

An Eternal Fear by Mohammad Khan

"Ok, mom I'm on my way. It's at the family burial site?....ok." I end the call. It's mid-afternoon on my first Friday off in years. I'm at the dinning room table in my small home.

"80 miles to the funeral", I say to myself while rubbing my temples. "80 miles." I look at my watch. I stand up and gather my things. I hear footsteps in the hallway.

"What's wrong?" My wife stood in the doorway. "I heard you talking to your mom. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah...well-No-no it isn't." I don't know why I am trying to hide from her.

"Maria, it's-it's my father. He died."

"I'm so sorry Will." Her arms wrapped around in a loving embrace and my arms dangled at my side.

"Do you want me to go with you", she asked.

"No. I'll go alone. I'll be back tonight."

We walked together to the door. I opened the door. I walked through the door, but stopped at the edge of the door frame.

Maria places her hand on my shoulder.

"Will", she whispered. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She spoke softly and intimately. The care and kindness in her voice is apparent and warm.

I don't face her. I am frozen.

"Do you want me to go with you", she continues.

I thought of putting my hand on hers and saying no, but instead I walked away without a word. I walked into the car and drove away.

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The casket was being lowered into the grave. Everyone took turns tossing dirt onto of the casket before we buried it. My father was gone.

My mom stood by the grave as people walked up to give their condolences and my brother and uncle stood with her. However, I stayed a ways away. Out of sight of the crowd.

But I can't hide in a sea of white. The group was large as the casket was being lowered into the dirt.

"He had a lot of white friends", I thought to myself.

He died from a fall.

A fireman for 20 years. Of all that he did, of all that he survived.

Even he fell down.

I watched the people waiting to give condolences. A few even noticed me and nodded in my direction. Many of them were friends of my father and extended family. The line extended further than the grass and into the concrete.

'Your father saved my life' some said when they met my father.
'He was the best man I knew.'
'He was kind.'

"I wonder how they'll speak of me when I'm gone", I thought to myself.

My father was a firefighter by day, but hobbyist writer. He worked on anything from political speeches to commercials to writing his own books. Though his literary sense never pervaded society as much as his speeches. He didn't speak much of it.

I reflected on my accomplishments as their kind words for my father continued. My father found purpose in it and told my brothers to find purpose. Whatever that meant. My brothers followed the same path in life: School. Job. Money. Family. Done. Life accomplished. What's next?

I never possessed any accolade worthy of mention. I knew my skills lie somewhere else. Of course I once I landed a paying job, my father told me to stay.

I never got to tell my dad I'm quitting my job. And I haven't yet found the direction I want to pursue, but I know I'm not on my path.

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The line was decreasing. Just a few families left. Some of the people I haven't seen in years.

Out of the corner of my eye a woman walks up to me. You couldn't easily spot her in the sea of white.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Will"

I nodded silently, acknowledging her condolences and my inability to be human. After a quick glance at her, I look toward the ground when I spoke.

"Do I know you?" I still refuse to make eye contact with her. She did not look familiar, yet she knows me.

She continued to speak.

"I knew your father--"

"He saved your life too?", I interjected.

My father seemed to save everyone else. Helped everyone else. But himself. Or his family.

"No. You did."

I looked at her. Her dark brown hair underneath a black hat. I haven't seen her before. Who was she? How does she know me?

"I was biking alone one time. I couldn't have been more than 8 years old and I fell down and hit my head. I was far from home. Far enough that no one would hear me. I don't know how long I was on the ground and- you know the empty country roads back then.-Anyway, I didn't think anyone would find me...then I heard your voice before I blacked out. The squeaky voice of the boy who lived down the road."

I begin to remember. The memories appear in my mind like an old reel of film.

"You found me on the ground and tried to pick me up", she continued.
"But you couldn't -"

"I couldn't carry you on my bike without falling over." I finished her sentence. I remember now. "Instead I threw my bike down, and carried you back home.....we both lost our bikes that day."

I smile after finishing my story. A ghost from the past came to visit.

"Hello Lily", I said joyfully. In that one sentence, I relieved my entire childhood with her.

Lily Andrews. Her family used to be our neighbors. I remember being invited over to their house for a movie night or for a play date with Lily when we were young. But they moved when I was 15, and I never saw them again. Until now.

"It's been a long time", I said smiling.

"Yes it has, Will."

We embraced. Two old friends meeting again for the first time.

"It's so good to see you. You still driving the old crimson jeep", I asked. "I remember the games we played and how we pretended to drive. I still can't believe that car could start."

She laughed at the memories. "I don't know how we've managed to keep it alive for this long."

