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THE LAST FAMILY PILLAR

Timothy Johnson

David stirs in sweaty bed sheets. Rain taps the windows, and a gust splashes the glass like a tossed bucket, as if trying to get David's attention. Maybe it's a warning.

Elle mumbles. She is dreaming of her life's possibilities, some of them beautiful, some of them horrific. These days, she has trouble seeing anything except a curse. At least in her dreams, when she forgets, there is respite.

She cries out, and David bolts up. He touches her shoulder and finds her skin burning. He reassures her that he is there and that nothing is going to happen to her. Her voice calms, and she breathes deeply. She opens her eyes. In the darkness, they are joined. There, in the deep, rich oblivion, at least they are together.

"Oh, David," Elle's voice quivers. Her dry mouth makes a smacking sound under the strain of her grief-stricken, twisted face. Tears drip onto David's hand.

He must be strong for her now. He must be strong for the both of them. They have suffered the way no parent should. And David wonders when he will be able to grieve as Elle grieves. Until she is done, he cannot show weakness, and he knows his time will never come.

David pulls her to his chest, and the soggy warmth bleeds through his t-shirt. In the dark, he closes his eyes. In the dark, she glances toward the doorway. In the dark, their worst nightmares materialize.

The dead boy looms in the doorway.

"Oh, David!"

He releases her to the far side of the bed. She scrambles and pulls the blankets to her face. She screams into her hands. She cannot believe it.

David stands, and he feels it takes hours to get upright. He can't look directly at the dead boy, but David knows precisely what he looks like. David keeps an eye on the dead boy in his peripheral while he gets the aluminum baseball bat from the corner.

The dead boy grasps a rock in his left hand.

Elle's sobs settle. "What are you going to do?"

David is frozen, staring at his wife. He breaks the gaze and crosses the bedroom until he is just beyond the dead boy's reach. The dead boy lists and stumbles forward with a crooked posture, gnarled joints bent at unnatural angles, and David presses the baseball bat's tip against the boy's chest, keeping him at bay. The boy clutches for him. David feels the weak push but finds it easy enough to hold the boy where he is.

David takes the rock. It is light. He holds it up, inspects it. The bottom is plastic with a door that swivels on a hinge. The key is missing from inside. David gapes in wonder.

"What is it?" Elle says.

"Nothing," he says. "It's nothing."

He doesn't tell her because, if the dead boy remembers where the key is kept, he might remember other things, like maybe that his favorite dessert is whipped cream straight from the can and that for three birthdays in a row he asked to have his party at a jump room because his favorite thing in the world was to be airborne, free of the earth's constraints.

If the dead boy remembers anything at all, there is hope.

But David knows there is no hope.

He pushes forward into the hall. The dead boy at the end of the baseball bat steps backward on uncertain legs.

Elle crawls to the foot of the bed. "Where are you taking him?"

"Stay here."

Elle leaps from the bed as David closes the door behind him. He sighs in the hall with the dead boy at the end of his baseball bat. The boy has stopped reaching and stares at David with eyes that might be pleading, but that is impossible. David spins the dead boy around and presses the bat to his spine.

As they descend the stairs, David glances over his shoulder, expecting Elle to follow. But the door never opens.

David knew his life was over when the nurses allowed him to don baby blue scrubs and a surgical mask and then enter the nursery. Thomas lay naked in the crib, his arms and legs jerking as if he were an insect stuck on its back. As he reached for his son, he couldn't stop his hands from trembling. Just like his new son, he clenched his fists and realized, as scared as he felt, it was nothing compared to the fear of an infant torn from its womb and thrust into an alien world.

He regarded his son and knew the boy would never be as frightened as he was right now. The same was true for David, but he had to be strong. He had to be strong for Thomas, at least until Thomas was strong enough to rely on himself.

As his fingers curled behind Thomas' head and beneath his back, David knew this was the way it would always be. He could never show weakness. His time would never come. A father is the ground the son walks on, and that's exactly as it should be.

With Thomas in the crook of his arm, a swell of warmth overtook David. He would never be happier than he was right at that moment. He would never be so complete.

Knuckles rapped on the observation glass. Elle's father waved like a madman; her mother held a smartphone at arm's length. They were the only people in the world who understood what David was feeling right now, and they were acting like fools.

Elle's mother glanced sideways, and her mouth opened wide into an O. She lowered her phone, filming the floor. Elle's father clutched Elle's mother, shielding her, pressing her against the window. They closed their eyes, and even though their breath fogged the glass, David could tell their lips were moving. David could tell they were praying.

