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Compartmentalization

Dawn Hackett

He is on his dying recliner, dying on the recliner, thin skin, thin breath, wanting something, anything, wanting life. I am two feet away, twenty years away from him, waiting for his words to continue. He starts to tell me a story then loses himself inside one of his compartments. He wanders in and out of compartments and wonders who he has let into the one he is in now – does my daughter know about my lust, my wandering eye, my video tapes? He closes the door on it, that subject, opens it again. I'm right next to him willing to listen but he stops. His young third wife leaves the house again, speeding off toward a quiet parking space and anonymous cell phone conversations.

“She’s cheating on me,” he says. That compartment opens between us.

“Do you want me to confront her?” I ask.

“Hmmm.” He trails off again. The morphine has taken hold.

I watch him grab a moment of release. He said it, just one it. One fear is outside the compartment and lands on me. I take it gladly. I imagine her death at my hands. I plan it. She is small, my fingers would envelop her neck and I could watch the light drain from her eyes. Like my father’s eyes, they are flickering like a candle at the end of its wick, suffocated by wax. He wakes for a moment, sees me still two feet away. I want to grab him and crush him under my love but I don’t have enough of it. It is in a storage unit waiting. He is wanting again.

“The attic above the garage,” he says. “There’s a brown bag full of video tapes. Get rid of the tapes.”



I am back to wondering about the morphine, but I smile easily against his request. Espionage. I am in.

“OK,” I answer. I lie to myself. I lie to his morphine.

He pulls a small book of pictures out of his baggie pocket. “Take this. Don’t look at the pictures just burn it.” He slurs the last words “jish spurn nit”, fading out again to sleep. The compartment closes forever.

I hold the book of pictures in my hand and suddenly I am an alcoholic with an open bottle of bourbon, a shot of tequila in my fist, salt on my lips, a coke-head holding a white streaked mirror, a daughter with a secret window into her dying father’s soul. I find a quiet space in the hall and put the straw against the mirror, swill the liquor, swill my soul, take a crow bar to the compartment door. Old girlfriends. Sharon in the first sleeve, beside a pool, tanned nipples, tanned breasts. Carolyn in a hotel room beaver shot and no bra, nipples on alert under a cut-off t-shirt. I move more quickly – there’s Stance from Sweden ’78, Kirsten from Norway ’79. Last page final picture black and white 1960. Mom.

A side of her I hadn’t known, birthing position lots of hair big breasts huge nipples big smile, a mental picture falls into a compartment, obliterating all the others. I tear it to pieces first, all pieces in a bag now, all the pieces of every picture torn, unrecognizable, like my father. I return to my seat two feet away from him and wait for another compartment to open.

