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You find a way to keep it together

As Joe lay on his back, arms and legs outstretched across the large bed, he thought about how great the funeral was. He felt a little...jealous.

Would that many people come to his? Probably not. Penelope Rogers (she'd kept her surname) wasn't like him, she was always so sweet, so polite, so well behaved. She was the beautiful blonde-haired brown eyed daughter of the town's Mayor and he...well, he was the ugly brown haired grey eyed son of a small butcher. Beauty and the Beast. Joe was sure people often looked at the two of them and thought 'what the hell did she see in him?'

Hell, he'd asked himself that question for thirty-six years.

Thirty-six years was a long time to be married. Sure they had their ups and downs-who didn't - but...when you've lived with someone that long, day in and out, you were bound to get used to each other and not having her here, well, it was...weird.

Out of habit Joe rolled over on her side of the bed. He'd moved the nightstand and lamp from her side of the bed to his side. He lay on his stomach and moved about a little, arm and legs rubbing against the sheets. When he felt that the white sheets underneath were warm enough he moved to his side of the bed and shivered. It was cold. He lay on his stomach on his side of the bed and waited for the same old voice to say the same old thing: 'It's wrong to sleep like that. The devil sleeps like that.' He'd turn over but a smile would always creep on his face. Once he had the courage to mutter 'Surely the devil is busy doing *it* in ungodly positions at this time of the night when God can't see. I wouldn't worry about sleeping if I was him'. After witnessing the colour drain out of her face and the shock, the shrill 'Joe Pastern! How could you think such awful thoughts!' he'd vowed never to say anything like that again.

He recalled what his daughter Ella Rogers had said earlier that day at the funeral 'Mother was never warm. Even in the summer she'd be wearing layers upon layers. Dad and I would sweat just looking at her!' The guests laughed a little. 'So each night, Dad would get into bed first and he'd lie on Mother's side of the bed until it was warm. And then he'd move onto his side and always curse because it was so cold. He'd warm the bed for her. He did it every night for thirty-six years. Now that's love for ya'. Ella had said earlier that day looking at her Dad. 'And then Mom would always say Please, could you put the light out tonight?'

Ella had cried a lot at the funeral. 'I believe he's being strong for me. He doesn't want me to see him like that.' He overheard Ella telling Mrs Mitchells at the funeral whilst he piled his plate with tuna sandwiches. It was hard work being the grieving widow. 'I think he cries in secret, when he's all alone in his bedroom.'

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He rolled back onto his wife's side of the bed. He'd warmed the bed for Penelope every night for thirty-six years except that one night around Christmas, just a year before Ella was born.

That Christmas, he'd behaved like an idiot at the town's Christmas party. Made a fool of himself - not that he knew of course - he was told later, along with a few memorable clips. Reverend Mitz tried calming him down, 'my son, what the devil's gotten into you?' but Joe only sneered 'Reverend Tits [everyone gasped], how nice of you to join us and take time out of pumping Brenda.' Even more gasps. Poor Mrs Wilson had to be seated. He'd put an arm around the blushing Reverend's shoulders and said 'She's not always confessing in there is she? I mean how many sins can she have to confess everyday all day? Or are you both at it like rabbits and then she confesses while your spanking her?' He'd then imitated a women's voice 'Oh father I have sinned.' He laughed and imitated the Reverend's Glaswegian accent: 'Yes, my dear Brenda, you must get on your knees and suck - sorry, I meant seek, you must get on your knees and seek forgiveness.' There were a few more memorable moments.

Penelope had ran out in tears and Peter Rodson, good old Peter, St. Peter with thick dark brown hair and ocean blue eyes, such a good mate to Penelope, ran close behind her. Joe justified himself later by saying meekly 'I was drunk.' But if you'd done a breathalyser test on Joe that fateful night in Christmas you wouldn't have found even a drop of alcohol in him.

So he had *character*.

She hadn't come home that night. After waiting anxiously, treading up and down the stairs, waiting to be told off Joe had counted his lucky stars and slid into bed and fell asleep immediately. He saw Penelope sneak in early next morning, shoes in her hand, still in last night's suit but a long stylish grey coat around her, a coat he had never seen her wear but very familiar to him, with side pockets and round shiny buttons and the initials P.R sewed on, She must have bought it new, he thought. Fear stopped him contemplating on it too much. To his surprise she didn't tell him off. In fact, neither mentioned that night ever again.

Joe fell asleep quickly. *Funerals are exhausting* he thought. He slept with both lamps, his, hers, on.

