

Sins of Thy Father, Sins of Thy Son

By Rachel O'Connor

Growing up I knew the box far more intimately than I knew the watch inside. I knew every detail of it, every chip in the wood and the metallic scent the brass lock left on my skin. I would lie on the itchy plum rug spread over the sleek hardwood of my brother's room and stare up at it, perched on the high shelf, far out of my reach.

Occasionally, when Eli, my older brother, was feeling particularly generous he'd stand on his toes and with his fingertips slide the box off the shelf and place it into my waiting hands. He was tall, and lanky, and never needed to use a stool to reach it. I envied that. He got his height from our father and it seemed to me just one more trait they had in common. One more thing they shared. I am not tall, not now, and even less so then. I was always one of the smallest boys in my class. Small and thin like a fragile dove. Like my mother.

Eli never left me alone with the box, worried I would break it more than he was that I'd take what was inside. The lock on the front of the box kept me from that. The key to the lock had hung from my father's keyring until Eli became old enough that it hung from his. If the lock had not been in my way, I might have slipped the watch into the pocket of my slacks when Eli turned his back. I might've stored it in one of the mason jars my mother collected under the sink and buried it, jar and watch, just past the treeline that bordered her garden. But, then again, I might not have. I might have stared at the glistening watch where it laid on a bed of soft velvet and handed the box back to Eli to return to the shelf. I always knew the watch didn't belong to me. It never could. I was not the oldest son.

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My mother wanted a daughter. She wanted *me* to be a daughter. I think she wanted Ollie, my younger brother, to be one too, but by virtue of being the youngest her disappointment always seemed to pass over him like the avenging angel when there was lamb's blood smeared above the door. I don't think my father really cared. Boy. Girl. After Eli, it was all the same to him. He had his eldest son, me and Ollie were just spares. Spares he didn't think he'd actually need. Even after Eli left, just walked out the front door and never came back, I still don't think our father thought he needed me. He didn't need anything anymore, at least not anything we could give. All he needed was to die so the watch could be buried with him.

I'd only gotten a proper look at the watch once before. When Eli had turned twelve and our father had presented him with our family's one and only heirloom. I'd been nine at the time, still short, always short. Too short to see what was in the box when our father stoically held it out for Eli to take after all Eli's friends and party guests had shuffled out. When I stood on my toes to get a better look, our father snapped the box shut and pressed it firmly into Eli's hands.

"This is the single most important thing you will ever own, Elijah. Take care of it, treat it with respect," Our father said in his gravelly, serious voice, "Keep the box locked so it doesn't get lost. The key to the lock will stay with me until you're older. Then it will be your responsibility. Do you understand?" Eli nodded slowly, carefully, so our father would know he understood the gravity of what he'd just been given.

"Use your words. Booker men use their words," Our father snapped, glancing at me as he said it. Even then I understood the implication. That I did not use my words, that I was weak. That, to him, I was not, and would never be, a Booker man. It stung then, but it doesn't anymore. I understand it now. I understand that after Caroline meets me at the altar I'll take her name. And only partially because I know my father would roll over in his fresh grave. I would rather have

her family name than mine, her parents always treated me more like their own son than the parents that created me anyways.

“Yes, Father, I understand,” Eli had said softly. Our father gave a tight nod.

“Good.” He said. Not “I love you” or “I’m proud of you” or “Happy Birthday”, just good. He stomped out of the living room away from the streamers and balloons and leftover pizza, he left all that for my mother to clean, and towards his office. Eli stood quietly with the heavy box in his hands, a strangely pained look on his face, as he listened to our fathers footsteps recede. He did not move until he heard the heavy door open, then slam shut.

He turned to me then and smiled. It was a sad smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, but all Eli’s smiles were sad. So, to me, at the time, it was just a smile.

“Do you want to see it?” He asked me conspiratorially. My cheeks, still pudgy with baby fat, split into a gap toothed grin.

“Really?” I whispered, “Can I?” Eli nodded and knelt down on one knee, already so tall then that he had to for me to see.

He lifted the lid of the box slowly then held it out for me like he was presenting it to me, like our father had to him. It was a small old-fashioned pocket watch made of gleaming gold. There were delicate little flowers carved into the front acting as a border around the gentle bowing swan carved into the center. A matching gold chain curled around the watch protectively. It all lay on a bed of regal blue velvet like it was in a display case at a museum.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed out. Eli laughed, or more accurately breathed out a sharp steam of air in amusement. Real laughs were rare with him.

“Can I touch it?” I asked awestruck. Eli’s smile, sad as it was, dropped from his face. He pulled the box away from me, but still held it at a distance like it was a crying baby he didn’t know how to calm or a bomb that he didn’t know how to diffuse.

“Better not,” He said, then as though he could sense my disappointment, “Maybe when you’re older.” He reminded me of our father when he said that, if there was ever a time our father could be considered warm.

“Do you want to help me put it away?” He asked. I grinned again.

“Yeah!” Eli laughed, a real laugh, at that. He closed the lid and latched the brass lock gently, like a lover. Then, he placed it in my hands.

“Put it on my dresser, will you?”

