

Marooned

Van's father was a big man, bigger than Van would ever be. Dennis Ryan stood with a wide back, broad, thick shoulders, and forearms as wide as small trees. He towered over men six feet tall. He had worked as a merchant marine in his youth, and hard work at sea had made his arms and body as coiled and taut as the rope he handled all day. A favorite trick of his was lighting kitchen matches on the rough, rock-hard calluses on his hands. They were like a pair of cheese graters, and when Van was a boy, his father handled him like he was made of glass to avoid damaging him.

For all his bulk and brawn, Dennis Ryan was a quiet man. A soft man. Not "soft" in the sense of being weak; he had shown Van the extensive map of scars that covered him from head to toe, detailing for Van the assorted acts of violence at sea which precipitated each one. He was soft, rather, in a way that would make him stop and save a turtle trying to cross a busy road. Or care for a bird that had fallen out of its nest. He was *soft* in the sense that he was *kind*. He cared about things. He cared about animals and insects and (sometimes) people.

During Van's childhood his father made his living as a carpenter, a builder. The story set between ship and hammer, about his leaving the sea for dry land, was his father's favorite, and Van had heard it countless times. As Dennis Ryan told the story, he woke up one morning, young and stupid and missing one eye, in a hospital somewhere in Georgia. There had been a car accident that may or may not have been his fault, and definitely involved alcohol. The first thing he saw when he opened his eye was Van's mother, trying to take his blood pressure.

"Good morning, Captain Morgan," she said to him with a smile.

"Where am I?" He asked her.

"You're in heaven, sweetie. Can't you tell?" She let the air out of the cuff with a loud hiss and wrote something on his chart.

"So that makes you an angel, then?" He smiled at her through swollen lips.

“If you want. Or could be I’m a demon.” She shrugged.

“Guess I’m going to have to keep my eye on you then.” He pointed to his uncovered, surviving eye, and according to Dennis, she giggled slyly.

And that was all it took. Dennis traded in his sea legs for a pair of work boots, and thus began the brightest-lit time of his life. Van’s mother breathed beauty into Dennis Ryan’s salt-washed world. Life before her had been bad food, back-breaking labor, and close living quarters with ill-tempered men. Van’s mother was a ray of filtered sunlight, warming his skin after a long, long storm. They set up house in a suburb of Atlanta and had a son. Dennis read him pirate stories and adventures of brave captains battling the wild sea. Van’s mother sang him old ‘70’s folk songs. She collected yard gnomes and planted them around the edges of their world.

Van’s earliest memories of his mother were the warm, cuddle-scented skin dreams all children deserve. Smiles and the sweet melodies of a happy mother’s voice shined down from her face, and Van’s young toddler world was contented and fascinating. As he began to walk, though, he saw her from a place outside of her arms, saw her whole, not just a face above his. He saw tears. He saw her sitting in her chair, staring out the window, ignoring him as he banged his empty sippy cup against her knees, pleading for more milk. Van saw his huge father kneeling on the floor next to her as she sat in her chair, his own face wet with tears, his voice quiet and urgent. While she stared out the window. Somedays still she held Van, too tightly, and whispered over and over that she loved him, that she was sorry, and she loved him. Her eyes inches from him, wet and alive, ringed with fire. His small hand touching her face. Those memories are fewer, and older. There are sharper images of her in her chair, looking out the window, her eyes as cold and unfeeling as raindrops.

One night, when he was five years old, Van’s mother walked out the door after a quiet disagreement with Dennis, and Van and his father never saw her again. She never came back for her things, never withdrew money from their bank account, never wrote them a letter. The police couldn’t find her. Dennis hired a private investigator to search for her, but she was truly gone. She had disappeared completely.

It destroyed Van’s father. For Dennis, losing his life with Van’s mother was like finding himself cast off, marooned in a suburban archipelago, his

small crew looking to him every day for answers. The disappearance was immeasurably worse than if she had just been killed. At least then there would have been a body to mourn, a burial site to visit. A disease or an accident to blame, somewhere to direct all the anger and anguish instead of turning it all inside. Sadness became his world, became *their* world.

Several years after his wife's disappearance, Dennis built a workshop behind the house and spent his evenings there shaping things out of wood. The first thing he produced was a fairy tale house, about gnome-sized, with a crooked window in the front and a high, peaked roof which sagged drowsily to one side. The siding and the roof were covered in small, irregular wooden shingles and Dennis had incorporated small twigs to serve as molding and trim. A rounded front door opened and closed on tiny hinges, and the entire thing was painted in five different, happy spring colors. Young Van loved the gnome house. His father left it on the back deck and Van brought a different toy to stay in it every night, imagining his dolls and action figures enjoying legendary visits in a multi-colored, magical castle.