Early next morning Joe went for a jog. It was important to stay fit and healthy. With his rising cholesterol level and diabetes Joe didn't want to take any chances. He jogged

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lightly on the cracked pavement outside his house before running up the street. He turned right and crossed the road without looking. It was quiet. No busy bodies around, no cars, not a soul in sight. Only the chirping of birds could be heard. He walked through the black steel gates and joined the thin path leading into the park. As he walked past large trees he looked up to their branches. No bird in sight and yet so much chirping, so much tweeting could be heard.

Joe jogged with his elbows poking out around the park following the thin path marked with various forms of shit, dog, cat, duck, bird, hell – maybe even human. He paused a little when he reached a small abandoned public toilet covered with brown leaves and broken twigs. The door was closed and a ‘NO ENTRY’ sign was stamped on the old door. At the top were two signposts, one saying ‘Male’ and the other ‘Female’. There was some writing on the wall, what stood out the most was a red heart with the letters ‘J 4 R’ engraved in black.

Joe stood there for nearly quarter of an hour smiling to himself. It had taken him an hour to paint that heart and those letters. He was sixteen at the time, ‘an anti-social and arrogant boy’ as Mrs Wilson had called him. Rachel Weinstein, his first love and girlfriend, had made him a man here, in one of the cubicles, the disabled one.

Joe continued to jog along the path. An uncomfortable sensation gripped his heart as he wondered where she was at the moment, where any of them were for that matter. Rachel, Steve, Marla, David, Rex (really known as Matthew, his best mate – and though he was reluctant to admit it – it wasn’t very masculine – Rex was also his soul mate) and Deborah.

He sighed.

They’d made promises to stay in touch, be best mates forever as people often said in naivety, or maybe hope, but one thing lead to another. And...well, days turned into months and months into years and years into decades. Joe wished, he wished he was brave enough when he was younger to write to at least one of them or even call. To fight for what he truly wanted. But he’d told himself ‘oh it’s too late now’. And now it really was.

He was familiar with this feeling. He felt it often when he thought about the old days. The feeling passed after a few minutes but it’d paralyse him at first and then leave him feeling numb. *God! That feeling when we think of the past* he thought.

He shook his head vigorously. But an image of Rachel lying next to him, naked, on their last night together came to him. She was smiling but her eyes had looked red, swollen. The image was so clear it frightened him, all the right colours, right shade, he could see her light pink nipple and few hairs under her arm, he could taste her apple flavoured lip-

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gloss. She reached over with one hand and stroked his arm 'Please' she said 'would you hold me all night?'

His legs were beginning to ache. *Mustn't stop now, must not quit.* He stopped at the park pond. His eyes searched for fishes but there was none there. *Must keep jogging, can't quit.* Quitting stank of fishes. When he was twelve years old he'd entered the annual Science competition at school. His father at the time was working in a fish market before he got his true calling. When his father arrived home in the evening, stinking of fish, he'd found the spaceship Joe was building in kitchen bin. He'd picked it up, washed it and took it upstairs to the attic.

What's this doing in the bin?

Ugh dad, you stink.

That didn't answer my question boy.

His father sat on his single bed. No amount of perfume, aftershave, and air fragrance could remove the fish smell his father had left on the duvet.

Come here boy.

He'd picked up Joe and placed him on his lap.

D-a-d.

Joe felt uncomfortable. He was twelve years old now. Suppose his friends found out? Matthew would never stop teasing him. Suppose Rachel thought he was still a baby?

Now you listen here. What's wrong with this?

I can't do it. It's too hard dad. It keeps falling apart. Ugh, Dad you smell so bad.

I'll help you. But you do not stop, you got that boy? So it falls apart, you find a way to keep it together.

But I can't Dad.

You can. You can't quit. No one ever achieved anything by quitting. The first part of triumph is try. You do not quit okay?

Yes, dad. No quitting. Now can you go? You stink of fish.

Joe Pastern walked with a lot of effort up the stairs. He sat on the top stairs and started undoing the white laces of his dirty black trainers. He didn't want to get mud on the carpet. He thought about all the things he could do now. If he wanted to he could walk in the bedroom with his dirty trainers. But something stopped him. For one, he actually liked the carpet. And old habits took a long time to die. As he undid his laces and took his trainers off his thoughts drifted from gardening to the weather, to food to Christmas parties, and then to Rachel.

The last time he'd seen her was at Deborah's Christmas party, just a few months before he married Penelope. To his dismay Rachel had decided to settle in America. They were all there. It was the last time all of them were together under one roof. He and Rex had spiked the juice. Again. And were waiting patiently for the consequences.