As David rocked his new son, a dead man lumbered through the birthing ward, an I.V. still buried in his arm, metal dragging on the ceramic tile. Perhaps the dead man was lost, but he carried on, paying no mind to Elle's horrified parents who still hadn't gotten used to the dead rising and returning to the ones who loved them. This man's family could never be rid of him now.

In that same way, David's life was over.

Thomas learned about mortality when he was eight years old.

He sat on the living room floor with his legs folded under him, little denim overalls wrinkled because he hadn't grown into them yet. On the carpet, he slammed his metal toy cars together, making screeching and crashing sounds with his mouth.

Outside, there was a screech and a crash then voices. Thomas' father ran across the front yard, and the boy plodded to the window, grasping the sill with his pudgy fingers. A rust-colored, boxy car was parked in the driveway. The sun gleamed off of its chrome pieces. Thomas' father was talking to a man Thomas didn't know. They were pointing to the ground and rubbing their faces.

It wasn't long before the stranger got back into his car and drove away, and Thomas' father carried something wrapped in a blanket to his car and also drove away.

Hours later, when the sun was lower in the sky, David returned home. He came in the front door and gazed at Thomas down the long hallway into the kitchen. David's face was darker—haggard and drained—and he sighed with heaviness.

"We need to talk." David patted his son's back. "Come on."

David sat Thomas at the kitchen table. Thomas wouldn't look David in the eye. Maybe the boy thought he was in trouble.

"Chewie had to go away," David said. "And he won't be coming back."

Thomas' eyes burned. "Why!?"

David wiped his mouth. He couldn't find the words. "That's what happens, Thomas. It's a part of life you will have to learn about. Most times, it's very sad. But it's the natural order of things."

The boy caught a snuffle. "But what happened to him?"

"Chewie was hit by a car." Tears welled in David's eyes. He looked away. He had to be strong. "It was my fault. I wasn't watching him close enough. And he was old. He probably didn't see it coming."

"Did it hurt?"

"No, Thomas. Chewie wasn't in any pain."

"What if I get hit by a car?"

"What if you get hit by a car?"

"Yeah."

"You won't get hit by a car, Thomas."

The boy looked down into his folded hands. "Okay."

"Are you okay, Thomas?"

"It's the nature order, right, Dad?"

"That's right." David stood. "Stay here."

He left the boy in the kitchen and went out the front door again, and when he returned, he carried a small puppy with lanky legs, floppy ears, a smushed nose, and a brindle coat.

Thomas squealed and ran for the dog.

"Stop." David's voice boomed in the hallway.

Thomas halted.

"This isn't Chewie."

The boy peered at him with a curious, confused expression. The new puppy didn't look anything like Chewie, who'd had shaggy, golden-brown hair and a long, narrow snout. This one had short hair and almost no nose. Thomas would later learn it was called a boxer.

"This is another puppy. One you will love just as much as you loved Chewie, but he will never replace Chewie. You will always have Chewie *and* this little guy. Understand?"

Thomas nodded. David set the puppy on the floor. It wobbled on uncertain legs. Thomas slid on his knees to greet him.

With glassy eyes, Thomas looked up to his father. "What's his name?"

David smiled down with reverence. "That's up to you."

Thomas scrunched his face. "Tigger!"

"Tigger? Why Tigger?"

"Because he looks like Tigger!"

David laughed. Earlier that day, he hadn't known if he would ever laugh again. The natural order of things is to return.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Thomas?"

"Tigger will need a house. Can we make him a house?"

David smirked. "Sure. Whatever you think he needs."

Together, they made the ugliest doghouse David had ever seen. But it was also beautiful.

Sometime between David getting his email inbox down to twenty-four unread items and logging in for a two o'clock webinar, a voice at his cubicle startled him. With the summer heat still rising off of his Wolverine t-shirt, Thomas stood at the opening, fidgeting his fingers.

"Thomas?" David said. "What are you doing here?"

"I took Tigger for a walk." He lowered his eyes. "But I forgot my keys."

"Why didn't you just call?"

"I forgot my phone, too."

David leaned back in his chair and sighed. He gazed at the boy with no disdain, only the cool problem-solving scrutiny of a father.

Thomas' ashamed eyes fixed on his father. "Please don't be mad."

"Of course I'm not mad. Thomas, no." David rolled forward in his chair and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "You just have to try to focus on what you're doing, okay? Your mother and I give you the freedom you have because we trust you to take care of yourself."

"Don't lecture me, Dad."

David stiffened. "Okay." He breathed deeply. "Let's go."

They left David's office and retrieved Tigger from the bike rack outside the building on the concrete plaza.

"You understand it costs me to miss work, right?" David said.

"Yes."

