

TITLE: Unopened

SUB-CATEGORY: Short story (fiction)

NAME OF ARTIST: Jeanne Mullins

Unopened

Paul couldn't say why he took a day off from his job as a high school science teacher to unpack the six boxes marked "Other" that were scattered about in the garage. Perhaps it was because he and his wife, Maria, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Angie, had unpacked all the boxes deemed worthy of labels—while the rest of these boxes were strewn around like unclaimed freight. He felt an odd kinship to the discarded with a nagging suspicion there was something buried inside one of the boxes that would prove to be valuable.

His wife thought he should've waited till the summer to unpack the extra boxes. He did have the summer off, after all. His wife didn't have the summer off. She was what his mother-in-law referred to as the Breadwinner. And Breadwinners – didn't take the summer off – at least not those working for a major pharmaceutical company on the cusp of announcing a new Alzheimer's drug. But despite his mother-in-law's long-standing digs at his economic worth, Paul was proud of his wife. He eagerly climbed into the moving van that took them from Lodi, New Jersey to Athens, Georgia.

The first box Paul opened was no bigger than a shoe box. It contained all of his baseball cards. He once had hordes of cards, most of which he had been collecting since he was five. His dad was a big baseball fan and together they'd assembled quite a collection. But when they moved, he only kept the valuable ones. The rest he gave to his nephew. It seemed odd to him now that he'd agree to tag the box "Other" since the contents were so valuable. He could easily have lost track of some of his most valued boyhood possessions; his Mickey Mantle card worth over four hundred dollars and his priceless Hank Aaron rookie card. But he remembered now that it had been Maria's idea to cart off his entire childhood to the attic. If only memories could be locked away so easily.

He carried the box upstairs to the FROG – which he learned from real estate agents was an acronym for Finished Room Over the Garage. He and Maria laughed and wondered why they'd agreed to move south where frogs were kept indoors. But oddly enough, the FROG had become his favorite room. He placed the baseball cards in the drawer under the entertainment center. He didn't mind keeping them there; that's where he spent most of his time anyway.

The next box he chose to unpack was about the size of a small kitchen appliance. He didn't find a toaster inside but he did find all kinds of ceramic pottery covered with layers of tissue paper. Must be fragile. The first item he unraveled was a handmade ashtray Angie had made in kindergarten. It was mud green and made of clay. **Angela** was hand-printed on the inside. He remembered how proud she'd been. It was the first time she'd gotten the "g" right. She always made her "g" look like an "a" with a weird tail but this time her handwriting was perfect. Then he found a few pots that she had fired in a kiln. They were all disfigured. He had no idea why Angie kept them. Maybe reminders of happier times.

At the bottom of the box, he found an enormous wad of tissue paper. He removed the clump to see if anything of importance was hidden underneath. He was enjoying this task more than he'd anticipated. It was like going on a treasure hunt of your own life.

But instead of finding more ceramic items, he found a small journal covered with pictures of pink ballet slippers. Paul opened the first page. Written in perfect penmanship, which looked vaguely familiar, he found the following prose.

BLAME

She never understood what made him change. Some said hormones. Others said it must be drugs or alcohol. She didn't know. She only knew that one moment she trusted him with her life and the next moment she was afraid to be left alone with him. She blamed everyone. She blamed no one. She blamed herself.

Paul read the entry twice. Once with interest and the second time with the scrutiny of a crime scene investigator. But before he could act upon any suspicions he may have had, the phone rang. It startled him and his arm flinched, knocking over the ashtray. It cracked and shattered into more than a dozen pieces. A pleasant memory smashed.

"Ha...Ha... Hello," he stammered into the phone. It was Maria.

"You sound funny," she said. "Anything wrong?"

Paul wasn't ready to talk about the ledger, so he lied. Something he never did. "No, I guess I'm just tired of unpacking." The lie slipped out easily.

"Listen, hon, I won't be able to pick up Angie after soccer practice today. Some of the head honchos dropped in on us today. I have to go over the projected sales figures again." Of course Maria had to stay. That's why her company had re-located her to Georgia— so she'd always be available to handle corporate problems. Maria had a cool head and stayed calm under beauracratc pressure. A trait executives found attractive. "Could you get her?" she asked.

