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Hero Complex

Ronald Paulson often wondered who was the first person to ever utter that infamous phrase that he now associated with his mother every time he thought of her, maybe even before he thought of her hair or her eyes or the stump of her right arm that ended where most people had an elbow.

You're becoming just like your father.

He knew better. He knew that he was nothing like his father. He knew that the phrase was just a tool, like a nail that she hammered into his head over and over to keep him in his place. *Ronald Paulson, you're going to leave me and break my heart, just like your father,* she repeatedly told him.

She was the only one who ever called him Ronald. To everyone else, he was just Paulie. In elementary school, when all the kids started to experiment with giving each other nicknames, the kids narrowed his down to either Paulie or Ronald McDonald. Paulie, they decided, was easier to say and thus became the name that everyone would associate with him for the rest of his schooling.

Paulie had just gotten off the phone with his mother. She claimed to be on the brink of a heart attack, having her only son outside in a blizzard. It's not a blizzard, he had to point out. Besides, he had no choice. Sixteen pizzas had to be delivered to the Demerly house on East Grover Lane, and it was his day to make the deliveries. Paulie was the owner of Paulie's Pizza, a successful, three-year-old business in their town of 25,000 people. Paulie, with the help of his cousin and his best friend, built the company from nothing. The three of them nearly ran the restaurant by themselves, though it had finally grown to the point where they could afford a few part-time workers. Paulie was proud of his business, and he wasn't going to let a small snow storm stop him from making a nice profit. From his understanding, he gathered that the Demerlys were having some kind of family reunion. He had no idea why they chose February, the coldest month of the year, to hold a reunion, but he wasn't going to complain. Making a hundred and fifty dollars off of one delivery wasn't a chance that came

along every day.

Paulie stacked the boxes of pizza on top of each other in his back seat. Though he had just brushed all the snow off of the car windows, it was already beginning to cover his car again. This was going to be worth it, he had to remind himself. He once again wiped the snow off before proceeding into the car. The mango-scented tree that hung on his rearview mirror, next to his lucky rabbit's foot, was powerless against the inebriating odor of over a dozen pepperoni pizzas.

Normally, the drive to East Grover would take no longer than ten minutes. But with the weather so crappy, he didn't want to risk going any faster than he had to, especially with his mom's voice still pounding in his head. *Ronald Paulson, you're going to leave me and break my heart, just like your father.*

His father. The term "piece of work" had been invented for his father. Paulie didn't like to admit the effect his father had on him. His mom, on the other hand, never let people forget that she lived each day influenced by the lack of a husband in her life. Six years later, and she still acted as if he had left yesterday. One day, she'd curse his name and declare that they were better without him. The next, she'd moan melodramatically that she would never be able to raise two children by herself. And some days, when Paulie least expected it, he'd enter the family room to find his mother sitting in her blue recliner, staring at the TV but not really watching it, her face expressionless. She would eventually excuse herself and lock herself in the bathroom. First, she turned on the bathwater. Then, the CD player. After a minute or two, he'd hear her cries. Paulie never knew how to react, so he'd sit on the couch and play the movie of him punching his dad in the face in his mind, over and over again.

When his little sister also began to lock herself in the bathroom and turn on the bathwater, Paulie assumed she was also crying over their son of a bitch father. It wasn't until he realized, after he had brought home two whole pizzas and she had eaten an entire one, that she was trying to hide something else.

Paulie did nothing to try to help his mother or his sister. He went to work every day, kept them fed, paid the bills, and figured that was enough.

No, that was a lie.

He knew that wasn't enough. He knew he was doing the exact thing his father had done. But what else was he supposed to do, really? Paulie didn't know how to fix something another man had broken.

Paulie was in no hurry. He barely pushed the accelerator. The pizza would still be hot when he got to the house. The Demerlys were nice people. They had a big house and always tipped generously. Sure, he'd be naïve to think that they were a family without problems. But he couldn't help but think they were a lot better off than the Paulson family at the moment.

Paulie gazed past the constellation of snow falling onto his windshield. At first, he thought he was imagining the figure walking toward him. It was a dark, small outline of a person dragging along a big, black suitcase. Either this person was suicidal or was the victim of a cruel prank. Paulie slowed down to a near stop as he drove closer to the person. It hadn't been his imagination. A young woman stood in front of him. Her lips were pale, and splashes of soft pink had settled on her cheekbones as a result of the cold. Her fingers, bright white and numbed, clutched tightly to her suitcase. There was nothing joyful in her expression, though. Her knee-high, heeled boots might have something to do with that.

