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The Replacement

When Rachael Devons was a kid, she'd always thought her parents were like gods. Funny how kids always saw their parents as immortal, never to change, never to leave them behind. Certainly, Rachael had never thought her dad would up and kick the bucket a month shy of her eighteenth birthday, just after she unpacked all of the crap college students always brought their first semester of college which they'll never look at afterwards.

Ages later, Rachael walked up to her father's grave. She felt something twist in her stomach as the tall iron gates towered behind her, the rows upon rows of marble blocks and frozen stone angels, looming like dark sentinels. She cringed at the thought of her father filed away with all those people, buried under six feet of rotting earth. Dad always said he'd get a headstone with a funny saying, something like 'Out on Vacation' or something like that. Mom wouldn't let him. Instead, he got a flat little stone with his name and dates, half-devoured by the grass on his plot.

Rachael tried to keep the grass down whenever she visited, but with as rarely as she came home, the grass ran her down. Kneeling down, she pulled out a pair of plastic safety scissors and started snipping down the blades. By the third blade, her knees hurt. By the thirtieth, she reconsidered actually hiring someone to do this for her as her back shrieked at her. She squished the thought. Dad would have done the same for her. She ignored the spike of resentment which tried to break free. No, he would have done it. He just up and died first.

Her mom had once told her that this was where generations of Devons were buried. One day, she said, even she and Rachael would take their places there, right in the family plot. Rachael shivered. She could smell the rot from here. When they buried her father, Rachael had put their last family photo in his casket. She'd watched as they lowered her father into the ground, throwing dirt on their memories.

At the funeral, all Rachael could remember was how unnaturally smooth his face had looked, like someone had given him post-mortem Botox shots all around his face. It had been like looking at a wax doll that happened to wear her father's best suit, the one he always said made him look like one of the actors in *The Matrix*. Rachael almost screamed when she first saw him. Nothing had prepared her for having to look at him like that.

She managed to heave herself up from her knees, stumbling as they buckled with a sharp stab of pain followed by that near painful pins and needles feeling. She turned to her beat up Toyota Corolla. It was time to bit the bullet. A few minutes later, Rachael pulled into the cracked cement driveway of her mom's home, narrowly missing her Mom's hideous lawn gnomes. After Rachael's dad died, Mom replaced him with the ugly ceramic creatures. She found the first one on the way home from the funeral. It had been laying on its side, its dirt smudged cracked face planted firmly against a spectacularly roach-ridden couch, dirt from God knows where half-covering its blocky legs. Her mom fell in love with it at first sight. Rachael? She discovered a deep-seated fear of lawn gnomes. Knife wielding gnomes a la *Chucky* chased her through her nightmares for weeks. In the coming months, lawn gnome after lawn gnome crept up into every corner of the house. Rachael dreaded the day one would wait for her in her closet at night when she came home over Christmas break.

And then, one day, about a year after her dad died, a new gnomish figure made himself comfortable in her mom's house. When Rachael first met Richard Little she had thought her nightmares had crawled out of her mind and into real life. Richard was as gnomish a man as she had ever seen, complete with stained overalls, long curly beard, and abnormally crimson cheeks. Rachael's mom picked him up at Home Depot right next to the gnomes.

Rachael put on the emergency brake, ignoring the lawn gnome marking the start of the sidewalk.

"Welcome back," Richard said. He leaned against the doorway, this time wearing green overalls. "Your mother is in the back."

Rachael resisted the urge to flinch. Remember, she thought, it's just that guy. She ignored Richard's offer to help with her bags as she hauled her unwieldy, puke green suitcase out of her car. She suppressed her sense of resentment. Her mom had replaced her dad with a breathing lawn gnome. No more than a year after her dad died, Rachael's mom married Richard. Her return marked the sixth month of their marriage.

Later, over the dinner table, they stared at each other over the piles of mac 'n cheese, daring each other to be the one to break the silence. Rachael played with her tower of the yellow-orange lumpy goop, scooping up some with her spoon and drowning the shriveled looking green beans. Richard alternated between twiddling his thumbs and glancing at her mom in a desperate plea for help. His beard hovered dangerously close to dipping itself in cheese. She didn't notice; too busy focusing on cutting up a chicken strip.

