

Old Leather

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“Oh. Just like your father always used to wear.”

As she perched at the foot of the staircase to unlace the vintage, black, leather boots she'd just thrifted, right under the faded pencil lines on the banister that charted her childhood growth, Brie paused and sighed. *Deep breaths*, she told herself, *let's not start fighting the moment I get home*, but the air she sucked in was stained with the same brand of stuffy, pine air freshener her mother had insisted on her entire life. It reminded her of how much she hated that this place—this creaking little island of a suburban house—still was *home*. She wanted home to be out there, out in the world somewhere, but she couldn't seem to make her college dorm worthy of the title.

“Mom!” Brie shot to her feet and stomped after her mom into the kitchen, eager to pound a white picket boundary into the soil of her summer break. “You know I hate being compared to him.”

“Well, it's true, sweetheart,” Mom sniffed. “And it's not just the boots. Goodness, you've even started dressing like him.”

A thousand retorts surged from Brie's lungs and fell still on her tongue. She wanted to tell her to fuck off, to tell her that it hurt to be compared to an abusive, deadbeat dad she'd never met, and that it hurt all the more now that she'd spent months injecting herself with estrogen to make sure she'd never look like whatever he looked like. So what if she was wearing a tank top and jeans instead of forcing herself into a dress? It was the twenty-first century, and everybody dressed that way. So why did her mother have to compare her trans daughter to the man she hated most in the world? What the fuck was wrong with her?

But she couldn't say any of that to the mother she owed so much gratitude to. In her father's absence, Brie's mom had devoted herself utterly to juggling jobs and raising her daughter. The middle-aged woman was a tree in autumn, strong, sturdy, even beautiful—just not the way everyone said she used to be. Her hair was beset with gray and her face with wrinkles, and she had long since retreated into a wardrobe of shapeless blouses and fading earth tones. Brie had once read online that, if trans girls wanted to see what they might look like after transitioning, they should look at their moms. For as much sense as that made, she often found herself wishing for just a little bit more.

More ingratitude.

"I'm not dressing *like him*," Brie complained. That her mom was basically supportive of her being trans was another thing to be grateful for—even if she sometimes let a few things slip. "I don't care how he dresses, or dressed, or whatever. I'm just trying something out!"

"Hm." Those pursed lips were almost as familiar as the scent of Mom's stew, bubbling on the stove. "So, how are your grades?"

Brie suppressed a sigh. A change of subject was about the most she could hope for. "Fine, Mom. I'm passing all my classes. Well above average."

"That's good," Mom said, although Brie heard *'that's good enough, barely,'* instead. "But don't let yourself get lazy."

"I won't." Brie had been hearing that one all her life. "Promise."

"Would you like some tea?" Mom asked. Then, without an answer: "Put the kettle on."

"Sure." Couldn't Brie get a moment to haul her suitcase upstairs first? But she couldn't refuse; Mom was busy fussing over the stew, and Brie should have been grateful she was getting a home-cooked meal. Mom really was a wonderful cook. She had so much to be grateful for. As she made to grab a couple of mugs, though, the sound of her new boots against the kitchen tiles robbed both of their attention.

"Take those off already," Mom clucked. "I don't want you tracking mud in here."

This time, Brie let the sigh sing. "I won't, Mom. I only just got them, and I cleaned and polished them myself this morning."

"Hm." A sniff. "Let me see." Another axis on which to be weighed and found wanting. Brie figured it was better to get it over with. She presented one foot forward as Mom bent down to peer at the black toe of her new boot. She

lingered strangely, bent over like that, perfectly still. “Yes,” she murmured slowly, a moment later. “These really... really are exactly like your father’s.”

Brie tried to push past it. “Got them at this old thrift store, near campus. I wanted to try something a little more, I guess, *me*, than all the girly stuff. Grabbed some rags and a tin of polish from the same place. Didn’t seem too hard to-”

“No good,” Mom interrupted sharply, stirring. “You haven’t buffed it out at all. All that polish is just smeared on the surface. That’s why it looks so dull and uneven.”

