Comes After Cato

by donna d. vitucci

When they called him down there to the morgue to identify the body, he drove behind the wheel of his truck like some steady maniac on a long haul. The Ford 150 cried out for new shocks, but that hardly mattered. Mud plastered side panels and wheel wells didn't matter. Movie-of-the-Week music thumping dire through his brain and his limbs didn't matter. What mattered? Only that he identify Cato, busted head and all. Even the inner racket of his melanoma shrunk as he looked straight-on into the mess of his grandson. Robert's scab from last summer that rioted cells from his foot straight up his leg instead of healing, well if it had itched right then he would have scratched it off just to see blood other than this boy's.

All night he tried reaching Steve and Mindy in Vegas, where they'd entered one of those gambling tournaments. He kept ringing Steve's cell and getting bumped into the message system. Damned things. Nobody around anymore to pick up, everybody on hold, all the world's problems funneled into voicemail. He wouldn't leave the shocker that was going to slam them soon enough, just said, “Call me at home right away. I mean it.” And “Where the hell are you? This is your dad and I need to talk at you right now.” And, “Don't you ever check your god-forsaken phone?” He bet they were winning.

No sleep then, his head shiny-ache full with the brand new motorcycle Cato'd killed himself on. Robert didn't plunk down the money for it, though God knows he had the cash, and had spent plenty of it catering to the whims of that boy—more than half his indulgences turned sour. Steve, who himself rode a Harley, refused to co-sign for Cato, begged Robert to stand tough on this one. When Cato bucked up the gravel drive, come to show it off, yelling, “Look Pawpaw,” over the growl of the machine, Robert told him, “You make one mistake, take one wrong turn with that, and I'm chaining it to this goddamned tree.”

He set his hand on the trunk of the oak. Felt good to lean on something sturdy, since his legs took to buckling without notice.

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Kid had busted up so many automobiles, and other shit, it was a miracle he got out of high school alive. That girl Cato'd flipped for, the one who had his baby last Christmas, she co-signed. How she could back up the loan, Robert didn't know because she was only a nail tech, whatever that meant.

News reporters rang, and Robert said they should go print what they'd already scooped from the police reports and the scanner, or they could all go to hell. When the caller ID listed Steve's cell, Robert picked up before the first ring finished.

“What's so important, Dad?”

Tinny and pissed off, his son sounded a million miles away, he could have been on Mars.

“Looks like your boy done killed himself on that motorcycle.” Robert had never been known to mince his words.

Steve screamed, “What?!” and in the background he could hear Mindy railing, the girl with a sixth sense about her boy and hitting Steve with incoherence while Robert hung on the line and waited.

His voice all broke and croaky, Steve said, “We'll come back.”

Robert heard his daughter-in-law keening.

“You damned well better. And get Mindy something from a doctor. She sounds off the wall.”

“Dad—“

“I know. Get a flight. We'll talk when you get home.”

Mindy begged to look before they fixed Cato, and Robert warned what she'd see would haunt her all her days, but she wailed, “Don't you tell me. He's my one and only boy.”

When the funeral director lifted the sheet, she collapsed as Robert knew she would. He bent and lifted her with a difficulty he hid from his son, and he kept Mindy in his arms, though honestly he wasn't used to holding a woman. Margaret dead almost seven years, and even before that they'd had a good twenty where they lived together as roommates, nothing but fake kisses since they conceived Steve. Steve, who stood there dazed, no help, the three of them left to cope in that basement.

Mindy, her voice clotted with tears, said, “I should have had more children.”

“No replacing Cato,” Robert said. More words could be dangerous, still he tasted them. “Could have a dozen, but it won't change this.” And wouldn't do, either, pinning guilt on her and Steve for going off gaming. Cato had been twenty, with an apartment on his own, and he'd lived a life of flaunting their house rules all the way to the county's legal code. He was of the tribe of good looking punks who get away with all kinds of shit and make you love them while they're scamming you.

