

Jigsaw Cactus

by
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CHARACTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	AGE	GENDER
PAUL	Cherry's Dad	39	Male
CHERRY	Paul's Daughter	20	Female

A worn out man sits surrounded by jigsaw puzzle pieces, their boxes, and beer cans. An almost completed puzzle of a family of three is in the center, but the face of the woman in the middle is missing. A girl with green hair walks in holding trash bag suitcases. She watches the man aimlessly shuffle pieces around. She closes the door heavily with her foot, and the man turns and finally--sees her. His breath stops. He worships her bitterly.

PAUL

Cherry.

His voice cracks on her name. Embarrassed, he turns back to his puzzle pieces. Cherry, sags against the door in defeat. She waits for a few moments. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply. He doesn't acknowledge her. She breathes deeper and harder. He doesn't acknowledge her. With an exhausted grunt she drops her trash bag suitcases. She starts to walk over to him, but she steps on the outskirts of the family photo puzzle. She kicks at a beer can next to the photo, avoiding confrontation with the picture. She picks up the can and hurls it into the air, as it begins to descend she makes a whistle noise until she catches it close to the ground with the imitation of an explosion.

CHERRY

Take your medicine, you look like a mop full of water.

The man flips over puzzle pieces.

CHERRY

If I hug you you'll probably just cry.

Paul ignores her. She goes over to her trash bags and rips them open. The clothes tumble out.

CHERRY

I brought my laundry home. Aren't you happy I even have a clean bag? Do you think I can overstuff the laundry machine? That binge eating monster can gorge itself on my sweat stains.

She pulls a floral printed dress off the floor and holds it against her, she inhales deeply. She smiles, laughing and dances to her dad.

CHERRY

It's hers, you know. Nicked it before I left.

She shoves the fabric into his face and he flinches closing his eyes. He holds his breath.

CHERRY

Breathe. In--out.

The man shakes his head and picks up a piece of the puzzle even though she's suffocating him with the dress.

CHERRY

You have to breathe eventually.

He takes a deep breath his face turning less red.

CHERRY

Smells like me doesn't it? Smells like Strawberry Smackers and wind. My favorite kind of smell after hitchhiking in a man's convertible. There were a few of 'em. That I rode with. One had a red car, one had greased hair, one had a kid, cute--last one though--. He was real nice--called himself Dog. I thought maybe he was an axe murderer type at first when he smiled and was missing four teeth, but I figure...if I keep sucking on lollipops the way he cow-cuds on tobacco then I might be missing a few teeth too. He invited me to his apartment on my way back, like the others. Said it was just a pit stop in Arizona, but something told me to come on home. Guess that's good parenting on your part--right?

Cherry snatches a piece of puzzle from the ground and flips it like a coin in her hands. He reaches for the piece frustratedly.

CHERRY

You want this?

PAUL

You've been gone.

CHERRY

Want to know where I've been?

PAUL

Sleeping with half the country? Shooting up with somebody else's bloody needle. How the hell should I know. You've been gone.

CHERRY

Great dad. Awesome.

PAUL

Give me the piece, okay?

CHERRY

Not okay. Heads or tails?

PAUL

Give me the piece, Cherry.

Cherry laughs at her name.

CHERRY

Some stranger asked why she named me that when I was driving up through Colorado. I was at a cafe on top of Mount Evans when a plaid shirt wearing moose man plopped down and started a real conversation with me...aren't those just nice, dad. Real conversations?

Paul sighs, exasperated.

PAUL

You went to Colorado?

CHERRY

For a week. They have all these Native American tchotchke shops with rocks that are steeped in mythic rites and rituals. I'm a Grossular Garnet, or at least that's what the kid behind the counter told me as I popped his checkout cherry. The rock's naturally green...

She points to her hair.

CHERRY

Weird, right? Irony's a bitch. The card was like--here.

She goes and pulls out a card from a pocket of her pants.

CHERRY

"The Grossular Garnet- rooted in the ground around her, mother earth's stone protects with the folds of her branches and the covering willow of her hugs." Funny to think of me as a mommy right? She'd be proud of that--and then she'd think the salesman was a fucking quack artist.

