriend.” He shrugged. “Long time ago. We’ve got a couch to move, you and me. Get a box and move.” I glanced back down at my finger, the clot still intact, and nodded my head. He wasn’t going to give me anything more about Joan. Not yet.

I turned back around on the seat. Several of the piano keys had sunk in like bad teeth. Others were missing pieces of white or black, exposing wooden

rectangles where I had imagined real ivory. The piano wasn't something I could ever hope to fix. It was junk. And hiding under that cloth, it was a lie. Just like everything else in the house.

I replaced the cloth and stood up. I chose a large box by the hall to prove I was capable of helping. They waited for me to go first; probably worried that I would stay back for fear of hurting another finger, but they also needed me to open the door because they were already holding boxes. I set my box on the banister and pulled the door open, catching the corner of the box. It spun and tumbled to the floor, dumping Grandma's trinkets along with a small container of remains of a past family pet. The tin fell onto the hard tiling and dented a corner badly, spilling its gray-and-black powdery remnants along with two small chunks of white.

"Christ! That was Miser!" Mark yelled.

Steven leaned his head toward his brother, "It died 'Miser;' it was born 'Mister.' Dad changed its name when it was ten and officially became grumpier than his own damn self." Steven's eyes dropped to the dark powder on the floor, "Course the cat was orange back then."

"Clean it. I need a cigarette."

They walked out, and for the first time I was glad there wasn't a breeze.

Grandma's bathroom was as dark and dusty as the rest of the house. The tub was covered with flecks of damp dirt. And invisible nettles. It was the room in which her body was found. I imagined her lying there in an old night gown, white or maybe pink, one hand up near her face, the other on her stomach. I couldn't decide if her eyes would have been open or shut. For some reason I dwelled on that. They said she had a heart attack.

I found blue, green, and yellow cleansers under the sink before the unexpected sound of a garage door opening across the street pulled my attention to the window. A black car slowly backed out, making several corrections to stay straight. Mark stared across the street. Steven leaned against the exposed bottom of the couch, smoking. I wished he would get snagged on one of the nails. He flicked the butt too close to Mark, who glared at him, and then returned his gaze to the house. The garage door groaned its way shut, and the black car drove away. Staring vacantly at the yard, Steven lit another cigarette. Mark tapped his foot on the ground, waiting for Steven to pass him one.

I didn't want to move boxes. I didn't want to spend my day trying to prove something to them. I didn't want to clean up their damn pet. I wanted things that weren't. I had a strange desire to take that piano apart because it wasn't worth restoring. I left the cleansers in the bathroom because, seriously, to hell with that, and I stepped back into the hallway.

When somebody says not to go in a room, the first thing I want to do is get a good look. A door nobody ever talks about, like a photo of a young girl, can become part of the wall. Until now I never needed to go to that room.

Nothing else was down there, as far as I knew, but apparently there were coiled things waiting to strike and clots waiting to break free.

The hinges squeaked and moaned. Colors, brilliant even with the shades drawn, covered the walls. Simple Minds, Tears for Fears, Prince, Queen, The Bangles; they all looked across the room at one another, striking poses, vying for attention in the quiet. A dresser, a bed, a stool. Everything else was too dark to see. I flicked on the light for a better look.

A record player sat on the desk just inside the door. I hadn't seen one in years and couldn't help but wonder how many years it had been since anybody had seen this one. My ears ached for compensation for the death of the piano. I flipped the switch on. The needle, already set in the grooves, began to feel its way across the vinyl, reading the small divots and bumps. Queen's song, "The Show Must Go On", began to play.

A turquoise Care Bear sat on the comforter of pink triangles, blue circles, and purple squiggles. A stuffed E.T. had fallen off one side of her bed. Hers, because I knew whose room this was. It felt like I gained and lost an aunt in a day. I could still, perhaps, learn about her. On a dresser rested arm sleeves, a couple of bows, a can of hair spray, a clock that had died sometime in the past at 11:58. Everything was doubled in the mirror. The dull complexion and appearance of my own reflected face was emphasized, being surrounded by the images of the rock star immortals posing in posters all over the room.

I felt the complete absence of time. The room was stuck between two frames of film and Joan might walk through the door if somebody could only fix the projector. I crossed to the window and debated opening the blinds. Maybe the sun's light would somehow get the picture started again. Maybe it would reveal too much. After all, a room preserved for thirty years must have its secrets.

I couldn't help but wonder how many times Grandma stood in the room. I imagined she would hug that bear a long while, probably smell the lingering perfume within it until one day she had breathed it all in. Or maybe, I thought, she avoided the room and never came down the hall past the bathroom after she made that bed one final time.

The music stopped suddenly, followed by quiet. Mark and Steven stood just inside the doorway trying at first to stare me down but getting distracted by the history around them. Their feet were as rooted as if they had also been in that exact place for thirty years.