I took off for the stairs, walking up them stiffly like a soldier. I stayed that way, stiff and serious, until I set the box on top of Eli’s dresser for him to put on the shelf later. I felt like a guardian, a protector. That was the only moment I could almost forget the watch wasn’t mine.

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Smoking is a disgusting habit. Father used to smoke cigars in his office no matter how much our mother complained about the smell.

“At least crack a window!” She’d plead. Father would scoff as if that was the single most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

“And let the cold in? Honestly, Maggie, do you want me to freeze,” He’d say back, waving his hands as he said it just to really drive home that our mother was a bad wife if she said yes. So she’d murmur that of course she didn’t and drop it. At least until the next time she caught a whiff of cigar smoke seeping out from the crack under the office door.

Eli smoked too. He started young, so young I can remember him doing it before he left. He smoked a lot. Sometimes he'd get up from dinner twice to stand on the back porch and smoke a cigarette. He was respectful of our mother enough to do it outside, unlike our father who occasionally lit a cigar at the table, but not respectful enough, by that point, to ask our mother if he could be excused.

I could never stand the smell. It reminded me too much of our father. Or, it used to. After Eli left, I guess it started to remind me more of him. It still bothered me, but in a different way. It made me think of Eli's grounding hand on my shoulder when our parents would get into it. The hand that would steer me away from the raised voices and guide me towards the checkers board set up in front of the fireplace. It made my heart ache painfully and reminded me of the emptiness of that house after he left. I don't know if that's better or worse than when it made me stand up instinctively straighter, speak a little clearer. Caroline would probably say worse because when it reminded me of Father I never used to smoke. Now I smoke almost as bad as Eli did.

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I didn't know if he still smoked until I stepped out of the kitchen and into the cool outside air. Eli was out there already, black pants, black shoes, but black blazer discarded at his feet. He leaned over the porch railing, his forearms resting on the old, warped wood. A cigarette dangled burning out between his fingers. I hadn't expected him to be out there, but I wasn't surprised. Old habits die hard, I guess.

"You got one for me?" I asked even though I could feel the halfull pack of Lucky Strikes burning a hole in my back pocket. Eli didn't say anything, didn't even turn to look at me, but he

gestured to an L&M pack on the wooden picnic table shoved in the corner of the deck. I decided to take that as an invitation, it was as much of one as I was ever going to get. I slipped one from the box and moved to lean over the railing next to him.

“You got a light too?” I asked. He held out a silver lighter with the initials A.S.B engraved in a cursive script on it. Our father’s initials. I lit my cigarette and held the lighter out for him, but he made no move to take it. Instead, I set it on the railing next to me. We smoked in silence for a minute, time I used to get a better look at him. He looked good, all things considered. Healthy. His hair was long, longer than I’d ever seen it, reaching down to his shoulders in soft, shaggy waves. It suited him.

When we were young, he kept his hair short. Or, more accurately, our father kept it short. Anytime it grew out enough that it started to graze the top of his ears, our father would dig out his clippers and buzz it close to his scalp. He looked a lot like our father with short hair.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” I said casually, breaking the silence that had wedged itself between us. He shrugged weakly.

“Didn’t think I would either,” He said, his voice gravelly like our father’s was, probably from years of smoking, and less warm than I remembered it, but it was still unmistakably my brother.

“Where’s the husband?” I asked after a moment, aiming for a relaxed tone and terribly missing the mark with the awkward forced way I said the last word. Eli said nothing, just did that sharp amused exhale he does and flicked his cigarette. I watched the ash fall into the grass below.

“Why did you come?” I asked finally when it became clear that he wasn’t going to answer my other question. No point in beating around the bush anymore. Not when Eli had made

it so clear he wasn't interested in smalltalk. Eli took another drag of his cigarette then let out a long, deep sigh.

"Had to see if it was true." He said simply. I straightened sharply.

"If what was true?" I asked, tense, daring him to say it. He straightened too, slower and more deliberate, and turned to face me, towering over me like when we were kids. His eyes, when they met mine, weren't blazing like I'd expected, or even cold. They were dull. Empty.

"If it was true that he'd really kicked it." Eli said, saying each word with care and proper annunciation. He said it like he wanted every word to sink in before the next one had left his lips.

"This is a funeral, Eli," I said hard and quiet, startling myself with how much *I* sounded like our father, "What if Mom heard you talk like that?" Eli held my gaze for a moment before turning away and leaning back over the railing. He took a drag of his cigarette.

"Let her hear. He was my father too." And of course he was. He was Eli's father when he dragged Mitch from two streets over out of our house by his hair and threw him to the ground. He was Eli's father when he knocked him down too for trying to pull him back from Mitch. He was Eli's father when he choked down one last rattling breath before he started his long descent to fire and brimstone. He was always Eli's father, but he was only mine once. And that one time made me glad for that.

That one time, the ickiness it brought, still clings to me. To my hair, my clothes, my skin. It doesn't wash off. It's like the smell of cigarettes, how it never really fades from a chainsmoker's car or from the carpets in my apartment, no matter how much pumpkin febreze Caroline sprays. I smell that ickiness on Eli, sickly sweet and rotten. I wonder if he smells it faintly on me. I wonder if he resents me for it.

