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Watch the Cigarettes Burn

I scraped the bottom of my center console with my fingers, searching for hopefully enough coins to buy a pack of smokes and an Arizona tea. The letter brushed my fingers, but I pushed it to the side when I found the stack of quarters I was looking for. I walked up to the door of that run down Sunoco and went inside to retrieve my escape from the world. This seemed to be the only constant in my life — watching those damn cigarettes burn slow and steady until they’re gone.

“Hey Ms. Kennedy!” The lady behind the counter shouted. This seemed to be the most sincere form of flattery to my 18-year-old self, but it was so hard living in a world where everyone knows you more than you know yourself.

“Hi Martha,” I said. I tried not to laugh at her big ole goofy smile and her cracked bright pink lipstick that spread from ear to ear, but a side smile came out and I saw her wink assuming she picked up on it.

It was a daily thing, Martha and I. I would walk in and we had the same interaction. She’s never told me about her life, and although she knew everything about mine there was a contentment in this relationship; a subtle friend that I needed the most.

I routinely walked straight back to the refrigerators that carried the tea and grabbed the mango one and headed up to the counter where Martha waited on me with a pack of Marlboro’s already rung up.

“Ya know, I have never met a young girl like you that buys a pack of these a day. Shoot, I smoke like a chimney and I don’t even go through a pack a day.”

“What can I say, I like what I like,” I said as I chuckled and let out a brief smile. “I’m here for a good time, not a long time.”

I handed her the change and walked out the door. Martha smiled and waved me on. She knew my parents, but she would never share the little secret we held together.

I got in my car and drove to the grove, a little spot behind the lake by my house — the only place it seemed I could ever find serenity. I looked out the window on that 5-minute trip and saw families holding hands as they walked around the lake, and rollerbladers laughing as they raced each other past the sign in front of a big church.

Happy Birthday Pastor Kennedy!

Really, I thought. They didn’t have some inspirational quote they could put out on there? Little did they know, little did anyone know.

I kept driving until I reached my signature spot. I got out and climbed onto the hood of my car and lit a stick. I never actually smoked them; I just enjoyed the sensation of watching them burn to their death. Slowly but surely the light went out and I was onto my next one.

“Abstinence is key,” “Don’t have sex before you’re married,” “God intended on us to only have one partner,” and even a purity ring on my 14th birthday instilled in my mind the thought of going to hell if I were to engage in premarital sex, that was until I turned 17 and found the letters my parents had hidden from me for so many years prior.

“Mr. Kennedy, we’ve never met, but I am your son.”

My jaw had dropped. This statement played over and over in my head like a broken record. Who is this person and what does he mean he’s my dad’s son? Did I have an older brother? These questions engrossed my mind like a weed spreading into a field.

“Dad?” I called out. My voice shaky.

“Yes dear?” I could hear his echo through the wall coming closer to their room where I was. “Oh, no,” he whispered.

“What . . . who…I just—“ the silent elephant in the room cut me off and our eyes sat still engrained into each other’s.

“That’s . . .that’s my biological son.” His eyes slowly drooping and filling like a hose.

“Where is he? Why isn’t he here with us and mom”

“Mack, he’s not your mom’s son.”

“So, who is his mom?” I asked. Of course I knew about broken homes and family lies from TV, but I never once thought about this happening to me. The thought of the one clear rule my parents raised me upon being a lie hit me like a strike of lightning. The only truth I had in my life, taken from me because my dad decided to irresponsibly hoe around.

“Well who is he then? Why haven’t I met him? Who is his mom?” I asked again.

“I don’t have contact with him, I never wanted you to know about him,” he said, biting his lip to hold back the tears any chance he got. “This is my life now, your mom, and God, and you are my life now. It was all a mistake.”

“So you’re telling me because you were irresponsible and it was a ‘mistake’ you get to neglect your child? What if that was me? What if I were the other child that you were neglecting? And what about me? Who says you get to rid me of a relationship with my only brother?”

“Mack it’s not like that!”

“So what’s it like then? Are you even my real dad?”

“Mack—“ He said as he reached for my hand in comfort. He stared at me with lifeless eyes. He knew I was right, and he knew the lie I had grown up upon was out of the bag.

I pulled my hand away.

“I feel like I don’t even know who you are,” I said. A tear fell down my face. “Does Mom know?”

“Yes honey, your Mom knows.” He said.

“And she thinks this is the best way to go about it? Really?”

“Mack . . . this isn’t about you or your mom. This is about my mistakes and me. This is something I need to do when the time is right.”

“So when will the time be right? Will it ever be right?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He said. Tears filled his eyes as he walked out of the room.

We hadn’t had a conversation about the letters since that day.

My dad was a pastor in our old town in California, but he said it was his ‘calling,’ to help the mission of New Life Church in Cleveland, Mississippi. I’m pretty sure it was actually because he was worried I would try to reach out to his son, my brother. He wanted to get as far away from his mistakes as he could, as if moving away would change everything. Right before my senior year began he moved our family to this janky little town to fulfill his “lifelong” dream, preaching about the severity of the sins he had once partook in. The rest of the congregation sit back and watch the show, not knowing the depth of the words he’s speaking, besides my mother and I, but she was just as much to blame as he was. I was alone, but my parents had become a hit in this little town. They thrived on the sense of community, and the people of Cleveland felt a sense of security when he took over the only church.