A month or so later, there was another gnome house on the deck when Van got home from school. This one was slightly larger, and the roof drooped slightly lower. It had a yellow star on a twig sticking cock-eyed from the roof's peak. That night there was a big party for Van's toys to celebrate the new construction. After that, a new house appeared every few weeks. Soon they lined the perimeter of the deck and started creeping out into the back yard.

"Dad, you should sell some of these, you know?" Van said when he was older. "Let's rent a table at the flea market and I bet you could make a bunch of money."

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"They're shit," he replied.

"Well, let's give some of them away then."

"No, I told you. They're shit."

Van loved them. As more of the gnome houses appeared, the nightly gatherings of figures and dolls and stuffed animals grew in size and attendance. Van found some old strands of Christmas lights in the basement and asked his father to run them around the deck and the yard.

To the distant sound of tinny music coming from his father's workshop, characters danced and laughed and chatted the night away.

As Van grew older, so did his father. The houses generated at a much slower rate and eventually stopped altogether. They filled the yard, high and low. Van had taken to hanging some of them from low branches in the few trees in the back, and they swayed above older, earth-bound models circling the trees' trunks. The bright colors had long ago faded to an almost uniform light brownish/grey, and what shingles were still attached were warped and split. Not long before his father was killed, Van asked him during one of their few conversations, "Dad, the houses. The gnome houses, you know?"

"What about them?"

"You spent so much time on them, put so much work in. But I never saw you take any pleasure in it."

"Why would I? They're shit."

"They're not, though. They're amazing."

His father put his beer down and looked Van straight in the eye, something he rarely did. "Well, they didn't bring her back, did they?" And he stood up and went to bed. Two months later he was killed by a hit and run driver. He had stopped by the side of the highway to help a motorist change a flat tire. As he was working on a stubborn lug nut a car swerved onto the shoulder and that was the end of Dennis Ryan.

That was the end of Van's father, but it wasn't the last of him. It wasn't the last of the witches brew of emotion Van felt whenever thoughts of his father lumbered through his mind. The love and hate boys often feel for *that* man in their lives. That first, huge man. It took half a lifetime for Van to tease out the roots of the anger he felt for his father. He realized he had grown up blaming Dennis for his mother's disappearance. *He killed her!* Young Van devised dozens of horrible scenarios detailing how his father had murdered his wife and disposed of her body. That charge was weak, though, even in the court of a young child's mind. There was far too much eye-witness evidence of Dennis' devotion to his wife, his unequivocal love for her.

He drove her out of the house! That was the next silent accusation Van held in his heart. His father had made her leave, intentionally, or by making

her hate him. It was a fault in his father's character that had made her run. It had been preventable, and the blame for her disappearance lay entirely on his father.

Many years later, when the piranha who lived in his mind stopped eating for a time, Van fell upon the third source of his anger, the true, defining source. *It was my fault she left.* He had blamed himself for his mother leaving, and the guilt he felt was impossible for a little big heart to live with. So, he turned it into anger and directed it straight at his poor father, whose only crime had been to love two people more than the entire world of people put together. Van never spoke to his father about his anger. He just kept it in his belly, undigested, letting just enough escape from time to time to help fill the tub of Dennis Ryan's sadness. Van knew later what had always been obvious: his mother was sick, and her sickness had destroyed their world. It wasn't Dennis's fault, nor Van's, nor hers. It just was. Like so many tragedies before and after, no one is to blame, and everyone suffers.

After the State Troopers left on the night of Dennis Ryan's death, Van went out onto the back deck. The very first gnome house his father had made still stood where it had first appeared. The wood was so rotten it was practically fused to the old wooden railing which ran around the deck. More than half of the small shingles were gone, and something was growing out of the crooked window. The tiny hinges were completely rusted, but Van managed to get the door of the house open. Inside was the stuffed bunny Van had placed in there many years before, his very first, and his favorite stuffed animal. His name was Mr. Flumps, although he had gone through numerous name changes since his mother had first set him in Van's crib. She had called him Mister Snugs, Sergeant Snugsly, Floppy, Mister Flopsy and eventually Van had started calling him Mr. Flumps. He was the only thing Van had of his mother, and it had only seemed right that he should reside in the original gnome house.

His father had been right, though. It didn't bring her back.