

The Last White Gorilla

By: Taylor Whiteman

“Christina, do you think you could get me another cup of ice?”

I’m slightly startled by this new frail voice. It was a voice once so boisterous it filled room. I turn to my father, wiped his lips and softly stepped out of the room to refill his cup. I never let him see any fear in my eyes. I never let him see how weak am I feel when I am alone walking down the long hallway to the kitchen. As I walk down this hallway of a home that was not mine to have a childhood in, I pause to think of all the ghosts of good times hidden between the slats and plaster. Even the memories that once felt like sandpaper against my skin now bring tears to my eyes. Every memory I once tried to push away, I hold onto for dear life.

And with each step down the hall my eyes play tricks on me. The mirrored walls act like movie screens, playing back each time I had walked these halls before, blurring the lines between the life I am living and the one I once lived. Seeing faces that aren’t there, the sounds of music and laughter that once filled this dead space. Even in this delusion, calm washes over me. I can feel joy in all the memories we shared. All of the memories, except one.

Why is it that the memories that hurt the most, are the ones seen most clearly? I can still feel the July sun on my skin and the breeze flowing through my hair. My thighs sticking to the navy-blue leather seat of your 1984 Mercedes, and the tears that ran down your face. It was the only time I ever saw you cry. It was not exactly how I had imagined it. I never thought that you could look so weak. But even in your weakness you were able to find laughter; remarking at how well hot dog buns could soak up tears. But behind that feigned laughter you created to kill the

tension, you told me your truth. You told me that it was your turn. That you wanted to die. That you would seek out treatment to prolong whatever short amount of time you had left, but that you knew there wasn't much time at all. Your words, unwavering and spoken as if they were made of stone, felt confident. But your words could not hide what hid behind your tears. Tears screaming out to the heavens, "I'm not ready".

And while you are afraid to face your death, I am even more afraid to lose you. It was in that moment that I felt as if I finally found my purpose. I knew it was my job to tend to you, to protect you the way you once protected me. To dress a man who once dressed me, to feed a man who once fed me, to bathe a man who once bathed me, and to love this man the way he loves me.

Which is why I am here, when no one else is. But I am not upset, I've learned that I cannot be upset because no one can love the way I can. My children and husband love in their own way, as do my brother and sister, and my father and mother in their own way. I love each unconditionally. Maybe it's that they thought I could do this all on my own, or maybe it's that they knew it is too hard for them to even try. Whatever it may be, sitting by your bed and feeding you ice chips is my memory, and mine alone. It does not get to be tainted by their presence or overshadowed by their pain. It is mine.

As I brush my hand through your few remaining strands of hair. Hair once a thick brown forest, I can only imagine what is going on inside your head. Are you dreaming of better times, of laughter with old friends and summers you could never recreate? Or are you dreaming of the mistakes you made and the bridges you've burned, of what comes next for a man who made half the mistakes you did, of whether you are going to heaven or hell?

As the sound of your breathing fills the room, it feels as if the room is frozen in time. I have no time left yet thinking I feel as if I have all the time in the world. I try to find peace in this

moment. Not knowing this is the last time I will ever have you all to myself. In this silence only one voice cries out, calm and cool, with words that have a recognizable breathy quality to them. The security system announces, "Front Door Open".

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"How's he doing, Christina?", I recited to my sister, as if I didn't already know or was genuinely interested in her interpretation.

My father is dying. I know this, she knows this, everyone knows this. No one is surprised a man of 84 years is dying. It's how life works, after some amount of time the grim reaper comes for you and there is nothing you can do but lie there and wait. It's what's only fair.

But what happens after, that isn't always fair. You get to leave this world and go onto whatever comes next, but we get left behind to clean up whatever messes you were hiding under the rug. And after working with you, in the same office for 25 years, I don't know what's hiding under there. I only know that it is a mountain of mess that may never be cleaned. I don't know how it all got this way, but, in the end, you started to act like you did back at the start, hiding things from people so they couldn't understand the kind of man you are.

I guess that the people who admire you don't know how cruel you can really be. Or is it that people admire you because they are so much worse than you? But do they know the real you? Do they know what you did to your wife or what you did to your children? Do they know what you did to me?

