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2019 Winner Creative Nonfiction

The Last Straw

The Miami Airport international arrivals door slid open and several people walked out. Not them. Standing next to my three siblings, I leaned across the metal barrier, peering inside. Is that them? Before I could discern anything, the sliding doors closed. I stepped back, feeling the recurring conflict I felt every summer. I was eager to see them, but wondered if I'd be disappointed again. I often disagreed with what they insisted we do together and wanted as much attention as my brothers got from them. Maybe this year would be different.

The door opened. A familiar tall, slender man with slightly bowed legs strode out, a big grin on his face. Noticing his high-water jeans, faded Hawaiian shirt and Birkenstocks (his concession to shoes when forced to wear them), I rolled my eyes. It's 1975 for Christ's sake. Time to stop looking like a hippie.

His stringy hair, with new hints of grey strands, had grown longer since I'd seen him last year. It now hung below his ears. Terri, his 28-year-old Australian wife, bounced along beside him in a crocheted mini-skirt and white peasant blouse, flopped open at the neck revealing the tops of her newly bulbous boobs.

Before I could move, Topher, my 10-year-old youngest brother, hollered, "Dad!" then ran towards him, flinging himself into his arms. Heidi, my older sister, Scot, my other brother, and I followed on his heels. By the time we reached Dad and Terri, they'd dropped their bags and opened their arms for hugs.

We'd been waiting for them to arrive from Fiji where they'd anchored the black, ferro-concrete Chinese sailing Junk, with red eyes on the bow, that Dad built in 1971. This year, instead of us sailing with them in the South Pacific, they were flying with us to Peru. Our Lan Chile flight was leaving in about an hour.

On board, I scooped down in the middle next to Heidi, who'd claimed the coveted window seat. She turned to me. "Bummer your graduation was today. Are you sure you're okay missing it?"

"Compared to a trip to Peru, it's a no brainer. But I wish Dad had been willing to leave later so I could've gone."

"You know how Dad is," she replied. "He does what suits him. Besides, you're only 16. Maybe he thought you had two more years in school."

"Smchhh!" I sucked my teeth. "You're probably right. He's often clueless about our lives."

"And most everything else."

"Let's hope he doesn't do anything stupid this trip."

"Girl, don't hold your breath."

Everyone behaved themselves for the first few days – until we arrived in Cuzco. Our first evening there we gathered on the wooden balcony of a small two-story guesthouse, watching the busy square below. When I heard a match strike and smelled a pungent scent in the air, I swiveled to the right. Dad puffed on a lit doobie and then passed it to the person sitting next to him in the line of rickety chairs.

I raised my eyebrows in a what-the-f***-is-he-doing? way to Heidi. She shrugged and snatched the joint from Topher's lips before he could inhale. An old hand since high school, she took a hit before handing it back to Dad. She knew I didn't smoke and with the glare I shot her, she wasn't about to pass it to Scot, even though our 14-year-old brother had smoked with Dad before.

I jumped up and stormed into the small room us kids shared. Here we go again. I knew it wouldn't last. Why does he always have to do this? Can't we just have fun without him getting high or doing something dangerous?

Later, when Heidi sauntered into the room, I confronted her with a barrage of questions under the harsh light of the bare bulb on the ceiling. I tried to keep my voice down, but it rose higher with each word. I'm sure Dad heard me.

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"Where the hell did Dad get that? Did he bring it or did he buy it here? He's going to get us thrown in jail! And what was he thinking passing it to Topher? Did you say anything to him?"

"Shhh." Heidi, less confrontational than I, said. "Calm down. He's being discreet. I think he got the message when I took the joint away from Topher."

"Well, if he does it again, I am going to say something," I retorted, true to my roles as caretaker of Topher and outspoken sibling.

"Mellow out. Try to let it go." She knew how easily I could explode.

During the rest of the journey, I let a lot of things slide. When Dad showed the boys how to chew coca leaves while hiking, I said nothing, although I read our guidebook to confirm they wouldn't get high from the leaves.

I ignored my misgivings after he urged me to take pictures of the Uros people living on the reed islands in Lake Titicaca, even though they didn't want their photo taken. I didn't want him mocking me.

And I went anxiously along when he insisted that we hide from the guards at Machu Picchu at closing time. I didn't want to ruin it for everyone. I snuck behind a wall of huge, tightly fit-together, rectangular boulders, hoping it'd be worth it.

Later, as we sat on a rock cliff near the trail to Huayna Picchu (the mountain peak soaring above the Incan preserve), the orange and pink rays from the sinking sun set the extraordinary, stone complex below on fire. The village came alive in the light. For an extended moment, I was transported outside myself. When I returned to normal awareness, I felt relaxed and almost willing to forgive Dad.

