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## The Old Man

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# The Old Man

Madeleine Polcyn

Believe it or not, I have seven younger siblings -- yes, seven. Seven humans who all look towards me for guidance, who could screw up like I did because they were dumb enough to use me as an example. And that's scary. They could come home smokin' crack and decked out in ink and leather, and when the Old Man would ask, "Why in God's name would you do this?" they would reply behind nicotine-stained teeth, "'cause he did it, Pops." I don't want 'em to do anything I did, though. I want 'em to be better.

They're not my biological siblings, o'course; I don't think the Old Man is potent enough for that, bless him. We're all adopted, so besides the twins, none of us share any blood. For all I know, I *do* have biological siblings, but I pray to God I don't ever meet 'em. My biological family was *shit* -- sorry, pardon my language -- and couldn't keep their hands off o'me. Not a good place to be.

A lot of people make the assumption that the foster system screws you up, but that's not it. The system itself wasn't so bad, but I was eleven when I got thrown in there. At that age, even if you're put in a house, no one really *wants* you, 'cause you're not a baby or absolutely precious. I thought I could say goodbye to ever getting out. I guess I was lucky.

The Old Man was a combat vet who attended college after being discharged and scored a cushy job as the head videographer for a local news channel. He married his high school sweetheart two days after their graduation, but she high-tailed out of there with some pilot not long after the two of them got full custody of all the little ones. No matter, though, because he still had that big house he inherited from his old man. It was only because of his wife that he got any of us, 'cause I bet no one in their right mind would let a thirty-some-year-old cynic riddled with PTSD look after his twelve-year-old counterpart without another voice of reason. Back then, I didn't care, though. I had a mom. I had a dad, the most relatable dad ever. I thought it was awesome.

But like I said, it's not the foster system that screws you up. It's the people who throw you in and, sometimes, the people who yank you out.

At first it was a fairytale, but of course, I was still messed up: nightmares, anxiety, violent outbursts, all of it. And the Old Man was exactly the same, 'cept he directed his violence towards me and the other kids after his wife abandoned us. I was always the Old Bastard's favorite target, since I was the oldest, but I *never* hit back. Two of my sisters did, though: the one closest to my age, who was an adult by then, so the Old Man kept his mouth shut. And one of the twins, who the Old Man had removed real quick.

It didn't help that I got bullied real bad in high school. There was always this one guy, who always toed the line between toyin' with my feelings and breakin' me down, and one day, I just I dunno. I snapped and attacked him, tried to strangle him. He *lived*, though, don't worry! I went home and cried to the Old Man, and, for the first time, he didn't tell me to toughen up. He let me cry, and it well it was *weird*.

The kid's family didn't press charges. His brother told the Old Man that his dumb ass deserved it. The Old Man checked me into a psych ward, said I was, "a danger to the babies," that Old Crook.

After a month, I was discharged, but I wasn't "all better," no. I was fuckin' pissed. I lashed out at the Old Fool and ran away the next night. I did real dumb things, like cocaine and prostitution and all that dumb shit, and when I came home oh *God* when I waltzed back home like I hadn't been on a monthslong coke binge, the Old Man could've wrung my neck. But he manipulated the system like he manipulated everything else, and I didn't have to go to jail. I just had to face rehab and the dirty look in his eyes when the Old Criminal asked me to set the table or help one of the little ones with homework.

All six of the little ones were homeschooled, which provided the Old Man the perfect opportunity to twist their minds and keep them silent with God and discipline. He was real good at twisting things, twisting 'em with poisoned words and a grimy, deadpan stare.

And God forgive me but I *hate* that Old Fuck's grimy stare.

But the little ones? Right. I don't want 'em to turn out like me, but I doubt they will. The Old Man's a devil, but the youngest six were all taken in as babies, so the only thing tainting them is *him*. My other sister, the one closest to my age, is so smart, such a ball of sunshine, and she'd never get involved with anything like that.

I say they're lucky even if they're dumb enough to look up to me. I love 'em even if I don't show it a lot, and I'm so proud of 'em. Someone's gotta be.