

Original Sins

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Thanks to everyone who's put up with my talking about this.

Chapter 14

Normalcy Is a Process

“I thought I was going to have to knife somebody just to make room,” Alex said as she sat down at the table. It was a cheap thing that looked as if it was been bought surplus from another failed coffeeshop, mostly due to how its mosaic surface was at odds with the rest of the mostly wooden-and-bamboo decor. Her massive au lait mug probably cost more than the table itself: Jimmy’s plain black coffee in a to-go cup represented the other extreme, with little flecks of the wax lining of the paper cup already floating atop the steaming liquid. The shop was raucous with the noise of many conversations and the echoes of bad acoustic design: one would have to shout to be heard more than a few feet away.

Jimmy gave an economical shrug, the sort of thing that could have conveyed anything from mild disagreement to faint acquiescence. “Europe’s always loved coffee. The first coffeeshop opened in Vienna, you know.”

She rolled her eyes, which was probably more sarcastic than anything she could’ve said. “Anyway.”

Jimmy took a sip of his coffee and watched her. He didn’t say anything. After a few seconds of this she scowled and began to watch him back,

her own expressions a mocking parody of his. The patience of teenage daughters not being as great as that of their fathers, though, within fifteen seconds she was withdrawing into her seat and looking down at her au lait.

“You always do this, you know.” From her it wasn’t an accusation but an acknowledgment of a bleak reality. “You always withdraw. You don’t talk. You came all this way just to give me the silent treatment.”

He shook his head in the negative, keeping his eyes on her.

“Yes you are, Dad! Jesus Christ, listen to yourself! You’re like a monk with social anxiety disorder or something!”

Jimmy lifted an eyebrow in something that could’ve been amusement. He shook his head again a moment later, as if perhaps he’d had to think on it for a bit.

“Dad.” Alex leaned forward, her forearms on the table and her center of mass above them, closing the distance precipitously. “You want to talk to me, then you’re going to have to talk to me because I am not going to do this thing where you’re silent and I’ve got to read the tea leaves to understand what’s going on.” There was a heartbeat of pause, and then — “I deserve a lot better than this.”

Jimmy took a sip of his coffee, let that be all his answer for a bit. “All right,” he said once the cup was back down on the table. “Ask a question.”

“Why do you keep giving us the back of your hand, and you’re all Mr. Friendly to everyone else?”

He gave his head a brief shake. “I’m not. Listen, Alex — when I’m working a room, that’s . . . that’s not me. That’s just skills. Anybody can learn them. But who I am, who I really am, is just . . . this. Quiet-like. If you want me to get talkative I’ll do it, but you won’t be seeing who I am.”

She scowled, thought about it for a bit and stalled for time by blowing on her au lait. “Okay. So assuming argento you’re, like, this warrior-monk

with a vow of silence. What happened? Why?"

"Arguendo."

"Whatever."

"Repeat it. Get the word right."

She rolled her eyes again. "I'm not twelve, Dad." Silence went back and forth between them for a few more seconds, a battle of wills over finer points of vocabulary. With a sigh she relented. "Assuming *arguendo* that you hate talking, why do you hate it?"

Jimmy broke the eye contact to stare down at his cup of coffee. Nothing happened for so long that Alex finally repeated the question. "Why do you hate it?"

Jimmy nodded a couple of times, then looked back up at her. "Seventeen. You're seventeen."

She arched a brow and mocked him with her own silence.

"Seventeen." He shook his head, then looked down. "I remember when I had you in the palm of my hand and your feet in the crook of my elbow, you know? And—"

"—And you remember it because I pissed all over your dress blues, yeah, Dad, I know."

"Funniest Goddamn thing," he said with a barely-suppressed chuckle. "I walked out of the maternity ward with big stains all over my left side and smelling like piss and Pablo and Colonel Harcourt are out there laughing at me and... you know, he refused to consider me out of uniform? Colonel Harcourt, he said that of all the things that can stain a uniform, your newborn daughter's first piss sure beats the hell out of blood, shit, vomit, or anything else that tends to get on 'em."

"I know, Dad. You've told me that story about fifty times."

"No, I haven't. Not like this. There's a lot more to that story. I told

you some things that day, standing there with you, okay? And I know you don't remember them. I promised you, though, I promised you that when you were old enough I'd tell you again." He stopped, stared at her a moment incredulously. "Seventeen. When in God's name did you turn seventeen?"

She didn't answer.

"Thank you," he said after a moment. "Seriously, thank you. Thanks for not saying 'last September.' This is hard, Alex." He shook his head for another moment, and then — "Seventeen. All right. You want me to make good on that promise now?"

She nodded once, silently.

"When I grew up, Alex, my dad ...he wasn't an evil man. He just chose to do evil things. He was an alcoholic. He took swings at my mom, at me. He'd drink all our grocery money and Mom and I'd be stuck eating tins of Vienna sausage for dinner. When I told him I was hungry, well. On a good day he'd offer me some of his whiskey. On bad days he'd beat the hell out of me. Because, you know, didn't I know how hard he worked just to provide what we had? Why couldn't I be grateful for all that he did for us?"

"— Granddad beat you and grandma?"

"All the Goddamn time, Alex. All the Goddamn time. That's part of why you never met either of them. Why neither your mom nor I ever talked about them. Anyway. So, finally, I'm fourteen. I'm sitting there in the kitchen with Mom and Dad's just pulled up. He's been out hunting, but that's really code for sitting around in one of his alky friend's back yards drinking, boozing and blowing the shit out of whatever tree stump has the misfortune of being there. He comes in and he bellows, you know, loud as the Devil, why the fuck isn't dinner ready? And he was supposed to get

groceries so we could have dinner. But he didn't. And he had a shotgun in his hand, he hadn't put it back in the gun rack yet. I tried to tell him, you know, I tried to tell him I'd go to the grocery. And he sneered at me and asked with what money. Next thing I knew—"

Jimmy held up his hands, mimicked striking someone with the butt of a shotgun.