Lily stood with me watching people say their condolences to my mother.

"So what are you doing these days?" She asked.

"Well.... I-"

"Will!" Exclaimed someone from the ground. It was Lily's mom. I waved to her.

"I'm sorry I have to go", said Lily. "My mom is waiting for me."

I nodded. She began walking away. After a few feet, she turns around.

"It's good seeing you again."

"Likewise. Take care." Lily left with her mother and drove away in their crimson jeep.

As people were leaving, the sun was dropping casting a the sky in a red-orange hue. My mom and I were the last to leave.

My brothers and uncle drove with my mom and I in my own car. I followed behind to make sure they were ok.

"It's 8 pm", I thought. "Still have an hour of sunshine left."

My father stipulated to be buried at the family cemetery 80 miles away from our home. I don't know why we couldn't do it anywhere else.

As we merged onto the highway, I kept my distance from their car in case they decided to stop. The sun was setting behind us. And we were driving into darkness. The only two cars on the highway at the time.

I noticed the hazard lights of a car ahead. My parents car decided to pull off to the side to see who's car it was. A crimson jeep.

It's Lily's. Their headlights remained on along with their interior lights and hazard lights. I pulled over to the side

I walked to their car. My mom was walking ahead of me. Joyce, Lily's mom, was standing by passenger side while Lily was making a call standing in the headlights.

"Joyce!", exclaimed my mom. "What happened?"

"Tire trouble. And we don't have a spare. Lily's callin the agency now."

Lily is walked back from the front of the car. "No cell service here mom."

"How bout we give you a ride, Joyce?", said my mom.

"We can take you where you need to go", spoke my brother.

"Oh, that would be lovely." Joyce saw my mom's car has no room for Lily. "But where would Lily sit? I suppose we can move--"

"She can ride with me". I chimed. I stepped closer so they could see me. "It's just me in my car, so I have the space. She can ride with me....if she wants."

"Oh, that would be wonderful. It'll be just like old times, right Lily?". Joyce spoke joyfully.

Lily spoke joyfully. "Of course! I'll grab my things."

Joyce joined mom and brother and uncle in their car and Lily sat with me.

We drove off in the same manner. Me driving behind my mom.

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"Where are we going?" I asked Lily.

"Near where our old house was. I'm staying with my parents before they drop me off at the airport for my flight."

"Oh, I can take you to the airport."

"No-no-no. I don't to be trouble. I need to pick up a few items from home anyway."

We stayed quiet for a few more minutes. I thought I should make small talk. I haven't seen her in years.

We still had 75 miles to go according to the navigation.

"So, where are you headed?" I asked sheepishly. Lily was staring out the window watching the night grow and the trees pass by.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm headed to New York to give a lecture on archeology in Mohenjo-Daro at Columbia University."

"You're an archeologist?"

She turned from the window and spoke directly to me.

"Yep! I couldn't stay away from digging in the dirt and the history of civilizations. My dad said it wasn't very 'lady-like' but I loved it too much to quit. How about you? What've you been doing?"

"I'm in between jobs. I-mean I have a job now, but I'll be quitting soon."

"Why?"

"It's not for me. I-I". I stammer and stumble through my words. "It just didn't sit right with me. I can't explain it."

"I remember you saying you wanted to be an astronaut", Lily said snidely.

I chuckled at her comment. "We were ten. From what I remember, you wanted to be an Olympic sprinter.....you sure gave the kids in the neighborhood a run for their money."

We stopped talking a for a while. Enjoying the silence and enjoying the reminiscing of our shared past.

"I'm sorry about your father. He was a great man", she said somberly.

"I don't remember you meeting him often."

"I know he was a great man because of how you are. Sons reflect their fathers", she said confidently.

I smile snidely and nod.

"He never failed to remind us of his rhetoric. He was a writer so words came easy to him. It became breathing to him."

"I always thought the way you spoke when we were younger was strange. In a good way."

"I loved the way he spoke. Every word meaningful. Each syllable profound and purposeful."

"Did you have any favorite sayings?"

Without hesitating, I said. "He never spoke anything that couldn't stand as the last thing he'd ever say."

I stopped to see Lily's reaction. She's looking forward as I speak, but she's listening.

"Did you get to say goodbye", she asked.

"No, I was at home when I got the news."

"My father would always tell me goodbyes are for those who love with their eyes, for true love is a connection of the heart. Your father will always be with you."

She spoke comfortingly as a long-time friend would.

"Oh", I replied.

I appreciated her condolence though I don't think she sensed the indignation in my speech. The apathy of my reaction and my stubbornness to not talk.

