

Framed

Wait, that's not my dad!

I'd just finished a trip halfway across the country, from New England to Kansas City, or, more accurately, to rural environs forty miles outside the metropolis. We'd sung probably 2000 beer bottles off the wall, found every letter in the alphabet on signs in each state, and played cards until they were so mutilated you knew half the deck by looking at the creases in the bicycles on their backs.

Grandma had just ensconced me in the north bedroom, dust motes swirling in afternoon sun over a multi-colored quilt.

"Find a place for your stuff. You can use the bureau there. Supper's at 6 and then go to bed early. You're working with cousin Ed on the farm tomorrow."

I'd spent a few minutes staring at my teenage face in the distorted mirror that overhung the dark oaken antique, wondering if that mustache would really come in or not, then filled two drawers out of my suitcase. I was looking for a spot for the last few items, and pulled out a heavy leather tome, gold filigree, and opened it. A wedding album.

Mom was pretty, I thought, flipping to a random page.

But Dad really looks different.

I mean really different. Dad was medium build, balding, and what hair he had left was blond.

This guy was taller, with a full head of black hair.

I looked at the date.

Two years before I was born, so, what, a year before Mom and Dad had married?

Who was this guy?

I looked closer at the couple.

Mom beamed back at me, wisps of veil framing a smile that even in black and white, glowed.

I've done it. I found the one I was looking for, my forever.

What had happened to him?

There was no active war for him to die in.

Was it an industrial accident? A car wreck?

Or had she left him? Changed in a year from smiling bliss to despair because he'd slept with one of her bridesmaids? Cowered in her bedroom when he came home drunk one night to kick the dog before he'd knocked her around a bit?

I looked at him more closely.

He didn't seem evil.

He didn't share the same joyous smile as hers. He was more composed, reserved. Almost as if he'd won a race, or a contest. Assured. Not quite smug.

A new thought came to me.

Maybe he'd left her.

Finally gotten what he wanted, and, after just a few months, gotten bored and moved on.

Chased after a new prize.

Or maybe he hadn't done the chasing? Maybe he'd been the one chased off. I knew Grandad kept his shotgun hidden on a couple of hooks above the inside of the coat closet. I'd found it last year looking for an attachment to the vacuum.

I looked closer.

Yes, tall.

Darker hair.

That's not my dad.

Faint mustache on his upper lip.

A face that looked a little like the one I'd stared at in the mirror earlier.

That's not my dad.

Or was he?