Father's Day

by Gary Moshimer

I nudged my old man's boot from the coffee table and picked up beer cans. The boots were chewed-up and he still wore the shirt with his name, but he'd retired. There were little burn holes in it from welding and smoking. I emptied the mound of Lucky Strikes. He talked in his sleep. “What's for dinner? Where's your mother?”

“Steak. I'll fry when I come back.” I swung his legs to the sofa. It was only four o'clock, early even for him to start his bender, even on a Saturday. “I'm going out with Nate.” I paused at the door to scan the furniture, how it had those slip-covers to preserve things after my mother had died of cancer. I opened my mouth to say, “Mom's dead,” but I didn't.

It had rained and now the sun was out so the trees flying by were washed and new. New starts: I would get the old man help. I would tell Emily I loved her even though she had sights on distant schools and I was a community school fool. About time she knew.

Nate had the Boone's Farm between his legs. He knew I didn't want any. His hand went between the neck and the stick. This was his brother's vintage Opal, two-seater. He down-shifted too much, showing off. When he should have he didn't; Donnelly's long hill had an underpass at the bottom, a puddle across. He sped up instead and said, “Watch this.” Later we would get the meaning of the word hydroplane.

I heard the echo of the crash, going on and on. I thought I was dead. During the time I was dead I didn't see my mother. And no bright light or tunnel. Just a grainy black-and-white scene of Emily in her barn. She lifted a ladle towards me. I sipped the warm milk. Then she dumped the bucket over my head. “Son-of-a-bitch! Why did you have to die? I was going to choose you!” Her old man appeared in the frame and laughed with his four woodchuck teeth, so happy I was gone. I tied his shitty laces together.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/gary-moshimer/fathers-day»*
Copyright © 2020 Gary Moshimer. All rights reserved.

But then I was back, squinting through yellow halos. Nate's head hung, blood dripping. There were no airbags in this thing. I tried to say his name but couldn't. They cut me out as a curled-up form that couldn't uncurl. I was born, and my first word was her name.

“Relax.” The young doctor smiled his fake smile. I wanted to rip his head through the smile-hole. He uncurled me and felt my abdomen. I pounded the rail. He traced something with his finger. “Seat belt marks. We're going to have bruises.” He was still smiling.

“It's not possible.” I gritted my teeth. “I wasn't wearing a seatbelt.”

“Oh, you were. Look.”

They were there, the bloody tracks. “I didn't put them on.”

“Someone did.” He patted my shoulder. “You also hit your head on the dashboard. You may not remember stuff.”

Like my home number. My father wouldn't answer, anyway. I could only think of Emily's. This was back before cell phones.

From the next cubicle came Nate's voice. “He'll fucking kill me!”

After the nice medicine I fell off a cliff, floating down, down. There was a cold hand on mine and an angel's voice: “I'm here.”

“Mom?”

“It's Emily.”

“How long…”

“A while. Watching you.”

My nose tingled with barn odors. “You're a smell for sore noses.” My voice was drunk.

There was a throat clearing--her old man in the background. I cracked my eyes to see his stiff hair. Ray. He was sixty-something, like mine. I lowered my gaze to his boots, untied as usual. He shuffled in the corner and read a poster.

Nate sang out, his medicine on board. “Emily, is that you? He loves you!”

I watched Ray go red.

Ah, '74. Before cat scans on everyone; before “observation status.” They sent me home with a pocketful of pain pills. They said,

“Watch the blood in your pee. Wake up every two hours. No heavy machinery!”

I yelled at Fake Smile. “But, my backhoe!”

Ray had his turd-like pickup, a box of dust and fumes. I coughed and my ribs stung. He had that grin. He chewed something also turd-like and I thought of his cows.

The springs groaned and so did I. Ray used his elbow like a pinball flipper. Emily squeezed my hand and Ray's eyes wandered from the road, landed on our knotted hands like a hammer. The truck scooped through ditches.

“Good thing you had the belt on.” He spat out the window. “You'd be in pieces.” He spat again. “So…where's your old man?”

“I don't know. Just…out.”

My house was dark. Emily found the porch light before I hobbled in, bent at the waist. I found my mother's cane on the porch and Emily held my shirt. Ray clumped in behind. My old man was where I had left him, hours before. A butt smoldered on his chest. Ray said, “Jesus,” and snatched it, killing it between his thick fingers. Then he squinted at the name on the shirt. “Ralph.” He knuckled my old man's bony chest. He shook him until he sputtered awake.

The scene and the pills made me dizzy. Emily eased me into the recliner and worked the lever. She sat on the arm and we watched.

“Your boy's been in an accident,” Ray said.

My father thrashed his head but wouldn't open his eyes. “No, his mother was taken, but he is okay!” He sat up suddenly and threw punches.

“I'm okay, Dad. I'm here.”

Ray held my old man's head in arthritic hands and talked to him. I closed my drowsy eyes to listen. I couldn't do anything else. Ray's voice dropped way low until it had a soothing power, soft and steady. I couldn't hear the words, but after a while I felt my father's rough hand on my arm. He was on one knee, saying he was sorry. Then Ray

helped him up and led him in to the bed. I drifted off to the sound of their voices, so far away.

Emily woke me up like the doctor had told her to, every couple hours. The last time she was looking through her college letters. I could see Ray's shadow pacing on the porch. I wanted to say my piece, but she was all business. “We have to go now. It's very late.” The porch boards creaked.

“What will I do without you?”

“You have each other.”

“No. I don't want to be left with just him.”

I jerked too quickly and the chair snapped to the upright position. Emily jumped up and her papers flew all over. The day's events hit me, a stab in the gut. I hugged her waist as hard as I could, my tears in her shirt. I wanted her to take me in, but she just held my head lightly, like she didn't know what to do with it.

The shadow out there loomed closer, filled the doorway. He needed her, too. She gathered her papers. “I'll call you tomorrow.” I glanced at the clock on the desk: it was already tomorrow. I heard my old man snoring loudly, but it was not enough for the terrible loneliness I felt.

I nodded to Ray, tears drying on my cheeks, and he nodded back.

Something touched my arm. I was too sore to move, even my eyelids. Then my old man's cracked voice: “I made breakfast.”

I opened my eyes. He had a mottled hand on my arm. It looked scrubbed, and beneath the coffee and bacon smells I detected soap. His hair was combed. He wore a different shirt, a striped job he'd last worn to church with my mother.

“Get out,” I said, in a good way, but his face drooped. Then I put my hand on his and he understood.

He eased the chair up and very gently placed the tray on my lap. “I don't want to hurt you.” The tray always made me think of Father's day and how I had surprised him as a boy. He watched me

eat. I was starving. I nodded to him that it was good, and he nodded back.

After a while he said, “So. Seat belt, huh?”

“That's right.”

“You've never worn a seat belt.”

The sun took one of those perfect morning angles and suddenly lit our faces. We studied each other, and for the first time in a long time we didn't look away.