

The Lost Mother

“Grandpa, Grandpa, are you alright? You fell, and you hit your head. I called Mommy and told her what happened, she left work and is on the way home, please tell me you feel alright Grandpa.”

Chelsea glanced at me with sorrow and fright in her bulging green eyes. Being the youngest of my kin, and my 19th grandchild, at a measly 7 years old she was my best friend in this world, and my inspiration day in and day out.

“Oh honey, I’m ok, your grandpa will be quite all right, I just found something that took the wind right out of me.”

Without another moment of hesitation, she quickly exclaimed, “Well, what did you find Grandpa?”

Although the question was innocent, harmless, and quite simple, the answer was rather grueling and horrific. So, although it forced every piece of my heart to shatter while lying to my tiny partner in crime, I had to, “I found an old toy race car from when I was a kid and lived up in the mountains.

My daughter Tracy, Chelsea’s mother, had explained to Chelsea that my father was a raging alcoholic with governmental paranoia, so I spent the majority of my childhood in a secluded cabin in the woods. I felt awful about lying, but I knew she understood not to pry on anything related to the subject, forcing her not to ask any more questions, and causing me not to have to make up any more lies.

“Dad! Where are you? Chelsea! Where is your grandpa?”

And with that, Tracy was home, and the conversation was dropped. Chelsea trotted her way back into the house, and I sat on my workbench out in the garage. “Dad, what happened, Chelsea called and said you fell?”

I knew I had lied to my granddaughter, but I couldn't lie to my daughter on this one. She was a grown adult, a mother of 4 beautiful children, and worked full-time as a University professor to support her family. She was the youngest of my own five beautiful children, and our father-daughter bond has been unbreakable since birth and only grew stronger when she became a widow so young, similar to myself. My four other children being sons, I always prized my baby girl. Much like her mother, Chelsea had also landed that special spot as both the youngest and only daughter. Unlike my granddaughter who the truth would only hurt and confuse, my daughter needed to hear it. Any lies or falsity would only hurt her worse in the end, and I'd never been particularly good at lying to her even when I tried.

“Yes, I did fall, but it was because I found something.”

“Chelsea texted me to let me know you stumbled upon a racecar from your childhood in the woods. What happened to not making everything about the gore you've seen in your life and more about the fact that she's 7 years old.” Ironically enough, she has but a clue as to how much her daughter loves zombies, war stories, and conspiracy theories about aliens, but she only talks to me about stuff like that.

“Listen, I know you are upset, but trust and believe I had to say something she wouldn't question for her own good, but it wasn't the truth.” I hesitated momentarily, allowing the memories from over 25 years ago to slowly flow into perspective. The memories first being pleasant and peaceful, then suddenly dark and deceiving.

“Do you remember how mom passed away, fighting in the war overseas when you were 10 years old?” Confusion spread across her face just as rapidly as the gunfire on the battlefield did back in my Marine Corps days, “Yes I remember mom dying, I cried for months because they said her body had been too mutilated to be shipped home, so she was cremated over there.”

Confusion turned to disgust and underlying rage within milliseconds, “ Why are you bringing this up? It was 27 years ago, I am now a grown woman, with a family, and I work my ass off. Why is this relevant?” Feeling the unease emitting from her core, I briefly recalled the day I was honorably discharged. My late wife, Jamie, and I had decided she would further her career and I would assume responsibility as a stay-at-home dad.

I said not another word, just simply pulled out the tiny note tucked into my back pocket, tears beginning to stream, and gently handed it to Tracy. “This was taped to the back window of the garage, the gate was left open, and rose petals were sprinkled on the grass under the window.” I watched intensely as Tracy slowly unfolded the creases and allowed her eyes to adjust to the faint writing in the dim lighting. She read the note aloud exactly how it had been written.

Greetings to the family of Jamie!

