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## Winner - The First Year

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## The First Year

He got to the gym twenty minutes early. Melody was still swimming. Jim waited outside the pool, looking in through the smeared glass to watch his daughter. Each time she reached the end of the lane, she stopped, her chest pressed heaving against the cement. Resting her elbows on the edge of the pool, she took off her goggles to wipe them out with her thumb. She then pinched her nose between two fingers to squeeze out the water. When she was ready, she placed both hands on the ledge and paused for a moment before pushing backwards into the water.

The pool was almost empty. It was just Melody, and the bored pimply lifeguards, their heads listing to the side, their red rescue devices slipping from languid arms. Then there were the old men as well, men his age, men with nothing to do all day except swim back and forth, their movements even as a pendulum. When they slowly rose from the pool, water streamed from sagging breasts down tight-round stomachs. Jim could see them watch as his daughter clambered out of the pool, pinching the bottom of her swimsuit between her thumb and forefinger to tug it down over her butt the same way she had when she was five years old. She did not seem to notice the old men staring. He supposed they were invisible at her age. Their heads swiveled to follow Melody as she made her way to the changing room. When the door shut, they returned to swimming in the same unbroken motion.

Waiting at a bulletin board beside the door, Jim idly read the different class descriptions. He could not remember whether Melody was taking any of the classes. She had gone to the gym every day since returning from college for summer break. This surprised him. Melody had never been physical, even as a child. She learned to ride a bike, reluctantly, at age eight. She took up rollerblading at ten, but only for three and a half weeks, and then only with his old ski poles for balance as she trod doggedly up and down the sidewalk. She had never learned to swim much beyond a childish paddle with her chin thrust incorrigibly out of the water.

Her total disinterest in the rites of childhood sports had worried him at first. The child psychologist said it might be some unfathomable child's way of coping with her mother's death. The psychologist said that about everything. Those were the moments when Jim hated the psychologist, with her undertone of complacent assurance that she knew his daughter better than he did. But the psychologist did give him permission to give up on buying Melody baseball gloves and signing her up for little leagues, saying children were strong and coped in their own way. The psychologist told him to find out what Melody liked to do, and encourage her to do that, whatever it was.

Naturally, when he had asked his seven-year-old what she liked, her answer was ponies. He supposed it should not have surprised him, given the accumulation of pony backpacks and stickers and birthday cards during her preschool years. Personally, he had never been able to understand the fascination with the oversized and unpredictable draft animals, but he bought some horse books to thumb through together while he sorted out the devilish implications of riding lessons for a single parent's budget. Death and divorce did not differentiate in their disregard for accustomed household income. Fortunately, though, just as he had consigned himself to Saturdays spent in an overripe horse barn, Melody suddenly forgot ponies and switched all of her enthusiasm to paints. Jim suspected that this was under the influence of her

newest best friend, whose name was Ryder, but who appeared blissfully free from any intention of living up to it. With that peculiar knack that he always marveled at in mothers of turning mundane childhood activities into social events, Ryder's mom baked cupcakes and spread out newspapers on their kitchen floor and organized painting parties that were the talk of their first grade classroom.

Jim did not attempt to compete with the party organization. He had been forced to learn, fairly early, that he did not possess all talents of parenting equally. If his wife was alive, perhaps she could have balanced out his deficiencies—although he could only guess how she would have been as the mother of an elementary school child, an entirely different creature from a baby or toddler. Maybe she would have been no better than he was—an alternately comforting and discomfiting thought. But she was not there, and Jim did what he could. He bought Melody crayons and markers and bright tubes of acrylics. And then, when she was older, watercolors and colored pencils and oil pastels from nearby art stores, purchased after long consultations with the pony-tailed and paint-splattered employees about the best canvases, the science of acrylics versus oil, the return policy. Melody loved color. She would lay sprawled on the dining room floor, in a sunny splash below the window, drawing for hours. All her pictures were bright swirls of color and smooth, blended lines that faded in and out of each other. They were not what he would have expected—no houses or flowers or dogs and, thank god, no horses, no recognizable forms at all. But he was strangely proud of her when he saw them. Melody herself was quiet, generally, but her pictures were loud.

When she had returned home from college three weeks ago, Jim offered to sign her up for summer art classes at the community college. They had a few introductory painting classes, some sculpture or collage-making if she wanted to try something different. He gave the pamphlets to Melody. She nodded absently, but asked for a gym membership instead. She said that she wanted to do something different. He found himself oddly disappointed, but agreed.

