

## SMOKE

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*George Knuepfel*

"IF I EVER get like that, I want you to shoot me." Ryan's voice sounds so young in this hospital room where my father is dying of cancer.

"Ry, shut up, ok?" I watch the green dot and its trailing line on the screen of the electrocardiograph rise and fall.

"It's gross," she says. She sits with her hands under her thighs. I think of sitting next to her and putting my arms around her shoulder, but after ten days, I am exhausted. Ryan comes to the hospital in the early evenings, wearing her blue and green school uniform. Looking at her across the room from me, I suddenly see her as other men must see her. The uniform makes her look sexy. She wears a blue-black sweater over a white blouse, a plaid skirt, and dark green knee socks.

"Honey, go home."

"Then I want you to come too," she says.

"I want to wait awhile longer."

"I can wait."

Whatever Ryan and I talk about sounds more important and intimate in this room. I am close to my daughter here. Her school books are piled at the foot of my father's bed and there is something so useless about books on the bed of a dying man, I start to laugh.

"What?" Ryan says, looking at me.

"Oh, nothing," I say.

"What are you laughing about?"

"Your books."

Ryan smiles. "What about them? I don't get it."

"I don't know. I swear. I don't know. The covers maybe. I'm tired."

Ryan looks at her books: Latin, Chemistry, American History.

"I don't get it," she says again, frowning her bushy eyebrows that are just like her mother's.

Ryan has long brown hair, beautiful skin, and braces on her teeth. She looks more like her mother than like me, and if I take my glasses off and purposely blur my vision, she could be Susan, who left for California with our landlord over a year ago. Susan, who always seemed surprised at the

fact she actually had a daughter who kept growing, soon regarded Ryan as a younger sister, and wrote her twice. Both times Ryan threw the letters away and suggested we move so her mother wouldn't know where we were. She thought I was foolish to honor the lease, mail the rent to California, and clean the apartment for the new couple who moved in after we finally left.

"I'm tired," I say softly to myself, standing up, then sitting back down.

I have started smoking again. After five years without a cigarette, my father's dying makes me edgy. Even the advertising agency where I work wasn't enough to make me smoke.

Outside the sky is an unbelievable lavender, a shade I would describe in a perfume ad as "exotic yet subtle."

Ryan looks at me. "We're learning definite articles in Latin. Want to hear some?"

"Sure."

She clears her throat, stares at the ceiling and says, "Hic, haec, hoc. Hous, Hous, . . ."

"Sounds like hiccups."

Ryan rolls her eyes and tilts her head to one side. "Ha, ha," she draws. "I know. But I have to do it. I have to pass. Latin is the only class I'm really worried about."

"You know it's not important, don't you?"

"What?"

"Latin."

"Yeah, I know," she says slowly, staring at my father, "but you shouldn't be telling me that." She reaches for her Latin book and flips it open.

I light a cigarette.

Ryan looks up. "May I have one, please?"

"What do you think?"

"I told you. I told you that every time you light one, I'm going to ask for one, and if I start to smoke, you know whose fault it'll be."

"You're too young to be as stupid as your old man."

Ryan blushes quickly. "No one says that any more."

"Says what?"

"Your old man'."

"What do you say?"

Ryan thinks. "Dad."

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Ryan is downstairs in the hospital cafeteria. My father has one eye open and it is staring at a corner of the room. Earlier in the week, I stroked his face, tucked him in. But now he is comatose, and I watch him, night after night, and tell him the daily news of my life in case he can hear.

Two nights ago, Ryan and I told him about Cat Chomps, a cat food campaign I am working on. Ryan filled in the information I forgot, such as how our cat, Marvin, was my original inspiration.

“Day three of Cat Chomps, Dad. I had a great idea today. I already tried it out on Ryan. Now, remember. Up to now, Cat Chomps can only be bought in France, right? My idea is to have a campaign showing a variety of cats doing dangerous things in order to get Cat Chomps. The slogan will be ‘A cat had to risk all nine lives for Cat Chomps.’ I showed Ry this sketch of a cat in a parachute floating down over France. I sketched in the Eiffel Tower and a few people wearing blue berets and striped sailor suits. My favorite is the first drawing. I have this cat stuffed in the mouth of a cannon. He’s wearing helmet and goggles. He’s about to be shot over to France. Get it? Ry saw this Snoopy stuffed animal in a parachutist outfit and wanted to buy it so she could stuff Marvin into it. That would have been something, huh?”

Outside the branches of two trees suddenly heave towards the window and the pane of glass rumbles. Across from me, the shooting green ball on the monitor bleeps by.

“No news from Susan, but who the hell is expecting any.” I have a dull headache behind my eyes. “Ry’s doing real well in school. You hear her do her Latin?” I lean closer to my father and position my face in the view of his one open eye. “Ry is doing great. Considering. Certainly better than me when I was her age. You remember when I was Ry’s age? Junior at Sacred Heart High. God, I hated that school!” I laugh and stand up to stretch. I think about the things I have talked to him about during this past week and I have nothing to say.

