

Family Secrets

By Ambrosio M Tirado

Carmine pulled out a worn set of copper keys from his pocket, stared at them, then walked past Diana toward the door. “I always hated this damn house.”

“The man left you his house. You can keep it, sell it, even burn it down, but he wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t love you,” said Diana.

“Diana, look at this place. It’s a dump, I have a crappy job and can’t afford to keep it or fix it. No one will buy this house in the shape it’s in! Even in death the old man is screwing with me!” Carmine stopped at the door to compose himself. “I’m sorry, I am out of line, it’s just that Mom and I would get yelled at for every little thing. He would tell me I was stupid, lazy, or too skinny. Bastard never had a kind word to say. Mom got the worst of it. I was happy when he started getting Alzheimer’s, felt like it was god’s punishment for the way he treated us.”

Diana followed him inside and closed the door. She placed her bag on the kitchen’s granite countertop. “You need to relax,” she said. “Is there coffee here?”

“Bottom left cabinet behind the empty pill bottles. Mom kept some there in case she had to stay the night.” Carmine picked up the remote to the TV as he sat on the sofa. “He was always sitting in this crappy couch bitching.” The TV flickered on displaying a news special.

“Here, drink this,” said Diana, sitting down next to Carmine. She passed him one of two cups in her hands, then sipped her coffee admiring the artwork flashing on the screen. A commercial came on and Diana looked at Carmine’s still full coffee cup. She took it from him,

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placed it alongside hers on the coffee table then held his hand. "Let's just start in the attic ok?"

she said, as she gestured towards the stairs.

"Fine," said Carmine, leading her upstairs to the attic. "Ladies first."

"Such a gentleman," said Diana, passing him up the ladder. "God, it's so dusty up here.

Did you guys ever go through this stuff?

"Nope," said Carmine. "Old man would never let us come up here. He smacked the shit out of me for playing here when I was a kid."

"How about I start on the left and you start with that old dresser?"

"Let's get this over with," said Carmine, sifting through the drawers. "It's all junk, I don't understand why he never wanted us up here."

"Did you know he was a soldier?" asked Diana.

"What are you talking about?"

"Take a look for yourself," Diana said, holding up an old photo.

"D. co, 101 Airborne Division, Vietnam, Phu Bai 1968. That's him right there in the middle with the ripped sleeves."

"Looks like you didn't know him as well as you thought," said Diana.

"I don't think Mom knew either, she would have told me."

"Oh my god, Carmine, is this what I think it is?"

Carmine moved around Diana, taking a knee at the side of an old footlocker. He winced at the scent of old foliage and paint radiating from the locker. There are several rolled-up parchments peeking out from beneath an old musty blanket. "What did you find?" asked Carmine.

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Diana handed him the parchment she had been inspecting. “Look at it,” she said, smiling and nodding at the parchment.

On one side, the texture felt coarse and brittle. Carmine ran his fingers over the bottom gripping it at its center. He unfurled the parchment as Diana moved behind him wrapping her arms around him.

“I can’t believe it,” said Carmine. “It has to be a fake, then again, this might be why he never let us up here. Where is my phone? I want to look this up.” Carmine released the bottom of the parchment and patted his side pockets attempting to find his phone.

“Here, take mine,” said Diana, reaching into her back pocket and dangling her red and white phone in front of him. “You left yours downstairs by the keys when we walked in.”

Carmine took the phone and passed the parchment back to her. “Hold this for a second,” he said. “I am going to Google the painting. Here it is. Open up that roll and let’s look at them side by side.”

Diana unraveled the parchment again, holding it out in front of them while Carmine held out the same image on the phone. “They match Carmine,” she said, pressing her face tightly against his.

Carmine looked back into the footlocker and picked up a faded yellow folded up letter. “This was his handwriting,” he said. He opened the letter. Carmine wiped away a welled-up tear as he returned the note to the footlocker. “You crotchety old bastard.”