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Professor Wood

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The Olive Branch

I am walking up a rich shaded dirt trail in the woods. I can hear the crunch of leaves and twigs under my feet. The tree canopy is tall and full above me blocking the sun from the path. There is a thick smell of damp earth and the sweetness of colorful fallen leaves. My father is by my side, quiet and thoughtful, as we walk together on a crisp fall afternoon like we had done countless times before. My handsome father is tall and broad with jet black hair and green eyes. My young heart is light and happy because I love being his sidekick. I am a little girl who adores her father.

Last spring my father had open heart surgery. I was stricken with worry about his health. He is turning eighty years old this year, and I was afraid I might never see him again. I hadn't seen or talked to my father since 2007, and I knew I needed to go home and visit. My father and I have not always seen eye to eye. I made a lot of mistakes, and I let him down. My father was always a hard, stern, stubborn man but it seemed that in his last years he was having a change of heart. He said when awoke after the surgery and the surgeon said he was going to be ok, he knew there were some things in his life he needed to fix. After all that time, he forgave me, before it was too late. I am fortunate to have this second chance with my father. To have him back in my life now means everything to me. I only wish we had more time together, because time is so precious now that my father only has another two to three years left to live.

So last summer I planned a road trip with my husband and kids to go back and see my father after ten long years. I was so happy for my family to meet him and know him and to see the home and town where I grew up. Seeing my father for the first time was a shock. I tried to prepare myself, but I was still struck by how different he looked. He was smaller, wrinkled and gray, and he seemed so frail and weak. What surprised me the most about his different appearance was that he looked happy. He was smiling, and laughing, and telling jokes. I had never seen my father like this, and it brought joy and peace to my heart.

The best part of the vacation was sitting with my father out on the deck in the mornings, drinking coffee together, and watching the birds land at the bird feeder. He could talk endlessly; a man that was always so quiet and reserved, now was telling stories for hours. One day he was telling my husband and kids the story of how he would take me hiking into the woods by our house to the stream called Winter's Run.

"Do you remember carving our initials in that tree, Jess?"

"Yes, of course, I remember Dad. When I was a teenager, I went back several times looking for that tree, but I never found it."

"You remember the old hunting knife I used with my name engraved on it?"

"Yes Dad, I do." I lied. I didn't remember the knife, but I would never forget the hikes.

"I still have it. I'm going to give it to you. It can be yours now."

I smiled and thanked him despite the sadness that panged in my heart knowing he was giving away a sentimental possession because he didn't have much longer to live. My father came right back with the knife; he must have kept it close and knew right where it was. Knowing this knife was important to my father immediately made it important to me. I wondered if he held

onto the knife to remind him of all the hikes we took together and the time spent with his sidekick.

When he placed it in my hands the rounded metal butt felt cold on my palm. The first thing I noticed was the dirt caked onto the bolster and around the top of the blade, it had not been cleaned. I'm not sure why he left it dirty, that's not like him at all, so I haven't cleaned the knife either. I'm leaving it just as he gave it to me. The smooth, thick, mahogany brown leather case felt sturdy and well oiled. The stitching is still strong and unbroken. The case has a belt loop so that it can be worn and a strap holding the handle in place with a secure metal snap fastener. The knife's handle is tightly wrapped, and while it did look old, it was still in great shape. The knife smelled like leather and old dried flowers, and it made me wonder what else was in the drawer where he had kept it tucked away. I brushed my fingers across my father's name carved in the leather on the front. It was not professionally engraved, it looked slightly bumpy and scribbled, like when I sign my name on a phone or tablet screen with my finger. But it is my father's signature, permanently frozen, and it's all mine.

Finally, there is a scratch in the leather right across my father's name: a blemish, a flaw, an imperfection. It doesn't take away from the signature on the case. It simply gives it more character. My father isn't perfect, just like I'm not perfect. We both have our regrets over time lost that we can never get back, and this knife felt like an olive branch. My father gave it to me hoping I remembered the love and relationship we once treasured. It was a gift of fond memories that we both shared. Memories of a little girl that adores her father.