He'd made small talk with Rachel. He introduced Penelope to her. Further small talk. And then it was lunch time.

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After lunch Joe stepped outside to smoke and Rachel joined him. It was a white Christmas. Pavement, grass, cars, rooftops, pipes, tress, rubbish, everything, everything was white.

‘Not given up?’ Rachel asked lighting her cigarette.

‘Nope.’ He replied, blowing out the smoke.

‘Penelope seems nice. I’m happy for you.’ She shifted from one feet to the next, shivering.

‘Thanks’ He said. ‘What happened to that bloke you were seeing? Mark?’

‘Michael. It didn’t work out.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ He lied.

She sighed. ‘Oh you know, shit happens, life goes on. Dar dee dar dee dah.’

He felt uncomfortable with her new found cynicism. Where was the girl who thought ‘To Let’ was ‘toilet’ spelt wrong and if you saw that sign – well the house was like a public toilet – if you really needed to go than you could so long as you didn’t touch the nice people’s home. Where was the girl who wanted to be held all night?

‘You pessimism is scaring me.’ He joked.

She laughed and threw her cigarette in the snow. It cooled immediately, releasing small lines of gas which evaporated into the air. ‘Well, we can’t be sixteen and in that cubicle forever,’ She teased. She pulled the sleeves of her orange top to cover her hands.

‘I wish we were sixteen. I mean – I wish we could turn the clocks back.’ He said. He looked at her without blinking.

‘So do I Joe. So do I.’ She said. She was about to add something, she looked like she wanted to say something more, she shifted uneasily, bit her lip, shrugged a little and opened her mouth.

‘Darling, there you are. Father’s here.’ Penelope Rogers said, her head poking out a little through the door. She smiled at Rachel, turned back around and the door shut quietly.

‘I have to go.’ Joe said.

‘I have to go too.’ She said, and walked off into the snow. He watched her footprints form in the snow. Later, when walking home with Penelope and her parents, talking about inflation, he’d looked at each whole footprint in the snow and wondered *Is that hers?*

Uh, that feeling when we think of the past Joe thought as he put his trainers on the top stairs, next to the wall. He pondered if that was the day things began to fall apart. Or maybe much earlier, maybe things began to fall apart on that Sunday when Mr Rogers offered him a six figure salary with a dental plan, just a week before Joe had proposed to his daughter.

He stood at the doorway of his bedroom, hesitating whether to go in or not, his right foot in, left foot out. Penelope had ordered a huge collection of furniture when they’d first moved in. All in a lacquered walnut-effect with elaborate marquetry detail and decorative diamante handles. A three-door wardrobe for him, a four door wardrobe for herself, two night stands, three-drawer dresser chest, vanity unit and a four feet six inch bed stead.

He made a mental note to order new plain furniture or just get rid of some of the clutter. Just looking at it hurt his eyes. He looked up. He’d keep the five-light chandelier of

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amber pendalogue crystals. But he would get rid of the two Chrysanthemum canvas. It looked hideous. Many times at night he'd woken up and that canvas had frightened him. It looked like some white sea monster with a lot of tentacles coming out. 'It's art honey.' Penelope had told him when she first hung it up on top of the suncrest electric fire suite, in the middle of the suite was a picture frame log-effect and a magnolia stone-effect finish. Its model name was 'Belgravia' and it cost him £755 of hard earned money. 'Model name: waste of money' he'd muttered, imitating the salesman when Penelope had decided 'we love it!'

He walked in straight to his wardrobe and started taking out the expensive suits, three dozen or so in every colour imaginable, all designer *of course*. He spread them out on top of his bed. He searched through Penelope's vanity unit. He found what he was looking and walked back to the bed.

Very slowly he started cutting up the suits with Penelope's scissors, in random shapes. Joe couldn't remember the last time he'd felt such ecstasy. But he felt bitter too. He was destroying a man he'd sold for thirty-six years of his life. The scissors cut the material easily. He liked the noise it made.

Pieces of expensive material, such smooth material, half a sleeve, bits of a leg, fell on to the beige floral carpet. Soon a pile of sleeves and legs formed. He put the pieces in a black bin bag. Several bin bags filled up. He formed a military shooting line with the bags.

When he finished he decided to do the same to Penelope's clothes. *Why quit when you're having fun? Besides, quitting stinks*, he thought as he cut the legs of Penelope's grey trousers.

It fell to the ground, unnoticed. And he kept cutting.