“Huh?” Brie blinked. The tone was familiar, but not the subject. Mom didn’t own any leather shoes; as far as she knew, her new boots were the first that had ever been in the house. To her admittedly untrained eyes, they didn’t seem so bad. “I mean, sure, it’s not a mirror shine, or whatever. But they’re old anyway, so I figure-”

“Old leather deserves respect.” This time, the interruption didn’t cut through Brie’s words. It floated dreamily by, and won her silence because of how strange it was to hear the voice Mom only ever used when saying grace. “Here, I... I should show you.”

“Mom? What are you...”

With strange impatience, Mom scurried out of the room and disappeared upstairs. Brie was tempted to follow her, but the infuriating sense that she was, somehow, still a child being scolded held her on the spot. In moments, Mom returned with a small leather satchel Brie had never seen before, and beckoned Brie toward the kitchen table. She made Brie sit and then, to the trans girl’s great surprise, knelt at her feet.

“First, let’s get all this off,” Mom fussed, as she poured from a bottle of water out into a small, plastic container. “Start fresh. This is saddle soap.” She opened a small tin from her satchel, then produced a brush which she dipped into the water, then rubbed against the contents of the tin until it worked up into a lather. After removing the laces from Brie’s boots, she began to use the soapy brush to scrub at the leather, taking dust and loose polish away from the surface and leaving it dull. “Always best to clean everything off, with old boots like these. You don’t know where they’ve been. They look well-conditioned, at least.”

“Mom, is this really the time?” A memory was stirring in Brie, of sitting just like this while Mom taught her how to tie her shoelaces. In her mind’s eye, it was a warm moment. She’d been a child, safe and comforted in her mother’s presence. The woman at her feet was, somehow, shedding her motherliness. There was an efficient, tempered excitement to the way she

moved, and an expertise Brie couldn't explain. It made her seem so much younger.

"There." Mom seemed not to hear the question. Once she'd worked over the boots, Mom plucked a rag from her bag and used it to dry their surface. Then another rag, and another tin. This one was polish, immediately staining the air acrid with its scent. As Brie watched, she brought it to her nose and inhaled as if it were a fresh flower, then swayed dangerously for several, long seconds with her eyes closed.

"Are you OK?" Brie ventured. Her words seemed not to penetrate. She could see rapid motion behind Mom's eyelids. Was she having some kind of seizure? "Mom!"

"There's no need to yell, dear." Brie's raised voice seemed to snap Mom back to her attention—only now, whatever strange dream she had found in the tin of polish was woven through her voice, leaving her distant. She sounded high, somehow, although Brie knew Mom would never touch weed. As she watched, Mom rubbed the fresh rag into the polish, then brought it to her boot. "Put the polish on like this. Just a little everywhere, for now. Doesn't have to be pretty right away."

"OK," Brie replied in a small, childhood voice. She looked down obediently, trying to follow what her mother was doing, but all she really noticed was that Mom couldn't seem to take her eyes away from the leather boots. Not even for a moment.

"That looks good," Mom said eventually, to herself as much as to her daughter. "Now, here's the best part. There's a bit of a knack to it, but I was always good at getting a proper shine."

Brie's eyes widened at how proud Mom sounded. She was every bit as enraptured by the look on her face as Mom was by the leather. Her eyes were distant and dappled with mist, like she was lost to something deeper than mere memory. Beneath the veneer of parental fussiness, Brie sensed something compulsive as much as nostalgic.

"Horsehair," Mom declared, as she reached for another brush, this one much larger and finer. "Just get it moving. Fast, not hard. The bristles do it all for you. Friction and heat melt the wax, and let it run smooth."

She was reciting as much as teaching. As she spoke, her voice settled deeper into dreamland, into a deep valley, sighing low and from her chest, and running slow as a winding, summer stream. It was like she was in some kind of daze, only her hands were as nimble as ever as she began rubbing the horsehair brush onto Brie's boots. Brie had nothing to do but sit there awkwardly, clutching uncomfortably at her own wrists, feeling the gentle

pressure lapping against her feet, and watching as her Mom devoted herself the way she'd never, ever seen her do in church.