There was something familiar about her. Maybe he had gone to elementary school with her. Or maybe he had delivered pizza to her house once. Something about the downward curl of her lips, the sad paleness of her skin, the way she hunched over as if she felt no one could see her, felt all too familiar. It was going to bother him until he figured it out, he realized. He had no choice but to stop.

He asked her if she needed help. She explained, somewhat ironically, that she was looking for East Grover Lane. Paulie wondered if he should tell her that she was going the wrong way. But she already looked as if someone were to breathe on her, she would break. He didn't want to make it even worse. So instead, he told her that he was going that way and offered a ride. She accepted without hesitation. There was no room for her suitcase in the back, so she kept it on her lap. Paulie glanced at her quickly but didn't want to seem rude by staring. Up close, he realized, she almost looked like a skeleton.

Her cheeks were sunken into her face, void of any extra fat. Her black pea coat nearly consumed her entire body. Her head turned toward him. Their eyes connected for an immaterial moment. Her eyes were big and dark brown and seemed to take up most of her face. Paulie looked away quickly.

Minutes later, he could still feel her eyes watching him. He focused on the now invisible road, which had been completely blanketed by the sticking snow. Most people were a little subtler with their staring. He didn't look like most people, he knew, and people liked to watch him as if he were a newly discovered species of bird. He had a tall, skinny body, and it had taken him several years to learn how to coordinate his arms and legs so that they maintained some semblance of balance. His ears were too small, his acne only seemed to cover one side of his face, and he had two different colored eyes. One was bright blue, the other was light green. Paulie gathered that most people, at some point in their lives, engaged in the experience of having someone look them in the eyes and really see them. He knew he'd spend his entire life having people look at his eyes, bewildered by the blatant contrast, and never really see him. With all that was already wrong with him, he didn't bother to do anything with his red hair. It usually just hung in a thin, stringy mess under his Paulie's Pizza cap.

Paulie always supposed that the deformities of his family were partly the reason his father had left them. Joe Paulson couldn't live with the fact that his wife had half an arm, his son had oddly small ears, and his daughter was overweight. Well, not anymore. She had, unlike Paulie and his mother, learned how to fix her deformity.

He asked the girl her name. "Isobel," she replied, without returning the question.

She continued to stare. Finally, in a brief moment of bravery laced with awkward tension, he pointed out the staring.

"You know, you're interesting," Isobel told him. "People notice you."

He immediately knew what she meant. He was a freak. People noticed freaks.

"You can thank me for giving you a ride and forget the condescending comments, if you don't mind," he responded. Paulie

liked to think he had a good sense of self-awareness. When his ears had stopped growing when he was six, his mother had started preparing him for the ridicule that would follow. She armed him with a shotgun of childish, rubber-glue comebacks that he would readily fire any time one of his classmates mentioned the size of his ears. The doctors tested him for a series of different diseases that were associated with having small ears, but Paulie didn't have any of them. He was just deformed. This made it worse for Joe Paulson. He could blame his wife's stumpy arm on the car accident she got into during their first year of marriage. If there was no clinical reason for his son being different, then he had no way to deflect the blame on anything but his own warped genes.

Isobel started talking again, though Paulie wasn't sure he wanted to listen. She mentioned that she was in college, that she had lost her scholarships, that she sometimes spent days in bed, only getting up to eat a little and to use the bathroom. Paulie wasn't entirely surprised. As he glanced over at her, he realized she was too thin to be considered healthy. She could probably use a few of the pizzas on his back seat. She could be pretty, but she was too sickly pale and nearly emaciated, and her face never even hinted at a smile.

It was then that Paulie realized why she seemed so familiar.

Isobel was, in almost every way, exactly what his sister was becoming. Sick, depressed, hopeless, too conscious of her imperfections. Completely disconnected with the rest of the world. The thought made Paulie feel slightly nauseous. How was he supposed to stop a seventeen-year-old girl from becoming a shell of a person?

He couldn't. Wouldn't. He wasn't her father. He had never signed up for this role. His sister was a smart girl. She'd figure out how to fix herself and then would make something of herself.

Paulie didn't know how long she had been making herself sick. She was twelve when their father left, and she had started to lose weight shortly after. Had this really been going on for six years? Paulie's conversations with his sister revolved around classes and work. He avoided asking her about her personal life. As she became skinnier, she stayed home more, usually closing herself in her room for hours. Paulie pretended that she was just studying in there, that she was happy.

Just like your father.

Each word was like a paper cut, small and nearly invisible but full of pain. Every time he forgot them, they came back unexpectedly, not allowing him to just let it go.

Even if he could somehow help his sister, he knew he couldn't do anything for the girl sitting next to him. She had her own family. One look at her, and they'd undoubtedly realize that something was wrong. They would help her.

Paulie asked her the address of the house she was looking for on East Grover.