The silence in the room is almost a texture I can feel. My father’s face is still. His lips, his pencil-fine eyebrows, his blue nostrils, all remain fixed in a contortion of sleep. I suddenly begin to imagine it is Ryan dying, her body connected to the heart monitor. Would I still be leaning against this window, impassive and tired, if it were Ryan? Immediately, I see myself pulling in staff doctors, screaming to them they aren’t doing enough. Nurses would be racing in and out, fluffing her pillows, checking the performance of the heart monitor. I would massage my daughter’s hands, as if my love could literally flow from my body into hers, and by some miracle of osmosis, my life seep into hers. I can even imagine flying Susan back from California as a last resort. I can imagine the ricochet performance of the green dot if that were to happen! What would Ryan do? Would she recover if for no other reason than to tell Susan to go to hell? It would be worth it.

But instead, I am watching my father die, accepting the fact, there is nothing to be done. I brush my fingers along his face and the monitor reacts as if it were a seismograph, recording a major earthquake. When I remove my hand, it resumes its steady pattern.

In the hall, I can hear Ryan talking to someone. One nurse, Joan

something, has really taken a liking to her. I heard her ask Ryan if she had ever considered medical school.

My father shuts his eye as suddenly as he opened it. A line of pink drool gleams in one corner of his mouth. An enormous vein above his left ear pulsates. The glucose in the bag he is connected to continues to drip steadily. I rub my eyes and go into the bathroom where, in the mirror, my face is yellowish green. *Why am I wearing a tie?*

The door to the hospital room flings open, and closes in slow motion. Ryan has walked in with a cup of coffee.

“Daddy?”

“In here, honey.”

“I spoke to this nurse and she said Gramps was on morphine.”

“Well that’s good. Maybe he can slip away with no more pain.” I click off the light and the sudden blackness makes me think I must sound callous to Ryan. As if reading my mind, she asks: “You think you’ll miss him? I mean, he is your father.”

“No, I won’t miss him. Do you think that’s terrible of me?”

Ryan doesn’t like to make judgments, but I can see she can’t bring herself to condone what I have just said. “I’d miss you,” she says.

“Honey, you’re young.” I don’t know how this answers anything, but I hug her clumsily, holding the coffee she brought for me.

“Dad? I have a test tomorrow.” She stands away from me and scoops a handful of hair up and twists it over her head. She fastens this knot of hair with a bamboo barrette I recognize as Susan’s, and stares at herself in the mirror. “Are we going to go soon?”

“Little while, ok? I want to keep an eye on that.” I point to the monitor.

“I think it’s eerie,” she says walking over to it. She places a finger on the green line as it climbs and falls across the screen. “It’s like a video game,” she says.

I smile at this analogy. “Keep Your Father Alive! Only \$19.95!”

“Fun for the whole family,” Ryan says. She pretends she has levers to pull and buttons to push. “Keep that ball bouncing!” After a while, she stops and turns to me with a shy smile.

We watch the green line form hills and valleys, and disappear as quickly as it reappears.

The sky has turned black, making the window an ebony mirror where I see myself standing with my hands in my pockets, watching my daughter.

“You think he’s changed any in the last couple of days?” I ask her.

She glances at my father. “I can’t tell. After a while, I guess you just look the way you look when you die.”

“I heard someone ask if you’re planning on medical school. Are you?”

“No Way José! Why’d you ask me that?”

“Just curious.”

Ryan stares at me and pokes some loose strands of hair behind her ears.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” I ask suddenly.

“What?”

“Honey, I’m just asking.”

“A boyfriend?” She sounds exasperated with my ignorance. “These are such weirdo questions!”

“Don’t get defensive. I’m your father for Christ’s sake.” Just to tease her, I smile and say, “You do, don’t you?”

Ryan covers her ears and shakes her head. I can’t tell if she’s laughing or angry, but when she swings her head, the barrette in her hair falls off. When I lean towards her to pick it up, she hides her face from me and mumbles something I can’t understand.

“Ry? Are you . . .”

“You don’t know everything about me, you know,” she says quickly.

“I didn’t say I did.” I sit next to her on my father’s bed and put my arm around her shoulder, but she breaks away from me and stands up.

“Here.” I hold out the barrette for her.

“I don’t want it,” she says, rubbing her face. “Can we please go?”

In the car, I ask Ryan to recite her Latin. After a while she does so. I look over at her, but she is staring out the window.

“Want the radio on?”

“Let me pick the channel,” she says, leaning closer.

“They said they’ll call us if anything happens,” I say.

“You mean if he dies.” Ryan has picked a rock station, but has kept the volume low. “When he dies, really,” she says.

“Yes,” I say.

I picture my father lying in his bed. The only light in the room would be the heart monitor’s green streak. Again, I imagine it is Ryan in that bed, in that darkened room. Could I actually leave her and drive home? Could I possibly go to work every day and, after a quick bite, visit her in the hospital? How differently I would behave!

I turn into the driveway and Ryan opens the car door before it has stopped. When I turn off the motor and step out, she is standing with her bookbag slung around her shoulder, waiting for me. Inside the house, the phone is ringing.

For a moment she is still. “You want me to get it?” she asks. “I’ll get it.” she says. She walks into the kitchen, and when she opens the door, a wedge of yellow light expands on the garage floor into a golden block. She stands against the door, the handset of the phone covered by her long, brown hair. “Hello?”

I am prepared to hold her, and to be comforted by her. But instead of calling me over, Ryan covers the mouthpiece with her hand and whispers that the call is for her. She closes the door between us for privacy and the

golden square of light narrows to a thin line. I realize suddenly that if the hospital were to call, they would get a busy signal. I think of telling Ryan to make her call short, but when I see her laughing into the mouthpiece, I go into the living room and take off my tie.