

Red Paint Puddle
By Elizabeth DeVido

My father has not left the basement in seven days. In any other circumstances, this would not be unusual. Since my parents moved into our one-floor abode the year I was born, the basement has served as my father's art studio. Take a look around down there and you'll find all his favorite pieces: Dollhouses with immaculately tiled roofs and brick-by-brick walls. Models of new property developments complete with little cars in the parking lots and signs in the windows. Hotels, gardens, train tracks, national parks, and monuments. Each of them so detailed you could see splinters in the wood, grass sprouting in cracks in the concrete, dimples on the miniature people that walk the foam grounds.

All of my father's work focused on small things. He could paint freckles on his little miniature dolls, create details so small you'd need a microscope to see them. My mother used to tease him about how he could only understand the world through a bird's eye view. The world was easier to understand when it was small enough to fit on a display. Patrons could spend hours squinting at my father's dioramas and never run out of hidden details to find.

Lots of different people found my father's talents useful. Property developers who needed models of the hotels and shopping malls they wanted to build. Museums that needed dioramas of civil war battlefields complete with little blood-splattered soldiers. Toy shops that wanted to sell his handmade dollhouses. But my father's favorite works were always his nature dioramas. Nothing kept him in a trance like creating the natural world with man-made materials. He could paint microscopic veins on leaves the size of fingernails, make tiny anthills on brown-painted dirt, cake rocks with mud and shiny water.

My father has been working on one of these nature dioramas for the past few weeks. For weeks he's forsaken the outside world to build his own in the deepest walls in the house. When he gets to the end of a project, it takes a lot to pull him from his studio to eat dinner. But I haven't seen him once. He hasn't stopped once. He hasn't stopped since my mother left us.

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The project began over a year ago, after a camping trip that left our family with one member short. I had just graduated from our local college and my mother insisted we celebrate with a trek up in the mountains. We packed the needed supplies and set up a tent just a few miles hike from a stream.

It was my mother's idea for us to go fishing on the first day. While my father enjoyed recreating the outdoors, my mother loved living in it. She loved to dig her hands in the earth until the soil stuck under her fingernails. She loved to wet her socks in the lake, catch fish with her bare hands. The moment our tent was ready, she pulled out three fishing poles.

"If we leave for the river now, we can grab a few in time for dinner," she said, then gave me a wink. "We'll catch ourselves some dinner."

“You go ahead,” my father said. He tossed his sleeping bag inside the tent. “We still have more stuff to unload from the car.” It was his turn to look at me. “Clarice, can you help me?” I was about to refuse until my mother answered for me.

“I’ll go set up the poles by the water,” she said. “I hear there’s a rocky bridge over the stream. I want to check it out before we start. I’ll be up there when you’re ready.”

She gave me a wink then disappeared down the path, three fishing pools swinging over her shoulder. I didn’t think much of it. I did as my father said as we unloaded the rest of our supplies. I moved quickly because I wanted to see the bridge my mother mentioned. At one point, father handed me a stack of wooden logs.

“I’m going to go check on mom,” my father said. “Set these a few feet from the tent. We’ll need it to boil hotdogs later.”

I watched my father disappear down the same hiking path my mother took. The sun was starting its descent and the air in the mountains was growing cold and crisp. I arranged the logs the way my father taught me in trips past. I kept them a safe distance from the tent so none of our things would burn.

The task was a bit tedious, and I was impatiently waiting to go to the stream to fish. The woods were quiet, hardly any animals were heard. So when I heard footsteps running down the path, along with my father’s uneven breathing, I immediately sensed something was wrong.

My father reemerged from the path.

“Dad,” I said. I dropped the log I was holding and made my way towards him. “Something wrong?”

He stopped me before I could approach the path.

“Don’t go to the river,” he said between sharp inhales. “Don’t...your mother...” He gave me a watery look, one I’d never seen on my father before. “She...wasn’t on the bridge...she was...I found her in the water. She...I think she fell.” His hands shook on my arms. “She hit her head on a boulder...she’s not moving...I found her in the water...”

