

"It's been twenty years," Zach thought to himself. He lied there in his briefs on his bed on a lazy Saturday morning. He was in that state of waking up where you would be wide awake, but you didn't want to get out of bed just yet. "It's been twenty years since he left me...since he left us."

The tobiano painted horse just graduated college and managed to kick-start his career as a tech writer; while he was good at writing, he never liked it exactly. Being a horse with a lean, human-like figure, he was a naturally strong runner too. He's been in cross-country and track all through high school and college, just like his father would have wanted, or so his mother would claim. He enjoyed it only that it kept him in shape, and he felt a certain freedom pounding out 5k's in nearly 12 minutes. He felt he could get up and run away from his mother, who seemed to be stuck in the past by pressuring him to be like his father. He never liked the competitive aspects of running; he never wanted to be in a business career either. He only wanted to live his life the way he wanted, with the wind blowing through his mane.

Zach stayed in his bed for a few moments before getting up and starting his day. It was Saturday, and he wouldn't start his new job until Monday. He only put on a pair of black sweatpants, which rose just below his tail base and fit loosely over his digitigrade legs, before starting his morning routine of juice, cereal, a quick run, and coffee.

He lived on his own in a small, one-bedroom apartment. Along with the usual furniture you'd find in a bedroom, he had a few pin-up posters of shirtless, beefy males of varying species on the walls. There was a picture of him and his boyfriend on the table next to his bed; it was from one of their annual meetups. His cheetah boyfriend, Dennis, lived close, but not close enough for either of their tastes. They would meet each other half-way in Prarieburg once a year, though their meetups have been more frequent after graduation. Running was something they both loved, and running was what brought them together.

He looked at the picture of him and his boyfriend before going into the kitchen for breakfast. They were both smiling like they were best buddies rather than lovers. "I wish you were here with me right now sweetie," he said to himself quietly. He didn't return the smile that the two goofballs in the picture gave him, however.

Zach thought about calling his mother this morning while having breakfast, despite her unofficial no-contact restraint she had on him. But he didn't want to hear another threat of her calling the police to keep her "faggot" son away from her. He wanted to comfort her on the anniversary of his father's suicide, just like he has in the past before he came out to her. But he couldn't. He snorted in frustration.

After breakfast, he went out for his morning run, still wearing just his sweatpants so that any passersby will see his lean, fit body. He always liked when strangers admired his physique, usually the women; his white, round patches would curve and shape themselves so smoothly on his fit body and would pop out against his dark-brown coat. It was one of many reasons why Dennis fell for him, among other things.

Thoughts of Dennis sprinted through his head as he ran. Thoughts of his mother in grief on this day in particular invaded as his hooves clopped on the sidewalk. Thoughts of what his father might say to him now, how he would react to how much he's changed

– what he’s become. His speculation of his father stayed for the rest of the run and remained when he got back to his apartment.

After checking the mail, finding nothing but the usual bills, he started up some coffee and took a quick shower while it brewed. His brain, too, brewed up an idea as he washed the heat and musk off his body.

“...No, no, that just sounds...dumb,” he thought as he showered, “Then again...I was only three at the time...” He chuckled at himself and his idea. “You know what? Why the hell not. It’s a bit of a lazy day anyway.”

He got out of the shower, dried himself off while admiring his naked, fit body, and put his sweatpants back on before heading back into the kitchen, where coffee awaits. He filled his favorite mug that he got from his boyfriend before graduation. It was dark-blue and had the school’s logo printed on it: a white, monochrome polar bear paw that said “UWP Polars” underneath. He went into the main area and sat on the couch in front of his TV that had a few gaming consoles connected to it. He unplugged his laptop sitting next to him on the couch, right where he left it to charge overnight. He set his mug down on the table next to the couch, turned on his laptop, and after waiting for it to boot up and loaded up Word, he began to type a letter to his father.

Dear Dad,

I know this may seem pointless since you, well, decided to remove yourself from our lives. In fact, I’m not sure why or what prompted me to write you this letter in the first place. Mom doesn’t understand why you took your life the way you did, seeing your lifeless body swinging from the rafters in the garage when we came home. Thankfully she shielded my eyes when we went into the house, but that didn’t hide the fact something was wrong. She told me everything that happened that day a few years later. During that time, I didn’t understand either, but I think it was because of your job. She told me you were stressed almost every day, and that everyone at work poked fun at you saying things like, “Why the long face Adam?” You always took that personally because, well, it was true; you were a horse after all.

You were in marketing, right? Mom pressured me into getting an office job that would give me a steady career with lots of money; I’m now a tech writer at Takenaka Technologies. Honestly, I don’t like it; I just wanted to live life. But she said you wouldn’t have been proud of me if I didn’t get a college education.

She also said you wouldn’t have been proud if I didn’t go for Cross Country and Track back in high school and college, like you did. She said I would’ve been disowned by you if I wasn’t like you. But...I hope you’ll be happy to know that I love running; I feel this...this freedom, you know? I’m sure you would understand. And while I love running, I never liked the competitive aspects that came with CC and Track; I couldn’t feel that freedom I did when I run on my own. I never stopped though; I run for about 15 minutes every morning before I start my day, even on weekends! So there’s something you would be proud of, I hope.

Thing is, one day in all those years of Track, I met the cutest cat I ever laid eyes on. One year in college, I met Dennis; he was a cheetah, so he’s a natural sprinter. He’s also my boyfriend. We don’t live together just yet, but someday we will; we’ve been together for about a year and a half now. Mom doesn’t talk to me anymore when I told her about him; I can’t imagine what she’s

going through right now, you've been gone for 20 years. Despite that, I have my own place, started my career, and found someone who loves me and cares about me, even if that someone is a guy. If you were still around though, you probably would've disowned me too and shoved your religion down my throat...just like she did.