Paul scoffs.

PAUL

A Mom?

He laughs.

You're not soft. You're the kind of stone that draws blood.

CHERRY

(Wounded pride)

Ouch.

PAUL

Now, hand the piece over.

Cherry drops the piece in a tall pile. She kicks at it with her foot, disappearing the piece. Paul shoves her ankle away. She bites.

CHERRY

Must have sucked for her--7 months along at 16. 'd Make me want to off/ myself too.

PAUL

Shut up!

Cherry hesitates. She bit too hard.

CHERRY

You look so tired--you look old. When you leave for a few months the whole world goes horizontal. It's like reaching the "Outer Limits."

Cherry takes out a pill and hands it to her dad.

CHERRY

Happy Pills. Here. Take one. You need it. You've been taking them without me right?

He smiles--condescending.

PAUL

Little Garnet. Maybe you are maternal.

CHERRY

Bullshit. You know that.

PAUL

My little Garnet.

He takes the pill with beer.

CHERRY

Water might be best for next time.

Paul holds a handful of pieces above his head, offering them to her.

PAUL

You want to help?

Cherry takes a step back and almost steps on the family photo puzzle. They freeze.

CHERRY

I snapped some photos--I figured maybe we could make one of these into a puzzle instead.

She pulls out her phone.

CHERRY

Look-Saguaros. They're holding hands having cactus parties and talking about all the assholes who run out of gas between Arizona and their LA dreams. Permanently parked by coyote shit and dirt devils. It's the weirdest kind of beauty.

Don't you want a puzzle of Saguaros? I feel like they're so claustrophobic. Having to be social all the time, but they do seem like a little--.

PAUL

Why should I give a damn about a cactus puzzle?

CHERRY

Saguaros.

Could be a nice--I don't know change or something.

Paul looks at the puzzle on the ground.

PAUL

I like that one. I don't want a new jigsaw.

She picks some pieces up, handing them to Paul. A pause.

CHERRY

I need to tell you something.

PAUL

Great--Hand me that piece over there?

Paul flips over a piece in front of him. Ignoring her.

CHERRY

I need to tell/ you something.

PAUL

It's a goddamn cardinal again. Have you ever looked at it? I think it's laughing. Little shit eating grin. I hate it.

CHERRY

Dad!--

She tries to ask again, but backs out, nervous. He intentionally ignores her.

CHERRY

(Resigned)

So the medicine?

PAUL

I feel more focused when I'm on it. I take it.

CHERRY

Good. And your heart medicine?

PAUL

Sometimes I forget.

CHERRY

That's only human. I don't worry about you for that.

PAUL

Sometimes I forget on purpose.

CHERRY

Well then--that's a good way to kill yourself.

He compulsively flips pieces over again. A pause. She tests him.

CHERRY

Quick. Efficient even.

Paul flings a piece at her and she ducks it.

CHERRY

Your bill of death would just be a post it note to the head that said weak heart--*suicide*

PAUL

Shut up!

CHERRY

wouldn't even be tossed around. Scott free dad, you wouldn't even be at risk for the wrong/ label.

PAUL

Shut up! Don't--just don't talk about it.

Paul scampers to Cherry, getting more and more agitated, begging at her feet.

PAUL

There's four full boxes left. Maybe I put it in them? Dump 'em out. Over there. Goddamn it Cherry, help me or don't.

Frustrated and hurt, Cherry picks up four boxes stacked in a corner. She pulls the lid off on each one. She dumps out the first box and there's silence as the pieces pour out with the sound of rainfall.

PAUL

They're all starting to look the same and every time I see more pieces--what does our puzzle look like? Our family? What does her piece look like?

She starts to dump out the second box and Paul crawl towards her wading through the puzzle pieces already strewn on the ground. When he reaches her she dumps out the second box and he lets the pieces run through his hands searching for the one he wants.

PAUL

It's not even under the couch. I've looked for it--there's dust bunnies and belly up roaches but I can't find her piece. I never moved it--it must be here--it's here. I'm just the idiot who lost the piece of his own wife.