For years after it happened, I would remind myself over and over that I was just a kid. A kid who had seen something he was never supposed to through the crack of his brother's door. A kid who didn't understand why his father's eyes lit up with rage or why he placed his heavy hand on his shoulder and said in his gravelly voice, "Good job, Son." But, in the quiet hours after everyone else had gone to bed, it was impossible for me to ignore one simple truth. I was the one that told our father about Mitch. I was the reason Eli had left. I had driven my own brother from beneath our roof like Cain killing his brother with a jawbone for his god's favor. And, as our father had stormed up the stairs towards Eli and his unsuspecting guest, even though I didn't understand our father's anger, for just a moment, I'd been happy for it. I'd wanted to see Eli be taken down a peg, to have a sliver of the approval that came so easy for him. I just hadn't realized that there would be no going back.

"He was Mom's husband," I said because it was easier to say that than talk about everything else that lay between us, "Curse him all you want, but not here." Not when his grave is still wet with her tears. Eli scoffed and stubbed his cigarette out on the porch rail. He let what was left of it fall from his fingers into the wet grass below.

"Enjoy the cigarette." He said coldly, pushing off from the railing and reaching to grab the silver lighter. He left after that. Just scooped up his blazer and shambled back inside. I let him go, didn't bother to try and stop him, but I didn't watch him leave. I'd already done that once. I didn't need the reminder of what his receding back looked like.

I finished my cigarette slowly, savoring the quiet and solitude. Eventually though I remembered my mother and Ollie, and felt enough guilt about leaving them to accept condolences alone to go back inside. My mother had lost a husband and Ollie was only sixteen. I had to go back in, be strong for them, act as their buffer because I knew Eli wouldn't.

When I turned to go back in, dropping the cigarette on the porch and stubbing it out with the toe of my black loafer, I saw Eli had left the L&M box on the table. I picked it up, intending to pocket it, figuring it was his loss. I'd never been picky about my cigarette brand. That's when I saw it.

Sitting on the table concealed by the L&M pack was a dull gold pocket watch with a swan bowing its head carved on the front. Though it had clearly seen better days and didn't look like it had been polished since the day Eli left, it was not a watch that could ever be mistaken for another. I thought of the empty wooden box upstairs, sitting now on my shelf. The one I'd found there, locked, the day after Eli left. I hadn't known nothing was locked inside for years after. Our father had never seen reason to tell me, but looking back it was obvious he'd only give me the box if there was no watch inside.

I'd always wondered what had happened to it, if Eli had taken it when he left, if he'd pawned it. I picked it up, surprised at how light it felt in my hand and ran my thumb over the engraved swan. After Eli had left, Father had given the box to me, but he'd always made it clear he'd wanted to be buried with the watch. The watch he knew was not inside. It was not lost on me that Eli had waited until after he'd already been swallowed up by six feet of dirt to return it.

I held the watch up to my ear for a moment and listened to the quiet tick, tick, tick. I was surprised it still worked. I didn't know much about pocket watches, but I knew that without regular care the gears would rust and eventually grind to a halt. Eli must have put special care into making sure it still worked, winding it when the clocks changed and possibly even taking it to a watchmaker when a gear got too old. I wasn't sure how to feel about that so I just slipped it into the front pocket of my suit jacket. What else was I supposed to do with it? I hoped that if it was out of sight it would be out of mind, but the weight of it felt wrong. It felt like something I

shouldn't have, like it didn't belong to me. I was not the oldest son and no matter how disappointing to our father Eli turned out to be, I never would be. I was a spare and he would not want me to have it. He would rather it had stayed lost.

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The weight of the watch stayed at the front of my mind with every wrinkled hand I shook and each "I'm sorry for your loss" I was given. I didn't see Eli inside, but I did see the grateful smile my mother flashed me when I took her place next to Ollie on the couch so she could slip away for some air.

Later that night after all the guests left and Ollie and my mother had both gone to bed, I placed the watch gently in the wooden box. Briefly, I wondered if I should tell my mother about the return of the watch, but as I placed it back in the box I realized It would only hurt her further to know her own son had denied her husband his last request. It was better for everyone if they thought the watch was still gone.

My hands caressed the lid of the box, catching on every splinter and chip in the wood. It felt familiar beneath my hands in a way the watch never could and I was brought back to all the times I'd just held the box to my chest in the late hours of the night after Eli left. I fastened the brass lock into place abruptly with the key that I had pried off my father's keyring before he was lowered into the empty grave. I thought of Eli as I did, about what that watch must've meant to him.

To me it had been a symbol of our father's love, his approval. But, laying down in the twin bed I'd outgrown years ago, I couldn't imagine a world where it had ever been that to Eli. Eli had felt father's approval, the approval I'd only gotten a taste of. A taste so acrid that I'd

wanted to spit it out even as I swallowed it down. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to ignore the image of Eli's split lip and the blood that trickled down his chin while Mitch sobbed behind him that burned behind my eyes.

I think there's a reason Eli didn't want it that I will never be able to fully understand. That was between Eli and our father, they carried that burden together. But, I guess it's just Eli carrying that now.