Mom was slow and fast at once. In her hand, the large brush danced across the leather, a blur of brisk, practiced motion, small circles then long strokes, leaving not a single square inch untouched. She worked with absolute expertise, honed still further by a breathless eagerness that was palpable in the way she strained forward to peer at her handiwork like a woman of half her years. She reminded Brie of a pianist in concert, letting the emotion of her music course through her and lend flourish and flair to her every movement. Yet behind that was tranquility as deep and still as the sea; Mom's virtuosity was not wildness. She knew the music and the tempo, and was its utter slave, and her eagerness never outstripped the pace of its performance. On her face was bliss, and bliss alone.

Brie had never seen Mom like that. She had never seen anyone else like that either, but that wasn't how the thought was framed in her head.

After a handful of minutes, Mom's work was bearing clear fruit. The black, murky surface of the boots Brie had thrifted was giving way to a lustrous, blemishless shine that grew steadily more brilliant with each sweep of the brush. Brie was embarrassed at how poor a job she'd done by comparison, but only briefly. The beauty of the polished leather sapped the tension from her spine, and as she relaxed into her seat, she found herself reflecting on the calm of the moment. She was home, she had the weight off her feet—and for once, she wasn't being nagged or chided. The only sound in the world was the kiss of horsehair against leather. A strange pleasure, certainly, but Brie wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not when it felt so right.

"There," Mom murmured very slowly, as the brush came to a halt. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"Yeah," Brie sighed. It was strange; she'd never much thought about leather boots before, other than as part of a slightly more punkish, androgynous look she wanted to try to pull off. But now, as the light caught the polished toe to form a sunbeam dappled with all the leather's inner texture, they seemed as beautiful to her as any painting in a museum could ever be. "It really... hey, Mom, did you, um, ever do something like this with that... with Dad?"

There was no reply. Mom had already surrendered to the next movement of the strange concerto: re-lacing Brie's new boots in strict, parallel, ladder-rung bars all the way up. She seemed not to hear Brie at all, and the trans girl was about to repeat her question when Mom did something that made her gasp and twitch: after tying Brie's laces, just as she always had done for her as

a child, she bent forward and planted a careful, reverent kiss on the tip of each boot.

“All... all done.” The reverie was fading from Mom, but its memory left her stumbling to her feet in a pleasant fog. Her face was aglow with a rapturous smile, and she seemed not to grasp the strangeness of what she had been doing. “So, you see? That’s how to take proper care.”

“Yes, Mom,” Brie replied, lost for all other words.

“You can do it yourself next time.” For a moment, Mom sounded almost sorrowful about it. “Now... goodness, the time! Let me get that stew off the boil.”

Mom scurried off, leaving Brie there with the sense of a fading dream, and with the scent of turpentine and the memory of her mother’s entranced face smeared like an oil slick across the inside of her vision.

“Mom!” Brie called out, as she came out of her childhood bedroom and headed down the stairs. “Are my boots ready?”

A month later, Brie had still yet to so much as touch a cotton rag or a horsehair brush, and not because she didn’t care about her boots. On the contrary, the shine left by a perfect coat of polish had become a point of pride, no different from the pride Brie took in her hair or her makeup. A single blemish could dampen her mood—and strangely, her mother seemed to feel the same way. The moment the boots started to lose their luster, she appeared, polishing kit in hand. Every time, every, it was the same ritual. Mom disappeared into the same stupor, and returned with the same false promise: *you can do it yourself next time*.

Brie now knew it was never going to happen. It had already become their normal, as routine as the sit-down meal Mom insisted they share every evening. And she had come to enjoy it.

“Excuse me?” The frown was woven through Mom’s voice. “Don’t take that tone with me, young lady. I’m not your personal servant, you know.”

“Sure, Mom.” Brie rolled her eyes. “But seriously, did you polish them yet?”

She arrived at Mom’s side in the living room just in time to see her face flicker through a set of strange, guilty expressions. It was Mom’s turn, it

seemed, to look like a chided schoolgirl. “No, I...” She recovered. “I have more to worry about than just your boots, Brie!”

“Mom!” Brie groaned. “But I’m just about to head out to meet some old friends! I told you this morning. What are they gonna think, huh?”

Mom flinched—actually flinched!—but held firm. “Perhaps you should’ve thought of that and polished them yourself.”