The people of the town thought I was just a quiet girl; any time my parents made me put on a front to be a part of the ‘perfect’ family at events I never spoke to them. We were like lifeless dolls walking and smiling and waving as the church congregation took pictures and cheered us on.

Our family was never the same; my parents didn’t even know I kept one of the letters — maybe they do, but they’ve never mentioned it. My dad didn’t want to own up to the fact that he had another child, and I didn’t want to brush it off. Our silent deal was agreed upon.

I was lighting the third cigarette when I heard an engine pulling up the gravel road. I tried to make out the car through the air-filled dust, but the unfamiliarity pushed me to turn the other way and keep focus on the constant burn.

“Hey,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Whatcha doin?”

He had a slight southern drawl that I wasn’t sure if I was into or not. You don’t hear it much on the west coast. He looked about my age and had the cutest dimple; I hated that I noticed that.

“Watching my cigarette burn,” I said. I could hear him laugh a little under his breath. I don’t think he expected that answer.

“Do I even want to know why?”

“Who are you to come here and critique my actions?” I asked him. “You don’t even know me.”

“Of course I do,” he said. “Why you’re Pastor Kennedy’s daughter. I’ve been wantin’ to meet ya for some time now.”

I admit it; I was into the southern drawl. I wasn’t into the fact that the only way he knew me was by me being Pastor Kennedy’s daughter.

“I go by Mack, not Pastor Kennedy’s daughter,” I said. The cigarette went out. “How’d you find me out here anyways? Are you stalkin’ me?”

“Woah, woah, woah, didn’t mean to offend anybody,” he said. “I heard through the grapevine you come out here every night.”

“The grapevine?” I asked.

“You know, the grapevine.” He said chuckling. He could see the confused look on my face. “All the church moms talk ya know?”

“Great, now I have the church moms stalking me,” I mumbled.

“It’s not like that, I promise ya!” He nudged me a little to get me to look at him. “I’ve just seen you around and I know we’re startin’ school soon so I wanted you to have a friend.”

I looked at him and was speechless, then went to light another cigarette to get past the awkward stare.

“So who is this Mack girl? What’s she all about?”

Did he actually care to look past my ‘picture perfect’ family to get to know me?

“What do you mean who am I?” I asked.

“You put up a ‘new-girl-who-doesn’t-need-friends’ vibe, but I have a feeling that’s a front,” he said. He was trying to get to me, I could tell.

“And what makes you think you have the right to label me without knowing me?” I asked.

“Word of advice, if ya don’t want me to think that then make me change my mind,” he said. The smirk on his face pulled me in; I had never felt like this the first time meeting a guy ever, especially since I found out my foundational thoughts of premarital sex had been a lie.

“I don’t have to prove who I am to you, or to anyone in this godforsaken town,” I said. “A few months of high school and I’m out of here.” I flicked the cigarette onto the ground and I lit number five.

“It’s not so bad here. You just haven’t seen what it has to offer,” he said. “Like me,” he stuck his hand out waiting for me to shake it. “I’m Will.”

I grabbed his hand, it was much firmer than I imagined and I could feel his calluses rubbing against my soft skin. I could feel the heat coming off my cheeks. How embarrassing, I thought.

“Well, Will, why do you care if I have friends or not?”

“I wanted to know what you were all about,” he said. “You seem interesting; mysterious in a comfortable sort of way.”

I didn’t answer because I didn’t know what to say. My eyes veered from his to the ground. Could he tell I was nervous?

I could hear the flame sizzle out on stick five through the silence. I lit stick six and held it between the tips of my fingers.

“Why do you come out here and just watch cigarettes burn?” he asked.

“Because I’m in control,” I said.

His brown eyes shifted from the cigarette to my hazel ones. “In control of what?”

“My life,” I said.

“You have it all. A great family, a big house, fame in the city. Heck! Y’all are basically superstars around here!”

“Little do you know,” I said. I flicked the ash off the tip onto the ground.

“You’re a woman of many words, Ms. Kenned— I mean, Mack,” he said.

I looked at him and realized I hadn’t heard the cigarette burn in a while and realized it was out.

“This town won’t get better unless you let someone in. Give it a chance.”

I needed a friend; I needed something.

I kept the saved letter in the center console of my car and everyday when I scraped it for coins it was staring at me. I had written him, my brother, back when I first found the letters, but then dad moved us states away. I hadn’t built up the courage to write him again; it was like my dad knew he was destructing a well setup plan.

“Hold on, I want to show you something,” I said.

Will had this giddy side smile on his face; I don’t think he knew this was the bomb I was going to drop on him.

“Read this,” I said. “This is what I’m all about. This is why I’m here.”

“Who’s this fr—“

“Just read it.” I said. He took the letter from me and slowly opened it up.

I could see his jaw drop in a swift movement, just as mine had done a year prior. He looked at me and I could see his big brown eyes staring in confusion.

Divorce in this little town was taboo, and having a child out of wedlock was one of the biggest sins you could commit. Exposing my dad could probably ruin his career and our family’s life here in Cleveland, but until that day I’ll continue to drive out to the grove and watch the cigarettes burn.