

Ashes of the one true story

His dying wish was whispered to his middle daughter—the responsible one, the one he trusted to not fall apart or faint or scream or make a scene. She stood behind him in the smoke-filled hospital bathroom. He steadied himself by holding onto the edge of the cold white porcelain sink; his cigarette clung to his dry lips and ashes cascaded into the sink. He looked straight into her eyes as they reflected in the mirror in front of him.

“All I need is for my ashes to be buried next to my son.”

She nodded. “Okay.” Her eyes narrowing slightly, but never leaving his.

“We need to be together under a single gray slate stone.”

She nodded again. “Ah hum.”

“Oh, and write ‘father and son together forever’ on the stone. That would be nice, very nice.”

Like always, she was the one who didn’t get pissed off and shout “What son?” or ask stupid questions like “I have a brother?” After all, dying wishes are not to be questioned or examined for every stinking detail. She had a PhD for Pete’s sake. Surely she’d learned that much in all those years of schooling.

He was right; she had learned. Only one little sigh and two quick blinks and she was on it. Well, kind of on it....

“Sure, Dad.” She reached around, plucked the cigarette from his mouth, took one long pull, and placed it back between his chapped lips. “And where would I find this son? Buried next to your best coon dog, Queenie? Oh, wait... you didn’t bury Queenie, did you? Too cold to dig a hole so you just threw her frozen carcass into the burn pit at Uncle T’s huntin’ camp.”

Ashes of the one true story

“She shoulda’ knowed better than to die at the peak of hunting season.” He shifted slightly so he could watch her in the mirror as she turned to leave. She stopped in the doorway, dug in her pocket, pulled out change, and counted the coins in her palm.

“I’ve got enough change for two cups of coffee. Be right back.”

When the clickety-click of her high heels signaled she was heading down the hall, he tossed the nub of a cigarette into the toilet, flushed with a raised foot that sent a cool breeze where “the boys hung free,” and used both hands to reposition the oxygen tubes from the top of his head back down to his nose. No use slipping back into his death bed since she’d already caught him taking a quick Marlboro moment, so he leaned against the wall with his bare backside against the cool tiles, and slid easily down to the floor. One swift kick sent the IV pole skittering across the bathroom, catching on the long oxygen tube tethering him to the wall above the hospital bed. Good thing he’d figured out how to crimp the hose without setting off the alarm. He didn’t want another lesson like he’d learned the last time he was dying... dying for a smoke.

“Damn. This is a mighty fine pain in the ass.”

In a few moments she was back, standing over him holding two paper coffee cups. With the toe of her fancy shoe, she slammed the toilet seat, and dropped down on it without spilling one drop from either cup on her stylish business suit.

“Nice view, Dad.”

“You could at least turn away while an old man covers his privates. Any sugar?”

“Like it’s the first time you’ve shown your ass. No sugar. Black will have to do. No cream in the vending machine either.”

Ashes of the one true story

“Damn.”

She was actually looking at him...closely. She'd expected him to be back in bed with the sheet draped like a death shroud as he would have done a few years ago. But, here he was still in the bathroom, now sitting on the floor, trying to pull the thin cotton gown over his scrawny legs. She wasn't fooled. She was willing to bet her last cigarette and a chocolate double-dirty martini that he still had plenty of swing in his garden gate.

He got himself situated and covered, then reached for the coffee before the cheap cardboard cup could get any soggy.

“Fact or fiction?” she asked as she blew across her steaming cup and looking directly into his eyes.

“Fact.”

“Really?”

“Really, little sister.”

He began to tell her one of the few true stories of his life. How he'd married a 14-year-old girl when he was 20 because he needed a “starting place” in his life. Because he'd actually “started” with her a little bit before her daddy and the preacher gave the nod. He said that he thought he loved her, and that he wasn't all that upset about all the threats from her uncles...or the gun fire from her mama.

“Understandable...” he said.

“Understandable,” she echoed.

Ashes of the one true story

He turned an unusual shade of melancholy, which caught and held her attention. He went on telling how he finally gave into the girl's begging to go home to her mama when he knew that she was too far along to be traveling by horse. So, he borrowed a wagon and took her bouncing off through the Mississippi woods, back where phone lines were as scarce as electric lines. When they pulled up in the yard on that dark night, she immediately jumped down by herself and ran into the house. He found her curled up in a big old metal frame bed with her little brothers — that left him to sleep alone where he could find an open spot.

He was sorry he ever took her back where he was sure those brothers' midnight thrashings caused the baby to come early and too fast before he could think to fetch a doctor or a midwife. He was sorry he took her back where her mama said "let nature take its course."

His voice became a whisper as he described wrapping the stillborn boy in the best old blanket the girl's mama had; told of holding the bundle as he walked all the way, miles and miles through the woods to the Calhoun Cemetery by the old white church; told how he dug the hole in the red clay earth by himself, could only find a half-brick to mark the spot near some of his family's old white stone markers. He remembered these markers seemed to be tilting away—as if to make room for his boy, his only son.

He left his horse, the wagon, part of himself, and her. Left her back where she belonged...in the big metal frame bed with her mama bending over her and her little brothers playing in the yard. Never to return. Never to see her again, ever. Never to speak her name again. Never to say his son's name out loud...not that day, not this day.

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They were silent for a long time. Long after the coffee was gone and the cold of the tile floor had seeped into his old bones, and her back ached from holding so still—waiting. He didn't move, just let his head fall back against the wall and closed his eyes.

"I'll find him, Daddy. Finish your coffee." He nodded at her and started gathering himself to get up off the floor. She didn't try to help, except for taking the crushed coffee cup he offered...like everything else he gave her, empty, used, or disfigured.

Many years later she walked through the woods alone. She dug the hole in the red clay herself. Placed the stiff, heavy cardboard box near the red half-brick marked with a deeply gouged letter "J." She could imagine him scratching with a 16-penny nail, over and over again, leaving his mark for his son. The small slate slab just barely covered both of them now, but she'd done—as always—just like she promised.

"Bastard." This was not the true story she wanted, but it was the only one she'd ever get, and now she was about to give the story the ending he'd wanted. She took a nail out of her pocket and scratched "father and son forever together," but she knew the first good rain would wash the letters away—and that was okay with her.

"Who will write the ending to my one true story?" she asked out loud. She had no dependable middle daughter...only the ashes of her own son and an old spiral-bound notebook of carefully written stories—all untrue except this one.