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5'1"

by Michael Kozlowsky

When his wife passed away after just seven years of marriage, John tried to get his daughter, Angie, to linger after dinner like he used to when he was a child. He would try to have her and her friends gather there before their nights out or after their soccer games and theatrical productions. Sometimes he didn't even have to engage with them, he would just sit back and watch everyone swirl about, talking and laughing, and he would just smile and sigh deeply, wishing his wife could witness this. It was better than food, better than drink. It was a home.

But his daughter was gone now, away at college, and, since she left, his kitchen was never the same.

He first noticed it when he was passing through the room like a ghost. In the gaping opening between the kitchen and living room—this rectangular arch with bright white moulding—his eye caught the panel where he had marked his daughter's height each year on her birthday. By the time she left, Angie was 5'1", the same height as her mother. This went along with their matching dark hair and eyes, and pale skin. All John saw of himself in Angie was the reliance on glasses and a rail thin frame as if cast in iron, never to expand. Spotting the markings in his periphery, he was already two steps into the living room when he jerked to a halt and

backed up. Something about the little notches seemed off. His fingers delicately traced the penciled lines laddering all the way down the moulding. 4'9" at age 14, 4'5" at 11, 3'11" at 7. John, himself, stood at 6'1". But, looking at the marks, he remembered himself being much taller than where he had last marked his daughter. He tried recalling the days before she left home, all those moments holding her, resting his head atop hers, the spot where her nose met his chest. If her nose was a dagger, it would have pierced his heart. He stepped forward and, thinking of Angie, wrapped his arms on either side of the entry way. For a moment, he closed his eyes and imagined having her back home, back under his care. He saw her as a rosy-cheeked four year old, sitting high in his arms and giggling madly as they ran from room to room. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the last time he ever picked her up. When did it stop? Why didn't he savor it? It was just one of those things that simply ended. It went away without him ever realizing it, the day she was no longer a child.

He forced his eyes open. Looking down, according to the marker, her head would have been much too high.

He grabbed a tape measure, the same one that he had used all Angie's life. Returning to the panel, he extended it, keeping the tip in place with his foot. The top mark that he had labeled 5'1" now read 5'7". Stepping back, the tape measure zipping closed and nearly catching his fingers, he studied the panel. Then he measured again. 5'7". Did he measure her incorrectly that last time? He didn't think so. A practical joke? He checked the wall for eraser marks. Nothing. Was he standing on something? Was the floor coming up? No. Everything seemed perfectly normal. He measured himself. Still 6'1". He decided he would measure Angie again when she next came home to visit. Christmas break. 91 more days.

The temperature had dropped like a bomb and John was at the kitchen table eating the sandwich he made himself for dinner. In the early darkness, he sat at one end of the reclaimed wood table, opposite the place his daughter would have sat had she still been home. He tried not to look up at that impossibly empty space. First, his wife, Jackie, had sat there, and she was now gone. Then his daughter had sat there, and she was now... "She's coming back," he said aloud to himself, his voice sounding so strange that he had to speak some more just to hear it again. "She'll be back soon enough." His voice spread like a thick fog. Like it rose up and got lost in the room, stretching into an ethereal thinness. Unnerved, he cleared his throat and took a bite of the sandwich. It was so big in his hands, he realized as he chewed. There was no way he was going to finish it. Perhaps he had lost his appetite. Perhaps he didn't like spam anymore. He set it back on the plate. It looked like a missile with a busted warhead. Yes, definitely something nuclear about it, he thought. In an irradiated haze, he gazed across the table at the empty chair. It seemed so far away. He used to be able to pass her salt, ketchup, without getting up. He reached across the wood planks, stretching as far as he could, imagining he was taking Angie's hand in his. But he couldn't quite get there.

His phone was charging in the kitchen when he thought he heard it ring, even though he was in the bathroom all the way on the other side of the house. Throwing down the hand towel, fingers still dimpled with soap, he ran for the phone, hoping it was Angie. It shouldn't have taken him so long to get there and he wondered if his legs were working correctly, if he was getting so old that he could barely run anymore. He never questioned his age and health before, but by the time he reached the phone the ringing had stopped. It turned out it wasn't his daughter anyway. More spam.

He decided to call her instead, enough with all the waiting. He was her father; he had a right to call her, to hound her if he wanted to. What if she was in trouble? What if she needed him? The phone rang several times, faint and distant, as if he were still in the bathroom. He thought he had his volume down, but it turned out it was all the way up. Angie didn't answer, of course, and he decided to leave a message. "Hi, Ang. It's Dad. I... uh..." He didn't like the way his voice sounded. Like he was in a cave. A very large cave, deep and dark. A lost voice. He spoke louder. "I was just hoping to talk with you. I was thinking about that time we played that joke on your uncle. How he nearly fell out of his chair. The look... you know... And I... You were so great. So funny. I... uh..." His own voice disoriented him. "It's getting closer to break. Two weeks now. I'm sure you're busy with finals and whatnot, but I... I just can't wait to see you again. Well, um. ...call me back whenever you can. Okay? I miss you. Love you."

Slamming the phone back down he noticed he was out of breath, as if something inside him were squeezing. Squeezing tight.

Staring out into the kitchen, he felt like something was off, like something was deeply wrong. The room seemed bigger than usual. It swallowed him up. The windows facing the backyard appeared far off, like glass at a hockey game. The entryway to the living room was wider, a yawning mouth. The floor leading to it stretched and stretched, the tiles no longer squares but rectangles. And why did he feel like he used to be able to reach the ceiling if he jumped? It looked so high now. An impossible leap.

