

The Undertaker's Son

by Caleb Stright

Luke Baird called the night you died.

He said, "Hey, sorry, do you want me to take care of it?"

It wasn't the right word, I wanted to tell him, that he couldn't call you it. That he could call you he or him or David.

"Is it there? At your house?" he asked. "I'll come pick it up."

"No, I should do it," I said, not knowing if I meant because it would be practical, that it would save me and your mother money. That it made sense because I knew how to.

I think I hoped it could be some kind of ritual. Something intimate no other parent, no other father and son, would ever know. "I should take care of him."

You were there, in the basement, on the table, just like all the other ones. Your eyes were closed but I put my hands over them. It had been at least a decade, half your life, since I had touched you. Since we had hugged at your grandmother's funeral. I paced away from the table and I asked you:

"When did you stop loving me?" And I answered, "It was early. You were five and had barely had a chance to learn love or to love me. Your mother was out in the backyard hanging laundry and you came looking for me. You weren't supposed to come down here, but you knew I was down here. You came through the door smiling because you were bringing me some piece of art in crayon on construction paper. And I was standing like this, in plastic and rubber and metal, with my knives and machines to make the human more human. You were too young to know what this was or who I really was. You

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couldn't understand. We were going to tell you.

“You didn't even know what death was, but you knew what I was doing was wrong. You knew I was something awful and something to be feared. You cried and you ran. You went right to your mother because you needed protected from me. From whoever I was or whatever I had become. And it stained you. You would never see me the same again. You'd always be peaking at me from behind your mother's apron.

“You said I didn't accept you. But you didn't accept me. I told you I would pay for college, all of it, everything, if you went into the business. Because it would pay well. It would give you a good life. Because it was Larter and Son. And there's no Son without you. You could have gone anyway. Somewhere else. Done whatever you needed to do. We would have paid. You didn't have to do what you did.

“You said I didn't love you. But you didn't love me.”

I had put the tube in your jugular and your blood began to leave. The saline had pulled my eyes closed. I was squinting; it was a red blur. It was your bike. Your first bike.

“You were four and you'd had it for just over a week. You were on the driveway hill and pedaling. I was on the porch and the miniature looked in miniature. You were pedaling and going too fast without it and then you were down. I was up and I was running. You were tangled in it, in the spokes and gears, and sliding. You were stopped and weren't crying. I was running and the world was rumbling and you weren't moving. You weren't crying.”

I shook my head. I looked at you. Lying there, mostly naked, you looked mostly unremarkable, except for those scars. The long, thick, ragged white bars up your knees.

“That was the first moment I knew you would die. You still loved me then.”

You were defenseless. Lying there. I thought of those few times I bathed you. Just me and you. That great responsibility of making you clean. Doing something you couldn't do for yourself. I liked to think, in that way that babies and kids and parents think, that those moments would define how every moment after it would be. That from that second forward, as I held your head back to keep your eyes safe from soap, you'd have to rely on me. Not your mother. Or anyone else. You'd have to rely on me.

You were bigger now. You were a man. But I wondered if your head would still fit in my hands. If I could, if I had to, hold you and protect you from soap. I didn't know. Not from where I was standing. Maybe your head would be bigger than my hands.

So I walked to you and stood beside you. With one hand gently lifting, I slid the other one under, too. I was never a big man. No one ever called me strong, but there in my hands, my two hands, I could still hold you.