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I come home from work and turn into the hallways stretching between the entryway and the kitchen. My footsteps echo through the house with a click-click-click on floorboards older than me. On most days, my first stop after work is to grab dinner in the kitchen. But I decided today I will finally visit my father.

The basement door sticks against the pale wallpaper like a stain, I’ve walked past that doorway every day, coming to and from work, for weeks now. Right at my feet is this morning’s breakfast for papa.

The door opens silently, without a single creak. Despite the age of this house, everything is quiet enough that anyone could walk around without making a sound. I’m greeted with a waft of smells from the top of the stairs. It’s been so long since I’ve been downstairs that the smell is almost nostalgic: Oil and paint, leather shoes, and cigarettes.

I drop down step by step, and I'm quiet so as not to startle my father. The basement is lit by a single lightbulb hanging from a beady string. The light is as oily and yellow as a tooth. My eyes look for my father.

It doesn't take long to find him.

My father is not hunched over his old bar stool, his thin spine snapped over the table. He's collapsed on the floor, crunched up on the carpet with his hands to his throat. The carpet by his mouth is caked with dried vomit.

My heart hitches in my throat, and the silence of the house screams at me. I stumble forward onto my knees right by my father's body. Corpse. Cadaver. Those words pass through my head but I refuse to hear them.

My hands shake over my father. I can't bring myself to touch him. I fear if I do, his body will crumble to dust. I kneel on the floor, my body is too quiet and too loud. My mind scrambled the scene around me, looking for answers. I look at the vomit by his lips, then run my eyes down to his hand, and the uncapped paint tube in his hand.

Suicide. Toxic chemicals in the paints, the one he used to create the individual stripes on a penny-sized butterfly, had poisoned him. Whatever had taken over my father, that locked him away in this house, decided to end it all with his favorite material.

It's centuries later before I tear my eyes away from my father. I lifted my gaze as if I could something in the room that could revive him. But the only thing the light in the room touches is the diorama on the table. I rise to my feet and look over it.

My father has been working on it for months, and it's one of the most impressive pieces I've seen of him. The plastic stream that runs the piece seems to stir with murk. The trees are base and each hair-thin branch is speckled with details. It's new. Some of the paint looks like it hasn't even dried yet.

The scene is a simple one: A murky stream running from one end of the display to the next, passing under a hole in a cliff, and bordered by a cluster of bare trees and bushes. The rocky structure is pigmented with grey, orange, and white layers of rock. The tigs blur together in a fuzz of rust. No flowers, no animals, no brightly glittering leaves. There's only one bright color in the diorama, and it's a spot of red in the river.

There are two miniature figurines: One stands on the rocky bridge stretched high over the stream. I lean over the table and squint to look close. The man on the bridge is dark-haired, dressed in a green flannel complete with orange and red stripes. His jeans look like real denim, and his shoes have tiny shoelaces. His gaze bends over the edge, and his face is painted with round eyes and an open mouth.

My gaze follows down to his, to the red spot on the water. The second figurine is half submerged with the plastic stream, face down, her blonde hair sprawled in the waves. The red paint spills into the walls, running from her head to a boulder right by the stream.

The scene squirms in my stomach, before I can even remember what—who—is on the floor behind me. My father's dioramas were always pleasant to look at, and they never contained stories. The families in his dollhouses were happily seated at their little dining room tables, the

museum soldier figurines lined neatly in a row. Even his Civil War recreations had very little bloodshed. Nothing like this.

My hands shake and fumble as I reach for my father's microscope, kept alongside his row of thin brushes. I hover over the figurines, watching their tiny features grow up the shiny glass. They're glued to the plastic ecosystem around them, a perfect recreation of...a mountain? A park? A...

Camping ground.

The words enter my ears as if someone had whispered them. Both figurines are wearing little backpacks I've seen before. I see the man on the rocky overreach, high above the little trees, looking down at the woman in the water. His expression is shocked, his mouth is wide, and he looks exactly like the man on the floor behind me.

And the woman. Her face is down in the water. Even my father may have not bothered to paint her face on. But I know those short blonde curls, that purple shirt, and white hiking shorts. The running shoes with the bright pink shoelaces...

My eyes fall to a small plaque at the front of the display. The title is one word:
ACCIDENT.