

**TO BE SIX**

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He is holding my small hands, in his big hands. We are standing at the sink, I'm on a little blue plastic stool, still wearing my shoes and winter jacket. I can barely reach the faucet. He is standing behind me. We are washing our hands. He keeps rubbing our hands together, until the soap is covering the whole sink. I giggle as the bubbles start floating around the bathroom. He grabs a fresh towel from the shelf to dry my hands, then lifts me off the stool into his arms. He grunts because I'm getting heavy but does it anyway. He knows I like being carried, and I don't know he has early stages of what the doctor called MS – Multiple Sclerosis. A chronic disease that affects the central nervous system, which is the brain, spinal cord, and optic nerves; weakening your muscles. I don't remember what we did that day, if we just came back from the playground or if I was dirty from playing soccer. But I remember that my father's hands felt rough, covered with calluses that had split and cuts decorating his fingertips, almost healed. I remember that his jacket smelled like cold cigarette smoke, and that he would start coughing after every time he laughed.

There was a cloud of melancholia around my father, a sense of bitterness in his voice when he spoke. A feeling of suffocation when he was around, you know when you are underneath your blanket, all tucked in? And after a while it gets too hot and stuffy, and you have to remove it to breathe again. Children are masters of intuition, parents don't know it, they think we run aimlessly and listen to nothing other than the songs our toys play for us. But the hearts of children are delicate organs. *"You love me, right? You love me very much, don't you?"* He asks while we sit in the car, he is going to drop me off at my mother's place. They broke up shortly after I was born, and I have been living with her ever since. I know what I'm supposed to answer, but it doesn't feel right, I don't want to say it, but I do. *"Yea, yea I do Dad."* I try to ease my conscious by not using the word love, I try not to lie to him, but I do, don't I? In a way, it's the same thing. The car is cold, the air smells like the tree shaped car freshener dangling from the rear-view mirror, *"Royal Pine"* the label reads, and again, cigarettes. He smoked in the car even when I was in it, and I hated it, and he apologized, and do it again the next time. *"Did your mom say anything about me after the last time I took you home? It's okay if you tell me you know, I don't want your mother telling lies about me, you know, I just want to make sure you get both sides."* The smell is giving me a headache, and all I want is to get home. *Home*. The word itself would make him flinch when I say it. I wouldn't use it to describe his apartment. That's what it was for me 'his' apartment. There were no toys, none of my clothes or belongings. I slept in his bed when I stayed there, and he would fall asleep on the couch with the TV still on. *Home*. He knows he is not part of that, I think, and he suspects my mother is. Not because we live together, no. He knows it takes more than that. I am six, but I know. I know too much already, because he tells me, my mother tells me - everything. I want to stop knowing and just be six. *"No, she doesn't"* I answer. And I didn't lie, she doesn't, for two days she doesn't talk to me after I see my father. We arrive in the parking lot in front of my house and I open the car door as soon as the break is locked. *"You act like I've been holding you hostage, relax, people will think I kidnapped a child."* He laughs, I stay quiet. *"Thanks for the fun weekend"*, a useless attempt of faking a harmonious goodbye. Of course he notices, and of course he can't help but make me feel guilty

for it. *“It’s fine, just go in already, no need to be nice to your father. I appreciate the pity.”* He laughs again, I stay quiet again. I remember thinking my father was right, I did pity him. And I remember being angry that night, because he would let a six-year-old child feel bad for him. He didn’t feel bad for me. Fathers, they never have the daughters they want, do they? And daughters? They never have the fathers they deserve.

I am twenty-three now. I stand at the sink in the bathroom of my own apartment and think “oh actually I am never going to stop being six years old and lonely”.