Mark's hand moved away from the record player, his arms crossed, hands turning into fists and nestling themselves under the opposite arms. "And just what the hell," he asked, "are you doing in this room?" His eyes narrowed and his head tilted. I felt like he could hear my quickening pulse and wanted to hear it better. "Getting pretty curious today."

"Yeah, like a cat," Steven chimed. "Like Miser." The bottom of his left shoe left a faint gray mark on the carpet as he shifted his weight back and forth. "Coincidentally, where our curiosity started. Remember that? 'Course, stupid us, just left him there. Mom thought he'd been hit by a car." He flashed a smile, or what he called a smile.

"You killed your own cat?" I asked, more shocked than disgusted. His lingering grin was his only response.

"Well, shit," Steven shouted, slapping his hands together. "If he thinks a cat dying is bad, we better not say anything about the casualties involved in our side job. The kid might freak out." The lilt in his voice revealed he thought he was funny.

Mark's slow sigh was one of gathering patience. "Let's mind our context, huh? The last thing we need is a panicked call to the cops." Mark took another step into the room, nodding his head. He pulled a stool from beneath the desk and sat down. His elbows went to his knees. "Sit," he said.

I lowered myself onto the floor in front of him. The fresh smell of cigarettes came at me from everywhere. Steven sat on the bed behind me, the turquoise bear tumbling to the floor from his movements. Instinctively, I picked it up. I wished that the music was still playing, that the clock was still ticking. Everything hung in the room.

"Would it make it easier," Mark started slowly, "if I told you that it's—it's for good reasons?"

He had managed sincerity in his voice. Good reasons? For casualties?

"Just tell him. I'm gonna just tell him," Steven said. "See, jackass there, what's his name, Eric, right? Eric got to being a little frisky with Joan. Joan, she comes to us and asks if we can help her teach him a lesson. As in, stay the fuck away from Joan."

Mark ran his tongue between his teeth and lips. "We offered to take care of it ourselves, you know. Rough him up is all, we told her. Nonviolent, she says. Ok. I told her, you get a chair and some rope, tie him up, scare him, see how he likes somebody getting too personal."

I shifted uncomfortably, excitedly. They both regretted and relished the story.

"Obviously we followed. What kind of big brothers would we be to miss out on seeing Joan scare the shit out of that bastard? So, night of prom, sure as hell he tries to lead her away from the bonfire at a friend's house." Steven was visibly proud of her, even at this moment. "She lets him, guides him toward a clearing. Not far from the drop off."

A lone cloud must have passed in front of the sun because what little light came in the window dimmed, casting a moment of cool.

"She lured him easily enough. He was all about that chair and rope, thought it was his dream come true. She tied him up without a problem; he

didn't struggle one bit, until she pulled out a hammer." Mark's eyes left this world and entered his own dreamscape. "The fear in his eyes was heavy, palpable. But uh, prom night drinks, you know. He fought back pretty hard and slipped the ropes. Joan didn't tie it too tight, because she wasn't too serious."

"Yeah well," Steven cut in, "Was her boyfriend who broke my arm with that chair when we seen what he done to her. Fast as fuckin' lightning. We couldn't stop him. You know who was there to help me? Made a splint out of the chair?"

"Family takes care of family," Mark said.

"Too bad nobody was 'round to help him. You know how it is...these teens, they drink, they wander too close to the drop-off. They hit every single goddamned rock on the way down. It's terrible." Steven shook his head.

Mark breathed in sharply. "I still have his class ring. Something to remember him by. I don't know, I just couldn't help myself. They never found Joan, though, for obvious reasons. I told Ma that she had talked about running away. That we didn't think she was serious. Even suggested that Eric threw himself over when he found out she was gone. I think Ma always hoped Joan would come back. And I don't think she ever really forgave me for keeping such a thing as my sister planning to run away a secret. I'd rather be hated than for her to have known the truth."

"Most people would. Hence—our *other* employment."

Mark rocked forward on the stool, lifting one of its legs off the floor, leaving him to balance on its other two as he held his breath for a moment before slowly exhaling. His eyes finally met mine. Like he was considering me rather than accusing me. "It's a family thing, you see. Family takes care of family. We protect each other at all costs." He was choosing his words carefully. "You, uh. You family?"

Behind me, Steven sniffed to remind me that he was there. Coiled, he waited for my answer.

"But. You were movers," I said.

"We certainly moved a lot of people." He sniffed again. Rubbed his nose. "You gotta just learn to go with the flow, kid. Like me. I don't give a damn. I just do what feels right."

A car door slammed shut. Mark rose from his seat and walked across the floor. He cracked the blinds open with two fingers. Peered out. His face dropped, eyes widened, and he whispered beneath his breath. He spun around and made for the front door. Steven, wary of unannounced visitors slamming car doors, called after him asking what it was, and ran out of the room.