"Pow. Right in the head. And that's when things get a little hazy, because I'm concussed. And that's the hardest Dad's ever hit me, and it hit me so hard I couldn't even hear. And there's blood everywhere and I'm bleeding and my nose is bleeding and my cheekbone's broken and I'm bleeding from my shoulder and I don't know why and for once Mom isn't screaming and I don't know why. And then I looked over at Mom, and I knew I was going to get beat again because he hates it when we look to each other for help, but Mom's not there, and—"

He became dimly aware of Alex leaning across the table now, her hand atop his wrist, taking hold of it. "Dad. Dad. Dad." He wasn't sure how many times she'd said it, but after a few iterations the word sunk in, and he brought his incoherency to a halt.

He took a few breaths, composed himself. When he next spoke, it was with careful, practiced neutrality. "Mom took a twelve-gauge from about six inches. I don't know if he put the muzzle in her face and pulled the trigger or if he was stupid enough to leave his finger on the trigger when he slammed me. Doesn't matter either way. He decapitated her. Her skull was reduced to splinters. A couple of bone splinters hit me, cut up my face, one splinter went into my deltoid. And there was all this blood, Alex. All this blood, just a fountain of it that turned into this stinking reddish-pink fog that got all over my clothes, my face. My eyes. The police, they have photographs of me at the scene." A pause, then — "Listen to me.

Describing the house I grew up in as 'the scene.' Jesus. Anyway. They have photographs. And what I remember is Dad looking surprised for a moment. And then he yelled at me, so loud I could hear it over the ringing in my ears. 'I bet you're going to fucking rat me out, aren't you? You little fucking rat.' He aimed the shotgun at me next, pulled the trigger, but — nothing happened. Out of ammunition. So he went for the chef's knife, and me, I ran like hell into the street, screaming. Once I was out he realized it was all up. He reloaded the shotgun, waited for the cops to arrive. But the cops didn't kill him, no. He just wanted an audience for when he checked himself out."

Alex whispered a single word. "Jesus." For once, it sounded like a prayer.

"So I got wrapped up pretty tight for a while," Jimmy continued, as if he hadn't heard Alex at all. "And that's the story of your grandma and grandpa. That's what I told you about, the day you were born. And that's why we haven't talked about them since."

"... And that's why you're so quiet around your family today?"

He watched her for a few seconds, then gave a shrug. "Kind of."

"There's more to it, isn't there."

He gave a wan smile. "There always is."

"But you're not going to tell me."

"Not tonight."

She gave a brief nod of acquiescence. Then — "Is that all you told me, Dad? In the maternity ward?"

He shook his head no. "There's more. But not tonight. Not tonight, Alex. Some things... you don't ever recover from them. The best you can do is find some way to keep breathing."

"The Trick Is To Keep Breathing."

“Yes.”

“No, I mean — that’s a song, Dad. The name of a song.”

He gave a wry smile then, and a hint of humor appeared in his eyes. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of it, but I like it already.”

“Garbage.”

“Well, maybe, but it sounds like it actually understands—”

“No, Dad, the band is Garbage—” She stopped, momentarily frustrated, then fixed a glare at her father. “Did you just set me up for a Who’s On First?”

Her father’s smile broke out after a moment: it was clearly a struggle to keep it restrained as far as he did. “Honey, their first album came out a month before you were born, and I used to joke with your mother that Shirley Manson was her only competition. Yes. I know *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing*. Hadn’t thought about it in a while, though.”

“Do you like them?”

“What?”

“Do you like the band?”

Jimmy quirked a brow at Alex. “I still want a hot date with Shirley Manson, so, I’d call that a ‘yes.’ Why? Are they important to you?”

Alex gave a confused shake of her head. “No. I mean, yeah, but — they’re not exactly my thing, you know? They’re more your generation than mine. They’re okay, I guess. Why do you want to know?”

“Because you’re seventeen and . . . I dunno.” A pause, and then — “We have to start somewhere, Alex. Finding out what music you like seems like as good a place as any.”

She nodded once to that, looked down at her now-cold au lait, shoved the bowl-like mug aside. “Make you a deal, Dad. Straight up, take it or leave it.”

"I'm listening."

"I'll make you a CD of every piece of music I've got that speaks to me. Everything that makes me angry, makes me sad, happy. Even the stuff that, you know, uh —"

"— Makes you frisky. Let's just put it that way."

"— yeah."

"I knew your mom when she was your age. There's this jazz artist, Candy Dulfer, that always put her in an affectionate mood—"

"— WTFMI, Dad!"

"— WTFMI?"

"Way too fucking much information. Don't you ever use SMS?"

"— No." Jimmy shook his head. "But you were offering me a deal."

She nodded. "You get every piece of music that speaks to me. And you. . . you tell me everything you said in the maternity ward. Everything."

He hesitated. "Alex, some of those things. . . I'd give anything for you to never need to know what I said. And I'm not sure you're ready. I learned some things way too early."

She said, calmly and quietly, "That's the only deal on the table, Dad."

He gave several seconds of serious thought, then nodded his head. "Okay."

"Okay? Deal?"

"Deal. You make the CD. You bring it to me. You promise me that everything on it speaks to you. And I'll tell you everything I said in the maternity ward. But — I'm giving one more rider here."

Cautiously, Alex ventured an "I'm listening."

Jimmy tapped the side of his now-cold cup of coffee. "You spring for heaters."

“Heaters?” She frowned, paused, and then laughed. “Oh. Refills. Sure, Dad. Okay. Refills.”