Jamie is alive and well! I'm sure you are delighted to hear of the return of your wife/mother. Sadly, she hasn't gotten to meet her 19 grandchildren sooner. Nonetheless, you may have her back soon if you obey our rules and regulations. 27 years ago, your loved one was one of the many simplistic Americans who had walked into our landmine in Iraq. Although 9/10 members of her team were murdered on impact, this lucky darling survived. Over these past several years she has made an excellent house servant and an even better educator to many children of my

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family. Her teachings of the English language have helped our organization accelerate in tremendous ways. I ask that this make you not look at her any differently, she was quite the fighter in her early days out of the coma. She endured several beatings and malicious forms of torture until we finally bent her to her will. Since then, she has been one of our best slaves, and for that we are gracious. Jamie's age is nearing 70 within the next few months, and I would like to allow her the ability to retire. She has proved to be a dutiful individual so she may be returned home for her retirement. All in all, we ask you not to contact authorities about this ever. I ask that her identity never be revealed in a way that raises suspicion. I ask that you never try to figure out who was holding your loved one. Lastly, I ask that everyone leave this residence on Saturday the 22nd, from 8 pm - 8 am. When you return to the residence on Sunday the 23rd, at 8 am you will find Jamie home safe and sound. Now, it is crucially important that you follow these specific directions, or your wife/mother's retirement will be six feet under.

With Gratitude,

King of Future

Tracy had tears streaming down her face in mass quantities by the time she was able to finish reading the note. "Typed with a typewriter and laminated. We can't track handwriting, technological ink, fingerprints, or any other source of DNA. Who are these people and how are they this smart? Better yet, what's with all the specifics? Why care that she would have 19 grandchildren by now?"

Although my daughter's logical explanation had mildly taken me aback, as she analyzed the letter further, I was equally proud to have raised such an intelligent woman. Nevertheless, I was also slightly hurt at the same moment by her near dismissal of the obvious. Not even willing

to consider the possibility that her mother may come home to us. “This must be a joke, someone wishing to collect a ransom or get something from us. We can’t let them rob the house, Dad!” I watched her eyes once she finished reading and she seemed incapable of taking her eyes off of the name *Jamie*. As if she was fixating on the specified lettering she had seen so beautifully arranged in many years.

I had spent enough time overseas, following the orders of strangers, oblivious to the reality of the world around me. This was no different, “No, we will leave during the timeframe requested. We have no idea who these people are, what they want, or why they are saying your mother is alive.” My voice caught in my throat instantaneously, it didn’t seem real to speak of Jamie and life in the same sentence. I had accepted so many years ago that my heart was never coming home to me.

“It doesn’t seem logical Dad, this could be just a couple of punks trying to break in and steal our valuables while we’re ‘coincidentally’ away. Listen I miss Mom just as much as you, but she’s not coming back. This isn’t real.” Her words stung like a line of wasps ready to defend their queen, but I knew in my heart we couldn’t just give up. After hearing nothing for 27 years this surely couldn’t be a hoax. “We are leaving Saturday at 8 pm, no question, no discussion. Ensure to pack your overnight bag with everything you’ll need because we’re not coming back until morning for anything. I don’t care what you think might happen, I know enough not to take the risk of disobedience. Are you worried about being robbed? We can replace the things in the house. How about you worry about what people like this would do to Chelsea?” Sounding harsher than intended, I gave Tracy a final slight nod and headed up to the house.

Chelsea wasn’t in the living room and her toys weren’t scattered in the kitchen, so I started towards the stairs to think for a while. Assuming she was watching cartoons, I had nearly

made it to my study at the top of the stairs when, “Grandpa, is your wife really coming home? I mean, will I actually get to meet my Grandma?”

No matter how much effort Tracy and I put into Chelsea being unable to eavesdrop on us, she always found a way to manage. “You weren’t supposed to hear that dear,” my voice now sounding weaker and more defeated than when I had just nearly scolded Tracy. I continued, “I have no idea what’s going to happen in all honesty, I just know we’re going to stay in a hotel room on Saturday night, and then we’ll come home Sunday. I suppose if your grandma is here, I’ll introduce the two of you before anything else.” I flashed a sheepish smile before returning my focus back up the stairs. “Well no matter what happens, you’ve got me and mommy, and hotels have pools to swim in, so, everything will be ok Grandpa.” That’s why Chelsea was my other half, her optimism, a skill I could never quite acquire, a skill that was often coveted by Jamie herself in an earlier life.