Melody walked to the gym alone in the mornings, when she said it was less crowded. She said that she liked the walk, but he insisted on picking her up a few times a week and going out to lunch together. He was not used to having to craft their time together, planning outings as if his child was a moody visiting dignitary. When she really lived at home, everything just was together. He knew that college meant Melody would be there less, but he never realized it would change what being there meant.

The difference first struck him when he visited her at college in the fall for parents' weekend. The two and a half day program was a blur of reassuring administrative meetings and orchestrated mingling with other parents between extracurricular shows and entertainment, but, out of it all, he remembered most clearly sitting across from her in a campus diner on the Sunday morning before he left. Melody wore her college sweatshirt and athletic pants, her hair in a clumpy pony-tail.

“Sorry I’ve been kind of out of it this weekend,” she said, clutching a cup of black coffee between both hands. Her hair was stringy and unwashed. “It’s midterms. I just have so much work.”

“I understand. It was good to see you anyhow, I just hope it wasn’t too stressful for you,” he said. “It’s strange that they schedule parents’ weekend right during such a busy time.”

“Maybe next year, wait until I get my schedule for the semester and then you can come up on a different weekend, when I have less work. If you don’t mind missing the parents’ weekend hoopla.” She made an affected gesture of brushing the idea away, which he could not help but wonder where she had learned. A roommate, a professor, a boy.

“Just let me know and I’ll come up whenever,” he told her. “I’m here to see you, not the other parents. Although they’re pretty entertaining. Do you think I could pull off a ponytail like Joanna’s dad?”

She smile and snorted, sliding down in her seat. He chucked a sugar packet at her and laughed.

It made sense to him to come up on a different weekend the next year, but it hurt him all the same, to think that his presence could suddenly become a distraction, an additional stress in her life. Even when she was in high school, worrying over chemistry homework that he did not understand a word of, he felt that he could help—coming in to talk to her, going over flashcards, bringing her a snack as she hunched over her papers. In college, he was just a guest, flitting in and out to be entertained for the weekend.

Now, in his own home, he felt the same way, waiting to pick her up for a lunch that was only an outing rather than an extension of their shared lives.

Melody emerged from the dressing room almost exactly at noon, when they were supposed to meet, her wet flip-flops squeaking across the linoleum floor. As she walked, she scrunched her hair in her right hand, squeezing out the water. He fell into step with her as they walked to the car. Melody looked like her mother—auburn hair, blotchy freckles, same upturned nose—but she had his loping, long-legged walk. He reached a hand out and ruffled her hair, and she laughed and swatted it away. It was an old joke that they had, because it was such a traditional sitcom “Dad” thing, but not much like either of them at all.

“How was your swim?” he said.

“Good. Getting better, I think.”

“I saw you. You looked good. You’ve got a strong kick.”

“I just get tired too quickly still.”

“That will come,” he said, and she shrugged dismissively. Somehow it seemed almost harder now to find the right thing to say to her, even more than when she was a teenager. When she was away at school, they talked once a week or so. He mostly let her call him—he felt strangely nervous sometimes about calling, unsure whether he would seem supportive or intrusive. They were both still figuring out how to talk about college. There were so many things that she thought he didn’t understand, but he did—her voice drifting off as she mentioned a few friends coming over, the growing boom of music in the background, as if he had never heard of a party. Then there were the things that she thought he would understand but he didn’t—the books she read or majors she considered, his perpetual trouble remembering her class schedule. He only understood the rising irritation in her voice, the blush of embarrassment and defensiveness in his. They had a comparatively sharp conversation about her poetry class for a good ten minutes before she realized that, while she was talking about T.S. Eliot, he was talking about C.S. Lewis.

“They’re both Brits with initials for first names,” he told her.

“Look, I really need to go study,” she had sighed.

As he drove, Melody leaned against the passenger door and hummed softly to the radio. Her hair was still dripping and frizzing from the pool, and her back left a wet mark on the seat. A faint cloud of chlorine misted through the air between them. She had been home from college for three weeks now, but he still found himself slipping glances at her as she rode in the seat beside him. It was not that it was strange to see her there—he had expected that it would be, expected that he would find himself surprised by her reappearance in the old places. But it was in fact quite the opposite, and this was what threw him off balance. He kept forgetting that she had been gone. It seemed so natural to have her riding in the car beside him, running errands, flopped on the downstairs sofa. He kept looking at her to remind himself, studying her for changes to mark the year passed.

There were changes every year, of course. The subtle alteration of a child’s face a year older, the baby roundness shaping more and more determinedly into adult features. Limbs growing more and more connected, no longer tacked-on, flailing attachments. This summer too, there was a new curve of muscle in her legs, and flex of sinew as she moved her arms.

“Where are we going for lunch?” She turned to him, thrusting her right arm out the window and opening her hand in the wind.