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60 miles to go. We stayed quiet for a while. The navigation grew quiet as my route stayed on one highway that snaked through the countryside. Forests line the side of the highway, only visible in the peripherals of my headlights. The scenery grew darker as the night progressed.

I enjoyed the silence, until she spoke in a barely audible tone.

"You mentioned you were quitting your job. Why?"

"It didn't sit right with me."

"What does that mean?", she persisted.

"I-I can't explain it. Something about the job didn't feel right."

"It wasn't your passion?"

I conceal my discontent with the word 'passion'. Everyone seemed to have it nowadays. I knew what I was good at and bad at. Passion to me was one of those feeble words for motivational books, DVD, and seminars. It held no weight other than to serve crap.

"No", I replied. "It wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

"How do you know that?"

"I've lived in the shadow of my brothers and family. Everything I've ever done has been compared to them. My father never let me forget who I should aspire to be. 'Why can't you be like your brother?' My grade teachers would say Oh your brother did so well doing this why don't you do as well'.....anyway I woke up miserable each day because everything I did was in their shadow..... but my degree would go down the toilet."

She didn't reply. I continued.

"My parents didn't go to college and worked 60 hours a week to pay for my tuition. I can't throw my degree away. "

"Then how can you walk away from your current job?"

"I didn't feel committed."

"What makes you feel committed?"

I'm getting defensive. I didn't answer and searched for a way out. Out of the corner of my eye and noticed Lily fumbling. Looking closer I saw a ring gleam slightly in the moonlight.

"You're married?"

Pathetic. My feeble attempt to change the topic from myself to her was predictable and banal.

"Was...he passed away last year."

I didn't respond immediately. I let the silence grow before responding.

"I'm sorry."

She cleared her throat before she spoke, but I could still hear her quiet sorrow.

"How about you?"

"No I'm not- I don't think that's for me-Do you ever think about getting remarried?" I deflected quickly. Again.

"My husband's dead." She spoke quietly. Stifling a cry and clearing her throat, she continued. "How about you? Do you have anyone special in your life?"

"Yes. For a few years now."

"What's she like", Lily spoke excitedly.

"She's great." I faded to silence hoping she'd get the hint that I prefer not to speak of this.

"I'm glad you found someone. I know you were shy when we were young. What do you like about her?"

"I-well. She's great." I stammered through hoping she'd again get the hint to move past this subject.

"Are you ok? You sound afraid. You've been acting weird since I mentioned her."

Her tone was soft and kind. Reminded me of how people spoke of my father.

"Not exactly". I spoke quietly. At this point, I wasn't sure if I was spoke or someone took control of me. Everything felt natural and raw.

"We never spoke much of feelings in our family." I spoke carefully here. I didn't know what I'd say next. All the words escape my mouth without my control. I continued with caution on my tongue.

"When I was young, I've always wondered what it's like to be loved, not through obligation, but through choice. To choose to love someone forever. To choose to love someone through the dirt and the muck of life. To choose.....my family's obligated to love me yet I haven't felt loved. I've been alone surrounded by people...until I met her."

I stopped speaking to hear her response but she had none. I didn't want to speak but I continued.

"You know...I was always separate from everyone. In gatherings, I was the one not speaking. In photos, I was the invisible one because I held the camera. The one with the best smile to hide behind. The quietest people have the loudest mind and in my mind roars a tempest so great that I have grown accustomed to its danger and made a home. I know nothing else but this storm.....and then I found a lighthouse to guide me through this storm, and I can't bare losing that light in the storm."

I stopped to process what I just said. Even internally, I can't believe I said this nor did I understand what I said. But it was authentic. It was real. My body felt tense. I had never been vulnerable with anyone before.

"I never knew you felt like this. Have you told her this?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean it-"

"It doesn't matter because I'm not doing anything about it."

"Will! You're not going to tell her!?" Lily was getting audibly and visibly annoyed. "Why the hell not?! How long have you been married?"

"A few years."

"Oh Christ. You really went downhill without me."

"What?" I laugh at her remark. The mood is beginning to lighten up a bit, so I loosen up. "You reappear after 15 years. Why are you talking to me like this?"

"You never had a big sister and you need one."

"You were hardly a big sister when we were kids. You weren't perfect either." I shot back.

"That's not the point. You're afraid of opening up and letting her know."

She was right. I knew she was right. Lily continued.

"When did you get so wise", I said to myself.

"You can't keep people out. You need to be open to it."

"I just don't think I deserve it."

She was clearly taken aback by it. Usually, she has a quick retort when I say stuff like this. I must've surprised her.