Saturday evening we began packing our bags, and Tracy started hiding valuables and putting family heirlooms away. “I think you’re wasting your time,” I hastily remarked as I walked into the dining room shortly after 7 pm. “We must be gone in less than an hour, and you’re worried about my great-grandmother’s vases.” Although I wouldn’t call her response overdramatic, I wouldn’t say it wasn’t regularly dramatic either, “Well, someone is coming to try to make a fortune off of our absence, and I would like to be able to hold onto as much as possible.” Ironically not only had she never met my great-grandmother, but neither had I.

Following that remark, I slowly and silently made my way out to the driveway. The time on my watch now read 7:22 pm, and we needed to pack the car up and head out. It took me only

a short 20 minutes to grab all of the bags, snacks, Tracy, and the kids, and then we were off to the hotel for the night.

Upon arrival, Chelsea and I swam in the indoor pool until closing time, hit the vending machine, and then watched a movie, until we both passed out. Tracy had gone to sleep right after check-in, while Chelsea and I stayed up to enjoy the fun. The three boys of Tracy's bunch had chosen to stay at a friend's house for the night instead, so we doped them off one by one on the way and secured the hotel room to ourselves. When I woke up, Chelsea and Tracy had been down at the free hotel breakfast, and it was already nearing 7:30 am. Shortly after getting up and getting redressed, I heard the click of the room's keycard being swiped on the panel lock. "We can go back to the house in the next 30 minutes, so please make sure we have everything packed up and clean the room." I couldn't tell if Tracy was relieved or worried, possibly both, but I knew when my little girl didn't feel comfortable.

When we got back to the house I told the girls to wait in the car while I went inside to do a quick sweep of the property. As soon as I opened the front door, an all too familiar face smiled up at me with compassion and force, "Hi honey, I'm home."

Being unable to control any of my emotions, I let out a quick yell, and then warm tears dropped from my eyes. "Y-Y-You're alive. And you're here. And you're... my Jamie." Tracy burst through the door calling out my name, but I couldn't hear her, I could only see my Jamie. "Mom!" Then Tracy's tears joined mine, and along came Chelsea. "Hello, I'm Chelsea, at 7 years old I'm your youngest grandchild, and by Grandpa's standards, the favorite. It's nice to finally meet you!" Chelsea extended her hand towards Jamie, shook it delicately, then sat atop Tracy's lap. We sat there and cried for at least 3 hours before we were able to move and acknowledge the day or life for that matter.

“W-W-What happened?” My voice was still a pitiful tremble, I wasn’t quite sure what to make of this.

“All in time my dear”, and with that Jamie had put all my worries at ease in a second just like no time had passed at all. Tracy made a delivery order from the supermarket, and she and Chelsea cooked up dinner and dessert so we could have a real family meal. The room felt completely in balance, with Jamie at one head of the table, and myself placed opposite in the typically empty placeholder. We laughed and joked all while enjoying both the food and company, but neither Jamie nor any of us dared speak of the elephant in the room.

Later in the evening, Jamie and I sat on the front porch swing, with our mugs of hot cocoa, and reminisced about the beginning days of our young love. We revisited the night we met, our wedding day, and down to the births of all 5 of our children. As my beautiful wife lay her head upon my shoulder once again, after 27 years of separation, she was still my heart. “I thought I had lost you forever my dear, I thought you were gone. Please, my love, talk to me about what happened to you.”

“Some demons are just better off left buried honey.” Her reassuring voice made me question no further. I could feel consciousness slowly drifting as my eyes became too heavy to bear. “It’s ok baby, allow yourself to drift into slumber, I’m home with you forever now.” At that moment, life shifted entirely, my soulmate had returned after I thought I had lost her eternally, and with that final thought my mind slowed and I had fallen asleep on the swing with my long-lost lover in my arms.