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opening extract from

Me, Dead Dad and Alcatraz

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I Think, Therefore I Am, I Think

Who are you?

How do you figure?

How are you supposed to know anything, really, but specifically, how are you supposed to know who you are?

Who am I, and what am I, and if I think I have worked that out, what happens if something new falls into the gumbo and changes it? Does that make me something new entirely? Should I get new clothes?

I found my mother sitting on the footboard of my bed with her back to me. It was an unsettling thing to wake up to, and I knew she hadn't come to tell me there were no blueberries for my pancakes.

"Elvin, have we ever talked about your father's brother Alex?"

The simple questions are always the worst. If you think you know the answer right off, then for God's sake dive into your laundry hamper. If you're completely lost, you're probably okay.

"Ya. The one who died in the plane crash, right?"

A brief, buzzy silence.

"Oh. So I did say that, then."

Should a mother really have to check and see what she has told you in the past? I'd have to say no.

"Um, ya, you did say that. *Ma*. Because he died. In a plane crash."

Because her back was to me, I was reading her shoulders. They slumped. They slumped and gradually sort of folded forward in a gesture of deceit and shame and awfulness before she finally stood and, keeping her back to me, said, "Except that he didn't, die in a plane crash. He is, more specifically, on the couch having a cup of tea and an English muffin with marmalade. Would you like an English muffin with some marmalade?"

Well then. What does one say?

"Not dead, you say?" is what I said.

Her sorry shoulders shrugged. But at least she turned around to face me. "It was really for your own good, Elvin."

"I know, and I'll understand someday, and I'll thank you when I'm older, and you had always intended to tell me when the time was right, but the time was never right, blah blah—"

"Oh God, no, I was never going to tell if you didn't catch me."

Sometimes her refreshing honesty really bunches me up. Especially when it's woven with great, whopping lies.

All this and I wasn't even out of bed yet. It was a wonder I ever woke up at all. Someday, I figured, I just wouldn't. Possibly tomorrow, if it's not really sunny.

"You know, Ma, stuff like this is the reason I'm fat and mental."

"You are not mental; you're just big boned. Put on your bathrobe, because your uncle is waiting to meet you."

Just the words. Just the thought and the words banged up together like that, about my father having a brother, and his brother having an English muffin. Right downstairs. Waiting for me. Wanting to see me. What could he want from me? I had a ghost uncle, and he was waiting for me. It was like a total Shakespeare tragedy.

And I was no tragic hero.

My uncle. All my father's people were gone, and most of my mother's, apart from a few distant stragglers clinging to the rocks of our family history. I thought we were all we had, and you know, I had gotten okay with us being all we had. I even liked being all we had.

I was told that by my *mother*. You hear something like that from your mother, you have to think you've got it from a fairly reliable source. But that would be *your*

mother; this was *my* mother.

So if she made up the plane crash . . . what else wasn't true? How many other dead people were out there roaming the landscape waiting to come sit on our couch? Could I be infested with all kinds of grandparents and cousins and things that I never knew I had and that, frankly, I didn't want?

When something is too much to contemplate, there is only one rational way to go. I would not contemplate it. The story of the plane crash that killed my father's brother Alex was true. It was tragic and romantic and didn't hurt me one little bit. There was no Alex anymore.

"Who are you?" was my icebreaker before I was even all the way down the stairs.

"Hi, Elvin, I'm Alex," he said when I walked through the living room door. He sprinted to me and started pumping my hand wildly. His hand was marmalade sticky.

"No, you're not," I said, pulling my hand back gradually.

The guy turned back toward the couch, where my mother was now sitting with a cup of tea. She shrugged.

"I told you he'd say something like that," she said.

"Why are you letting yourself be conned?" I demanded of my normally fabulously skeptical mother.

"He's a fake. He probably just wants our money."

"We don't have any money, Elvin."

"Really? Still?" the guy said. He had concern, both on his face and in his voice. He was nearly convincing. "Well, maybe I can help you all out with that, too."

"Oh . . . jeez, Ma, look what you did now. You embarrassed us in front of the con man."

"I am not a con man. And you have no reason to be embarrassed in front of me."

As if she heard that as an invitation, or a challenge, or her cue, my dog came slouching into the room. Grog.

"Oh mercy," the guy said. "What have we got here?"

"Grog is what we have here. That's our idea of a dog. So you see, we wouldn't have anything you'd be interested in."

He recovered quickly, and I had to give him points for actually crouching down to pet her. Most people just pull their hands up into their sleeves. "Don't believe I've ever seen a breed like him before. What is he?"

"He's a she, that's what he is."

"No offense, but I think I know a penis when I see one."

"That's not a penis. We're not sure what it is, but we are sure she has had puppies. They're not here anymore. The Smithsonian took most of them, and Roswell has the rest."

Still crouching, still politely stroking the hairy slab of mystery meat that was Grog, he turned once more back toward Ma.

"Why is he doing this?"

"Well, he's doing this because this is what Elvin does. But also, he is mostly telling the truth about Grog."

"And you want to know what else," I said, because he was still here, "yesterday afternoon Grog covered the whole family, but mostly me, and not you at all, in glory by getting beat up by another dog, not just any dog, but a tiny dog wearing a tiny tartan rain jacket."

