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What Now?

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He had just missed me. Truly missed me, that's all it was. He had just wanted to be with me like a man and woman should be.

I told myself this for another year. And I held his hand and kissed his lips and tried to please him for another year. Meanwhile, I could still see blood stains on certain articles of clothing.

It wasn't until I was seventeen that I finally grew up enough to see what that relationship really was. I got tired of being called stupid and ugly. I got tired of being forced into sex. I was just tired. I felt like a wounded hound following an abusive master, always hurt but always loyal.

Weeks later, I began to heal. I was becoming strong again. I was becoming me again. So I confronted him about the RV experience.

"It was not rape!" he yelled. "You're twisting what happened to make me into a bad guy! You're f***ing sick! You're a sick bitch!"

He had knocked me down again. Once more, I started to deny that it was rape. I began to protect him again. I made excuses for the few people who knew. "He really isn't a bad guy..." and "I wasn't forceful enough..." were some of my favorites.

It wasn't until I met Gary that I really started to grow again. He rarely corrected my protectiveness but the gentle hurt in his eyes reminded me that what happened wasn't right. It wasn't okay.

It was then that I started to search. How many women has this happened to? I asked five women, all of which had been my closest friends since I was very young, if they had ever experienced any form of sexual abuse. All five of them had a story to tell. None of them had ever pressed charges.

I became aware of what an epidemic this was. Most of them don't even know they've been raped. Most of them are raped by someone they trust. But they are strong. They rise above it. I rose above it, but it will never be okay. Rape is a four letter word, rape is a dirty word, but I learned to use it. I learned to accept it. I will not protect my rapist.

Healing...
"No, thanks. I'm not hungry. I was just having a flashback dream about your mother."

"Oh yeah? Anything interesting?"

"Just the same stuff I've been remembering forever. What's the point in reminiscing when I know I won't be making any new memories? It was nice to see her though. Young. She didn't stay that way for very long."

"Harry, you ready for your meds?" The hospice nurse interrupted.

"Do I have a choice?"

"As much as I enjoy seeing you writhing in pain, I'd recommend taking the pills."

"Alright, Molly. Give 'em up."

The nurse placed five brightly colored pills in Harold's hand and helped him raise them to his mouth. The grimace on Harold's face told Jack that it was painful for his father to swallow.

Once the nurse was out of the room, Harold gave Jack a forced smile and a wink. "You should help her out. She seems stressed. Just a quickie in the kitchen should take care of it."

"Dad, you know I'm married."

"I know, I know. I was just trying to live vicariously through you. She's out of your league anyway. The only reason she hasn't jumped me is because she has to clean my shit every day. I may be on my death bed, but I'm still an animal."

"Dad, we need to discuss what you want to happen after..."

The pause was long as Harold fixed his gaze on the wall in front of his bed.

"Dad?"

"Would you shut up for a second? I've got some gas I'm trying to... and there it goes."

"That is probably the worst smell I've experienced, ever. But seriously, what do want me to do?"

"Well, I talked to the lawyer. I had him leave everything to you. Just promise me you won't bury me."

"I thought you had a plot next to Mom."

"I do. But, your mom is dead, and I will be too, so I really don't think our sleeping arrangements matter much. Besides, the thought of being buried creeps me out a little. Just burn me up and spread my ashes in the ocean."

"You've never been on the ocean."

"I know. It'll be a new experience."

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Harold slept through the night that night. He experienced his entire life in the form of flashback dreams. In the early morning, he awoke knowing he was breathing his final breaths. Jack was there.

"I guess it's happening, Buddy."

"I know, Dad."

"I spent all night last night reliving my life. So many what ifs. I hate what ifs. I'm done reliving and not knowing. It's time for what now. So, what now?"

Harold's eyes closed as his chest heaved one last time.