Do any of them care? I know that I don't. My father is lying before me on what I presume

to be his death bed, and I don't care. I can't care about someone who has hurt me so deeply, who has torn me down so many times just to laugh at me while I try to put the pieces back together. You have been, are, and always will be a cruel and vindictive man. A man who enjoys watching his family squirm. A man who needs to feel control and power over others. You have been, are, and always will be a cruel and vindictive man; and I have never, will not, and never will love you.

I have spent almost every day of my life with you. Working at a desk in an office right in front of yours, never too far from your doubting eye. I still remember the day you told me you were sick. The office felt dry and hot, almost like the furnaces melting metal beneath our feet. You told me you wanted to go down to the factory floor and make an announcement. With the red-hot glow of molten aluminum illuminating the room, I thought that this was the time. I thought you were finally passing along the torch to your one and only son. All the men were gathered around you, with soot on their clothes and hands and sweat dripping from their foreheads, when you told us the future for your company. The future for our company. Except that future was not what I was promised. You told us how in one year, your 40 yearlong legacy would be torn the ground and cheap condos put in its place. All this because he didn't want to fight anymore; how weak.

"How much longer do you think he has?" I calmly asked Christina

But she just kept still, looking longingly into my father's eyes, with a love I know he never showed her. How she could forget what he did to us as children, I don't understand. She always forgives everyone who hurts her. It's her biggest fault.

“The nurses said not much longer. But I know he’s waiting for Jessica to get here.”, Christina’s voice fragiley answered back.

The thought alone of my sister, Jessica, has me squirming in my seat. She was the crux of everything I believe is wrong in our family. Like my sister Christina, she understands the importance of family; how family is always there for you, how family will always love you, and how family means everything. But she somehow fulfilled a role in our family I always assumed was mine. She pretended as if she was the son my father never had. She embodied all of his passions: his love of horses, his indulgent gambling, his business savvy. She took from me the life I always thought I would have. And so I took something from her. I took away her sister.

I learned how to turn my Christina against her, and left Jessica my father as her only source of familial love and support. And my mind now is a murky pool of hatred, for both my father and sister, I turned to Christina and said,

“Who knows if she’ll make it. She never has the time for us.”

And with that we sat there, in silence. The only sounds filling the room were shaky breathing and a soft whimpering. With tears running down my sister’s face and each exhale from my father’s chest, tension flooded the room. With minutes feeling like hours, our silence passed as if watching paint dry on a hot summer day. And with the sound of an engine, followed by the slam of a car door the last of the family had arrived.

If the old man wanted to do me one last favor, he would die now before Jessica had a chance to walk through the door.

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It was moot trying to explain to my brother and sister how bad the traffic was getting here. As I tell both of them this, Christina just sits there, with crossed arms giving me a slight glance to acknowledge my presence. As if any more movement would break the tension we had built over the last few years. Mark is just standing in the corner, as if I am invisible. Maybe he just doesn't recognize me, we haven't seen each other in nearly a decade. And as I walk over to daddy's bedside, lightly kissing his sleeping forehead, I thought how it wasn't always like this. How at one point in our lives, we might not only have called each other siblings, but friends.

I can't remember the last time my whole family was all under the same roof. The thought of it alone seems like some faded photograph, all sun bleached and sepia-stained. We all care about our father in some way, why else would we be here? And I know that I care for my brother and sister, even if they don't care about me. I think of them often. Yet time has replaced their memories that once brought me joy into memories that blind me with anger. I wish I could forget their memory the way they have forgotten me.

Does Christina not remember how when everyone else abandoned her, I stood by her side? When our parents wouldn't dare speak to her for months because she wouldn't marry an Italian man, I stood by her. When she decided that she was going to get a divorce and our family condemned her sin, I stood by her. And on the night before her second wedding when our brother called her to say that he would never speak to her again if she went through with it, I stood by her. But as time passed, and wounds healed, our family would always return to her. And each time as they walked back into her perfect little picture frame, I was always out-of-frame,

out-of-focus, and out of her life.

