

1997: What I Wanted

by Thomas Pluck

If all the world had one neck, I would have clenched my hands around it and squeezed until everything went black. I had won the game of checkers Dad and I played all our lives, and he flipped the board on me. I'd made it to his side and forced him to king me, when he called me out of the blue, something he'd never done before, and I'd turned his favorite phrase back on his latest self-inflicted tragedy:

Life's a bitch.

Two weeks later, I heard he checked out and took the lead pill.

I wanted to keep hating him.

I wanted to not look at the pathetic, waxy and emaciated body in the coffin and feel pity for the man whose wake of wanton emotional destruction formed the stomach churning foundation for my formative years; gone was the charmer with glinty umber eyes and a disarming crescent grin, his acceptance doled out in niblets, treats passed to dogs standing stiff before the judges, trained to gladly suffer the verbal public flayings endured in between.

I wanted not to cry when they sang "Danny Boy" at his funeral, elegizing the prodigal son who'd gone astray, lashing out at everyone loved him, seeking relief from a wound that would never heal.

I wanted him to stand up and fight. To swell into the hammer-swinging hardhat who loomed in the parlor sipping vodka and orange juice, hurling brickbat words and scraps of heart shrapnel at my mother, sister and me. I wanted to throw one meaty fist into his face before he took the dirt nap, the coward's way out, before he did the Dutch and gypped me out of his comeuppance.

I wanted to revel, when his uppance had cometh.

All I threw was a rose into his grave.

And I sang Danny Boy with the rest of them, tears running down my cheeks.

From that day on, every fight I've ever had has been with my dead old man. His face has grinned from every drunk I've set straight, every cop I've mouthed off to, every driver who's cut me off, and every woman who's rejected me; they've all had that grinning face, saying I got you this time: I turned you into me.

The battle thunders on in silence; a fist clenched at my side, nails digging into my palm leaving little grin-like crescents to fight back the red mist clouding the corners of my vision, the fire in my blood and the vitriol on my tongue, to spare those close to me from my frothing, fatherless rage.