“I was thinking Kletzinger’s. Sound ok to you?”

“That sounds right,” she laughed. “You don’t change much, huh?”

“We all change,” Jim said and looked away from her, surprising himself at the click in his voice. He blamed himself for his failure to converse with her the way he wanted, but sometimes grew angry with her, not the annoyed anger, hot and brief, that flashed through him and then vanished when she was difficult as a child, but a new anger, a slumbering resentment felt before

only for his wife or his parents at times. It was an anger of adulthood. He immersed himself in her world, as much as he could, only to talk, to care, but she was not even conscious of his world. What connection could come from that?

Kletzinger's was not directly on the way home from the gym, but he considered it their place, if he was going to be nostalgic. It was a deli with overpriced sandwiches and potato knishes and two big vats of signature pickles—original and garlic flavor—by the register. Autographed pictures of celebrities who had passed through over the years spotted the walls. There was also a life-sized cut-out of Dolly Parton, who had visited the deli in 1992, according to the sign. Beside the height chart in Melody's bathroom, he pinned pictures of her over the years beside the Dolly Parton for scale.

They ordered their usual—two pastrami, two original pickles, two lemonades, and a walnut brownie to split for dessert. Their conversation was not too different from usual, either. Although Jim sometimes felt a new anger, he still felt an old compunction and a desire to please that was uniquely for his daughter. He teased her about the time that she had accidentally gotten a garlic pickle instead of an original. She reminded him about the time he tried a meatball sandwich and a meatball plopped out and rolled down his pants and across the sidewalk when he tried to take a bite. They talked about her old babysitter, who he had seen at the grocery a few weeks ago and confirmed still had a mustache. They talked about the new neighbors and their lawn-care standards.

She steered the conversation away from college. He had borrowed a book from the library a few weeks ago called, "Understanding Your College-Age Child," and it said it was normal for college students to seem either overly enthusiastic and gregarious or entirely shy and secretive about college life after their first year. He found that particular observation largely unsatisfying and contradictory, but was still comforted to read that nearly any behavior was normal. So he did not push Melody to talk about school. He wanted to let her take a break, if that was what she needed.

"There's a kickboxing class that starts tomorrow. I think I might try it."

"That sounds fun."

"Yeah, we'll see."

"You've been really working out. Are you thinking of picking up a sport or something next year at school?" He ventured. He thought that it did not seem like too much to ask, not too intrusive.

"Not really." She wrinkled her nose, but did not look at him. She was sitting cross-legged and staring intently at her right foot lying on top of her lap. He saw a small maroon scab peeking out from her sandal strap. She silently jammed a fingernail beneath its edge and pried it off, then played with the sunflower-seed-shaped clot in her palm. "I just really want to get strong."

“Sounds like a good goal,” he said, nodding with what he hoped was a neutral facial expression. He tried to toe the proper parental line between too enthusiastic and too indifferent.

He was not sure if it was healthy for her to hang around all day just going to the gym and home. It seemed a lot of time spent puttering doing this and that with nothing to stimulate the mind, but maybe he was confusing her with himself. He had retired two years ago. He had not planned on retiring then, but the company was downsizing and they offered him a decent buy-out. There was no reason to fight it. He had money saved and his daughter was almost grown. But sometimes on weekday mornings, he still found himself drawn to the front window, watching his neighbors cars zip away to work, just on the edge of wishing that he had somewhere to hurry to. But he supposed that it was different at Melody’s age, when life was still full of too much hurrying. She deserved a break. A good, quiet kid, straight A’s in high school, now a full-ride at a private university, spending money saved up from years of babysitting and summer jobs. She did not need to take classes or work this summer if she didn’t want.

He simply found it strange to see Melody doing something that, for all its physicality, had so little tangibility to it, for Melody was always a girl of stuff, an observer, a collector of things. Her rock collection littered the garden and dulled the mower blades. Her pressed flowers, forgotten, fell from the dictionary pages to crumble into the shag carpet. Jim had always wondered at the urge to collect, he who never saved a postcard, who bagged his wife’s clothes for Goodwill a few weeks after she died, not because he did not love, but because he could never see the love in things. He found himself wishing that he could. He saw in Melody that an ability to do this was a comfort he could not give. Melody had always found her own comfort. At four, in a brief-lived run of dance classes, she unabashedly marched forward when told to march back, turned in sharp little robot squares oblivious to the other children swirling in circles. At seven, she announced to him in the pediatrician’s waiting room that she was old enough to talk to the doctor herself. By eighteen, she told him what college she would attend with a reasonable comparison of the programs and finances. He could think of no reason to worry because she wanted this summer to rest.

