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Kaila Lancaster
Oklahoma State University

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Move-In

by Kaila Lancaster

He's gotten fatter since I last saw him. His sunburn on his head looks awful, but he wears the crusty residue of damage like a crown. Sunspots tattoo his arms and his legs. Strawberry-blond hair, coated in August sweat, clings to thick appendages.

Mom says to wear sunscreen and to moisturize, or I'll end up like him. Just like Dad.

Dad's stomach distends due to piss-yellow pints, but his arms bulge as the result of P90X DVDs; he's a walking contradiction. He's been working out, he says. Getting in shape. His goatee is as horrible as ever—red wires streaked with silver, worn with hypermasculinity. He strokes his chin and clutches the tuft of hair between clean, neat fingernails.

“Do you like the place?” I ask.

Dad examines my new apartment, studies its crevices, and surveys the faux hardwood. Then he looks at me, eyes scanning. He hasn't seen me like this yet—grown and moved away. On my own. He visited me in college once, but he came to my dorm with its twin bed draped in teal polka dots, photos of my high-school prom still tacked to my headboard. I was still a kid. He saw—sees—me as that eleven year old he left twelve years ago. I stood in our driveway, watched his white truck wheel out of our neighborhood. The pebbled cement prickled the bottom of my bare feet.

Now, his hands gently rake the surface of my kitchen countertop. He studies his palm, seems to hope for some sort of residue, longs for some sort of an excuse to perform like fathers do. Give advice, counsel. That kind of performance.

I think I pass his test. He moves on.

“You sure it's a safe neighborhood?” he asks.

“It has good reviews online.”

He accepts the answer and studies some photos I've already hung on my fridge: Mom and I on my twenty-third birthday, a cake resting on a table in front of us, the surface poked with pink candles. Mom and I at Disney World in matching mouse ears, our shoulders bare, burned. I'm in my cap and gown in one 4 x 6, the cap tilted, too big for my head. Mom stands beside me, her blonde curls whipping around her face, her eyes still red from crying.

Christine saunters through my front door. Christine—Christine with her pointed nose and her perpetually pursed lips, like she's always just eaten something rancid. My stepmother.

I still hate her. I shouldn't. I'm grown, the deed's done, it's over, and it's fine.

But I do. I hate her.

She says, "Nice place, Olivia." Her southern accent chokes the sincerity from her voice. I can't associate the accent with its stereotypical sweetness—when they slip from those lips, words drip with resentment. I've been a burden to her since I was a kid.

"Where's your mom? She wouldn't miss the big move, would she?" she asks.

She doesn't really care. She called my mom a fat bitch once when I was younger, over the phone. She doesn't care.

"Doing errands," I respond. "Doing errands" is code for waiting in the parking lot of the Walgreens down the street for my "all-clear" text.

Dad changes the subject. "Let's unload that couch. It's a long drive home."

The couch is almost brand new, but they're replacing it for a new one, giving this one to me. They want something "bigger" to "accommodate the whole family." The Fixer Upper craze has swept the South and clutched my father and his dearly beloved by the throats.

"This will look great," they say as we lift the sofa from the truck bed. We position it against the wall opposite the cable hookup. The sofa is ugly—brown with tan-and-orange floral cushions—but I can

sit on it. Christine says the sofa makes my apartment look like a home.

Dad says, "It looks good," and he walks to my bedroom, my restroom, continues his inspection.

He emerges and says something about the dusty vent above my toilet. "Pay attention," he says. "Clean," he says. Dad looks like some sort of bird, his chest puffed, his eyes bright against sunburned flesh.

With this piece of advice—clean, Olivia, pay attention, Olivia—he's done his duty as a father. Now he can post about his daddy-of-the-year deed on Facebook. The caption will read, "Moved my oldest daughter into her new place. Happy to lend a sofa. Welcome to the real world, kid! So proud!" The post will garner twenty-three likes at most. Most of his "friends" don't really know me, haven't met me. His most current photo/caption combo—a portrait of his stepdaughter Halle, a junior in high school—has already earned eighty-two likes.

Dad's friends know Halle. Halle's a gem.

By now, he's lived with Halle longer. He knows her favorite color, favorite food. Purple, chicken fajitas. He attends her school functions, volleyball games, the works. When he calls me, he calls to talk about Halle, about Christine.

He asked me once, over the phone, if I knew how much prom dresses were. "Can you believe it, Olivia? Five-hundred bucks for a damn dress," he laughed. "But Halle's excited."

"I'm sure she is, Dad," I said. Then I added, "Mom only paid ninety for mine," but he didn't take the bait. He avoids confrontation like he avoids admitting his adultery.

Mom and I will make fun of his comments, posts, and shallow gestures when she gets back.

When they leave.

After an hour of small talk, Christine coaxes Dad toward the front door. "Halle's texting me, Paul. She's bored at home," she says.

I walk them to Dad's truck; I think I see Mom's Escape in a space on the other side of the complex, three buildings down.

Christine pats my shoulder. Dad pulls me into his solid body and hugs me. I smell his deodorant and his house on his shirt. Musk. All-purpose masculine spice. He says, "I love you, kid."

I tell him to drive safe.

Mom and I eat cheeseburgers and fries on the couch. We wait for the cable guy and listen to talk radio with her phone.

"Your dad was okay?" Mom asks. Her hair is pulled into a knot at the nape of her neck. She's tan; sunspots freckle her soft arms.

I think she's so beautiful.

"He was fine." I lick salt off my fingers; I wipe the residue on my athletic shorts.

Mom and I discuss the essentials of surviving my first few weeks—what I should wear to the first day of my new job, when she'll come for a weekend. Cheeseburger grease coats our chins, and a glob of ketchup plops on the couch. It's a crimson pancake, circular and shiny, and it begins to harden on the brown fabric.

"I'll clean it up," Mom says. "You still have me for a day."

"No. Leave it," I say. "I'll clean it later. I'm saving for a new one."

