Mom suffered a much worse childhood than me. I didn’t learn about it until much, much later in college. In some way, it excused some of her behaviors to me, but not by much.

During one of my frequent trips to see him in the nursing home, Grandpa Fuller (a male tabby) mentioned how my Grandma Fuller (a female calico) had been a domineering matriarch in their family. It included verbal and sometimes emotional abuse, right up until she passed away one morning in her sleep. Afterward, Mom felt free to marry Dad, who acted as a stable rock for her, and Grandpa Fuller, in his own words, “…can enjoy my books and watch whatever film or television I want in peace, again.” Some of that ‘sinful’ content turned out to be the very pulp novels and detective noir films he’d shown me as a cub.

That day, I learned an important lesson. No matter how much legroom I claimed to have, saying they didn’t understand my choices, resented my inability to provide grandcubs for them, and carry on the Leander name, I couldn’t compare my childhood to theirs.

*However, that doesn’t require me to treat their opinions like Gospel.*

I always told myself that each time we visited church on the second Sunday of every month, not counting Christmastime. Acknowledging my maternal grandmother as an even worse, domineering mother didn’t mean I owed Mom anything. It didn’t mean I had to do everything she said and be her perfect son. At the same time though, I wondered how long it’d be before it all came to ahead, and we all spoke our minds to one another.

Well, that fateful day finally arrived one weekday morning, when I got a surprise call from Dad. He wanted to see me at my office as soon as possible. He wouldn’t say why.

A couple of hours later, he walked into the semi-busy café wearing a plaid shirt, jeans, and a look of concern I’d not seen on him since coming out years back. He was an American shorthair, meaning at first glance, you wouldn’t guess we were related unless you saw the resemblance in one of my eyes. Unlike my dad’s breed, Mom’s had more dominant genes, so I looked more like her than him. It apparently ran through the females on her side of the family.

“Zack!” He rushed over to me.

“Dad,” I asked, his concern infecting me as well, “what is going on?”

The middle-aged American shorthair glanced around the café and ignored a few stares from Daniel’s more regular customers who knew about me.

“Let’s talk in your office, son. Please.”

I didn’t object to the suggestion. In any other circumstance, I might have tried steering the conversation to something else, but seeing the stoic, stern father I’d grown up with stare at me with lost eyes made me worry. By the time I locked the door behind us and turned to see him sit down in the chair opposite my desk, Dad finally explained what was going on.

“It’s your mother. I think she’s…she…”

He could barely say it while I barely contained my disbelief.

“Mom’s cheating?” I finished for him, then stared wide-eyed like the older feline asked to join me in walking at the Crossroads City Pride Parade. “This isn’t funny, Dad.”

He shook his whiskers in a frown. “It’s not.”

“This a stupid prank or something?” I asked. “It’s not funny if you’re saying—”

“I’m not trying to be funny, goddammit!” Dad slumped into his seat before looking me in the eyes. “It all started last month. She started talking to me less. She’d make us some dinner, we’d eat in silence, then go to bed. Then, she started talking about some old friends she wanted to meet with, and I didn’t think much of it.”

If I had a dollar each time that I heard that element in a sob story, my side of the rent would be set for a lifetime. Seeing my dad go through such an emotion though was something I never found myself preparing for. At the same time, there existed heavy skepticism.

“I’m not gonna lie.” I tried telling him, “Mom is plenty of things I don’t wanna say here, but she’s never, ever been one to cheat. She might be bossy and a tiny bit of a narcissist, but she loves you! She’s always loved you.”

“I thought so too, and even ignored her making these long, private phone calls,” he said, and I mentally ticked at another cliché, “until I decided to follow her one day. There’s no book club.”

I groaned, “You did?”

“Yeah…” He nodded.

“And?”

“…she was seeing this-this cat at a restaurant.” He said. “She sat down at this table, and at it was this-this tabby cat. She wouldn’t take her eyes off him. I wanted to confront her then and there, but…I couldn’t.”

As much as I didn’t want to believe it, the evidence was damning. It made the fur on my neck stand up and want to pounce at my mother, demanding to know why she’d do it.

“I need your help, son.” He asked, “Can you look into this? Please?”

After a moment or two engaging my conflicted thoughts, from my role as their son to one as a private investigator, I settled on the professional thing to do. I said, “No.”

It wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but needed to hear.

“What?” Dad perked his ears up. “Why not?!”

“Doing this will possibly mean throwing away other potential cases later this week.” I told him, sitting incredulous and borderline angry. “Not only would I be losing money, but this whole case is a conflict of interest for me.”