“Ugh! Fine.” Brie swiped at the leather satchel that had come to live on the coffee table. She couldn’t find a proper rebuttal to Mom’s scorn, but the mutinous sense of unfairness lingered with her as she grabbed her boots and set out her tools. It had been like this her entire life. Little tests and taunts. Little rug-pulls of help and responsibility. Couldn’t Mom just do what she asked? What else did she really have to worry about, anyway? It wasn’t like she had a life.

Cleaning, at least, was easy. Nothing more than a little dust to wipe away with a rag. No soap required. The worst of it simply the way the task struck Brie as somehow demeaning. Once Brie was satisfied, she reached for the tin of polish. As she opened it, its scent blossomed into the air, sweeping aside the air freshener pine in an instant. Brie noticed Mom watching her closely, nostrils flaring.

“Not like that,” Mom tutted, as Brie started wiping the rag against the boot polish. “Fold it around your fingers. Nice and taut.”

“Right,” Brie muttered, her other hand forming a fist. Infuriatingly, it was good advice and made it far easier to daub polish on the boot.

“That’s too much. You’ll end up with clumps.”

“Mom!” Brie growled warningly, even though she could see that Mom was right. With a sigh, she painstakingly spread the polish out thinner and more evenly, determined to do a job so good even Mom couldn’t find fault in it. Then, the brush. Brie had yet to try her hand, but she’d seen Mom do it enough times. It couldn’t be that hard.

“No, no, no. Much too slow. You need to work up some real friction, if you want to—”

“God, Mom, shut up!” Brie erupted, as a coiled spring of twenty years ripped its way out of her breast. “You don’t like how I’m polishing my boots? You do it!”

A pause. A beat. “I already told you,” Mom retorted, spluttering with slow fury. She looked like a fish. “I have better things to do than polish your boots all day, young lady.”

“Like what?” Brie knew that she was setting off a bomb, but she couldn’t find it in herself to care. What could be worse than sitting there and taking it all? “Seriously, like what? You don’t *do* anything, Mom.” She folded her arms insolently. “Maybe you should be thanking me instead.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Mom barked. “I’m not your personal servant, Brie.”

“Aren’t you?” Brie sneered. “What else have you ever done except put me down in the name of teaching me lessons? God, I don’t know why you even *had* me if it was going to be like this.”

“You... you...” Brie’s mother was shivering with incandescent rage—but not only with rage. Beyond her red, furious cheeks, Brie could see the wound she had salted. The sight of those quivering eyes made her feel guilty, but that sourness was tinged with a greater sweetness. Years of patronizing little put-downs, and she’d finally found a way to bite back. “Y-you don’t get to talk to me like that! Who do you think is putting you through college, young-”

“Exactly.” There was such a thrill to interrupting Mom, for a change, and seeing her fall silent. “That’s what you want, right? A child to be proud of? So hurry up and polish my fucking boots so I can show them off properly.”

Every extended moment of conflict playing out across Mom’s face fed Brie’s strange, sadistic high. She half expected Mom to crumple, and half expected her to explode. What slipped out was something else entirely. “Jesus Christ. You’ve even started talking like him.”

Reflexively, Brie twitched with displeasure—but for the first time in her life, she felt her parental allegiance shift beneath her feet. Is this what her father had seen in Mom twenty years ago? Someone this easy? Someone this weak?

“Why not?” She laughed. The thrill of conflict was singing in her head as an adrenaline high. “Clearly you never said ‘no’ to him—about anything. All these years, and you’re still all... all weird about his boots. No wonder you never managed to get out there again, God! It’s pathetic. So go on. Polish my boots and relive some of those happy memories.”

“Happy?” Mom whimpered despairingly. “I wasn’t... what he did to me was... I barely remember the...” She closed her eyes, then rallied herself behind folded arms. “No.”

For some reason, that only made Brie angrier. “No?”

“No,” Mom insisted. The autumn tree had bent in the storm’s wind, but now she creaked back to rightness, the cogs of her bark betraying all the years of willpower she had at her disposal. “I’m not going to polish your

boots, young lady. And that's just the start. From now on, there are more than a few other things I'm not going to—"

She shut up the moment Brie grabbed the open tin of boot polish and shoved it in her face.