He returned to the panel with the height markings, tape measure in hand. He measured again. This time the 5'1" marker came in at 6'0". She was nearly as tall as he was.

The tape measure dropped from his hand—the sound of its crash was delayed, like a coin

tossed down a very deep well. This couldn't be right. None of this was right. He ran to the basement, the stairs seemingly endless, and dug through mountains of boxes until he came across the blueprints of the house. Laying them out, he realized nothing in the kitchen was measuring up to the original plans. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, everything was bigger than it was supposed to be. He ran outside, looking at his house from a distance, expecting to see a mansion, a gothic castle. But it all looked normal enough.

A man jogged by. "House looks beautiful as always, John."

John could barely nod in response. It didn't look beautiful. Not to him. Suddenly it seemed ugly. It seemed wrong. Not glaringly, but he could tell, even if no one else could.

He quickly ran back inside and measured all the other rooms of the house. They, too, were off. Not as drastically as the kitchen, but they definitely weren't adding up either. A slow growth.

The kitchen was palatial now. Opening the refrigerator door, he bent over to peer inside, and felt as if he were stretching for his toes. Throwing his hands inside the cavernous appliance, he discovered he came away with a plate of leftover pie. He brought it to the table that now seemed to have doubled in length. Tears were building in his eyes as he continually stabbed at his food and shoved it into his mouth, his thoughts awash with a past that didn't add up. It was after several bites that he finally noticed the pie had a strange taste. Like the ingredients had separated. The food swelled in his mouth, puffing his cheeks to great lengths. He nearly gagged. But down it went, bulging his throat like a growth. "Enough!" he cried, and shoved the plate far from him.

He buried his face in his hands, and in the quiet darkness he saw himself and his wife. He was holding Angie, only a few months old and as beautiful and precious as ever. "Should I put

her down?" he asked Jackie. "I really don't want to."

"I need to sleep, John. I need a good night's sleep."

"You can sleep. Go ahead. I can hold her."

"We all should get to bed. We're strung out. And you're not doing her any favors."

"Should I put her down?"

He pulled his hands away and the memory bled dry, but he still heard his voice. *Should I put her down?* The question was trapped in the air, spreading wide above him.

His throat hurt, like there were teeth inside it, biting to get out. He raised his hands to his neck. It felt twice its usual size.

Startled, he leapt up from his chair and stumbled across the room. He reached out for the counter for balance, but it wasn't there. It should have been, but it wasn't, and he fell, crashing hard to the floor.

Should I put her down?

The words were a whisper lingering above him.

He thought he might have chipped a tooth on the tile. He thought he might have broken his nose. Lying on the floor, he felt as if his arms had become noodles. They were long and flaccid. Using all his strength, he pulled his left hand closer and realized that it was translucent. He could see his entire kitchen through it. The room was a desert, stretching as far as the eye could see. And now it was like something had somehow pierced him, and was dragging him the lengths of this new world. Pulling in all directions. Like he was drawn and quartered.

Should I put her down?

His mind, along with the rest of him, was splitting apart. It felt as if everything inside it

were spilling out. He could see his entire life playing out before his very eyes. All of it. All at once.

His wife's handprint was on a piece of glass. One of the last things she touched. He kept it in the basement so that it would never be harmed. So that it would never fade. But he could hear the glass stretching. He could hear it cracking. He was going to lose what little he had left of her.

Should I put her down?

He looked at his hand again. He could barely see its outline now. "I'm not solid," he said. "I'm not solid."

He was spread thin, like a tarpaulin. His body light as air. He felt himself rising toward the ceiling like a gas.

He was struck with the sudden realization that half his life was over by the age of seven. Those first years stretched like his body was now doing, but the rest went by like a short weekend. Angie was in his life for merely a blink. It wasn't fair. She was only trick-or-treating yesterday.

S h o u l d I p u t h e r d o w n?

John continued to stretch through the air. He rose to the ceiling, pinned against it now. It was incredibly high. Ten stories easily. Years ago his daughter used to ask him 400 questions a day. He barely answered half of them.

He couldn't get down from the ceiling. He didn't know how long he was up there. His cells were stretching, wandering. Every molecule, every ounce of his blood and DNA. He was a galaxy.

Time, too, felt like it was stretching. The days were meaningless. He looked down on his

home like a picture from a dentist's ceiling. He didn't recognize it anymore.

Was he disappearing for good? What had he become?

The front door slammed.

"Dad?"

Angie? Was today actually the day? "Angie!" he yelled. "Angie!" But his voice was nothing but dew drops falling from the ceiling. "Angie!"

He saw his daughter enter the room. Her hair was much shorter now, and dyed platinum. She seemed to dress differently too, not so cutesy anymore, almost dangerous, like some punk from the eighties. Still, she was back. She was back in the kitchen. His Angie. His little baby.

"Dad?"

"Angie!"

"Where are you? You sound so far away?"

"ANGIE!"

"I can barely hear you. Where are you?"

He watched her pace around the kitchen. She looked happy. She looked like she missed her home.

Her phone beeped and she leaned against the panel with the height marks. After texting a message, she yelled toward the ceiling. "Are you going to come downstairs and say hello to your daughter or what?"

She traipsed into the living room and plopped onto the couch. And all at once, like a heavy downpour, John splashed back to the floor, all in one piece.

"Angie!" he cried, rising to his feet.

She stood up but he was already running to her. He grabbed her and held her tight,

noticing exactly where her nose met his chest. 5'1", dagger to the heart.