Some caveman with a prominent brow lay in the casket, the bones of his face huge and sculpted rock. Alive, Cato had been handsome. Everybody remarked on it.

Pastor said, “This death breeds a lump in our throats, but we need to talk of the good boy we knew, to celebrate Cato.”

Beside Robert, a drugged Mindy muttered, “That's bull.”

The pastor told about the time Cato and his buddies had a BB gun war inside the house, shot up Mindy's newly papered walls. The guys had to take Cato to the ER for patching up after he tried to dig a BB out of his arm with a razor blade. This drew laughs from the crowd. Another must have given over the details for the pastor to shape his story because he didn't know Cato. Robert strained, trying to recall whether they'd ever even baptized the boy, but chemo had peppered his once-sharp brain.

Cato had sported the most expensive gym shoes and the baggy pants of a gangster. When the cancer started spreading above his knees, it swole up Robert's legs so bad he couldn't wear his usual slacks. The scabs from his ankles to his thighs seeped liquid that ruined clothes. What he found worked was wrapping his legs in cut-up adult diapers, held in place with masking tape. He said then to Cato, “Where can I go buy some of those big pants you wear?”

Cato's narrow eyes laughed at him. “You'd look stupid.”

Robert said, “Like you don't?”

He'd ducked away so his grand kid wouldn't see him flinch, drove the truck to K-Mart for pants in the Big and Tall. Getting up and

down out of the cab proved trickiest, as his knees had limited bend. Robert sped on the same county road that would weeks later flip Cato's bike. Where'd the boy get off spouting cruel *to him*? Those guys he hung out with, they looked past Cato's needling—well, sure, he was the source of their good time, as he'd been given every video game and bike and skateboard and drive-able thing. People gravitated Cato's way, not only because of the dazzle-ly stuff he had; he charmed you with compliments, he roped you in with his smile. Which was probably how he first sweet talked that girl, who'd had his child, out of her clothes.

Come the day Benjy was born, and Robert's heart still hadn't opened. The world had rules, he lectured Cato, proper ways of acting, and improper. At the hospital, in view of all those babies in their bassinettes and nurses strolling the hallway, he told him, “Don't think about giving him your last name without marrying.”

Cato said, “Pawpaw, things are different these days.” But he didn't cross Robert.

Now they were talking with the lawyer about creating a trust fund for Benjy, about applying Robert's last name to him in every legal way. Cato's fiance still no part of the family, but she'd be tied to them forever because Benjy was the girl's meal ticket, and likely she damned well knew it.

Inside his head, Robert preached his own tribute about the good and bad Cato, boy with a perpetual want that Robert rarely denied since he couldn't bear his grandson's face turned away from him for any reason.

The circumstances of how Robert came to possess a U.S. mail truck didn't matter, but he drug out that little machine, three-legged in its looks, steering on the wrong side like in England, every time toddler Cato begged him to, putt-putted that engine around the block shout-singing, “I am the mailman, I work for Uncle Sam!” holding Cato tight when he cut sharp the curves. Kid laughed so hard he cried; Robert did, too.

That was pre-kindergarten, before Cato started kinging-it up, trading on a charisma he never had chance to figure the why of.

Nothing like the Mailman Song bound them together in that same hilarious way. Thinking back on it, preschool years were the prime time Robert had with Steve when he was boy.

Of course with Steve there'd been Margaret. Mother and son so tight, during Vietnam she vowed to boost him over the border and make her new residence Canada, too, though it never came to that, thank God. Froze out, Robert left them to each other, settled in at the shop where he welded for Diehl Steel, signed for all the overtime they'd dish his direction. What he contributed at home, when Steve would listen, touched on work, women, and doing what was right. Same things Robert failed trying to teach Cato.