There was a bare moment of resistance, told in a panicked, wide-eyed glance and a slight shake of Mom's head. Then, it was gone. Then, she was gone. The tree fell, and left a yawning silence in the wake of her almighty collapse. A nostalgic wind churned her shed leaves as they danced in the air, leaving her face twitching into the shape of an odd smile. But then that, too, faded, and Mom was left rocking back and forth on her heels, head inclined subtly forward as if she longed to bury herself in the wax's acrid embrace. A light had gone out in her; her eyes were lusterless, and she seemed a shell more than a woman. More than a parent. Merely a dead stump, rotted and hollowed from within by boot polish.

Brie couldn't say what had possessed her to do it. She'd noticed the effect the polish had on Mom more than once, but she was still driven more by instinct than observation. She let the seconds wear on, drinking in Mom's submission, then drew slowly back as her heart slowed.

"That's better," she sighed. Finally, some peace and quiet. "Dad did something to you," Brie murmured, after a moment. "Didn't he?"

No reply. Mom seemed at once not to hear her and to be hanging on her every word. On any other day, seeing her in such a stupor would have had Brie screaming for an ambulance. Today, it put a smile on her face.

"Guess he left me an inheritance after all," Brie chuckled, as something within her uncoiled. "Mom, listen. You're going to polish my boots every single fucking time I ask. Understand?"

An aching pause. Then a helpless nod. Brie shivered. She felt her words a whittling knife, carving Mom's heartwood into a new shape.

"And every single time they're dirty, even if I don't," Brie added. The power trip was unspeakable. The next nod made it all the worse. "You live for me, understand? Always did."

A nod. Behind the blankness of Mom's eyes, gears were turning. Brie could see it. She could see the pieces of her mother shifting and reconfiguring.

"You exist for my sake," Brie pressed. It had always *felt* true, and now it was. "You do whatever I want, whenever I want. No more talking back. No more nasty little comments. You keep your mouth shut and do what you're told."

Nodding. Always nodding. Was that all Mom was capable of now? Brie couldn't imagine falling into such a sad, sorry state for something as lowly as boots. She deserved what Brie was doing.

"Guess you've really been missing a real head of the household," Brie giggled. "But not anymore. That's me." She pressed the tin of polish and the horsehair brush into Mom's unresisting hands, then sauntered over to occupy the living room's finest real estate: the spot right in the middle of the two-seat couch. She splayed her legs the way she'd spent two years trying not to, and draped an arm over the back of the furniture. "Now hurry the fuck up and polish my boots."

She didn't need to tell her twice, or ever again.

Brie sat at the head of the dining table, and waited for Mom to bring her dinner.

In a way, it was little different from the ritual the two of them had been playing out for Brie's entire life. A sit-down meal in the dining room at the end of the day, just mother and daughter. But a small difference in perspective made all the difference. The spot at the head of the table, forever without a chair, had always struck Brie as sacred ground. Inviolable. Now she occupied it, she saw the world differently. From there, she could survey the room and all its comings and goings. The light from the window was behind her, and the evening glow made the shadows cast on the floral wallpaper stretch away from her as though she was its source. The plates and cups set out before her were a feast in her honor, and sat between the world and their family of two. Mere weeks ago, she would've been out there in the kitchen, helping to cook or fetching plates, then coming to sit down opposite Mom, with the patriarch's spot at the head of the table absent even a chair. Even-handed domesticity.

But now she sat at the head of the dining table, and waited for Mom to bring her dinner.

She relished it each day. When she forced Mom to bootblack for her—she had learned the word since—Brie could not have imagined the way her words had come to affect her mother. She had taken every frustrated command to heart, and now she wasn't merely obedient. She was *happy*. From winter's hollow stump, a fresh, dull flower had grown, free to turn its head towards the household's new sun and bask lazily in its glow. It was as if some taut thread

inside Mom had finally gone slack, leaving her to settle into the role that Brie was beginning to think had always suited her best: subordinacy. Perhaps she had been exactly the same way for Brie's father, and everything between old and new masters had been nothing more than a painful interlude.

Brie's feelings toward the father she'd never met were another thing that had been changing. For the first time in her life, she was starting to regard herself proudly as her father's daughter. It made sense; if they shared the same woman, maybe she wasn't the only thing they had in common, and after so long trying to escape his face, Brie was beginning to think that a few passing similarities weren't the worst thing in the world. It was part of why she'd thrown out all her skirts and dresses and trimmed her hair short. A patriarch's regalia suited her, she had discovered.