I had, of course, seen pictures of my father, though not many, and not lately, and not easily. And not only did this stranger fail to not look like my father, he failed to not make my funny and gabby mother stare at him in near silence and even nearer awe, whenever he wasn't looking.

"So you see, stranger," I said, "there is danger here. You'd probably better be on your way before I turn the beast loose on you. He only lives next door. He can have his jacket on in a second and be over here."

He stood up. The guy stood up, the stranger, after giving Grog a last extra-scratchy shake of her big, unnatural head, and he talked to me serious and warm and not bothered by my stuff.

"Maybe I could help you out, with training up the dog

a bit. Maybe I could help with a few things. I would like to do that, help out. I came here to help, Elvin Bishop."

"Whoever he is, he's not here to help. I don't care if he is out buying blueberries."

"He is not buying blueberries; stop talking about blueberries. He's taking a walk around the block because I asked him to so I can try and stabilize you. Who he is, Elvin, is your uncle. Alex really is your late father's brother."

I sipped my tea. I took a bite of my muffin. I do not like marmalade. There is a reason people compost orange peels.

"I guess you have some explaining to do," I said.

"I guess I do. I told you Alex was dead, because that was what Alex wanted."

"Why would he want that? Was he so ashamed people would know we were related that he needed to play dead about it?"

"No, no, nothing like that at all. In fact, it wasn't us he was ashamed of, but himself. Your uncle Alex did some pretty lousy things, back when."

I sat up straight on the couch and stopped chewing. "He did?"

Here's a thing. When I heard my mother say my uncle did some bad stuff, something clicked. Something not

altogether unpleasant. I ever so slightly liked him better for a second, or liked the *idea* of him better, even if he scared me more at the same time. I felt the tiniest little babbling stream of badness running through my blood, my bloodline, and I wanted to know more about it.

Or maybe it was simply the rush of suddenly *having* a bloodline to learn more about, with the bonus that it was not a boring bloodline.

"Did he kill somebody?"

"Of course he didn't kill somebody. Do you think I would have a killer in this house, Elvin?"

"You? I don't know what you're capable of at all. Maybe he is a killer. Maybe you're a killer. You did kill my uncle before bringing him back to life. I don't think I know you at all anymore, that's what I think. Who are you, lady?"

She listened, lips pinched tight together, until I ran out of stuff. Then she went to the kitchen and came back with a fresh cup of tea for herself and a blue ceramic saucer with orange segments fanned around the perimeter. She never leaves any of those white veins on the surface of the orange, which is pretty great, whoever she is.

"Right," she said. "He didn't kill anybody."

"Hijackings? Kidnappings?"

"No." Sip of tea. "No." Orange segment. "Want one?"

"Yes, please. Gunrunning? Smuggling? Did my uncle topple a government?"

"Steady, boy. Alex didn't do anything like that. He was guilty of . . . indiscretions."

I stared at her. Grog stared at me. The dog wanted the slice of orange I was holding. I wanted a meatier answer.

I passed on my fruit to my dog, hoping that maybe karma would then dictate I got what I wanted.

It was not, by a very long shot, the first time karma shortchanged me.

"Ma?" I made the come-here hand gestures like I was helping her back up a truck. "Indiscretions? What're indiscretions? I am guilty of indiscretions. Grog is guilty of indiscretions. But bringing a doggy bag to an all-you-can-eat restaurant is not something you want to be erased from history for, and neither is getting a hedgehog stuck to your nose. So what is the deal here?"

She sighed sadly, very sadly, a sad sigh that floated out of her and seeped into me. "It was a long time ago, Elvin," she said. "Alex is a sensitive man." Sighed again, seeped again, deeper. "Like your dad was. Like you are."

"I am not—"

"When he wanted to be dead rather than telling you about his mistakes, he meant it. He meant it so much that when I first refused to lie, he told me he would then

make it so I didn't have to lie. Do you hear, Elvin, what I'm telling you?"

Was I sensitive, really? Was that what I was?

"I do. I hear you."

Sensitive. You couldn't look like me, and act like me, and then be all touchy about it afterward. It just wouldn't work. I was not sensitive.

"Then you should understand that Alex should be allowed to keep some details to himself. There may come a time when you'll need to know more, but please just appreciate that now is not that time."

Even the term bothered me. *Sensitive*. Just the word itself was some kind of insult, some kind of implied accusation that you were too much of a lot of the wrong things. Too soft, too weak, too lame to even exist. I was not sensitive. *Sensitive* was code for *pathetic*. I had a good many flaws, but I was not in any way sensitive, and my mother really hurt my feelings by suggesting that I was. Sensitive, hell.

"I am not sensitive. Don't say that again."

I perhaps had spent too much time thinking there before speaking. Because by the time I spoke, my mother had finished her tea and Alex had finished his walk around the block and was rapping his sensitive knuckles on the door.

Ma stared at me. "Sorry, son. Did I say *sensitive*? I

meant self-absorbed." She was at the door, hand on the doorknob. "Remember, easy does it," she warned.

"Are you kidding? I am Mr. Easy Does It. I have a tattoo that says that. I'll leave him his mysteries, since he's so sensitive, like me."

She pulled open the door and there he was, standing in the beginnings of a rain that kinked up his hair like the fibers of a thick, cheap, synthetic, rust-colored rug. Which he may, in fact, have been wearing.

"Hey," he said with a wobbly, shame-drenched grin. "So did you tell him how I stole all that money from you and all?"