Does Mark not remember how I used to protect him from all the hurt in the world? How when we were kids, I would take the blame for his mistakes because he was too fragile to handle the consequences? How I introduced him to his wife, and was the catalyst for the creation of his own fresh apple pie and white-picket fence? Does he not remember that we are family, and that if our parents taught us anything it was that family means everything?

But my love for them doesn't stem from a hidden complex of masochism. It doesn't stem from a desire to always be mad. It stems from the man lying before us. With each rise and fall of his chest, he reminds me that our bond is one only siblings can have. With each rise and fall of his chest, he reminds me that family means everything.

We all endured life with our father; a man so proud and powerful on the inside, but who found ways to let his inner faults rest on our shoulders. A man who hid in his office most nights just to avoid his problems at home, who forced his emotional struggles onto his middle-school aged children, and who at times could become a loving giant in our lives only to tear down everything we held dear.

Bound by fate and destined to be better than who made us. That is what keeps drawing us back together. It is the force that has led us back together in this room. Back together to right wrongs that weren't made by us. To build upon mistakes of those made before us and to make mistakes that those after us will correct. Being together in this room is not easy for any of us, but at least we all understand that what is not easy, is most necessary.

"What is not easy, is most necessary", I still can remember my father saying that to me right before he told me how sick he really was. The August sun beat down on the two of us as we sat in the bleachers in the grandstand. I told dad that we could have gotten a covered box, but he

would always tell me he loved to watch the horse races ‘down with the people’. The two of us, all dressed up and yelling at the brown blurs that rushed past us were having quite the afternoon. With the summer heat making both of us sweat, dad rolled up his sleeves and that’s when I first saw it. I remember gasping at the two brown lumps on his left arm, and before I could ask him about them he just started nodding his head. He knew what I was thinking. He told how he had known for a few months now and that I was the last he told. I don’t really remember how I felt when he told me, all I could do is ask him which horse he wanted me to bet on for the next race.

“How’re the boys holding up, Jessica?” Christina asked.

“They’re doing good!” I said trying to lighten her mood, “They’ve been a little shaken up with all that’s happened. I still don’t think they realize that this might be his end.”.

She smiled. It’s the first time I’ve seen her smile in months. Knowing that at least someone in her family understood a burden she felt that she was carrying alone. Maybe now she knows that this is a burden that I have been carrying just as long as she has.

“They’re fine Christina, don’t worry about them”, Mark replied negating whatever solace he saw behind my sister’s eyes.

We all just sat there, looking worryingly into our father’s eyes. Afraid of the aggression and severity of the cancerous mounds that covered his skin and the infection that flowed through his bloodstream. We all looked at each other, not saying anything but feeling everything. Knowing that this was the end.

“He’s awake!” Christina said, excited. “Dad, how are you feeling?”

But what we heard in response was indecipherable. Just faint mumbles and gurgling sounds. Groans and gasps that carried on for minutes. Completely incomprehensible. Sounds that to us just sounded like nothing, but said, “This is the end.”

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Oh, my children, I have so much to say. Have you ever been in pain for so long that it seems to become the new normal? Or is it that you’ve been in pain for so long that it hurts to feel good? I wish I could take away all of your pain. I wish I could stay to help you through what’s next.

I’ve had quite a lot of time to think lately. You get that when you shit in a pan all day and get sponge baths from a Haitian woman named Martha. But I think I’ve figured it all out, except for one thing; should I tell you?

My whole life I always thought I was doing the right thing, but only now do I realize that most of the time all I did was what was right for me. I had a dark past, I acknowledge that and I am not ashamed of it. We all do what we have to, to provide for our families and to make our mark on the world. We all live with those sins, we carry our burdens with us no matter what. But what I am now realizing is that what I thought was right near the end, might actually have been my biggest mistake.

Due to situations, I was presented with as a younger man, I did good for myself. But these

situations allowed me to become a legitimate member of society, to be a man who was known for the quality of his work and that did very well for himself.