"Don't deserve what? Love? To be happy?", she asked befuddled by the very idea of a statement such as mine.

"Every time I think of being opening up to her. I remember what I've done. Everything I've said. My own demons and skeletons. I can't have her bear the weight of my problems."

"Well that's a great idea", she said sarcastically. "That way you can go through life without actually living."

Lily's words cut deep. Her words stayed in my head like shards of glass. I didn't respond and she didn't continue. We both stayed quiet to cool down.

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We escape the forest and pass into a clearing. Vast swaths of land on all sides of the car now. The moon illuminated the sky beautifully. I glance at the navigation: 40 miles to go.

I breathed calmly. Hoping my silence can ride the next 40 miles. But Lily wasn't done with me yet.

"What happened between you and your father, Will?"

"Nothing."

"Will", Lily spoke sternly. "There's something that happened between you and your father, and it's affecting your personal life. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. He was a great person."

"Will, if you can't be truthful with me, at least be to yourself. You can't even call him your father", Lily retorted. "What happened?"

"It wasn't just my father. It was everyone!" My outcry frightened Lily for a moment. I surprised myself, but I still continued.

"It wasn't just my father. My whole family is an emotionally vacuum. A vacuum. Void of everything but the work."

"I remember reading stories about your family in the papers", she spoke contemplatively. "I was amazed by what your family accomplished. Your mothers philanthropy. Your brother's altruism. Your father's leadership."

"Well, that's what they made us for", I spoke candidly.

The words came out of my mouth as if they were poison. The very mention of accolades made my stomach churn. Disgust. That was all I could think of when I speak of what my family has done. The disgust you feel when you see the morally appalling. The disgust you feel when you've been cheated so foully that it will stink for years to come and will remain past the grave.

"They raised us to be machines. We don't have time for how you're feeling. You can work your way out of feelings."

I fell cheated. Duped. Betrayed. My anger erupted in my speech.

"They took my youth from me. STOLE that from me! So EXCUSE me if I am a bit defensive and quiet, but I never had a chance to be otherwise!"

We didn't speak. In my rage at my family, I attacked my friend. The

cycle of violence continues.

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I glance at the navigation. 20 miles to go.

The night became darker. I think. It all looked the same. The sky already void of light couldn't grow any darker. I could see lights from a small town ahead. These towns were quaint, quiet, and quixotic. The route becomes downhill. The car coasts down the hill.

"I'm sorry", I said. "I didn't mean to-."

"I understand", she replied without looking at me. She glared into the void as she spoke. "You never had a chance to grow. To be comfortable with yourself. You're afraid of letting others experience anything similar. You don't want them to carry the burden of a deprived childhood."

As with any moment of human connection, I don't respond. Thankfully, Lily continues.

"I'm sure it was in good faith. They weren't trying to hurt you."

"No", I said. "They weren't. I remember that we were held to a perfect standard. Any flaw was an excuse for us to be lower. My father came from rags and my mother too. They held us to a standard they set for themselves."

"They were trying to protect you."

I can hear her tone begging me to see from a different perspective but I roared on.

I wasn't listening or talking to Lily anymore. I'm talking to myself.

"A standard so high, so out of reach that we gave up our childhood just to clear it. And for what? To be hollow shells of a people that can't think past a few tears?"

"You shouldn't be afraid anymore. They don't have control over you." She finally got to me.

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10 miles to go. The navigation starts speaking. 'Turn onto market street. Then turn right.' I am almost home.

"You're right. It doesn't matter anymore", I spoke softly. "A person isn't defined by the choices they have made but by the choices they will."

"Maybe she can help you through this", Lily spoke.

"Plato once spoke of two people in love as a being split into that roam the earth in search for each other."

"And you think she's the one?"

"I don't know."

I pull up to the house.

"Thank you Lily. For everything."

Lily grabs her bag. "Anytime", she takes out a small notepad, writes something down, and hands it to me. "If you need someone to talk to, let me know." She closes the door behind her and turns around. I roll down the passenger window.

"good bye Will" , she waves.

"I thought good byes are for those who love with their eyes." I reply.

She only smiled. A smile that took me back to our childhood.

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I drove back home. Later than I expected. The house seemed quiet. Quieter than the street. Even the bugs were silent. No fireflies illuminating the grass.

I open the door and see her still awake. Sitting at the dinner table. Maria, in all her heavenly glory still waiting for me. I don't deserve her.

"Will", said Maria as she walked up to meet and embrace me. "How are you doing?"

I grab her hand and guide her to the dinner table.

We both sit.

"Do you want to talk about?" She asks.

"Yes."