Call Kevin

By: Jennifer Leth

*This was a mistake*.

Kevin thoughtfully chewed on the cap of his pen, a habit his father had tried to break him of when he was young. But here he was– gnawing. It was something he did when he was frustrated, and this conversation was certainly frustrating him now. He wanted nothing more than to slam the phone down. *If this bitch doesn’t shut up, I just might.*

His father also tried to teach him to be polite, once upon a time. But, like all of his attempts to be a good dad in the absence of his late wife, Bud had fallen short.

“It sounds lovely,” a young woman’s voice hummed through the phone, a young and wealthy woman, no doubt. “I’ve been looking for one in this design for years. How soon can you have it delivered?”

Kevin didn’t answer. *Will I even let you buy it in the first place? That’s what you should be asking.*

“I’m not sure.” Kevin leaned back in the desk chair. It creaked, letting him know that this was a spot in which Bud had spent much of his time. He let out a sigh and ran his hand through his hair. “To be honest, ma’am, I’m not even sure that I’m going to sell it anymore. I’ll give you a call back once I’ve decided, and you can buy it then if you’re still interested.”

The woman scoffed. “I *have* mentioned how long I’ve been searching for a jacket from *this* Italian manufacturer, haven’t I? I’m willing to pay you handsomely. The ad said ‘Call Kevin’. And you’re Kevin, right?”

*Call Kevin.*

“Yes, actually, I am, and that doesn’t change a thing. If I’m not ready to sell, I’m not ready to sell. Keep digging through newspaper ads until you find another one.” He hung up and tossed the pen across the room.

He couldn’t believe what he had almost just done. One of Bud’s prized possessions, his wife’s Italian leather jacket, had almost gone for a song. Kevin wasn’t selling it for the money, that’s for sure. He had taken out an ad just for this one article of clothing. Not for the car, the TV, nothing else that Bud had left behind. At the time, he did it out of spite.

*Call Kevin.* Those two words haunted him, but they also brought him an odd sense of peace. Bud had been a prolific alcoholic for most of Kevin’s adult life. They were close when he was young, as close as a good father and son should be. But his wife’s death sent him where most grieving men go: straight to the bottle.

Kevin looked around the apartment. Bud’s living room was cramped. A worn leather couch sat behind a wooden crate that functioned as a coffee table. The desk in front of him was scattered with bottles and letters. He read through them earlier that week, the same day he found the jacket and a few days before he read through the other object on the desk: Bud’s ratty notebook.

\* \* \*

Kevin was seventeen when he began to hate his father. The year was 1973, and he was about to graduate high school. His mother died when he was eight – a car crash on a road trip – and the tenth anniversary of the tragedy was coming up. He was young when it happened, but not too young to remember how things were before her death.

They lived in Kearney, Nebraska. His mother was a sweet lady, the kind even Bud would fall in love with. Bud had been a bit of a Casanova before he met her, but they married happily in 1954. He loved her so much that he did the thing he swore he would never do: he agreed to have children. Kevin was born in 1956 and the small family spent eight love-filled years together.

That was almost a decade ago and Kevin had accepted that she was gone. Now he was focusing on finishing school and getting the hell out of Kearney. Bud had gone completely sour after her death, and he took out most of his frustration on his only son. At first Kevin thought he deserved the mistreatment; not knowing any better, he took his father’s accusations to heart. When Bud slurred insults at him from behind a beer bottle, he believed every word. Now that he was older and understood her death was an accident, he lost faith in his father and they began to grow apart.

“You little shit,” Bud would mumble as Kevin walked in the door every night after his shift at the car wash. He reeked of cheap liquor. “Where’ve you been?”

The answer was always the same.

“The car wash, Bud.”

“I’m your father, goddammit. I don’t want to hear my first name come out of your mouth until you’re my age, you got it?”

Kevin would simply answer, “Yes, sir,” then be on his way to the kitchen to make himself something to eat. For the most part they wouldn’t deviate from this routine unless Bud was feeling especially moody that night, so he pestered Kevin, inflicting guilt, until Bud decided to stumble off to bed. He wasn’t violent, and he never physically abused his son.

Tonight was different. Kevin had never gotten into smoking pot, although most of the kids at his second-rate high school were smoking it like chimneys. He did pick up smoking cigarettes though, and intended to keep it a secret. Bud always openly expressed his disgust towards smoking, which Kevin thought highly hypocritical.

“That smoke’ll ruin you, kid,” Bud would proclaim as he took a swig of whatever was nearby. To avoid an argument, Kevin usually smoked on his walk home from the car wash, then relied on the open air to remove the smell from his clothes. Tonight it decided to rain, so his buddy offered him a ride home. They smoked together during the trip. Kevin thanked him, then quickly ran inside, forgetting to air out his clothing before he entered.