Why not? Why not do anything she wanted? She owned the space. This house wasn't Mom's. It was hers.

"Just a little longer, sweetheart," Mom called out, emerging into the room. She was so soft now; look in her eyes most of all. "I'm so sorry! I want to make sure it's all perfect."

"That's OK, Mom." Despite the seismic shift in the balance between them, Brie had discovered that some habits clung to the both of them like flies to flypaper. "Don't worry about it."

"Thank you." Mom shuffled forward, a touch shy, and let Brie notice the large bag she was carrying behind herself. "I had something else for you, actually. Before we eat."

"Oh yeah?" Brie cocked her head. This was new. "What?"

Mom shuffled a little further, and Brie noticed the strange lighthouse glow emanating from beneath the now-frosted lenses of her eyes. As soon as Mom unveiled the bag's contents and spoke, Brie understood. "I-It's his jacket. I... thought you might want it."

Inside the bag was a black, leather biker jacket, neatly folded. Brie marveled for a moment at the proud, prominent collar and a slash of the zip running across the body—then, at the way that, despite the years since it had been worn, it hadn't gone to mothballs. It was faded and scuffed in places, but it was perfectly obvious that someone had been taking care of it every so often.

"Wow," Brie murmured, unable to keep the derision from her voice. "All this time, Mom? Jesus."

Mom shivered, but didn't bark back. She never did these days, and whenever she seemed about to stir, another session with Brie's boots quickly

settled her. Brie couldn't fathom what her father—it must have been him—had done to make her like this, but the seed of her revulsion at the method had grown into a wandering vine of curiosity. She couldn't blame him for taking what was on offer, and she couldn't help but think that she had a lot to learn from him, if they ever met.

"Do you want to t-try it on?" Mom pressed. It was clear from her blush and shifting feet what *she* wanted, at the very least.

"Sure," Brie replied, bemused, and stood. She was happy to indulge, and Mom was all too quick to drape the leather jacket over her shoulders and begin fussing with the sleeves. Brie let her do all the work, quietly preparing herself the moment the jacket's weight truly settled on her. Preparing herself for the passing of crowns.

"There." A perfect handmaiden, Mom retreated to a reverential distance once her work was done. "How does it feel, sweetheart?"

The first thing to hit Brie wasn't the weight, but the scent. Years of macerating inside a bag, stuffed in some closet, seemed only to have concentrated the aroma of faded cologne, stale cigarettes, and old leather oil. Before, Brie would never have called the combination pleasant, but now it settled around her like a blanket, instantly familiar, and conjuring a now-beloved figure into mind.

"Good," she breathed. "Really good. How do I look?"

"Perfect." The doting adoration in Mom's eyes tripled, and the satin disks of her irises quivered with unformed tears. "Just like him."

A month ago, a near-bigoted comment like that would have prompted an argument. Today, it prompted nothing more than an ocean swell of Brie's pride. She looked down at herself. The leather jacket hung perfectly from her broad shoulders, framing what was beneath: a white tank top, faded jeans, and a studded belt. For the first time ever, she found herself grateful for her height and her build. It let her carry the regalia of a man she'd never met but had, against a lifetime of instincts, come to respect.

"Hey, Mom," Brie ventured, a question long at the back of her mind weaving its way to the fore. "Do you... I know it's been a long time, but do you have, maybe, any pictures of Dad?"

Mom didn't even blink. "Just a moment, sweetie. Let me get it for you."

She dashed off, as eager to please as ever, leaving Brie to stew in a strange mixture of excitement and anxiety. She had been tempted, over the years, to wonder, even to ask; succumbing felt somehow disloyal to herself. Yet now, her pulse quickened at the thought of setting eyes on the conqueror to whom

she was heir, and knowing him just a little better in the process.

When Mom returned, she was carrying the bootblackening kit. She set it down on the dining room table, then reached inside for a compartment Brie had never bothered with. Inside was an empty tin of polish, and inside *that* was an old photograph, folded several times. Mom handled it like a relic as she unfolded it and offered it with both hands for Brie to take and inspect.