My hands trembled. There could be danger. I thought it must be out of fear that I rose from the floor, stepped out into the hallway, and closed my aunt's bedroom door behind me. Quickly, quietly, I made my way back to the living room, to the entrance, and peered out through the window in the door.

A red SUV sat in the driveway across the street, the back hatch still open. A woman was in Grandma's yard talking to Mark; her bare arms waved in conversation, and long legs extended from a knee length skirt. It was Molly, visiting home on a long weekend. I could just barely hear their conversation. Business was good, she was so sorry to hear about what happened, and hoped everybody was alright. She stepped forward and hugged Mark like an old friend. I saw her make the move to let go of the embrace before him. She gave Steven a brief one-armed hug.

Mark nodded his head back to me and I heard him say that I was inside, cleaning something up. Then he gestured to the couch, and I lost his words again. He looked so happy to see her. Genuinely happy.

I pushed open the door and heard Molly clearly, "Well, now, I can help you. Got two arms as good as anybody else's, haven't I?" Her voice was both sweet and heavy, like a dripping honeycomb.

Mark raised his hands, ready to say that wasn't necessary. Her eyes moved to his calf, pink and swollen, and she insisted. She put down her purse. Steven took the side with the stinging nettles. They wedged their fingers under the edge of the couch and counted together. "One, two, three. Lift." A step toward the truck. The leaves rattled in the tree across the street, I thought. Another step toward the truck. Then, her face fell. We all heard the rattle. She dropped her end and jumped back, and I instinctively jumped too. The snake lunged after her in a long defensive strike. The edge of the couch hit the ground and caught the snake's tail, silencing the rattle, holding back the bite. The hard movement of Molly's drop pulled a nail across Steven's hand, which sliced clear across his palm. His end dropped to the ground, freeing the snake which leapt again.

A snake of that size can open its mouth wide enough to wrap around the muzzle of a small mammal. Drops of venom are known to leak out even before contact with its prey. This snake's bite landed high on Molly's inner thigh. As the hollow-tipped fangs sank into her flesh, it squeezed a gland in its head and injected its venom. One fang hit the femoral artery. The spurt of blood spat back at the snake and caused it to release and slither away. Molly crumpled on the ground, life seeping out and death seeping in.

Molly's high shriek tore at her vocal cords. Her face contorted like a reddening gargoyle. Blood pulsed out of her, harder and faster as panic and adrenaline flooded every inch of her shaking body. Mark was already at her side. He dropped to the ground and put his mouth to the wound to suck the venom out. Her agony rattled the window in front of me, echoed down the vacant street, and shattered a chunk of Mark's heart.

I clenched my hand too hard. My heart raced inside my chest. While Mark sprinted across the yard for the rest of the bottle he had applied to his leg, blood seeped through the clot on my finger. As Mark dashed back to the

convulsing and foaming-at-the-mouth woman, my own blood beaded at the tip of my finger and dripped onto the remains of Miser.

The contents oozed from the bottle onto Molly's leg, while Mark's finger pressed into the arterial gap to stop the flow of blood. Drawn out like a sailor to a call of the siren, I approached. It was rare for a reaction to the venom to be so intense. It could have been that the other fang hit a vein sending tainted blood straight to her heart. Mark didn't seem aware of anybody but the two of them as Molly continued to shake and foam. Mark touched her leg where the reds and browns had not.

I realized how much I liked that shade of red. How well it mixed with the browns of earth. How good the tightness in my stomach felt—panicked, anxious, adrenaline-fueled. I approached Steven, turned, and leaned slightly in. "Is it always this—this exciting?"

Steven turned his head toward me. The right corner of his lips curled upward, and his eyes gleamed. We both looked back to the slouched man. Mark shouted for somebody to call 9-1-1. I reached for my pocket and started to pull out my phone.

Steven held his hand out and shook his head. "The last thing we need is a panicked call to the cops."

Mark took her left trembling hand in his, held it comfortingly, and whispered to her, *sshhhhhh*. He held her hand, looked at her hair which now covered in dirt and saliva. Slowly, as though at war with himself, he grasped the diamond ring on her finger. I could see the fight happening behind his eyes as they shifted from her face to her leg and to her finger. I could feel the energy. As I pushed my phone back into its pocket, Mark slowly and gently slid the ring off of her finger. That was the drive. Looking into the whites of her rolling eyes he whispered one more time. *Sshhhhhh*. He slid the ring into one of the small pockets of his cargo pants. There was the compulsion.

I knew who I was then. Who I am. I am my dad—strong and hard like the earth. And I am my uncle—calm and flowing like the water. "Yes. I'm family," I said. "I think we need to move her."