“Zachariah Thomas,” Dad hissed at me, “do you hear yourself right now?”

“I am hearing myself,” hissed back, “and you’re telling me to go out and stalk my mom to prove he’s been cheating on you, my dad. Let’s say this is all true and Mom’s cheating—a judge or her divorce lawyer could point to you being my parent. It’d be biased at best, and whatever advantage you’d have in court would be tossed out because I’m your son.”

The explanation down on him, and Dad sighed. “…oh.”

“Here’s a better idea.” I reached into my desk drawer and searched for a business card, but it wasn’t mine. It belonged to one of my competitors in southern Crossroads. “Call this number and talk to a ram named Jimmy. We know each other. He owes me one big-time for something I did last year, so he’ll help for free.”

I handed him the card, and Dad relented. He’d make the call.

“Hey Dad?”

“Yeah?”

I scratched one of my elbows as I stood to let him out of my office. “Sorry for this to happen, and if it turns out to be true, I’m…I’m sorry this happened.”

“Don’t be, son. It isn’t your fault.” Dad’s ear fell. “One more thing, Zack?” I look at him expectantly and nodded to show I listened. “Can you pray for me? Pray that I’m wrong?”

Without a single beat, I told him yes. I would pray, just once.

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Three days later, I learned the truth. Of all the thing I expected my mother to be, a ‘cheater’ turned out to be none of them. I found out firsthand when they invited me for dinner. It wasn’t the second Sunday of the month, but before I could lie to Mom and say I had an ongoing case, Dad came on the line and said it was urgent. It meant one thing: they planned to talk to me about what I feared the worst.

The taxi ride over allowed a pit to expand at the bottom of my stomach. Growing up and becoming a teenager and eventually an adult, I believed in plenty of things. The constant that never changed was that my parents had the perfect marriage. Neither forgot birthdays, anniversaries, presents for holidays, and they ironically seemed like the perfect model couple.

Appearances could deceive, as I’d later soon learn.

Each step through the front door felt like a challenge. At best, I expected a passive-aggressive discussion between them as I mediated reluctantly during dinner. At worst, I expected a full-blown breakdown between Mom and Dad with me awkwardly trying to stop one from throwing forks or food at the other. What I didn’t expect was to walk in the living room and see my father animatedly talking to a male tabby cat several years older than him (“No kidding! I’m an engineer too, but for electrical.”). Mom sat nearby drinking some iced tea, then stood up upon seeing me. So did Dad and the stranger.

“Mom? Dad?” I asked in clear confusion, “What’s going on? Who’s he?”

“You must be their young son.” The tabby stepped forward and shook my paw. “Nice to meet you. Zack, right?”

“Yeah,” I nodded slowly, “that’s right.”

“Sweetie,” Mom spoke up with a smile, “I’d like you to meet Robert Fuller. Robby, this is our son, Zachariah. He’s…your uncle, my half-brother.”

Over the course of an honestly relaxant and delicious dinner, I finally learned what was going on: yes, the tabby my mom had been seeing happened to be my Uncle Robby, Grandpa Fuller’s only son from his first family. To make a long story incredibly short, it turned out that Grandpa Fuller had an estranged family before marrying my grandmother. Remarrying after a divorce (and especially to an abusive, domineering woman like my Grandma Fuller), led to Grandpa and his first family being so estranged in fact that Uncle Robby had only been mentioned several times in passing to my mother (when Grandma wasn’t in the house, let alone the same room) while Robby didn’t even know he had a younger half-sister until recently.

What had been believed to be my mother having an affair turned out to be just her having a series of emotional, awkward series of reunions with Uncle Robby.

“Why didn’t you tell Dad about it?” I asked Mom at one point during dinner.

“I was going to, Zachariah, but I wanted to reconnect with Robby first.” She softened her features and giggled when Robby, a so-called ‘New Englander’, struggled eating a classic Utah Scone without the sauce dribbling down his first. “We hardly knew the other existed. I felt it’d be best to have us talk before I tell the family my half-brother actually does exist.”

“Again, I’m sorry I ruined the surprise, honey.” Dad chimed in.

“Don’t worry. I think it’s sweet.” Mom leaned to the side and said, “Your father over there thought I was cheating, and almost hired a detective like you before he confronted me. Almost didn’t even believe me until I offered to invite him over. Can you believe it?”

“Admit it, you’d be suspicious too.” Dad chuckled.

“I wouldn’t cheat on you. And neither would you, me.” Mom giggled, then returned to her meal as I pretended to hear all about it for the first time.