Brie rose to her feet and did so. For several long moments, she studied the man in the photograph, drinking in every last detail that might tell of him.

“Is this really Dad?” she whispered.

“Yes, dear,” Mom confirmed, smiling.

Brie took another long look, and a long pause. Then she pinched her fingers, and tore the photo in half.

“Brie!” Mom shrieked. It was the strongest show of emotion Brie had seen from her in weeks.

And Brie didn’t care. “I can’t believe it,” she howled. “Just when I finally think I might finally have something in common with the guy! But this? God, Mom, you actually fucked that loser?”

“B-Brie,” Mom whimpered, twitching—then cringing, as Brie tore the photo again, into quarters. “That’s not... he’s not... t-treat your father with respect.”

“Seriously?” Brie snorted. That one was new. A consequence of forcing her to slip back into old habits, perhaps. “Fuck that! I can’t believe it. Another fucking disappointment.”

The man she had seen in the photograph was the very embodiment of failure. Unkempt, unshaven, unattractive. He was wearing the same jacket Brie was now, but not well. It didn’t suit him. Not as well as it suited her, anyway. He looked like a man trying—and failing—to live out some infantile, James Dean fantasy. His hair was an oily mess instead of a slick mane, and his eyes were sallow and bloodshot instead of sunken and intense. Even in still life, the way he held himself betrayed nerves and self-consciousness. He was hardly a man Brie could feel proud to call a father. If she saw someone like that on the street, she’d cross to the other side to avoid the stink. The only piece of the puzzle the photo provided was the visible pocket watch looming from his breast pocket, in Brie’s eyes now nothing more than a conman’s confidence trick of a way into someone’s head.

“Don’t say that,” Mom snapped, but it came out like begging. She was at war with herself, new conditioning battling against old. “Treat your father

with r-respect. Treat... treat your father with respect. It's... we need to treat your father with respect."

A broken record. Pitiful.

"Oh no, Mom," Brie sneered. "I was talking about you. *You're* the disappointment. You let this deadbeat asshole rule your head for twenty years? You let him knock you up? Christ." She knew it was unfair. That was exactly why it felt so good.

"But..." Mom pleaded. "I was p-proud to be his... proud of you! I love... live... live for... y-you?"

The more she flailed, the more Brie felt the dredges of her respect for her mother slide into the abyss. It was pointless, all of it. She had never been anything more than a clockwork doll set on a rote performance of motherhood, letting her spring wind down over the years. It was time for something else. Time to shed the last few trappings of their old relationship. Time for Brie to prove that, unlike her father, she was worthy of the jacket across her shoulders.

"Hey, Mom," Brie hissed venomously. "Kiss my boots."

She was prepared to drown out any pushback with force, but none came. Mom seemed more than happy to be freed of the prickly yoke of her own thoughts. "Y-yes, Brie."

She knelt to the ground, bent forward, and pressed her lips to the toe of each of Brie's boots in turn. Brie could see the moment the scent of polish, still fresh from earlier that day, hit Mom's nose; a tide of lethargy claimed her, and the tension fell from her shoulders. She was at bliss.

"Good girl." Brie shivered as the words left her lips. It was so wrong, but there was no meaning in restraint anymore. "Kiss them again," she ordered, when Mom began to draw back. Her lips curled. "Kiss them like you used to kiss him."

"Yes, Brie." Mom's voice was already a dream's song of years past, and the dream only deepened as she obeyed, careful pecks becoming long, deep, lavish kisses. Brie couldn't help but laugh as, from within her trance, Mom found a lover's passion to devote to the onyx-black leather of her daughter's boots.

"*That's* how the two of you made out?" Brie sneered, watching her Mom drool all over her. "Guess he didn't teach you to kiss properly. Probably didn't know himself." She licked her lips. "Maybe it's time for me to teach you how the world works, Mom."