"So," Richard began, his voice rising up an octave like he'd swallowed a balloon's worth of helium. "How are your classes going?"

Rachael stabbed a chicken strip, feeling a sudden longing for that Calculus textbook in her dorm room. It made a perfect shield for avoiding questions; all you had to do was hold it open in front of you and suddenly, everyone was too busy avoiding the memories of the last math class they had to take to want to approach you. She let herself zone out, blurring her surroundings.

"Fine, I guess."

"Do you like your teachers?"

"They're fine."

She refocused her eyes onto the knob of the chair Richard claimed. It was shiny and smooth, like someone had taken polish to it. Back when her dad was alive, he'd made that chair. He'd made the whole dining room set, table and all. He was always handy like that. Her mom had always said that was one reason she married him: he could take any material at all and turn it into something beautiful. But this guy, this gnomish replacement? He couldn't even hammer a nail without smashing his finger in the process. Rachael herself ended up having to help fix things up every time she came home on her breaks, just like her dad had taught her.

“How do you like the food? I made your favorite things. You still like mac ‘n cheese, right?” her mom said in between bites the size of a postage stamp. Her eyebrows squished in hesitation, like she was afraid of what Rachael's answer would be.

Rachael hadn't liked mac ‘n cheese for ages, not ever since that first semester at college when she managed to get the king and queen of all bouts of diarrhea after downing the artificial-tasting muck her dining center liked to call its mac ‘n cheese special. Yeah, it was special all right. Especially painful, that is. She forced herself to take a bite. The liquidy mound slid down her throat like phlegm, almost making her gag.

“Tastes great, mom,” she said, somehow keeping a straight face. Well, as straight a face as one could have while trying not to choke.

Her mom's forehead smoothed out. “Great! I was afraid you'd grown out of liking it with you going off to college and all.”

“Right...” Rachael took another bite. This time, it lodged itself somewhere in her chest, making her grimace. She took a hasty swig of the whole milk her mom had insisted she have—something about a growing girl needing some real milk, not that fake stuff at school, whatever that meant—to dislodge it.

The awkward silence returned again.

“So, how’s the office?” Richard said.

“I work in McDonald’s,” Rachael deadpanned.

“Oh. So...have a boyfriend yet?”

Was he really going there? “No.”

“Well, that’s fine. Getting started too young isn’t good anyway. You have plenty of time.”

“Thanks...” Rachael stabbed her chicken strip.

Rachael’s mom chose that moment to jump up from the table. Her face turned a pasty white as she dashed off to the bathroom, retching loudly when she got there. What was left of Rachael’s mangled appetite died instantly, withering away with every new sound. Richard grimaced.

“Sorry, she’s been doing that a lot lately,” he said, getting up to go after his wife.

When it became obvious that the nausea just wasn’t going to go away if they were to ignore it—the realization coming after the second wave, which came as soon as Rachael’s mom looked at the food just long enough to feel sick again—they resigned themselves to seeing a doctor. In one of his rare assertive moments, Richard insisted. A few minutes later, they found themselves in a tiny, sterile room in the local gynecologist’s office.

“So, yeah, you’re pregnant,” said the doctor, the shortest woman Rachael had ever seen, clicking her pen closed. “Congratulations.” She turned to Rachael. “I guess you’re not the baby of the family anymore, eh? Have fun with your new sibling.”

Rachael’s mom’s face had turned pale, but that was nothing compared to Rachael and Richard’s reactions. One would think that they were the ones who were told they were pregnant with how bleached their faces became.

“Pregnant?” Richard stuttered, pressing a hand to his forehead. He sat down on the stool, the legs creaking dangerously under his weight.

“Yes, pregnant. Three months along, if I were to guess,” the doctor said.

Richard fainted. Rachael’s mom panicked and the doctor sighed as Rachael watched him fall.

After the doctor resuscitated Richard with some foul scented smelling salts, Rachael and company wandered off to a nearby park to process the shock of the news. In retrospect, the news shouldn’t have been quite so surprising considering Rachael’s mom had been relieving herself of her meals for almost the entirety of the last month. However, Richard being male and Rachael still being more than a little irritated about the whole replacement father issue caused the both of them to gloss over some of the finer points of observation. On Rachael’s mother’s part, she had been so preoccupied with the rigors of daily life to pay much attention.

