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## Family Reunion

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## Family Reunion

Let me start by saying this: I had no choice but to leave that night. I never was much of a family man. I mean, I gave it my all, but I'm sure I would have been better at it if I would have had the better fortune to have been with someone other than Loretta. She wasn't exactly a sweetheart after I ruined her life. We both had different plans for our lives but things don't always end up the way we plan them. I know this now. I didn't think I would ever take this flight to California for this kind of reunion.

When I walked out of Loretta's life I had no intention of never coming back. I was fed up with her, and she of me and we couldn't take anymore of each other. But I didn't want, or expect, things to go the way they did. We were married too young and had our daughter Julie too young. With all the trappings of being parents at a time we didn't want to be parents, and she with someone she didn't want to be a parent with. It was too much to handle. Back in those days a man married the mother of his child for better or worse, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Loretta was a cold woman who blamed me for messing up her life, and she never let me forget it. In fact, she made sure I could never forget.

Loretta was a business major at a time when fewer women were going to college than are today. She was driven, intelligent, and stunningly beautiful. She was going to be successful and was attracted to men who she knew were going to be there at the top with her, who could handle her intelligence and confidence. I had a football scholarship from Ohio State University as a middle linebacker, and was doing well in school, majoring in engineering. I had a 3.9 grade point average, and I was an All-State football player. My junior year we had a class together, and I heard her speak out to the professor

when he said something she didn't like. The professor lambasted her for her opinion, but she stood her ground. She was beautiful in her fury. She was strong willed and stubborn, not at all as delicate as many of the girls on campus. I fell instantly in love.

Our courtship was a whirlwind. We were inseparable, but she always seemed to have an invisible distance to her. We often studied in each other's presence, but not together because our majors were different. Afterwards we would make love like there was no distance, but it would be there again once the afterglow wore off.

Once she found out she was pregnant she was so ashamed that she left school. This was in the late 1940's, mind you, and things were much different then. She'd had grandiose plans for her future, and was well on her way to achieving them. She believed that I took these plans away from her. She fully expected me to go with her and marry her. Make her a proper woman. How could I have refused? I dropped out of college and we moved to a nice little suburb outside of Chicago, where I took a job as a manager at a railroad depot machine shop. Loretta became a housewife and mother. The worst nightmare of a power-hungry aspiring businesswoman.

Over the next few years things became more and more icy and distant between us. We still made love, but it was mechanical and disconnected. Our bodies required the touch and pleasure, but her heart abhorred that need. We functioned as a two-party coalition to raise a daughter but there was no marriage there in the traditional sense. Just two people bonded by one common love: our daughter. She was no longer in love with me. I could feel it in her indifference to my attempts to rekindle those emotions that had originally landed us in the shared life that no longer brought her the happiness it once

had. She tried twice to go back to school, and twice she dropped out. I asked her why she wouldn't stick with it and she replied that "it was too late."

Once Julie was in grammar school Loretta began working as a secretary at a department store in town. She never talked much about her job there, but I think she was miserable in it. She was supposed to be running a place like that by now, and probably would have been if she would have finished her last two years at the university. When I would ask her how her day had gone she would look at me coldly and I felt the accusatory undertones. Her personality had gradually changed over the years but I had no idea what she was capable of. My god, why would I have left had I known?

The night I left I did so because she told me she was leaving me and taking Julie. She said she could no longer live under the same roof as me. She couldn't stand looking at me anymore. She didn't know where she was going but she planned to pack her stuff and take Julie with her. She was serious. I knew from five years of being married to her that she wasn't kidding, so I left so that she and Julie could have the house. The house had been paid for with the help of a small inheritance given to her by her late, modestly rich uncle. I reluctantly packed my bags and left in my truck. Three weeks later the place was a smoldering pile of rubble.

