

Salt and Pepper

Chicken between my teeth makes that sticky clicking sound when I chew—and now I hear that in my knees when I go upstairs, each step like glue attaching and releasing. My wife glides silently like a silk scarf falling off a mannequin in the twilight hours before stores open, when people aren't bustling about. I'd hoped for more years of quiet.

My old man said his joints seized up because of injuries playing football with friends, dreaming of playing college ball, and because of a lifetime of putting his knees and elbows to the cold cement floors of buildings to paint the lowest spots. He told my daughters just before he died, still able to raise his warped arm slightly when he wanted to say something of importance, that he had so many white hairs because of paint splatters that fell when others were painting above him—that if they wanted to keep their dark hair, they needed to do something more with their lives than idly play sports and paint.

“You work smarter to get ahead,” he'd said.

I was never brave enough to wear a football jersey, and I'd spent my career in an ergonomically correct leather chair on wheels. Now, I fear I am listening to my body follow the same path, soon to be restrained in the shackles of my own helplessness.

My daughter sees me staring into the hall mirror on her way out the door to one of her final high school track practices. She smirks and turns around, the same look on her face when she'd caught me pausing before the boxes of hair dye at the grocery store a few days earlier.

“You're not old, Daddy. Here, try this on those silver stripes,” she says, rummaging through her backpack and then handing me the permanent marker she keeps to label the tags of all her uniforms.

“This marker is navy blue, not black,” I reply, shaking my head. “It's ok. I know I'm not old.” I smile and tell her a meteor was about to crash to the ground but that just a few feet above my head, it burned up into ash, those fragments of outer space landing in my hair.

“How come it disappeared instead of knocking you out?” she jokes, as she swings open the door.

“Just luck...that's all,” I say, knowing she's already three feet out the door. “That's all any of this is.”

Her older sister is preparing to interview at only small law firms outside a calculated radius from mine; she emphasizes every chance she gets that she doesn't want special connections to sway anyone. At my first job interview so long ago, a man greeted me, his black shoes so glossy that in them I could see the reflection of his outstretched pale hand.

“Lee Samuelson. Now...is your father Gary Samuelson?” he asked, looking through my papers.

“Yes sir, he is.”

“Ah, what a turkey.” He chuckled heartily. “Salt of the Earth,” he said, emphasizing each word, before getting back to his queries for me.

I knew that it wasn't my newly acquired degrees in the same shiny plastic frames as everyone else's or anything I'd said, other than confirming, “he is,” that landed me that job. It was a huge firm, so I only saw the man two or three times in the elevator or hall before he soon retired. I never felt comfortable asking him how he knew my father, and my old man denied knowing him. I tried to thank my father for somehow polishing my status before anyone knew me, but he waved his hand and turned his head away with a terse chuckle, refusing to accept the credit. I'd give anything to show him now that even without playing football and painting high-

rises—one of the only honest jobs available to him during those times—body-betrayal was inevitable. He'd done everything right.

My wife opens the kitchen door into the hall and stops abruptly.

“You’re still standing there? In that time I already have two dozen cupcakes baked for Sara’s last team picnic. I’m going to smash up that mirror into tiny shards and spread them in my flowerbeds. I hear the remnants of vanity are especially beneficial for roses,” she says with that sly grin I can’t live without.

“I’m just contemplative,” I retort. “Besides, you love baking. You wouldn’t have to do it. I’d write a check to the chicest bakery in town. ”

I pull her to my side and kiss the top of her head; my elbow cracks to highlight the first movement, and my neck audibly punctuates the second. I notice some specks of white against her shadowy hair. She takes her turn with the mirror and notices, too. She flips her hair in smooth silence. Her white spots are just flour; they brush right off.