Rachael glanced at her mom through the corner of her eye, finally noticing the suspiciously disproportional roundness around her stomach. It looked kind of like her mom had shoved a tennis ball under her shirt and padded it with Kleenex. The idea that some little future sibling was forming in there made Rachael feel a little nauseous. She tried not to imagine the kid, but the images came anyway: a miniature Richard, complete with a beard on its bald head, grinning with a full set of teeth in the newborn’s mouth. Rachael shuddered.

“A child,” Richard said to her mom.

“Yes?”

“We’re having a child?”

“That’s what the doctor said.”

“What happens now?”

What do you think happens now? Rachael wanted to say. Instead, she looked away. A few yards away, a wedding party, bride and all, posed for their photographer. Rachael clenched her jaw. A few months ago, it had been her mom and Richard who were posing for the camera, smiling sickeningly happily. It should have been her dad who was there, not Richard. If he hadn't died...

“Rachael?” her mom asked her, poking her shoulder.

Rachael shook herself out of her stupor. “Pardon, what?”

“Are you all right?” Her mom had that look on her face she always used when she wanted to get Rachael to confess to something. It looked kind of a cross between terror and an intense stare, complete with the raised eyebrows and wide eyes. Rachael subconsciously backed away.

“I'm fine.”

The bride posed with her bridal bouquet, surrounded by the bridesmaids. The flower girl, a mass of poufy pink in the distance, tripped over her skirt, sending rose petals flying everywhere.

Her mom paused for a second, breathing harder, a hand on her chest. Richard hovered around her mom like a bearded fairy, arms half raised as if he would need to catch her.

“Do you need to take a break? We can take a break if you want,” he said.

Her mom's eye twitched. “Richard, I'm pregnant, not sick. Stop that.”

Rachael sniggered under her breath until her mom's glare made her freeze. “Sorry.”

They strolled for a little longer until the weather decided to make its displeasure known and dumped a large quantity of icy water on their heads, making them all resemble translucent wonton wrappers. An hour and a change of clothes later, Rachael and Richard were sent out on a mission to buy

a Wii and a game to pass the time. Rather fearing the reaction if they said no, they went without argument.

Richard stared at the Wii system display case like a man who had no idea what he was looking at. In fact, Rachael was pretty sure the guy had never seen one in his life, let alone had gone near any game system since SNES was still the big new thing. The one time Rachael had tried to introduce him to gaming, back before her Playstation had broken, he had managed to break both of her remotes. Needless to say, she never let him near her machine again.

However, even though she was in her all time favorite section of Wal-Mart, something kept her from truly enjoying the experience. Perhaps it was her stepfather's insistence on touching everything within sight and muttering some nonsense like a Neanderthal first exposed to fire. Or perhaps it was the awkward way he skirted around her like she was going to sink her teeth in him the first chance she got. No, she decided, it was that hat, that damn red hat which made him look even more like a demented lawn gnome than he had before.

Her mom loved to knit. She loved it almost more than sewing and God knows Rachael had enough homemade shirts to prove it. For the last few months, her mom went from mildly enthusiastic to downright crazy about knitting, buying every book on the topic and heaps upon heaps of yarn, crammed into every spare corner of her sewing room. Misshapen hats the color of the rainbow covered every remaining surface of the room, spilling out into the rest of the house. The specimen currently settling in a misshapen heap on Richard's head like a dunce cap was her mom's latest creation. Some days, Rachael wondered if her mom really wanted to torture her.

She was broken out of her thoughts by Richard trying to play the Wii game demo...with the remote backwards. Weighing the options of either a, watching Richard humiliate himself in public or, b, do something before he figured things out himself, she decided to take pity on him and intervene.

“Hey,” she said, reluctantly coming closer. She had become a little less anxious around him since she had first met him, but the hat was bringing up unpleasant memories and she didn’t want to get any closer than she had to.

No reaction. Richard kept swinging around the remote in an attempt to make Link move. He growled in frustration when Link wandered in the opposite direction.