It was different for her than it had been for him. He had been the first one in his family to graduate high school, let alone college. He worked his way through state school on a morning job at a donut shop and evening job at a bar, then picked up factory shifts when he could, going to school at night, tramping slowly into management. It was different for her. But that was right. That was what people worked for, so that it would be different for their children. He just had to remind himself how different it was sometimes.

“It looks like Mary’s home,” he said on the way home as they drove past her high school friend’s house. For the first time in months, the old green jeep with fuzzy dice in the window sat in the driveway, the car he had seen lurch away with his daughter inside while he muttered an involuntary prayer under his breath so many times. “Have you seen her yet?”

“I haven’t really seen any of them.”

“Are they back around for the summer?”

“I just don’t really want to.” She popped her shoulders up in an exaggerated shrug, but he saw her feet pressing down against the car floor. “I feel like I’ve outgrown them or something, you know? I just don’t know what I’d say to them anymore. It’s just different now.”

“College is a change,” he said slowly. “It might be fun to see them though. Catch up.”

“I’ll see them sometime.”

Coming inside the house, they stumbled over a pile of her shoes at the door—running shoes, flip-flops, flats, sandals, casual sneakers. He pushed them to the side to clear a path. The shoes, the sweaters strewn over sofa backs, the socks tossed in the middle of floor, the half-empty cups planted on side tables didn’t bother him. He loved it. From the moment Melody came home, her presence seemed to transform the character of the whole house. Even when she went out for the afternoon, the house hummed with the energy of her coming return.

“I’m going to read on the porch. Want to join? Some lemonade?” He turned to Melody, but she was still in the hallway, fumbling through her shoes for a pair of sneakers.

“I think maybe I will go to Mary,” she said. “Might as well if she’s around.”

“Oh. Have fun then.” He was accustomed to these sudden changes of mind by now. He shrugged and watched her moods float past, watched her float past him to the girl who insisted her hair was naturally black even though it glowed purplish in the sunlight, who at nineteen apparently possessed some easy key to relating to his daughter that he could not acquire through careful study.

When Melody skidded off on her bike, he went out to the back deck. He spent most afternoons there with a glass of iced tea and a book. He always read travel books. He had never had the time or money to travel himself, but he enjoyed planning the trips in his mind. His friends always talked to him before they planned their vacations. They teased him that he could write his own travel guides, if he only went somewhere. In the past year especially, once Melody left for school, they told him that now was his time to do something for himself, to go on one of the many trips that he had planned.

Of course, he knew that they were right. Now he was free to do all the things that he never could as a single father with a young daughter. This summer, even more than last fall when Melody first left, seemed like a turning point in his own life. He could no longer ignore the fact that he was an empty nester after the first full year that his daughter had been gone. During the first year, he still felt like he needed to be around, although for what he wasn’t sure. “I can jump in the car anytime that you need me,” he would tell her on the phone. Four hours. Three and a half even. “Yeah, it’s ok,” she would sigh. Aside from the parents’ weekend, he never had to make the trip, except to take her to and from break. Now that the first year was over, he couldn’t pretend anymore that he needed to be around.



But knowing that he could not ignore it was not the same as knowing what to do with it. He was trying. He bought a book called “Parenting Yourself” on rediscovering life after your children leave home. He went to a couple of social groups for empty-nesters, but they were mostly couples either trying to relight the flame or not light each other on fire. He thought about trying to meet people through hobbies of some sort, but he never really had any hobbies and felt like now was a little late to start. He had learned not to put much hope in dating.

He had stopped at a travel agency a few weeks ago to pick up some brochures, dashing out before the travel agents could engage him. At home, he laid out the brochures on the dining room table. He spent a few afternoons thumbing through them, but it was hard to envision himself really in those places.

The canned pictures in the brochures did not make him imagine Venice or Barcelona. They just reminded him of all the college brochures that he and Melody had sorted through at the same table just a little over a year ago. For months, all the mail was hers. Glossy brochures showing students circled with their books on sun-dappled greens, floating through the air toward a basketball net in their school colors, huddled with smiles over coffees. He had to be careful opening the mailbox to keep the brochures from spilling out. They had made the dining room into a kind of control room, as if they were in a war. Melody the general, him for the first time just an assistant to high command, stopping to bring a snack, or to listen, careful not to say too much. Loose lips sink ships.

He would find her sitting there for hours, her fingers tracing over each glossy picture, lips moving as she read each college’s letter calling her to come. At her age, the future still spoke loudly, commandingly. It invited, coaxed, cajoled, sometimes terrified into its arms. He remembered how it was. Now, at his age, the future seemed just a silence, afraid to speak. Or maybe he was just too afraid to hear. He was not unaware of his own inadequacies.

