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About 1100 words

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The Frame Between Them

By Joseph Laguerre

Lucas lets himself into the house, easing the door shut behind him so it doesn't echo.

The quiet meets him first.

It always does.

Everything is in its place—the same shoes lined neatly by the wall, the same faint scent of lemon cleaner, the same stillness that feels less like calm and more like something preserved as if nothing inside the house is allowed to move too far from where it was left.

He hangs his keys on the hook by the door and stands there for a second longer than he needs to, listening.

Nothing.

He moves into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. The light spills out, cool and familiar. He takes the orange juice, sets it on the counter, and reaches for a glass.

“Hey.”

Lucas turns.

Dan stands in the doorway, loosening his tie, slipping off his suede blazer and draping it over the back of a chair. His sleeves are still buttoned, his posture still straight, like he hasn't quite left the office behind.

“How was school?”

“Fine.”

Dan nods once, like the answer fits where it should. “You met with the counselor today.”

Lucas pours the juice, watching the level rise as the small bubbles gather at the surface.

“Yeah.”

A pause stretches between them, thin but noticeable.

“What’d he say?”

Lucas sets the carton down, fingers still resting on it. “We talked about options.”

“Options.”

Lucas doesn’t look up.

Dan steps further into the kitchen. “Business schools?”

Lucas leans back against the counter, glass in hand. “Not exactly.”

Dan exhales, quiet but controlled.

“Still thinking about writing.”

It isn’t a question.

Lucas takes a sip. The juice is colder than he expects, sharp against his teeth.

“I want to apply to Columbia.”

He doesn’t say anything else at first. Not the way he’s been thinking about it for weeks, not the late nights, not the blank pages that didn’t stay blank for long.

“For writing,” he adds.

Dan’s mouth tightens, just slightly.

“For writing,” he repeats.

Lucas nods.

Dan looks past him, toward the dining room, as if the answer might be sitting there instead.

“You’ve always been good with numbers,” he says. “There’s a path here. Something steady.”

Lucas sets the glass down.

“I know.”

The words come out softer than he intends, almost like an apology.

Dan studies him. “Then why walk away from it?”

Lucas pushes off the counter, taking a few steps toward the dining room before stopping halfway, like he’s forgotten what direction he meant to go.

“I’m not walking away,” he says. “I just don’t want to step into something I didn’t choose.”

Dan crosses his arms, though not as tightly as before.

“You think I chose wrong.”

Lucas shakes his head. “No.”

He hesitates.

“I think you stopped choosing.”

The words hang there.

Neither of them moves.

On the wall beside them, a photograph—Disney, years ago. The three of them, sunburned and smiling, caught in a moment that didn’t know what was coming.

Lucas reaches for it.

The frame is lighter than he expected.

“You were there,” he says, holding it up. “And then you weren’t.”

Dan doesn’t take the picture.

“After Mom...” Lucas trails off. The rest doesn’t come easily. “It was just work. Work and more work. Like that was easier.”

The kitchen feels smaller now.

Dan looks down, then away, then finally back at the photograph in Lucas’s hands.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” he says.

It’s not defensive. Not even explanatory.

Just something said out loud.

Lucas nods once, though he isn’t sure what he’s agreeing with.

He looks at the picture again.

He remembers the heat of that day, the way his mother kept laughing at nothing, the way she insisted on one more ride even when the line was too long. He remembers her hand on his shoulder, light but constant, as if she were always making sure he was still there.

He remembers thinking that things like that didn’t end.

He hands the frame to his father.

Dan takes it this time, more carefully than Lucas expected. His fingers settle along the edge, thumb brushing the corner where the glass meets wood.

“My father wanted me to stay in Stillwater,” Dan says after a moment. “Run his store.”

Lucas leans against the doorway now, listening.

“I didn’t.”

Dan lets out a breath, something uneven beneath it.

“I had a teacher, Marlowe. He told me not to listen. Said fathers... they think they’re protecting you.”

He glances toward Lucas, briefly.

“Sometimes they don’t know what they’re protecting you from.”

The room settles around them again.

Dan walks into the living room, setting the Disney photo back before moving toward the fireplace.

Another picture sits there—him and his father, standing in front of a small house, a set of keys between them.

Lucas follows, stopping just short of the threshold.

“When I gave him those keys,” Dan says, almost to himself, “he told me he was proud.”

Lucas watches him, the way his father’s hand lingers on the frame, adjusting it slightly even though it doesn’t need adjusting.

“He said if I ever had this conversation...” Dan pauses, searching for the rest of it. “I should listen.”

Silence returns, heavier now, but not as sharp.

Lucas steps forward.

“I want to write,” he says. “I don’t even know if I’m good enough yet. I know when I try to picture myself doing anything else...” He exhales. “It feels like I’m already giving something up.”

Dan doesn’t turn around right away.

Outside, a car passes. The sound fades almost as soon as it arrives.

“New York’s expensive,” Dan says finally.

Lucas almost smiles. “Yeah.”

Another pause.

Longer this time.

Dan straightens the picture on the mantel again, though it hasn't moved.

"Your mother liked it there," he says.

Lucas looks at him, something tightening in his chest.

Dan steps back, studying the frame to make sure it sits just right.

"Leave the acceptance letters on the table when they come," he adds. "We'll look at them."

Lucas nods.

It isn't permission.

But it isn't a refusal either.

Neither of them says anything else.

In the reflection of the glass, Lucas can see them both—his father facing forward, himself just behind him, not quite aligned, but closer than before.

For a moment, neither of them moves.

And then, almost without thinking, Lucas steps a little further into the room.