“Uh, Richard?” A little boy behind them pointed and laughed. Rachael glared at the brat before poking at Richard. “Hey, we’re supposed to get Mario Party. Mom’ll get pissed if we take too long.”

That seemed to get his attention. When he realized how close Rachael was, Richard jumped back, nearly jamming his back into the demo station. “R-right.”

Thirty minutes and more money than Rachael cared to think about (even if it wasn’t her money) later, they returned home, where Rachael’s mom waited for them in the living room, a huge bowl of popcorn on the table.

By the time Rachael returned for Christmas break, her mom had expanded to roughly the size of a baby pool. Luckily, whatever brain cells Rachael still had left intact after her finals kept her from actually commenting about it and consequently earned her a few more decades on earth. In the time since her mom’s pregnancy was discovered, Rachael and Richard had bonded. Or, to be more precise, they involved themselves in a conspiracy otherwise known as the Plan to Get Mom to Relax Properly, which largely centered on getting her to stop running around at eight months pregnant. Mom was not amused.

So, when Rachael attempted to drive up the icy driveway—eventually giving up after the fifth attempt and near miss of the neighbor’s cat and parking on the street, praying the snow plow wouldn’t hit her car. Actually, take that back; if it got hit, she’d have an excuse to buy a new one. Back to the story—

she was a little more than a little nervous to see her mom standing there in her maternity gown looking rather disturbingly happy with the most hideous Christmas sweater in her hands.

“Welcome home, Rachael,” she said, shoving the sweater into her daughter’s chest. “Do be a dear and wear that, please.”

“O-kay,” Rachael said.

The inside of the house looked like Santa’s Workshop had puked all over every available square inch of property. Tinsel stuck to everything and everywhere, dousing the place in a dust tinged sparkling hue. At least twenty strands of Christmas lights plagued the entryway alone and the living room contained such a large, elaborately decked out tree that Rachael had to duck under its limbs to get into the living room. Richard huddled in front of the fireplace, also wearing a Christmas sweater along with yet another hideous red cap, this one so long, the tip brushed against his upper back.

“She got you, too, didn’t she?” he said, glancing at her without turning.

“Yup.”

Her mom waddled into the room, ducking awkwardly under the branches.

“Now that we’re here, let’s get started,” she said. “We have one hour until the doctor’s appointment.” She dumped a pile of wrapping paper and scarves on the table.

“What is this?” Rachael asked. When did her mom even find the time to knit all of that? Rachael had been under the impression she had been so busy with everything that she hadn’t the time to do her hobby to her usual extent. An hour later, Rachael’s nose was burning from all the contact with the wool.

When Rachael’s mom finally let Rachael stop wrapping scarves to go get in the car, Rachael nearly cried from relief. On the drive to the doctor’s office, her mom put on Christmas music during the entire ride. Rachael stared out the window, trying to block the repetitive tunes. Once they finally arrived

at the doctor's office, Richard and she sat in the corner of the examination room in blessed silence, watching the doctor put the jell on her mom's stomach. They watched, rapt, as the ultrasound revealed the wiggling form of Rachael's new sibling.

Rachael watched the baby shift on the screen, a shadowy moving form she'd one day have to call her sibling. This gray blob was going to be her mom's new kid, her replacement. It'll be just her mom, Richard, and the kid. Once this kid was born, her mom would have her new family. Question was, would Rachael have a place or would she be tossed away, right into the memory grave with her dad.

Richard touched the screen, looking at his first kid in awe. No one noticed when Rachael slipped out, too busy congratulating her mom on her healthy developing baby and cooing how cute it was.

A week later, Rachael contemplated the diaper aisle at Wal-Mart. More specifically, she tried to calculate the sheer volume of baby poop and pee which would go through the glorified tampons.

"Richard," her mom was saying, "newborns aren't that big. Get the smaller one." She pointed at the three-month size kitten baby jammies Richard held out. He obediently put it back and retrieved the correct size.

"Rachael, we don't need diapers just yet. Your little sister isn't going to be born for a while yet," Rachael's mom said. The woman grimaced. "Darn, I forgot how much babies weigh. My back is killing me. This isn't even as heavy as you were. You were such a fat little baby."

"Mom!"

"What? It's true. Anyway, go look for pink yarn. I want to knit your sister a blanket."