Yes, that's what he would do – get Angie now and take her out of school so could get to the bottom of this strange journal. He was lost in his own thoughts, too preoccupied to pay attention to what his wife was saying. She repeated her request. "Can you get Angie?" He grunted something into the phone and hung up.

He called the high school attendance office and asked them to sign Angie out. He was afraid that if he went inside the building, he'd start asking a lot of questions and make a scene. Paul knew how embarrassed adolescents got when parents raise a ruckus in their school. But the attendance officer told him Angie had already left for the day. Had he forgotten? He'd signed the permission slip. Now he remembered. She was having soccer practice over at Lakeside Park.

He didn't have to leave right away so he re-read the entry again with calmer eyes. This time he wasn't sure it was a diary. He noticed it wasn't signed or dated, and it was written in third person. He had never written in a diary or a journal but he imagined it would at least be written in first person. Perhaps he over-reacted. He had no hard and fast evidence to support the hypothesis that his little girl had been ...been what? Maybe she'd innocently copied over some song lyrics— kids were always downloading stuff from the Internet. It did have a title, like a poem or a song. He reassured himself, that's all this was, a literary work of sorts. Calmer, he flipped to the next page of the ledger. This was what he read:

POUNCE

It used to be different. She wasn't always wary of him. They used to be close. He taught her many things, for he was her teacher, her leader, her mentor, her protector. He taught her how to enjoy the outdoors, how to pick a secure camping spot, and how to water ski barefoot. This was her favorite. But it is not these things she remembers now, she only remembers that he taught her how to be distrustful of men and to always be on the lookout for the pounce; because sooner or late, no matter how nice they seem, the pounce always comes.

Sweat poured from his brow. Perhaps his first inclination had been right. This wasn't a song lyric, but a teenager's cry for help. It did seem more personal— it made specific referencing to things that made him uncomfortable— men, pouncing, and water skiing. Paul knew all too well who had taught Angie to water ski. It was his brother Jack. They had spent many spent summer vacation together with their wives and children and Jack had taken it upon himself to teach all the kids to water ski. It was kind of his thing, the way it was Paul's thing to show them how to drive the motor boat. He remembered with vivid clarity the water-skiing episode because he and Jack had argued about it. Paul didn't think a nine-year-old could handle the rigor of water skiing but Jack was very persuasive – convincing Maria that it was safe— and he had won out in the end.

Paul always thought his baby brother was a bit of a daredevil, but the notion he was a ... pedophile was unfathomable. Yet, here sat the evidence—described in such a harrowing, erudite manner. But that was just it. When he allowed himself a minute to objectively look at the text— something that would be incredibly hard for most people to do but as a scientist trained to be clinically methodical it came second nature to him— it seemed too scholarly for his struggling-in-English-class-daughter to have written. If it turned out that Jack was the one who had hurt Angie, he wouldn't hesitate to call the police. But for now, the evidence was circumstantial at best. Right? He read on with such great urgency he almost tore the page from the spine. He found this entry:

THE LESSON

He was five years older. He had been her friend, her buddy. He taught her how to shoot bow and arrows when she was seven. When she was eight, he taught her how to how to fire a gun. At age nine, he taught her how to catch a fish. He was always patient, gentle and funny. When she was ten, he taught her that sometimes good people did bad things to good people. He was a good teacher, and she was always willing to learn from him, but this wasn't a lesson she wished he didn't teach her..

Paul trembled. While he was relieved that Jack couldn't possibly be the perpetrator, he still didn't know much else. Who had been giving Angie *lessons* and what exactly did he *teach* her? Whom could he castrate? She had said he was five years older. Yet he couldn't think of a single older male—other than himself and Jack—that spent this much time in the company of his daughter. And where had these incidences—he could only think in terms of incidences—occurred? But it didn't make sense; they never stayed at the same Lake George resort more than once. Could it have been a guy at one of the local parks or marinas? They did tend to re-visit favorite attractions, even if the lodgings changed. How could this have gone on right under his nose?

