

## Exposure Index

He knew three things about his father. Monster. Creep. Pervert. This was his mother's prayer to her rosary each evening before bed. She had passed with the frost in April, found upright in a Shaker chair with the black beads clenched in her left fist and an envelope addressed to Jonathan on the floor beneath.

He pulled the rosary from her hand, the coldness was no different than her touch when she was alive. She had been a woman rendered blank from the horrors of her past. *Of your father*, she'd often say. He never once saw her cry. She proved impervious to sympathetic emotion, and synthetic. The release of an onion's volatile sulphur compound had no effect on her tear ducts. No smiles either, and laughter was only a definition of something someone else did. And now emotion had become impermeable to him. He did not care that she was gone.

The envelope, he let lie for six months.

His only memory of the house came from a rear-turned view out the back of a Buick with his mother's foot growing heavy on the gas while her hand gained momentum with each slap to his head. *Turn around, damn it*. He was either three or four, whatever age memory begins to stick. They had motored twelve hundred miles away within a day's time and took up residence in a rented shithole above a neon-lit laundry mat. And now twenty years after the frozen memory, with the envelope in hand, he stood in the driveway of a now deceased monster.

The house, a two story mortared stone, once fenced by hundreds of rose bushes now victim to entangled strands of thorns, bequeathed to him, his parents only child. The lawn, wet and dirtied by fall's blanket of leaves. Remnants of his father's life littered the property. A rusted-out '67 Ford, dozens of shattered beer bottles surrounded by scores of shells, empty canisters stenciled with words like emulsion and sodium carbonate, decaying varmints. Without hesitation, he went inside.

On one wall, black-framed prints of Larry Clark photographs. Teenage lovers in dirty bathwater. Needles in sophomore arms. Virgin tongues licking the steel of guns. He knew Clark's work well, had memorized the images in *Tulsa* in case his mother had found and burned the book. Which, she eventually did both. *You are not your father's son, quit looking at this smut*.

On the facing wall, stained wood-framed images of teenage girls posing with their

animals, musical instruments, trees. A business card tucked in the corner of a frame: *Memories for \$115, two outfits, with or without props, one 8 x 10, and several wallets to send to family and friends.* His mother refused the request for a professional senior photo and laced his cereal with laxatives the morning of yearbook picture day. No photos had hung on their walls and no photo albums sat dusty on shelves. She made them live a life not captured.

He now knew two more things about his father. They both shared a love of photography and the allure of grotesque. Doesn't make you a monster or a creep, he thought, just curious. Another trait they shared.

He had kept his 35mm Vivitar under a broken floorboard beneath his bed. Each week he had two opportunities to shoot. 9 am Sunday mass and 5:15 pm Thursday mass. He had one hour and fifteen minutes to investigate his subjects, his mother's jewelry collection. A best friend necklace, the half that read "Be Frie." A class ring from Oakland Catholic High, 1994, imprinted with a track shoe sporting wings. And a handful of other non-expensive trinkets that he never saw his mother wear, but always saw her admire. He developed the film at a near-by high school, breaking in after hours, and stored his archives in a forgotten fallout shelter.

The inside of his father's house was orderly and deceptive, as if it had been kept sterile before necrotic damage settled on the inanimate. Antique chairs black at the curves, blue mold rot on gold finished lamp posts. He removed the letter from the envelope and reread the directives. *Study the photographs. Take note of faces. Walk under bell archway connecting kitchen, pull refrigerator out from wall, open basement door.*

Newspaper clippings lined the walls leading down the steps. *In Puzzling Case, Cross Country Runner Goes Missing During Meet. Into Thin Air: Famed Teen Equestrian Vanishes Without a Trace. CMU's Student of the Year Found Strangled in Schenley Park.* No less than thirty articles all referencing the same seven people were pasted to the drywall. At the landing to his right, the studio. Cameras, lighting equipment, props - a varsity jacket draped over a chair, text books, graduation caps, all covered with dust and webs. And to his left, a closed door with a hand-written sign "Keep it Dark."

The letter provided specific instructions. "Slide box # 76, negative 12. Enlarge. Agitate the film every 10 seconds for one minute, pour out stop, pour in fixer. Agitate every 10 seconds per minute for 10 minutes. Pour out fixer, the image is no longer light sensitive."

Now there was hesitation. Monster. Creep. Pervert. He found himself in a trance, sifting

through the motions of prayer to an imagined rosary. He pulled a pill bottle out of his pocket and swallowed two Valium whole. No chewing, just one hard and dry swallow. He read the last line of the letter *The truth is not learned, it is developed* and entered the darkroom.

He processed the negative by touch and memory, no eyes. He would look when it was hung.

Two people developed, and a shadow. His mother and a young woman from a portrait upstairs. The one guiding her horse through a pasture, now captured with black beads pulled taut against her neck. Four hands, all clenched, two asking for forgiveness and two taking it away. In the foreground, a silhouette of a photographer, a caught voyeur punished for his subjects.