“You li’l shet. Where’ve youbin?” Kevin could tell by the extent of his slurring that Bud was especially inebriated that night.

He didn’t bother to answer, figuring that the old drunk wasn’t conscious enough to comprehend a genuine response. As he turned his back and headed towards his room, he immediately recognized his mistake.

“I said, where’ve youbin!” Bud stood up slowly and set down his beer.

Kevin turned around to face him.

“The car wash, Bud. Remember? I work there, just calm –”

“Who do you think you are? I ain’t Bud to you – I’m your dad!” At this point Bud was nose to nose with his son, his hot alcoholic breath filling Kevin’s nostrils, his hairy finger jabbing him in the chest with authority.

Kevin nodded sheepishly, then tried to back away, but it was too late. Bud was close enough to smell the smoke on his clothes, and took the opportunity to grab him by the back of the neck.

“You bin smokin’, haven’t you?” The smoldering anger in Bud’s voice could have singed Kevin’s eyebrows. “Handem’ over.”

He scrambled nervously for the pack in his coat pocket. As he placed it in Bud’s open hand, his trepidation quickly turned to confusion. To his surprise, Bud calmly asked for a lighter, then shoved a cigarette in his mouth and proceeded to smoke it. Kevin thought he was in the clear for a split second as the drunk slowly exhaled the smoke.

Then Bud wrapped his meaty fingers around Kevin’s lanky forearm with an iron grip and firmly pressed the burning end of the cigarette to the back of the boy’s hand. Kevin screamed with pain as he struggled to get away, but it was no use. After his skin was thoroughly burnt, Bud released his grip and stumbled back to his chair. “That’ll teach you, you stupid kid.” He passed out at the end of his sentence.

\* \* \*

When Kevin received the call from the police informing him that his father was dead, he absent-mindedly rubbed the scar on the back of his hand. He resorted to this habit if there wasn’t a pen around to chew on, but he wasn’t aware of it.

The last time Kevin had spoken to Bud was during his early twenties; he had just graduated college after completely relying on scholarships, loans, and his own money to foot the bills. He was about to move to Chicago, miles away from the small town he grew up in, and he wanted to make one last attempt to rekindle his relationship with his father before he left. The intervention failed miserably and they had never spoken since.

*Not only did the bastard have to drink himself to death,* thought Kevin, *but he had to leave a mess behind for me to clean up.* Being Bud’s only living relative, it was up to him to sort through his possessions. He had spent years away from Kearney, and now here he was, standing in the doorway of his father’s dingy apartment. Bud sold his house shortly after Kevin went to college; an apartment was more practical for a barely functioning alcoholic with a dead-end job.

The light filtered into the living room through the blinds, casting lines of light on the floor like the bars of a jail cell. The place smelled of liquor and mothballs. Dust swirled as Kevin began to sort through Bud’s things. Letters on the desk, most of them bills; beer bottles scattered haphazardly wherever they landed, usually the floor. Scattered laundry in the bedroom, with no clear distinction between what was dirty or clean.

Then he found his mother’s Italian jacket. This pristine monument to his wife, untouched yet perfectly free of dust, was the only thing hanging in Bud’s closet. A smile crept its way onto Kevin’s face. Bud might be dead, but he could still spite him in some small way. He took out the ad in the newspaper the very next day, and intended to sell it as cheaply as possible. *Call Kevin.*

A few days later, as he was taking a closer look at some of the objects on Bud’s desk, a small notebook caught his attention. It seemed to be something Bud used often; it was bound in fake leather, worn and dog-eared, and it had the address of the apartment written on the front label. Kevin had never known his father to be organized enough to find something like a notebook necessary, and the address on the front suggested it was something worth finding if it were lost. Intrigued by this new aspect of his father, Kevin began to thumb through the yellowed pages.

At first it seemed like the doodling’s of a drunken man writing himself reminders, but as he read on he realized it was much more than that. There were several mentions of AA meetings, and budgets and phone numbers. And there was one particular phrase that he never expected to see: Call Kevin. Over and over, in between dates, grocery lists, and contact information, Bud had written himself a reminder to call his son. “AA meeting Dec. 17th. Call Kevin. Talk to Ryan Hampton about counseling. Call Kevin.” On every page, at least once, Bud wrote himself a reminder.

Kevin was in shock. Bud wasn’t just writing himself reminders; he was calling out for help. Every day for what looked like several years, Bud told himself to call his son.

\* \* \*

*Call Kevin.* The voice of the rich woman still rang in his ears. It may have not been Bud’s voice, but it was enough to convince Kevin that selling the jacket was wrong.