

## *My Old Man*

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*Editor's Choice Award Winner*

It was a windy day in October when the house fell down. The sturdy frame had stood tall for some time, but it was ancient now, frail from age and wear. Not much was left, save for the memories and creaking floors. But it was one final, God-given, conclusive breeze that brought down the home.

I hadn't believed the old bastard could do it—die, that is. His heart hadn't worked in years, but there it was, still beating like the belt he used to be so fond of swinging. And there he was, griping about how "the world don't work the way it used to" and how my mother was "the only good thing to happened to him" and how I wasn't "more than a disappointment with arms". In the final moments, he made me look away, promising him his pride was still there, unyielding. No apologies, no explanations, no "I do love you son," no nothing. Just a cold whisper telling me to "turn away" and his soul finally raising the white flag. Actually, his soul would've went fighting on its knees, struggling until the end. That's how I like to look at it. The other way would be too easy, and I know that's something he would never allow.

I never knew him completely. Just the outside. Get up, work. Eat, drink some coffee, work some more. His hat on, some dry grass to chew in his mouth, and his favorite belt around his waist. That was the outside. That stubborn smirk of distrust on his face, as if he expected us to fail and wanted to see if we couldn't. Mom must've seen the

inside of him at some point. She was the only one who loved him fully—we did some, but not all the way because love was for her, not him, who took our love and beat us with it. She wasn't like him at all: she was the one who sat by our beds and made us feel like we had a place in the world, a purpose that would be our own someday. But somehow, she saw light in him. To us, he wasn't nothing but the man who made us work until our backs broke. To us, she was the light I saw under the door as I laid in my bed, scared half-to-death but not going to tell anyone that I was still scared of the dark, scared of him.

After Mom got sick, there wasn't really anyone to take care of the house or him. I think that's what finally broke him—loving one thing for all those years, and then watching it fade away, scared but smiling—that's what did it. Hell, it broke all of us. The saddest part was that she went without her favorite part of herself. Mom always had the nicest hair—strong, thick, soft, a brilliant blonde that made you look twice: once because it caught your eye and second because you couldn't believe how one man could ever be so lucky. Well, her hair started going on a windy day in October. I remember because the roof was shaking like how it used to, before it fell in on itself. After that night, more and more started falling out, and one trip to the doctor confirmed my worst fear. By Christmas she was gone. What had once been the light underneath my door became the tears I wiped on my pillow, broken and heavy with the realization that if I called out, she would not answer.

As time went on and he got meaner, we all got tougher. "Never ask for anything you can't earn," he told us, "and you'll never owe anyone a thing". Well, I didn't ask him for nothing from that day on. From then on it was us and him, until one-by-one, everyone else left and then it was me and him, until I was old enough and then it was just him. I like to think he preferred it that way—a simple man needn't be bothered by distractions that children only offered. He knew there wasn't a future for us there and he raised us knowing there never would be. If there was, why would he swing so hard with that damned belt?

What finally did bring me back home was the news that he wasn't going to be here much longer. The old bastard didn't even tell us, it was the concerned town preacher. Well, I was the only one who came back. They had their own lives to live, and he never exactly showed much care for them, so, why would they? I don't blame them, but still—no one should die alone—not even him. When I got there, I thought

the house might flatten if I spoke too loudly. But God held it up, just long enough for me to try to see him off, until he told me to turn away so he could die without me ever seeing the inside— seeing him alone, seeing him afraid. Not 30 seconds after I walked out the house did God give my old man a burial of his liking.

It began with the roof—it went this way, then that, and finally decided to go inside itself, as if it were exhaling a sigh of relief, tired from the weight of the stars and the pain underneath. After the roof was laid to rest, the structure soon followed, like children returning to their mother's call. "Coming," said the walls, joining the floors on their descent to the ground. When all was said, and done, there was a heap of wood, plaster, tile, and furniture laying, finally at rest. It was almost silent, the way the memory and time-worn house collapsed upon itself. Grateful to have lived and to have served so many, it dropped to one knee, then the other, and then laid, the house finally going home.