I don't know if you would've still loved me, or if you did 20 years ago before you died. I hope your soul's doing well though in the afterlife; I've been doing just fine myself.

*Your Son,
Zachariah*

After he wrote and proofed the letter, he printed it off. He got up off the couch and went over to printer, which sat on an old desk pushed up against the wall on the opposite side of the couch and TV. He grabbed the letter and pulled out an envelope and a pen from one of the desk drawers. After tri-folding the letter and sealing it in the envelope, the only thing he wrote on it was *To: Dad* on the front. He also put his return address and a stamp on the envelope, if only to make it seem authentic. He had no idea what to put for the sending address. His ears and tail twitched at his excitement, yet he second-guessed himself if he should have done this. He set the sealed envelope on the desk and went back into his room to dress more decent before leaving.

* * *

Zach got out of his car and walked across the graveyard to where his father laid at rest, with his letter in hoof-hand. He had on a pair of tight jeans and a red tank top; his favorite getup if he wanted to feel good about himself for the day. He was in the small town where he grew up and went to high school; the same town his parents grew up in, went to high school, and met each other. The graveyard didn't take up a large plot of land, and there were only two pathways for cars that ran through it vertically and connected in the back. A simple, black iron fence surrounded the property, and the entry points had simple arches connected to the fencing; they were a humble greeting for those who wished to visit and mourn their deceased.

He headed toward the reddish headstone that marked his father's burial site, as well as his mother's future burial site. On the left side of the headstone, a grey rectangle made to look like an old piece of paper had his father's name, birth and death dates, and his epitaph etched in:

*Adam Gregory Thompson
1960-1994
Don't let the Bastards grind you down*

"And yet you let them do that to you," he said to himself quietly as he read the epitaph. His ears lowered. He looked to the other paper-like rectangle, which only had his mother's name and birth date:

Katrina Beverly Thompson
1963-

There were only simple laurels that decorated the upper corners of the headstone. Along the bottom, there was, what used to be, his full name and birth date etched underneath both their names. A shoddy paint job covered it, the color barely matching the stone. He could feel the weight of his tail sag down on his lower back when he saw this; for a moment, he couldn't breathe.

Regaining composure, Zach found a large, smooth stone from another, more decorated grave stone. The envelope in one hoof-hand and the stone in the other, he placed them underneath his father's name, using the stone as a paperweight, even though it wasn't too windy out. He knelt down in front of the head stone for a few moments in silence before going back into his car to head home. He couldn't stop crying for the majority of the trip back. Even though he called up Dennis for comfort, it didn't stop his heart from breaking.

* * *

The next morning after getting up and going about his daily routine, Zach noticed a sealed envelope on the ground by the door before going out for his morning jog. It only had his name on the front and nothing else. Curious, and willing to break his tradition just this once, he opened it. Inside was a letter. He unfolded it as he headed towards the couch in the main room and sat down. He started reading.

Dear Zachariah,

I am not your father, obviously, but I know of him. I was visiting his grave yesterday when I found your letter; you must have just left when I stopped by. My name is Sarah. I was a close friend of his back in the day; in fact, we were more than that at one point back in high school. Of course, we broke up, given that I'm not your mother, but we remained close friends; I even went to your parent's wedding. However, I lost contact with him years ago, almost 20 years ago coincidentally...I guess that's one of the many funny ways life works, you know? But I assure you, I knew Adam more than your mother did, and he loved you to death...

He paused for a moment after reading that last sentence. He scoffed, "Heh, might be just her cliché way of trying to comfort me, then saying I shouldn't be gay." As he continued reading, however, he noticed Sarah barely touched on the fact he has a boyfriend; all she said about that was, *I'm so happy that you found someone Zach; I hope he's a cutie! As for your father, he would at the very least be tolerant of Dennis, so long as you're being respectful of each other. I would love to meet him if you make your way over here again.* Zach smiled and felt his face flush red. Throughout the letter, Sarah never mentioned anything

about his father being a hard-ass; all he seemed to be was a nice guy with somewhat strict morals, but wouldn't go overboard with sharing and expressing them.

At the end of the letter, Sarah gave her address in case he wanted to write to her more, whether about his father or just because. "Well, she *did* date the guy at one point after all," he thought, "At least there's someone who knew him and is willing to talk to me." He looked over the letter again, noting her pride in him running CC and Track, meeting Dennis, starting his career, and being independent. He felt a child-like love towards Sarah; she sounded so supportive and caring that he wished she was his mother instead.

He called Dennis, asking if he wanted to go on a date to their hometown and meet Sarah. He explained what she said and how he felt about her, referring to her as his "adopted" mother. "That would be wonderful hun," Dennis said over the phone, "I'm so glad there's someone that was willing to talk to you about your father."

"I am too," Zach replied.

"I'll meet you at our usual place, then we can carpool over, ok?"

"Yep. That's been working out pretty good, but I would rather live with you."

"I know...I know. We'll make a day of it!"

Zach whinnied in delight.

Dennis giggled, "I'll see you Saturday then hun."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

After Zach hung up, he felt much better about this situation. As he headed out for his daily jog, he felt confident that his father would still love him despite who he is, if he were alive. Maybe he wouldn't agree with his attraction to men, but Zach could take comfort in knowing that he wouldn't be disowned. As his hooves pounded the sidewalk while he ran, he thought about his mother again, though more apathetically today. He didn't see her as his mother anymore after what she's done in the past, what he saw on his parent's headstone, and after reading Sarah's letter. If his own, biological mother disowned him, what's going to stop him from disowning her?