Somehow, he didn't find himself surprised when she gave him the Demerly address. It just seemed to fit in with the theme of the day. Her family must not have seen her in a while. As soon as she walked through their front door, they'd realize that she needed their help. No one could ignore something so obvious.

He stopped in front of the house. Isobel bit her colorless bottom lip as she stared at the house. They might ignore it, he realized. They could ignore it just like he ignored his sister's problems and then would claim it was someone else's problem.

Paulie didn't have a hero complex. He just wanted to do his job, get paid, and live through each day. Nowhere had he signed a contract agreeing to help lost girls. And even if he had, he wouldn't know where to start.

She got out of the car, and he followed suit, gathering as many of the boxes of pizza in his arms as he could carry. Isobel waited by the car for him, not looking too anxious to go inside. Was this the part where he told her he knew she was hurting and offered her a safe place to stay whenever she needed? No, he didn't need to do anything.

"Here," he said suddenly, surprising himself as he reached into his red, Paulie's Pizza jacket and pulled out a thin, white business card.

He extended his arm to her, and she took the card out of his hand and looked at it. Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Paulie was sure he felt even more confused than she did. What was he doing?

"Just in case," he said. "You know, if the college thing doesn't work out and you need a job." What he meant to say was, *In case you're lonely and suicidal and for some reason actually want to talk to me.*

Paulie didn't stay long. He dropped off the pizza, collected a tip of twenty-three dollars, and left. He again drove slowly, mostly because he didn't want to prove his mom right. She thought that each day would finally be the day, and whether willingly or not, he'd leave her alone in the world.

He didn't go back to the restaurant. Instead, he returned home. Ever since he could remember, his house had smelled like a mixture of cinnamon and cigarette smoke. He leaned against the front door and breathed in the warm, somewhat stale air, grateful for the stability. His mom had fallen asleep on the couch. Paulie picked up the blanket from behind the couch and spread it over her. So much for her so-called heart attack.

His sister sat on her bed, typing on her laptop. Paulie stood at the door for a moment, watching her. Leah Paulson's hair was red, like his, though she took better care of it. The chubby little girl he knew was gone. Paulie could see the bones below her neck, sticking out and pressing against her skin. She looked up. Her eyes, like Isobel's, seemed big enough to cover her entire face. He wondered if that's what happened when people became depressed; their eyes became bigger, more desperate for someone to finally see them.

She asked what he was doing. He told her he was thinking. What about? Paulie shuffled his feet on the brown carpet. That was a loaded question.

"Let's go to dinner," Paulie suggested. He didn't know if it was a good idea to take a girl with an eating disorder out to eat. "You can pick the place. You want Chinese? We haven't had Chinese in a while."

She asked why. She wasn't dumb. Her big brother never offered her food that wasn't pizza from his own restaurant. Paulie felt like a fool.

"Because we never hang out anymore. I miss my little sis," he responded. This time, what he meant was, *Because I'm worried about you, and I don't want to be an asshole like our father and just pretend there's nothing wrong, then abandon you. I'm better than that.*

She agreed to go with him, as long as he paid. He wondered if his money would be flushed down the toilet.

As Leah sat in the passenger seat of his car, he realized more and more that Leah was just like Isobel. She stared at him shamelessly.

After a few minutes had passed, he asked her why she was staring. His sister had always been the only one who didn't stare.

"You just look older than I remember," she replied. A hint of a small, nearly invisible smile played at her lips. Paulie couldn't recall the last time he had seen her actually smile. The little hint of it made him realize that he missed it. Paulie didn't know what to say. She was too fragile. He couldn't say the wrong thing.

Leah gently touched the lucky rabbit's foot that hung from his rearview mirror. Their mother had given both of them a rabbit's foot years ago, along with two pennies that she had claimed to find heads up. Paulie noticed that even Leah's hands seemed too bony. Looking at his sister, he had a hard time believing in luck at the moment.

"You started the business because of Dad, didn't you? To prove to him that you're worth something," Leah surmised. Paulie looked at his sister, then looked away quickly before she could read the expression on his face. He had often wondered if his real motivations were, as she said, to prove something to his father. But his little sister wasn't supposed to think about that.

"You started throwing up because of Dad, didn't you?" It would be a lie to say that the question came out of his mouth before he realized he was asking it. He knew exactly what he was asking. He knew it could make the situation worse. But he had gone six years without asking it, and nothing had seemed to resolve itself in that time.

Leah lowered her hand from the rabbit's foot and moved it to the steering wheel, placing it on top of Paulie's hand. Paulie didn't look at her. He was too afraid to see her cry. He wasn't ready for that yet. Instead, he turned his hand over, touched his palm to hers, and held her hand firmly, unwilling to let it go.