I tried to provide everything I thought you needed. Your mother made sure you had the finest clothes, the most intricate toys, she even got you a television set when they first came out. I sent you all to the most elite private school in the state, fully paid for all of your college educations and allowed you to study whatever you wanted. I wanted to be the champion of your dreams, let you all reach for the moon and get lost amongst the stars. At least that's what I tried to do, and I think I did a pretty damned good job.

Yes, I'll be the first to admit it, you aren't Wall St. Executives, or Titans of Industry but what you are is something I don't think I ever was. My children are happy. You all have loving spouses and beautiful children. Each of you in your own way has made me proud. You made me happy.

As your children, my grandchildren, came into my life, my focus moved from making and saving money to spending it. I needed to give my grandchildren everything I could, because I knew one day I wouldn't be able to. And my whole life I wondered if I ever gave you all enough. I took you all around the world, fulfilling my greatest dreams with my whole family by my side. Leaving my business by the wayside, deteriorating into a state of disarray that I became too sick to fix. I gave you a sense of security, knowing the entire time that it could never be as true as I led it onto be. And I'll be the first to admit, it might not have been the right thing to do, but I am human. I am flawed. But for my entire life, my wallet was strong enough to hide my problems from you, and my heart too weak to stop myself. My heart is too weak to tell the truth.

But now with a small motor beneath my skin pumping my blood through my body, my heart has nothing else to do but what it could never before. It's going to tell the truth. I am going

to prepare you all for what's next, and it's going to help you move on.

So my children hopefully you'll all shut up so you can hear me speak, because this is the last lesson I'll ever give.

Jessica, you always treated me like a friend. You always tried to be there as much as you could, but you were never there enough. You found a life for yourself and you chased it, and for that I am not mad. But what pains me to this day, is how blind you were in your pursuit. You always found yourself needing to come back but never staying long enough to be satisfied. You know what you are doing is not the best path, and soon I will not be here to help you anymore. I learned how to be happy with our only time together being when you crashed and came to me asking for assistance. But soon I will have to let you walk on your own. You need to be careful now, avoid the land mines set before your path and tread lightly. You need to learn how to become truly independent and take fewer risks. I hope you learn that so one day you can be a mother to your children the way I was a father to you.

Mark, you always stood by my side. You are my only son, and my partner in business. I tried to teach you everything I knew, but you were too stubborn to listen. You always thought I had it out for you, that I hated you. Did you ever stop to see the life I gave you? I gave you education, I gave you opportunity, I gave you employment. Do you really think that I would have done that to someone who I didn't care about? You need to understand that I care about you. That I want you to succeed. But all of that doesn't mean that I will just hand it over to you on a silver platter. You need to work for your future just as I did and if you cannot do that, well than I as your father have failed you.

Lastly, Christina. You were always there to listen. And yet with all I've told you this will be the hardest thing for you to hear. My first born darling baby girl, you are weak. You let the

world walk all over you, as if the soles of their shoes might one day tell you they love you. You search for good in the belly of a wolf and see evil in a rose. Your life has been difficult because you make it so and your life will be difficult after I leave because we made you this way. As you've probably figured out through your own failing marriage, your mother and I never loved each other, and through that never loved you. Or at least never loved you the way you needed us to. It's not that we didn't want to, but that we raised you in a home devoid of emotion. A childhood that was cold and calculated was all there was to heat your soul. We filled you with material possessions because we had no other way to show you how proud we were of you, and you now reject them because they make you think of those days. I know I could have been a stronger man when you were younger, but the truth is that I didn't want to be. I worked hard to make it up for you, but once a heart is shattered the pieces never go back together quite the same. I am sorry I made you this way, but you need to accept that this will never change. And you need to know that I will always have this regret in me.

Oh Christina, don't cry. It's all going to be ok. Tell me sweetie, what's the matter?

"Dad", she said choking back tears, "you can go now"

And while her words told me that it was time, her tears were running taking back every utterance that left her mouth. The tears streaming down her face, begging me to say. Begging me for one more day, one more hour, one more minute. And while I acknowledged their silent pleas, I looked her in those big brown eyes I made, and with all the energy I had left I felt it escape my body.

I'm sorry Christina. I'm ready...