That feeling didn't last long. Several days later, sitting on a large sand dune in the desert, north of Lima, overlooking the South Pacific in the distance, I snapped. I hadn't wanted to come there, but Dad had insisted. None of my protests over what he'd wanted us to do held any water with him. Left with no choice, I went along on the overnight excursion, but refused to participate.

Camped in the desert, Dad, Scot and Topher had been up way before dawn, digging in the dark under kerosene lanterns as the short, local cowboys (vaqueros) Dad had hired jabbed long poles into the sand to locate old graves.

He'd been to Peru before with a buddy who introduced him to these fellows. I don't know how he made the arrangements, since he didn't speak a lick of the language. Somehow, he always found a way to do what he wanted – like all the times he skipped port without paying his bills, although he had plenty of money. Nothing stopped him. Moral responsibility

didn't stop him. Knowing it was illegal, didn't either.

By now the sun was up and the vaqueros long gone. They left in the early light, carrying with them the black-market dollars Dad paid them, and some of the pots they'd unearthed. In the full light, the long line of graves they'd plundered shimmered like wide wounds in the sand. Scanning the partially refilled holes, I wasn't sure which one held the body of the little old woman they'd reburied.

I sat near the remaining scattered pots, stunned and crushed by remorse. Why did I let Dad drag me along? This is so wrong. These are just simple folks' graves and everyday pots they used during their lifetime. They've dug them up for what? The pots don't even have the high-priced value Dad expected. The holes punched in them by the vaquero's poles took care of that. What a sacrilegious waste.

My internal musings were interrupted by Topher running around, whooping loudly while throwing sand up in the air. Some of the sand blew into my eyes. My defenses down from lack of sleep and resentment, I yelled at him. "Stop throwing sand."

Then I jumped up and strode over to Dad, who reclined on the dune. "You need to get him under control."

Dad's response to my demand came quickly and quietly. "I am not interested in being an authority figure. I just want to be your friend."

I exploded. "Well, guess what? You're not our friend. You're our father. Start acting like one. You think you're above all the rules and you're teaching the boys they can do

whatever they want. It's not okay."

Dad sat there, speechless, while Heidi and Terri tried to calm me down. They came over to where I stood, towering over Dad, and implored me to sit down. I brushed them off and continued screaming. "I've had it with you. You are always stoned and never ask anything about us and our life back home. I bet you didn't even care that I missed my graduation to come here."

Dad finally stood up and shouted back. "That's enough. You need to stop."

"Fine. I'll stop. I'm leaving." Turning, I stomped through the sand to the Jeep. I grabbed my back pack and dug around in it until I found my passport, then icily asked Terri, now by my side, "Where's my ticket?"

I was enraged enough she knew not to mess with me. Opening her patchwork cloth bag, she pulled out the ticket and handed it to me. She urged me not to go. "It's not safe for you to hitchhike to the Lima airport from here."

"I don't care. I am not staying here with him." Putting my straw hat on over my bandana, I strode off in the direction of the highway miles away. I didn't look back until I heard Scot calling my name. I glanced over my shoulder as he ran up next to me.

"I'm not gonna to let you go by yourself," he said, waving his ticket and passport in his hand. He knew he could never persuade me to stop.

"Do what you want?" I responded curtly, hiding my relief that he'd joined me.

We trudged side by side in silence across the desert in the hot sun, our feet sinking into the soft sand with each step. We dragged on for what

seemed like a long time, although it was probably only 20 minutes. The road still felt impossibly far away when the open-air Jeep pulled up and stopped in front of us.

Heidi jumped out of the back, while Dad and Terri stayed up front. "Come on. Get in the Jeep," she begged. "It's too hot out here. And as Terri said, you're not safe. You don't need to interact with Dad at all. We're leaving the day after tomorrow anyway. Please, just get in."

Scot, knowing Heidi was right, put his hand on my shoulder and encouraged me. "Let's get in the Jeep."

With my temper now cooled a bit and my brow hot and dripping with sweat, I grudgingly acquiesced. Dad had enough sense to keep quiet all the way back to Lima. For the rest of that evening and all the next day, I kept to myself, not leaving the room, even to eat. Heidi and Scot brought me drinks and snacks, most of which I left untouched. They'd seen me shut down before. They left me alone, figuring I'd snap out of it once we got home.

What they didn't know was this was the last straw for me. I said nothing when Dad lied to the Miami airport custom officials about not having anything to declare. The pots were wrapped up in clothes in our carry-on bags. He'd decided to smuggle them in despite the holes. Besides, I hadn't spoken to him in two days. Nothing he nor I could say would matter. I'd left my respect and yearning for him to be a father in the desert in Peru. When we ambled out of the international arrivals door, I didn't even say goodbye. I simply walked away. NM