Robert felt the distance jump just around the time his son, and then his grandson, grew old enough to challenge him, to suddenly see him smaller than God. Bullshit. He'd never had good communication with them, nor with Margaret either. He'd never told a single person how he felt about what held an ounce of importance for him. And just what did he deem valuable, anyway? He inched back from plumbing that mystery as this was no day to pick over the bones of his own lost cause.

Robert sighed and Mindy put her hand on his. She had Cato's narrow eyes, or more correct to say he'd had hers. Eyes that didn't betray much. He could smell the lotion she used on her skin, and the powder, the perfume, the layers she put on for the world all piled at the back of his throat to stop his swallowing. What he'd give for a drink of cold water. Where was that damned fountain he saw when the mortician hustled them through the maze of this place to look and choose a coffin?

Cato, too, had been a hustler. Robert suspected his grandson had been the thief who broke in one night, stole cash from his bureau and the World War I Luger Robert had been given by his own father. Never pressed charges, didn't turn the boy in to Steve or even grill Cato about it. Wouldn't have been the first time Cato shit where he slept, with Robert sidling in to mop up, lips zipped tight. He resisted confronting the boy, and this wrenched him deep. It might have made a difference, but who the hell could tell?

He was no whistle-blower. He'd taught Steve, and then Cato, the same: “Don't be a snitch.”

Halfway through the funeral service, his skin-crawly legs tipped off the nausea he was getting to be old friends with. He had to excuse himself, half-bent to cause the least fuss, avoiding the trip laid out for him by the legs and feet of Mindy, Steve, and the girl with Benjy on her lap.

He wondered if corpses ever rested on the leather-like slab where the attendant directed him. Lying stretched out there in the dim back room, he dreamed Cato rode his goddamned motorbike right up and over a chest that already felt hollow.

“I'd take it from you if I could, Pawpaw.”

More useless yammering. Though with Cato, or even the ghost of Cato doing the taking, Robert supposed he might be able to knock heads with what barreled down the pike on the back of this cancer, especially since he'd numbed himself to the boy's robbing him of most every other meaningful thing. Disease and Cato putting the squeeze on Robert in the back room of the funeral parlor seemed apt, as both resisted discipline.

Above the din of exiting mourners, he heard Mindy wailing her son's name clear from the other room. Robert knew he should rise and get out there with the rest of the family taking their last look before they shut Cato for good, but his legs wouldn't obey. All the cells of his body would rebel if he tried getting up. Robert felt like buck shot scattered through a carcass, and even that buck shot wasn't going to hold it together.

“When you gonna grow up to be worth something?” he'd dared Cato at the very last, a memory that made him groan.

“You all right?” Steve said.

Robert nodded with his eyes closed. “I will be.”

Steve said, “We're making our way out of here now.”

As Robert sensed his son shifting to the doorway, he said, “I'm with you,” but had to think about it deeply before his eyelids would peel and reveal the moment.

Cato's bike had dented his ribs, nailed him flat, slit a trench in him so deep it cut at the leather-covered slab. What fired through his center beat Mindy's shrieking by a goddamned mile. He was a two-faced granddad, and they'd not reconciled, damn it, he'd been unable to let love outrun despising, at least enough so the boy'd know it.

If Cato had been the dare-devil leaping the gorge, Robert was the lip of the land, awful far off and crumbling underneath the boy hitting ground, Cato whooping it up even as he was slipping, the crowd clapping, too, because they were always on his side, likely squinting, wishing hard he'd make it but afraid to look, everybody failing everybody else.

Robert swung his legs to the side and rose slowly to sit. This stole his equilibrium and he awaited what was never restored. “Who's going to help get me unstuck from this slab?” he said.

The car doors outside were slamming, voices receding. His hands squeaked against the leather-like cover as he leveraged his feet to the floor, slowly, slowly, and the adult diapers he'd wrapped as a make-shift buffer inside his pants tore from where they'd adhered to his legs, allowing the sores their stagnant, copious weeping.