

## *Careful Little Edits*

By Sirena Van Schaik

*My name is George...my friends call me Stoney.*

The letter starts simply; my fingers run over the paper carefully tracing the words of a grandfather I never knew. One sheet of paper, aged yellow, the edges frayed where he'd torn it out of a notebook, blue ink spelling out his life in a summary of grief before his violent end. The paper preserved in time in my mother's photo album, rust-brown splatters hinting at the truth, "Nothing more than dirt," my mother, the queen of edits, said.

I nodded, at nine, I already knew I'd get no other answer. I knew the word, knew that we only said suicide when we absolutely had to...instead, we talked about the careful little edits. Talked about the wallet he'd had in his possession when they'd found his body, the rifle resting in the pool of his own blood.

My mother's picture, her youthful 16-year-old face smiling between the brown stains, tucked inside it along with the comb that he'd used every day of his life. Four items...preserved in her album...carefully curated into the right edits of how much her dad loved only her. I wondered what items they'd find on my body as it grew colder in its own pool of blood. But we didn't talk about those things, we edited everything to happy moments where my mom could pretend that the ripples of pain weren't shimmering through our family.

\*\*\*

The same edits she'd made when she found my own suicide letter at 13. "What is this?" she asked, the looseleaf, lined paper clenched in her hands. I looked at the letter, trying to figure out the edit, "Just something I wrote."

"Are you thinking of running away?"

“Would it be easier?”

“Dammit Sirena, tell me this isn’t a suicide letter. Don’t do that to me. Don’t make me live through that again.” Her blue eyes stared at me, filled with a child’s hope that her daughter had never felt.

“It’s just a stupid thing I wrote when I was going to run away.” The edit.

Her eyes closed and I knew she didn’t believe me; we’d read enough suicide letters to know better. When she opened them again, it was in her expression—she’d accepted the edit.

“Well, if you are going to run away, do it when I’m out of town.”

I nodded. She wouldn’t be there for me.

\*\*\*

But I was there for her when we received a phone call when I was 11. My mother’s voice broke, her cries filled the evening as she looked at me, waiting for me to edit the terrible truth—her brother had taken his own life. Another pebble thrown into the pool, causing new ripples through her family.

I held her as she cried, her dyed blonde hair growing limper by the second as her carefully applied mascara became dark streaks down her face. She looked at me, waited for the edit as I sat there silently. I couldn’t edit this for her...she had never taught me how.

The anger in her eyes, knowing I’d failed her, as she swiped the tears was like a slap across my face. She moved away from me, the distance colder than before, editing the facts to fit her needs. I was not the right daughter for this task, she had others who could edit with her. The funeral she attended without me, the suicide note my uncle left finding its way into her little album of loss, another yellowed page for me to read.

\*\*\*

I couldn't edit the hatred in her tone as she told me to leave at 14. "I have no where to go."

"Go live with your father," she said, her mind already editing a world without me.

"He's not my father," a fact she'd edited so well she'd forgotten. She hesitated as she shoved my clothes into garbage bags, "He'll kill me, you know that."

She winced, her face filled with worry for a second before she edited it again, "Better him than me," and I knew there was no use. I didn't fight her edits as I waited in terror for him to come and collect me. Her new edited life was about to begin.

\*\*\*

But her edits came back to haunt her. At 16, I stood before her, crying from the pain I'd endured for those years living with him. Begged her to wrap her arms around me, protect me, but her arms were wrapped around my older sister as I stood alone. I watched her face and saw the resolve to edit once more, "It wasn't that bad. You're just exaggerating."

I blinked back the tears, squared my shoulders and accepted that the edit was there. She wouldn't protect me.

\*\*\*

"He's dead," she croaked into the phone at three in the morning.

"Who?"

"My brother, Wendall, he died." Her words are filled with grief and, at 24, I couldn't help but remember that child who'd stood in a distant living room and watched my mother age in seconds when her brother, Barry, died. I couldn't see her face, but her voice had aged with each word.

"Did he kill himself?" Facts so I could edit for her.

“No. His heart gave out.”

I nodded, then started the edit until she’d stopped crying, until her voice was no longer aged but back to its youthful timbre. My child-parent filled with hope.

\*\*\*

“You never come home.” At 38, I’d heard this edit before. “Why are you so cruel? You fucking kids had it so good.”

“We didn’t,” I said, no longer willing to live her edit. I spoke into the phone, my voice filled with sadness as I said the final goodbye. I could tell after everything I’d said, she was still editing, she’d make this her ungrateful daughter’s fault. But there was nothing I could do. I told her I loved her no matter what, that I had always loved her but, for the first time, I’d loved myself more.

I winced as the phone clicked to silence and the story between us came to an end.

As I pulled out a fresh piece of paper, not stained nor crushed, but blank and white like new hope; my blue pen began—*My name is Sirena...and it's time to stop editing.*