I stayed with my pal Eddie for a few weeks trying to figure out what I was going to do. I saw Julie a few times in the mornings when I would come and pick her up for school, and the last time I saw her was the evening we went to the county fair and ate corn dogs and rode the rides at the midway. She hugged me goodbye and told me she loved me. I took her to the front door and Loretta was standing inside watching me silently. She asked me through the screen door if I had said goodbye to my daughter. I

didn't know what she meant then. I went back to Eddie's and went to sleep on the couch that was to be mine until I got my own apartment. Eddie was a volunteer firefighter at that time and I awoke to him shaking me out of sleep to tell me my house was on fire. He had gotten the call a few minutes prior and was on his way to the blaze. I leapt out of bed, threw on my clothes and rushed to the scene. The police officers wouldn't allow me to get close to the house, stopping me a block back for safety reasons while the fire fighters fought the blaze. I stayed there all night until I got word that there were two bodies found inside. I fainted there on the sidewalk because I remember everything went black.

The bodies were of a woman and a young girl and it was an open and shut case. Back in those days there weren't any CSI units like there are today. The fire marshall determined that the blaze was set intentionally with kerosene. The authorities could find no evidence that there was any other foul play involved such as a break-in, and ruled it a murder-suicide. This type of thing wasn't as common back then, but even then, stranger things had happened. I did what any man would do in that situation. I planned and attended the combined funeral of my wife and daughter. I put in a transfer at my job and moved to Florida to work at a railway station outside of Tallahassee. I left Illinois and never went back.

I looked back often though, in my mind's eye. Memories are funny things sometimes, some of them seem to always be right behind you, especially the bad ones. I always regretted leaving the house that day. That guilt seemed to wear on me with the full weight of the past. A past that seemed to be summed up by that same guilt.

But I moved on with my life because that's all we can do as humans; keep going. I eventually remarried 12 years later but never had any more children because my second wife Kathryn was barren from the ovarian cancer that eventually killed her, 10 years ago. I never forgot my first wife Loretta, or my daughter Julie. Then a week ago I got a surprising phone call that damn near killed me, damn near stopped my heart, and is why I'm now sitting on this jet while it's waiting to be cleared for take off. I got a phone call from my daughter Julie.

Julie was now named Penny and had spent the rest of her childhood growing up in California. There was a transient enough culture in the San Francisco Bay area that Loretta could blend in without too many questions. Loretta had moved them there and their names had been changed. Julie didn't tell me what Loretta changed her name to and I don't care. Over the years Julie, aka Penny, had asked about her father but was always told that I had left them and never came back, that I didn't care about her and she should just forget about me. Julie doesn't remember the fire but says she remembers her mother putting her in a car she had never seen before and then driving for what seemed like forever. Julie disappeared when she was five years old and over the years the memories of me and our lives had slowly faded into the back of her brain like so many childhood memories do. They kind of become foggy ghosts we're not sure if we ever even really saw.

When Loretta was on her deathbed she told Julie that many years ago she had gained the trust of a homeless woman and her daughter who were living out of their car a couple towns over where Loretta sometimes went to the library to check out books. She would often feed this woman and her daughter and one night she poisoned them. She did

this late at night and brought the car home to load a few things into it for the trip. She then planted the bodies in the house, put the sleeping Julie in the car, went back in and set the house on fire, and locked the door. She wanted to leave her old life behind and leave no trace. A “rebirth by fire” she called it. The locals in the other town just figured the homeless woman and her daughter moved on and nothing was reported. They were like ghosts themselves. Loretta told Julie my full name and told her she should find me. It was some kind of last minute atonement for her sins. Julie was floored and immediately following Loretta’s death she began searching for me. With the internet it wasn’t too hard. She found me in just a few days by using phone and court records (I have one assault conviction from years ago). She then called me and spoke to me for the first time in over 45 years.

I booked the first flight I could get to California and am now on my way through the friendly skies to be reunited with my daughter again. In a sense I feel as if I am finally going home. Julie and I are now strangers but are both eager to get to know each other. I only hope she can forgive me for leaving.