His daughter was hardly ever out of his sight, he was what his mother-in-law called Overprotective. But according to the diary, he wasn't protective enough. He was sick with blame—what kind of father doesn't know that his daughter was being... Molested? There he'd said it. Molested. A nightmare of a word, a horror of a concept. However, unthinkable, it seemed to fit. Yet, it didn't. If his daughter had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of an older boy, wouldn't there have been some kind of visible, tangible signs of trauma? He was sure that a ten-year-old girl couldn't have handled this alone. Maria had to know something.

Paul dialed Maria's office. He was told by her secretary she was unavailable. This was unacceptable. "Brenda, interrupt her now. Tell her it's about Angie."

"What's going on?" Maria said with a hint of irritation. "If you can't pick her up just arrange a ride with one of the other mothers?"

"No, that's not it." He chose his next words carefully. "I found this journal. I think Angie's been... molested." His voice hovered on hysteria.

Maria's response, however, was curt. "We'll talk about this when I get home."

"So you know something?" He was interrogating her, like a parent who has just found pot in his son's room.

"I said we'll talk about this when I get home." She hung up.

Maria had never hung up on Paul before. He took her silence as acknowledgment. It was true. Now he was frantic. He needed to know now— not three hours from now – who had violated his daughter. If Maria wouldn't offer up any suspects, he'd figure it out himself. He went back to the journals and re-read them hoping to find clues he missed before. But nothing specific jumped out at him. He had hit a dead end. He hated dead ends. They lead to bad outcomes.

Twenty minutes later Maria walked into the kitchen. Paul's nose was still stuck in the journal. She must've left as soon as she hung up on him. Her eyes were puffy and mascara ran down her face. She looked trounced, like she'd gone one round too many.

"I'm glad you're home. Help me understand what's happened." He clutched the journal so hard his knuckles turned red.

"What's done is done." Her voice was flat.

"What are you talking about? I can't let my daughter's molester go unpunished." Paul could not understand Maria's complacency.

"For the love of God, Paul, let it go." She said.

"I can't." He said and pointed to the journal. "Have you read what's in here?"

"I would say so, since I'm the one who wrote it." Her eyes seared into him.

"You what?"

"You heard me. I wrote it. It's my journal!" She grabbed it out of his hand and clutched it to her chest. She ran her fingers along the cover. "It wasn't supposed to be a big deal. You remember when my company sent me to a therapist, just to make sure the promotion and transfer went smoothly?" She opened the diary and skimmed a few pages. "Dr. Sloan and I got to talking, and I swear to you I just casually mentioned some stuff that happened to me when I was a kid. She's the one

who suggested I write down everything I remembered so I could clear my head of the emotional cobwebs.”

“Did I hear you correctly? You *casually* mentioned that you were sexually abused? How does one *casually* drop that into a conversation? And why is it you never *casually* mentioned it to your husband?”

“I couldn’t. There were just too many spiders.” She backed away from Paul. His tone of voice frightened her.

“You’re not making any sense. What do you mean there were too many spiders? I told you everything about myself and... and you withhold this –this **incident** from me,” he said as he inched closer to Maria.

“I withheld it from myself all these years. Don’t you see?” Paul loomed over Maria.

“No, I don’t! I’ve been married to you for twenty years. How could you keep this from me? Your own husband?” Maria cowered. Paul noticed her cringe and it stopped him cold. What was he doing? This wasn’t the way he talked to his wife.

He needed distance if he was ever going to get a handle on the situation. He stepped back – and from a wide-angle view – he was able to scope his wife as though he was a member of the bomb squad and she was a crate of unexploded ammunition. This time, with the eye of someone whose life and the lives of others depended on his ability to detect and thwart disaster, he saw it all—the aloofness, the inability to get beyond a perfunctory sex life, the need for control, and the general malaise and irritability getting worse with each passing month. The signs had been there all along, except he had been too oblivious— no, that wasn’t it—he had been too terrified of the consequences to open the package. But now that he had, he must claim the contents.

And all the emotional cobwebs it held.