Below her, Mom stiffened slightly and lifted her head. Apparently, that taboo had sharp enough teeth pierce even the thick, soporific veil boot polish and leather placed over her. “Brie, we can’t. You’re my-”

Brie’s hand formed a knot in Mom’s long hair and pressed her mercilessly back down, grinding her nose against the freshly-polished leather. Mom’s shocked intake of breath drowned her anew, and she went still. She broke open. Brie let her sink for a moment, relaxing her grip, stroking her fingertips gently across Mom’s scalp in the way Mom had done for her so many times, as a child. But her childhood was over. She had other desires now. Brie had tried being into boys the way girls were supposed to, but she’d lost her appetite for pretending. Relationships with women her own age had never really worked out either. Her tastes skewed older. More specific. More maternal. Now she could satisfy them. Why not? That had become the eternal question beckoning Brie forth. It wasn’t embarrassing anymore. Not to her, and she no longer cared what anyone else might think. Freud was an instruction manual.

The taboo didn’t bother her either. Mom lived for her, and she lived for Mom. Neither one of them had anybody else. It was perfectly natural.

“You’re going to forget all about that man,” Brie told her firmly. “You don’t need him anymore. You have me.”

“Yes, Brie,” came the dreamer’s reply.

“He was just a bad substitute,” Brie pressed. “While you were waiting for me. Saving yourself for me.”

“Yes, Brie.” The way she said it was so perfect. The same way Brie always said *Yes, Mom*.

“You never wanted him. Not really.” Perhaps the scent of polish was getting to Brie too. She could hear something from the kitchen boiling over on the stove. She didn’t care. She wanted to see how much of herself she could stamp into her mother’s mind. “You’re not into men. You’re into girls like me. The only reason you ever let him touch you is because he reminded you of your daughter.”

It made no sense at all, but that was exactly why it felt so good to stitch the incoherent spiral of a desire into the fabric of Mom’s being. Brie had long since learned that Mom couldn’t resist or repel the thoughts she handed her. Not when she was so far gone.

“You crave me, and you belong to me,” Brie purred. “You live for me, and your body lives for mine. For the body you made and carried. I guess it’s been years since you got to perform a wife’s duties that way. A mother’s

duties. But here I am, Mom. Get to it.”

She guided Mom up again, and let wisps of fresh air revive her, lending breath and filling the new shapes Brie had sculpted for her thoughts with animus. After a few moments she stirred, then looked up at her daughter. Her eyes were clouded, but then the hungry lighthouse-lamp shone anew with a glow that was at once motherly, and anything but.

Brie eased herself back down into her seat, keeping her legs spread in a wide stance. The invitation was obvious, as was the pronounced tent at the front of Brie’s pants. It had been there since the moment she donned the jacket. Mom hesitated—but only for a moment, before bending to her new desires and crawling underneath the table so she could unfasten Brie’s belt.

“That’s it,” Brie purred, as Mom took her in her mouth. “Good girl.” No more nagging. No more chastening. No more reminders and unwelcome advice. Just the wet, lurid, sucking smack of her cock against the back of Mom’s throat. But there was, she reflected as she planned her move into the master bedroom, something missing. Something she did want to hear. “Hey, Mom. Let’s have a talk about what you should call me, from now on.”

“C’mom, Mom. Hurry up! And stop fussing so much, everybody’s staring at us.”

A familiar refrain, an unfamiliar tone. Now, as Brie sat on the high shoeshine chair at the kink night of the local queer bar rather than at the gate of the old school playground, the words fell from her lips a sleazy, mocking tease rather than a childish whine. The comment bent ears, then eyes, and then a small crowd really was staring at the spectacle of a young, butch woman getting her boots blacked by a woman twice her age, and strikingly resemblant.

And what a spectacle Mom was. As Brie had cast off the remnants of ill-fitting femininity and replaced it with flamboyantly masculine touches that better suited her, she had pushed Mom in the other direction entirely. Her mother was currently wearing a long, red, pattern-printed dress, the kind that better belonged in a 50s sitcom. Kneeling at Brie’s feet, enraptured by the task before her, she used its hem, in place of a rag, to distribute and smooth out the polish she was applying to her daughter’s boots. To some eyes, the black stains had ruined the garment. To Brie’s, there was no better wedding ring or collar. At least, not until she got a chance to fuck an heir of her own

into the cunt that had birthed her.

But for now it was more than enough to witness how, in response to Brie's command, Mom immediately quickened her work, then looked up to gaze at her daughter with eyes faded and adoring.

"Yes, Daddy."

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