With the third box she dumps he gets more and more frustrated, throwing the pieces behind him he doesn't want. With the fourth box he kneels directly under the pieces she's dropping being baptized in them.

PAUL

None of them are her. None of them here, are her. Did you find her? When you left--did you find her somewhere out there? You were closer.

CHERRY

No.

PAUL

You had to have--because she's not with me.

CHERRY

She's not there either.

PAUL

What color hair did she have?

CHERRY

We have pictures.

PAUL

But what did it smell like?

CHERRY

Dad...

A pause.

CHERRY

I saw Antelope Canyon. The walls were fire and sand. The kind where you see purple even though it's all orange and red--where you close your eyes and the world feels like real magenta. It would be a great puzzle.

PAUL

What did she sound like?

CHERRY

I went to Mendenhall Glacier Caves--in Alaska, Daddy. I went to Alaska on my own and I felt like a real adult and nearly froze my ass off when I didn't wear a warm enough coat. Cold hurts like a fucking paper cut. I could feel the bones of my face and the blood rushing above them. A lot of things hurt--a fuck ton. But--Nothing hurts more than cold.

A pause. A resolution.

CHERRY

I'm gonna tell you something.

Paul's holding a piece up to the light examining it. Cherry shakes her head growling and rubbing her face.

CHERRY

Fuck this.

A pause.

Daddy. I'm pregnant.

He drops the piece.

PAUL

No you're not.

CHERRY

I'm an almost mom now. I didn't find her. But I'm having a kid. And it's knocking the wind out of me and I needed a home again.

PAUL

A home only when it's convenient.

CHERRY

Dad?

PAUL

I can't find her face. I've been looking at these puzzle pieces for 8 months. You walked out that door and I've been stuck here searching and then you come back and you're practically jumping to replace her? You're ready to throw in my face that you're ready to be a mom, that you're ready to love like that? To be like that? To swap out that face I love with yours?

He picks up a handful of pieces and throws them at Cherry.

PAUL

No.

He does it again.

PAUL

No! NO! Nonono. I say no. You don't get to be a mom. You don't get to grow. You--we don't get to age or change or move or heal until I can find her face again! I sat in her chair yesterday--and all the cushion was still in it. It's been sitting there alone, and I felt more in touch with the unused chair than my own dead wife. I pulled out hair from the drain in the shower and it was short, Cherry. There was no sign of her in it. I buried my face in pillows and rolled it to every side and it smelled like me. It smelled like my aftershave. I went into her closet and laid out all her old sweaters, only sweaters--and I couldn't remember the last time I had looked at her and said you are the most beautiful person that ever decided I was worth caring about. And when I pulled out her shoes I realized I forgot what colors look like--she loved green. Wore green everything. I notice Cherry. That's why you dyed your hair isn't it? I forget, every single day, different things about your mother because she took herself away from me. And you, you evaporate like water and when I open my eyes you're there and then I close them--I hold on to what's left of her when I think in the corners of my eyes I can feel what she smelled like--skin and Pledge and dish soap, but I open my eyelids and you're gone. The one piece of her that's right in my pocket always and I've lost you too--and no one kisses me anymore. I don't remember how to kiss.

A pause.

Cherry--you can't be a mom, because you need a mom. I need your mom. I don't know how to need her less.

CHERRY

She's not in these pieces.

PAUL

She's not out there either.

A choked pause.

I loved her.

CHERRY

But that wasn't enough.

A pause.

Be happy Dad. Change.

PAUL

I need her permission.

CHERRY

You have mine.

Paul crawls on his knees towards Cherry. He leans his head against her flat belly like a husband worshipping his newly pregnant wife.

CHERRY

I think we should make a puzzle of the saguaro's. There's none of them for miles and then they all stand there holding hands. They all stand there happy. They all stand there, dad.

Cherry squishes the puzzle picture of the family. Paul catches one of the pieces that falls and puts it in his pocket.

CHERRY

A real family.

She drops the puzzle pieces like scattering the ashes of the deceased in the wind. She looks back at her father.

CHERRY

Dad?

She extends her hand to him. The lights fade.

END PLAY