Still, it had been strange to see Melody alone at the table, so totally contained, adult, inside herself. He assumed somehow that she would be a part of him forever—it was not just presumptuous, the shock of her sheer childhood openness led to it. Aside from himself, he had never seen anyone else fall down so much, pick themselves up, go through every pain of growing with such unembarrassed honesty. It was hard to believe that she could become someone so entirely separate, foreign even, after all that. It could only be because of the forgetfulness of childhood. She did not remember all those small moments the way that he did.

The college decision was the beginning of a separation that he knew was natural, that he was proud of, but that unnerved him all the same, even this summer after a year away at school. For a moment, he found himself wondering if it would be different if her mother was here. Maybe she needed someone to connect to about the uniquely female challenges of college. But he caught himself before he could go too far with those thoughts. After his wife died—her strong frame crumpling suddenly from its fluttering butterfly of a heart—he had those thoughts all the time. They came on suddenly, randomly, as he sat in the car at stoplights or spread peanut butter on Melody’s sandwiches for lunch. They paralyzed him. He learned slowly to fixate on other

things when he felt the thoughts coming on. The more immediate, physical things the better, he found.

Laying his book on the table beside him, he looked out into the backyard at the oak-leaf hydrangea clustered around the air conditioner. They needed to be cut back before the branches covered the air conditioner completely. He would cut them back tomorrow. He would get the shears from the garage. He would buy lawn waste bags from the store. He would do it in the morning. He held a deep breath and then blew it out.

The whirl of the air conditioner died away beside him. He could hear mosquitoes beginning to buzz around his ear. There was a sudden chill of evening in the air. He stood up, and went around the house to get the mail. The neighbors were out in their driveway, loading their flock of small children in the car, and they all waved at him with closed-mouth smiles as they went on their way.

The mail was mostly credit card offers and a few coupon catalogues. He was about to throw the whole stack away when he noticed a letter from Melody's college, addressed to the Parents of Melody Young. He studied the envelope for a moment. Her grades had already come last week, posted a few days on the fridge before she complained and pulled them down. He was sure that her fall tuition bill would not come for a few weeks, although he could be wrong. He had always thought that it would be easier to keep track of things once he retired, but, the less he had to do, the more absent-minded he found himself. He pulled the letter from the stack and padded inside to the kitchen table, opening it after he put his glass in the sink.

It was a formal letter on university letterhead, with two perfect block paragraphs of texts on a cream paper, folded in thirds. "It has come to our attention," it began, "that there has been a great deal of concern over a series of sexual assaults occurring in campus dormitories in the past year." Apparently an article had run in the school newspaper and then gone viral online, where the university seemed to assume that he had seen it. The letter did not give much more information about the assaults themselves. Just that the college was rigorously following official procedures and pursuing appropriate disciplinary action. It was signed by the university president, or his signature stamp. It did not give a contact number to call for concerns.

He held the letter in his hands for a moment, shifting it from right to left hand as if trying to determine its weight in their lives. It could mean his daughter or her roommate or a friend or total strangers to them both. He had no idea. For a moment, he considered trying to find the article it referenced online, do some sort of frantic detective work before Melody came home, but it seemed a waste—what could he find when his daughter had not even told him. Instead, he left the letter on the kitchen table and walked back out onto the deck.

The front door screeched when Melody came in, and then it was silent. He vaguely heard her footsteps in the kitchen, the smack of the fridge door, the clink of a glass on the table. He ran his index finger down a page about insider tips for renting cars abroad, pretending not to hear the screen door open. She slipped into the chair beside him, folding her legs up onto the chair with her and hugging them in with a hand wrapped around each ankle.

If there was one thing that he had learned, a man raising a daughter alone, it was to stop talking sometimes. Not when to stop talking, or why to stop talking. But he had at least learned *to* stop talking, the weight, if not the meaning, in the action itself.

“It’s cold out here,” she said softly, a faint rasp of exercise in her voice, or of tears, he couldn’t tell. He felt his face flush to think that he couldn’t even tell that anymore, that she must know and hadn’t told him and there was nothing that he could do to make her want to tell. She sat within arms’ reach, but seemed no more knowable to him than when he first saw her in ghostly blurred outline of the ultrasound.

He looked up to see her eyes on him, studying his face. She looked away the moment that he turned. When she finally murmured something, he could not hear it above the renewed whirl of the air-conditioner. She did not repeat herself. It seemed wrong to ask her to.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“There is one thing that I wanted to tell you,” he whispered. “You are already the strongest person that I know.”