"And that I can't do this again if you lock yourself out. You'll have to wait."

"But it's too hot for Tigger to be outside very long."

The dog was panting like a machine gun.

"You're right."

On the way home, David gave Thomas a couple of dollars to buy a bottle of water for Tigger. The boy giggled as he poured it over the dog's lapping mouth and watched him lie in the spill. Then David went into a hardware store where he purchased the fake rock and a copy of the front door key.

David missed his two o'clock webinar. He didn't want to do it anyway.

In a sporting goods store, under buzzing fluorescent lights, a salesman named Dick turned an aluminum baseball bat over in his hands. He whistled as he examined the cracked outer wall.

"You must have some swing, kid. This is a good bat. Real durable."

David narrowed his gaze at the suggestion. He uncrossed his arms and ran his finger along the bat's barrel. "He only ever hit baseballs with it. You can tell because there are no marks to suggest otherwise. No chips in the paint or anything."

Dick sighed. "I'm sorry. We can't replace it. The warranty doesn't cover the cracks, and it's past the expiration anyway. On the bright side, the season is over, and you're going to need a thicker bat next year in Babe Ruth."

The salesman held the bat out to David.

David's brow wrinkled as if he'd been presented with a problem. "Do you dispose of these?"

Thomas leaped forward. "No." His voice cracked with adolescence. "Let's keep it, Dad."

David examined the bat's cracked barrel. He rolled it in his hands. "Why?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't know."

"Sentiment?"

"What?"

"You want to remember?"

"I guess."

David throttled the bat's grip and shook. "Shame. It *is* a good bat."

Across the store, a dead girl moaned. She couldn't have been more than six when she passed away from God knows what. Her porcelain skin appeared undamaged, which was uncommon. Maybe she'd drowned.

An overly attentive mother had pulled the girl's hair into ponytails and was placing new shoes on her.

"How do they fit, sweetie?"

The dead girl didn't respond. They never responded. They only were there.

David's attention returned to the bat's cracked barrel. "Show us what will work for him next year. Everything but this brand."

Thomas nudged his dad. "Can we go?"

The boy's gaze was enraptured by the dead girl, the way she sat there, doing nothing, sucking in light like a vacuum, an ever-present reminder that this woman had raised a daughter and now she was dead. The little girl would follow her mother everywhere. She would wake and find the little girl at her bedside. She would drive to work and the girl would show up there hours later. If there was a storm, the girl would be dripping. The mother would order clam chowder for lunch and be reminded her daughter was dead. She would lie down to sleep, and that little girl would grasp her mother's ankle.

David patted his son's shoulder. "Come on."

"Wait," Dick said. "We have some really good deals on bats right now. It's the end of the season, so we're trying to offload this year's stock."

David turned and smirked. "No, thanks. I think this one will get him through the offseason."

On a cold January morning, hours before the sun broke the horizon and warmed Thomas' face through the closed blinds on his window, the boy died alone from an undiagnosed, congenital heart defect. One moment, the nerves that instructed Thomas' heart to pump were fine, and the next, they decided to never fire again.

The doctors said it was bad luck. They said it happens.

Not to Thomas, David thought. Not to my son.

In David's dreams, Thomas lives. He makes it through high school, only it isn't as easy as David and Elle hoped. It isn't for lack of intelligence. It's for lack of interest. The boy begins to learn what he likes and doesn't have the discipline to persevere through apathy. For the first time in his life, he begins to fail. David blames himself for Thomas' struggles. They talk about trying a new school.

But they are lucky. The boy proves resilient and brings a B home from a class he failed twice. Instead of detention, he stays after school to help build a set for theater. He likes to draw or paint. He makes David mugs and ashtrays even though David never smoked once in his life. He has a friend who does, though, so David places it on the patio table.

Thomas does well on the SAT. Not great, but well. He tells his father he wants to go to college. But maybe he wants to wait a year after high school. Maybe he will take a class or

two at the community college. He has heard that kids who don't go straight on to college usually never go back, so he says, if he takes a class or two, he'll stick with it.

It isn't long before David and Elle realize there's a girl. They meet her. She is sweet. But she is not the one.

The girl breaks Thomas' heart. He does not go to college. He takes a construction job instead. David can see in Thomas' eyes that he is ashamed when he looks at his father. David knows Thomas cannot put this feeling into words. David is simply happy that Thomas has not given up, that the shame has not created resentment between them. Maybe David hasn't told Thomas he loved him enough.

Thomas begins building things. First, he welds three horseshoes together to make a trivet. David and Elle use it to set out casseroles.

He builds a birdhouse and mounts it in the backyard on a piece of rusty rebar, which he sands and paints a dark green.