"Fine..." Rachael shuffled to the second most boring part of Wal-Mart. It was not the first as the holiday section still reigned as Rachael's least favorite place to be.

Her mom looked so happy picking out clothes with Richard. When Rachael's dad died, it had been like someone had sucked the soul out of her. Rachael had been much the same. She had wandered around in a listless daze, not even really noticing her surroundings. Once, Rachael had been in such a daze, she'd managed to walk all the way to the mall without realizing it.

On her part, Rachael's mom took up her lawn gnome collecting hobby. Before he died, Rachael's dad had designed lawn ornaments by way of a hobby outside of his career as a carpenter. When he died, Rachael's mom substituted the gnomes. It was like she was trying to revive her husband through the ugly things. When she met Richard, she stopped collecting. After that, it was like she was reborn.

Rachael knew, intellectually, that she should be grateful to Richard for this, but for some reason, all she could feel was profound irritation. Her mom was all she had left of her old family, the one she had before her dad up and died. Richard's insertion into her mom's life broke up that family.

Rachael grabbed a bundle of hideously pink yarn and wandered off to the gaming section.

Just before she went off to college—about a month before her dad's death—Rachael and her dad had sat down to play a game of checkers. Now, her dad was a total board game nerd. He had been the guy to buy everything *Dungeons and Dragons* and owned enough traditional board games to fill the first floor hallway closet.

Normally, Rachael was rather lukewarm about the whole board game business, being practically raised by gaming consoles, but since she had been about to leave for her Great College Adventure, she'd relented her teenage pride and consented to a game. It was a rainy day which, according to her professors, should have tipped her off to her impending year of misery beyond the normal teenage angst. Rachael, of course, being in the present and not being psychic and having slept through all of her literature classes anyway, didn't get the hint. Instead, she cheerfully chatted away about her college plans to the man who, one month later, would die of a sudden case of stupidity. The stupidity in this case,

however, being on a driver's part (the stupidity of imbibing the wrong kind of beverage with breakfast). She would always curse herself for having the last thing she ever said to her dad be "Is that really edible?"

Rachael's thoughts were interrupted by a loud squeal from the intercom.

"Excuse me," a thin, nasally voice said, "Will Rachael Devons please come to Customer Service. I repeat, will Rachael Devons come to Customer Service. Thank you."

"Eh?" Rachael said. Her attention divided, Link died on the Wii Demo. "Damn."

By the time she got to Customer Service, she found paramedics carrying her mom off, a panic stricken Richard keeping pace. Rachael caught up, ditching the yarn on a random shelf.

"What's wrong? What's happening to my mom?"

"She went into labor while we were looking at baby shoes," Richard said.

"But she's a month early!"

"Yes, I know."

As they drove in the car behind the ambulance, they glanced at each other. Rachael felt vulnerable. She wrung her hands, shifting nervously in her seat.

"She'll be fine," Richard said.

"What?"

"She'll be fine. We'll be fine. Don't worry."

For the first time, the irritation towards him began to die down. She smiled at him tentatively.

Becky decided to be born dinnertime. Encased in a wad of Mickey Mouse blankets with a pink knitted cap on her head, Becky looked redder and wrinklier than an Oompa Loompa, sans the green hair.

"Do you want to hold her?" her mom said, holding out the bundle to Rachael.

Rachael numbly picked Becky up, holding her at arm's length away from her body. The baby scrunched up her face and started crying, sending panicky waves through Rachael.

“Why is she crying?” Rachael said, trying to hand the baby back.

Her mom laughed. “She just wants more support. Lay her against your shoulder so she’s closer to you.”

As soon as Rachael did so, Becky stopped crying. The little girl smiled, making a fist in Rachael’s shirt. The baby’s body was a comforting warmth, like holding an almost hot beanbag that happened to breathe in her arms. Something clicked in her mind as she stared at the baby’s tiny fingers and smile. She suddenly had a hard time remembering why she was so angry all the time with that cute face so close to hers. She suppressed the urge to coo, not sure where that came from. It was both comforting and slightly disturbing, but Rachael was broken out of her thoughts when Becky yawned at her older half-sister, rubbing her face against Rachael’s shirt.