

LASTING INSTRUCTIONS BY NIGERIA LOCKLEY



Distracted by the deluge happening outside of my father's hospital room window I barely noticed when the nurse left. It seemed like she'd taken his vitals thirty times since visiting hours had begun.

My eyes averted his gaze and locked on the swishing lines cascading down the window. His fragility fractured my heart. When he called my name I pretended not hear the voice that once rivaled lightning. I didn't want to see him weak. I want to

remember him as the ox whose back I mounted when I couldn't make the trek across the long blocks of 125th Street. I want to remember him as the knight who slammed Stephan Stone on the ground when I discovered he cheated on me. Ox. Knight. Warrior. Protector. Father. PopPop.

"Yes, Pop-pop." I whispered no longer able to ignore his mucus riddled cry for my attention.

"I want to tell you something. "

"Yes, Pop-Pop, what is it?" Since he'd been hospitalized last month I'd begun calling him Pop-Pop again. When I became what I considered grown—16. Ha! I started calling him dad. After a summer abroad in London during college I started calling him father. And now. Now that I know at any moment of any day I may not see him again. I call out the name of the first man my heart learned to love. Pop-Pop.

He curled his now wrinkled and spotted finger commanding me to come closer.

"You have to do something for me," he said pausing to cough a bit.

"Would you like some water, Pop-Pop." I offered.

He shook his head no. His pride wouldn't let him show what was already evident. "I need to tell you something. I found the letters."

"What letters."

"The..." his voice turned into a low whisper as his room door opened, "...letters."

"Everything alright in here?" My mother asked her eyes darting back and forth trying to read one of our faces. She'd caught me midstride and I know with those eagle ears of hers that caught words uttered in other rooms had heard my father whispering.

First she dealt with my father, "You better not be trying to get her to sneak any contraband in here." Then she turned to me pointing her finger at me. "And you, you better not even start feeling sympathetic and think about sneaking anything in here. My heart can't take all this," she said fanning herself.

“Why don’t you take a walk around the hospital, Mom. “ I suggested. “You’ve been cooped up in this room since Pop-Pop was admitted. I saw a healing heart exhibit in the lobby on my way in. Apparently the patients all created paintings that would heal the heart. Go check it out.”

“I can’t leave your father alone.”

He rolled his eyes as she began to speak. We already treated him like he was dead. We made decisions and held whole conversations while he lay in bed.

“I’ll be fine,” he croaked. “My Jeanie is going to look after me. Right?” His eyes were wide open now. His eyebrows were arched higher than the arcs of St. Louis. I knew that look. He’d shot me that look across the table whenever he’d treated me to Baskin Robbins after school and my mother wanted to know why I didn’t have an appetite come dinner time. That look meant keep quiet. Cover for me.

“Sure, Pop-Pop, I’ll look after you tonight,” I said joining the conspiracy.

“Are you sure, Jeanie? I don’t want you going through no trouble. I’m his wife—caring for him during these last days are my duty,” she said valiantly as if she deserved a medal of honor.

“And I am his daughter.” I said firmly walking past her and to the door. “You know what Mother, I think you should go home. Go home, shower and rest for a while.” She didn’t move right away. Instead she stared at me. I opened the door and held it open until she finally gave in and walked past me.

Once mother was gone I returned to my seat and sent a mass text canceling all of my appointments for the evening.

Pop-pop wriggled around a little adjusting himself on the bed.

“I found the letters,” he whispered again. His eye danced back and forth.

“What letters?”

“The letters she wrote...” his voice disappeared as a coughing fit seized him. Blood lace saliva dribbled down his cheek.

I jumped out of the leather recliner and wiped his mouth.

“Thank you, Jeanie.” He kissed my hand rubbing the side of his face against the back of my hand. Slowly, he lifted his hand and wrapped it around mine. He pressed it to his frail chest. His skin was stretched so thin that I could see where each and every bone connected. His heart rattled around in his chest.

“Pop-Pop, are you alright? Let me get the nurse.”

“No, “ he coughed. “This time is for me and you, my sweet Jeanie.”

“This time is for me to tell you I found the letters. The letters she wrote. Once a week she wrote him.”

“Who?” I didn’t know if it was the medication talking or the illness.

“Religiously. She wrote. She never missed a week. I couldn’t count them all, but I want you to know I’ve forgiven her. Tell her I’ve forgiven her.”

“Pop-Pop, what are you talking about?” I queried trying to hide my frustration.

“Be slow to speak and swift to hear,” he commanded channeling his Sunday School teacher voice. “Sit me up, girl.”

I pressed the button on remote to the hospital bed elevating him slightly. I watched his ascent. The regality had returned to his eyes.

“I don’t know when she stopped loving me and started loving him. But. You tell her I’ve forgiven her.” He patted my hand softly, “Jeanine, I was there when she had you. You were a bloody thing, and all you did was wail. Like a siren. Day and night. Night and day. But, Pop-Pop held you to his chest and rocked you back and forth until you fell asleep. Now it’s time for me to go to sleep.”

“Pop-Pop, Jesus can heal you.” Tears cascaded down my cheeks. He’d suffered for so long I could not believe he was going to give in to the suffering now.

“Jeanie, Jesus healed me already. I forgave your momma for her affair. I forgave her and just as the Lord in His infinite love engrafted the Gentiles into the promise of salvation with the Jews I raised you.”

“Pop-Pop, what are you trying to say?” My hands began to shake. I didn’t want him to explain it to me.

He prefaced his response with a cough, “Be slow to speak and swift to hear,” he began to cough more violently, “Tell your mother. I forgive. Her.” Blood punctuated his sentence and every blue light and red light in the room blinked rapidly followed by beeps and buzzes as the life left his body.

THE END

“¹²Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.” Colossians 3:12-13 (KJV)

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