He builds a new doghouse even though Tigger is old and doesn't spend much time outside anymore. Thomas believes his parents will have another dog when Tigger is gone. It is the natural order of things. David and Elle have decided Tigger will be their last dog because Thomas has grown into a man and they only had dogs for Thomas to learn how to treat animals. Nobody really believes that. They are dog people.

It isn't long before Thomas is enclosing the patio with a roof and screen windows. He builds a shed for his father. He builds a gazebo. Other times, he molds scraps into pieces of art. Or, at least, Thomas says it's art. David doesn't believe him until he sells a piece to a neighbor for five hundred dollars.

On days when Thomas is at work, David sits on his screened-in patio, drinking coffee, feeling the breeze on his face, watching the neighbor's dead parents in their backyard, circling around the piece like they know what it is. They are chained to it, and David thinks this is wise, but if they're going to be there all the time, he thinks he will have Thomas build them a fence high enough to block the neighbor's back yard, but not so high as to block the view of the mountains.

One day, Thomas comes home, and he is nervous. David can tell because Thomas' posture is rigid. His hands are in his pockets. He doesn't speak much.

With him is his friend Lily, or Lucy, or maybe Jane. She has one of those simple but beautiful names, a name that hearkens to another time, a name that strikes a romantic cord in sentimental men.

She is not beautiful. But she is not ugly. She has a face with kind eyes that engage David and Elle with a confidence that shows she knows who she is. She dresses modestly, but being a man, David can tell she has an attractive body. She does something with her hair that shows she takes care of it but she isn't so vain as to dwell on it. Either she often wears it up or flips it over behind her and to one side without regard to a part. It is thick and wavy, or it is straight. Some days, depending on the humidity, it is both.

This day, she is wearing a ring on her finger. Elle cries and hugs her future daughter. David shakes Thomas' hand and watches relief pour into his face. His body loosens. David doesn't know what Thomas was so nervous about. But he also knows what Thomas was so nervous about.

He is beginning to learn it takes two sides of an experience to understand it.

Thomas insists on paying for the wedding himself. Elle will not allow that. In the end, the wedding is more extravagant than Thomas wanted, but he enjoys it all the same.

It is the same thing that happened when David wed Elle, and he knows it will be the same when Thomas' children marry. If they marry. If they don't, that is okay.

David watches Elle with their son, dancing in the dazzling lights. Soft shades of red, green, and blue beam onto their bodies as they rock back and forth to a song that Thomas picked because he knows his mother likes it. Maybe it is Bryan Adams or Rod Stewart or Sting, or maybe it is the song they did together for that Robin Hood movie.

When David stands to speak, he has prepared the embarrassing stories for this moment. He pulls the index cards from his inside coat pocket, gazes at them for a silent moment, and then puts them back into his pocket. He wings the speech because it's the only way to really say what's in his heart. The joys of his son's life cannot be written. They must be heard.

Months later, or maybe years later, maybe after Thomas and Lily/Lucy/Jane have traveled some, David watches Thomas enter the nursery and knows Thomas thinks his life is over. It isn't. It's just beginning. And this is the best part.

In David's dreams.

The rain is relentless. David cannot tell if he is crying. It looks like the dead boy is crying, but he isn't. David takes some solace in knowing the dead boy can't cry anymore.

In the rain, the baseball bat sings.

Next door, the neighbor's dead parents mewl like cattle, asking to be let in, but they aren't going anywhere.

The kitchen light turns on, and Elle is at the sliding door.

He must be strong for her now. He must be strong for the both of them. They have suffered the way no parents should. And David wonders when he will be able to grieve as Elle grieves, because until she is done, he cannot show weakness. Their life together is holding up a ceiling, and David believes, if he lets go like she has, it will crumble. He doesn't know that she would rather have him with her in the rubble.

David eyes the chain coiled in the mud like a snake, latched on to Tigger's dog house as if bleeding it dry. When he finds the collar made of metal clamps and a bolt, panic sets in like cement in his chest. He can't do this to his son.

In the darkness and rain, David finishes it. Under the weight of the father, the dead boy crumbles, and he is gone for good.

Between the gazebo and shed, David digs a grave, which his neighbors will not see beyond the wooden fence because it is tall enough for privacy but not so tall as to block the view of the horizon. Here, only the darkness can do that. Only the rain and fog. And David knows in his heart that those things will never lift. Even when they do, his mountains will be gone. Everything he built will be gone. Their remnants will forever rest under the ground in his backyard.

As Elle turns away and the kitchen darkens, David understands that he rests there now, too, buried, even though he fought so hard to hold everything up.

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