

THE STRANGER

I want there to be a mysterious stranger at my funeral. Standing in the back wearing a black fedora with a red feather and a brown trench coat. Brown because he will stand out amongst the sea of black, and red because it will suggest lust, passion, or love. I want him to be tall, over 6'2", that way he'll be taller than my husband, brother, and Doug. He would arrive late and wouldn't hold the door as it closed, he'd let it slam. Then he would stand beside the back pillar as all the seats would be taken, and even though everyone would be staring, he'd be looking straight ahead, at my casket. I want him to be one of the last to view my body. He would touch my hand, gently, and then he would look at my daughter. He would look at her but only for a second, just long enough for her to notice, and no one else. She would remember his face; his high cheekbones and strong jaw,

smooth skin and tempered eyes.

I want her to look for him at the reception, but discover that he has gone and that no one saw him leave. Then she would find her Uncle and ask if he saw the man in brown with the black fedora and red feather. My brother would look at her over his plate of pie pieces and tarts, and he would lie, "Nope." She would leave and he would start scarfing down the sweets. He would gobble them up in less than five minutes and when the plate was empty, he would see his reflection in it. They'd be using the silver. He would stare at the cream in the corners of his mouth and then he would remember that time when he was seven. When he took the last two cupcakes that our mother was saving for our father, when he lied and said that he saw me eating them after he snuck the crummy plate into my bedroom. He would remember the beating I took that day, not because of the cupcakes, but because our mother said I lied about it. He would remember the day he became a liar. A skillful liar that would go on to pretend to have graduated from college, marry a sweet young woman, cheat on that woman two weeks after their marriage, father a son by the young escort he'd been sleeping with, leave his wife of seven years and their infant daughter for that escort, try to start a new life with the escort

and son that would also end in divorce because he cheated on her too, call his second wife most every day after she left and tell her she was a dumb bitch, not be able to deny his adulterous ways in court because the escort wasn't such a dumb bitch after all, gain forty pounds and have to move in with his estranged sister. A liar that would cringe at the sight of his reflection because it reminded him of how much he loved sweets, and that he didn't know how to get his cravings under control.

I want her to look for Abigail and Doug next. She would find them sitting on the love seat with the torn, under-bottom as I would not have had the chance to have it reupholstered before my death. She would ask them if they saw the man in the brown jacket and black fedora with a red feather. Abigail would say, "Yes sweetheart I did, but I didn't recognize him... Did you, Doug?" Doug would shake his head and then excuse himself to the back porch. He would light a Camel and take a long, hard drag. He would blow streams of smoke from his nose and remember the way I used to love when he did that. "Can you breathe fire, too?" I had said. "Of course," he had answered, "all dragons can." "So you admit it," I had whispered. He smiled then. He would blow more smoke and remember the first time he kissed me

in his and Abigail's coat closet. He would remember the way I ran my fingers around his streams and the way I looked at him. He would remember the way he took hold of my wrist, pinning me against the guest's coats at Abigail's 40th birthday party; the way his lips felt against mine, soft and warm and gentle and firm, the way I pulled him closer. He would remember finding me attractive when Abigail first introduced us in college, about wishing he had met me before her. I want him to think of the last decade of my life then, the way he cheated on his wife and I cheated on my best friend, the way we never got caught, the way his eyes widened when I told him that I would leave, that he should too, the way he said he couldn't do that to Abigail, the way I said what about me, the way I looked at him when I said he would have to choose, the way he looked at me when he said *her*. I want him to remember the last time I kissed him, how it felt as soft and warm and gentle and firm as the first time. Then he would think of the stranger my daughter asked about and remember the way he touched my hand, and how angry it made him, because he wanted to be able to touch me that way but couldn't. All he could do was blow smoke streams and think of dragons.

I want her to find her father last, sitting at the dining room table with a half empty bottle of Bru-

gal and ask if he saw the man in the brown jacket and black fedora with a red feather. He would stop pouring his rum and glance at her, "Yes." She would wait for him to go on, and when he didn't, she would ask, "Do you know him?" He would continue filling his glass, "Why?" She would say, "I've just never seen him before, wondered how he knew Mom..." He would take a sip and say what he knew he shouldn't, but because he is who he is, he would, "He was her first lover." My daughter would frown, "What?" He would repeat himself, "He was her first lover." Then he would smile, "Gotcha!" He would let out an echoing belly laugh that would ring through the house and make everyone that heard it uncomfortable. She would look at him in disgust and leave the table. He would pick up the glass, feel its cold against his fingers and he would remember the time he picked up that old lead pipe. When he took it to his younger sister's teacher after his sister told him what the teacher had been doing to her. He would remember striking the man thirteen times, a good strong blow for every year his sister had been his sister, being hauled off to juvy in his last year of high school, not getting many visitors until I came, how shocked he was to see me because we never spoke at school, the way I took his hand and said, "You did the right thing." He would remem-