

He Loved Her (In Honor of Father's Day)

by Laura McCollough Moss

His truck was already parked in the lot when I got to the restaurant; judging by the rain on the windows he'd gotten there well before me. I'd called him from work to check on our plans.

"Let's meet at the Club at five-thirty," I suggested, distractedly checking my email.

He'd heard that one before.

"So you'll be there at what time?"

"Shut up! I'm leaving here within the next half hour."

I wrapped up my day within the hour (yep; he knew) and hurried home to check on things, take the dogs out and fix my hair. As I grabbed my keys and headed out the door, the microwave read '5:28'.

He was sitting at the end of the bar with his Old Granddad and gingerale when I walked in, making a dramatic show of checking his watch. I tossed my purse under the bar and took the stool next to him.

"Five thirty-six," he feigned annoyance. "When I say I'll be somewhere at five-thirty, I'm there by twenty-five after."

"Well Bud, we're not all retired like you. Some of us have responsibilities," I teased, catching the bartender's eye. He set a beer in front of me and took money from the pile in front of my father.

"She mooches off me every Wednesday," Bud declared, grabbing the quarters off the stacked bills and pocketing them. "I like to save these," he told me, again. "It seems you need quarters everywhere you go. The laundromat, to get air in your tires, three to pick up a paper- I get a lot of change when I come here." Great, Dad; great. I took my first crisp, delicious sip.

"What'd you do today?"

He shook his head. "I can't remember. I did a bunch of shit. I went and got my taxes done."

I'd forgotten he had the appointment. "That's right. Were you there long?"

"No, that guy does it really quick. I had everything with me that I needed; I see you're surprised, but I do get things straight once in awhile. He sat down, looked them over, jotted a few things down and said 'that'll be a hundred dollars.' Then I was out of there. He's a good guy."

"How much are you getting back?"

"Two hundred and fifty-four dollars."

"And you had to give him a hundred?" I laughed, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Yeah, I told him I usually got a kiss when I got screwed. Oh well, I'm glad it's over. I was late with them last year." He looked down and stirred his drink with the little straw. Last year. We were both quiet for a minute or two.

"Poor girl," he stood and put his money away; then he put a hand on the back of my chair.

"Let's eat."

The hostess seated us at a table we'd shared before. The chair across from me, and next to Bud, looked glaringly empty as it had the past ten months. Wednesday was our Happy Hour night; the three of us. Now it was just the two of us, but we kept the tradition alive.

"Look at that woman there," he smiled, watching a couple come into the dining room. "Your mother used to have that look. She'd have that little grin and look around, taking everything in and trying to see if she knew anybody. I always thought it was so cute when she did that."

Flash- just like that, I was about to cry, but I checked the emotion. I was getting really good at it; acting like all was well when I wanted to bawl my eyes out; for her, for him. She was gone, true enough; and that was hard to take. What turned out to be harder was seeing him alone. Ever the comedian, there was a sadness behind his eyes

these days that you had to know him well to see. And although we'd always been close, this shared pain now made us inseparable.

A man strolled by with perfect posture and a masterful comb-over.

Bud gave me that 'get him' expression; sitting there with his own low side part. We razed him about it all the time, but he still looked pretty-damn-good for seventy-five.

We chatted and ate our broiled fish. He sent over half of his home with me.

"I can't eat worth a damn anymore," he sighed, tossing the tip across the table.

We joke about it; I'm almost fifty, but when I'm with my dad, he's the Dad, and he pays.

When Mom was here it was the same way; I would let her cook, serve, and clean up the mess because she was the Mom. No matter how old you get, it's just that way. Your parents are your parents. Bud caught me glancing at the clock. "Well, let's get out of here. You want to get home to your husband." I had someone waiting for me, and it always made me feel a little guilty.

We made our way slowly out to the coat-check, and got ready to leave. Two couples stood talking in the doorway, blocking the exit.

We all did a little shuffle before they noticed us and let us pass.

"We had a name for people like that in the Navy," Bud pulled his zipper up.

"Oh really? What did you call them?" I took the bait.

"Assholes," he chuckled. That's Bud.

We hugged goodbye and got into our cars.

"Keep in touch," he called.

"I will," I whispered.

I will.

