

FRUITCAKE

by
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OVER BLACK:

"So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." -- Luke 15:20

FADE IN:

EXT. CAR - DAY

Driving down a rural highway, past exit signs and under bridges.

INT. CAR

Behind the wheel is DOUG MERILL, early forties, a resigned look upon his face as he sighs a quiet "hmm."

Beside him is KATE, a blonde beauty in her late thirties, who curiously glances over. A white box rests on her lap.

KATE

What is it?

A tiny chuckle escapes his lips.

DOUG (V.O.)

My father wasn't your stereotypical...
gay guy.

FLASHBACK:

INSERT: PHOTOGRAPH

A B&W pic of a man, a woman, and a young boy.

DOUG (V.O.)

That's my dad, Peter Merill. My mom,
Judy, and me.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Seventies era cars parked along the curb.

DOUG (V.O.)
This was my neighborhood.

HOUSE

A modest two-story job.

DOUG (V.O.)
This was my house.

INT. KITCHEN

JUDY (40), house dress, hair up, kneads dough on a countertop.

DOUG (V.O.)
Mom loved to bake, which came as no surprise. Both her parents were bakers. Owned a shop over in Youngstown, Ohio so... I guess it's true what they say about the apple not falling too far from the tree.

INT. LIVING ROOM

PETER (44), sits in his easy chair sipping a beer, wearing a big old pair of headphones. A t-shirt and a worn pair of work pants look pretty comfortable on this fellow.

DOUG (V.O.)
So, here's my dad grooving to Neil Diamond and drinking a beer. Pretty standard for a Saturday afternoon.

Doug (5), bounds down the stairs, baseball glove on his hand. He pokes his father on the head.

Peter shoots him a look, takes the headphones off.

PETER
Yes?

DOUG
Wanna have a catch?

Peter sighs.

PETER

Go throw it against the pitch-back for
a while. I'll come out later.

Before he can get the headphones back on, here's Judy in the doorway, hands on her hips.

JUDY

You go out there now. You're just
gonna sit there, suck down your beer
and listen to that... hippie music?
It's a gorgeous day outside. Your son
wants to play. I can't believe you. He
waits all week for this and all you
can do is sit there and --

PETER

All right, all right!

He rises, grunts, lifts the needle off the record.

PETER

Now look what you made me do. The
record scratched!

JUDY

Oh, go scratch your ass! Now get out
there and play with your son.

Peter takes Doug by the arm and leads him out. The little guy looks back at his mother and smiles, which she returns knowingly.

FRONT YARD

Peter and Doug play catch in the yard.

DOUG (V.O.)

Getting my father to do things was
sort of pulling teeth.

A lonely looking LAWNMOWER sits in the overgrown grass.

DOUG (V.O.)
But if it was between that or
listening to my mother complain about
it, well... I suspect he'd rather have
a molar extracted.

INSERT: PHOTOGRAPH

The same B&W photo from before. A hand appears and tears it
down the middle.

DOUG (V.O.)
Then my parents got divorced.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Doug sits at the top of the stairs, sullen, chin resting in
his hand. In the

LIVING ROOM

Peter and Judy go at it, lots of yelling and screaming.

DOUG (V.O.)
It was kinda hard to understand
because I was so young. The arguments,
the icy stares. I didn't know what
they were fighting about but, boy, my
mom sure seemed upset about something.

EXT. FRONT YARD - DAY

Doug throws a baseball against the pitch-back.

Peter exits the house, suit and fedora. A suitcase dangles
from his hand. He brushes his hand along Doug's cheek, a
crooked smile on his face.

PETER
I'll see ya 'round, Dougie.

QUICK FLASHES: (DOUG'S MEMORIES)

-- Judy, Peter and Doug on a picnic blanket under blue skies.

-- Judy sews a garment as Peter gives Doug a piggy back ride across the living room floor.

-- a red-stitched baseball floats slowly in the air.

BACK TO SCENE

DOUG (V.O.)

And, just like that, he was gone.

Doug watches a yellow taxi cab glide quietly down the street.

He turns back to the house. A curtain shimmers in the living room window, then goes still.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Doug creeps along the floor, inching closer to the

BEDROOM

where Judy sits on the bed, crying.

DOUG (V.O.)

Mom cried a whole lot. For hours on end sometimes. And she'd cry anywhere, anyplace. I mean, she just wouldn't stop.

CRYING MONTAGE:

Judy cries in the bathroom mirror as she applies lipstick -- She cries in the kitchen as she bakes -- She blows her nose in the car besides Doug as two of his baseball buddies curiously watch on from the back seat.

BACK TO SCENE

DOUG (V.O.)

But, eventually, the crying stopped.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Judy removes a cake from the oven, places it on the counter, takes her oven mitts off.

Doug, now 8, observes.

DOUG

What is that?

Raisins, nuts, various fruits on top. Looks delicious. Judy admires her handiwork.

JUDY

It's a fruit cake, honey. I believe your father has developed a taste for these.

DOUG

Looks good.

She glances at the wall clock.

JUDY

You better get ready. Your father'll be here any minute. And don't forget the cake.

On cue, a car horn HONKS.

INT. CAR - DAY

Doug shuts his door.

PETER

(off the cake)

What is that?

DOUG

Mom said it's a fruit cake. She says you have a taste for them.

Peter opens the box, peers inside.

PETER

She said that?

Doug nods happily.

PETER

Woman's got some sense of humor.

EXT. CAR - DAY

They pull away.

DOUG (V.O.)

And that's how it went for a while. Mom basically raised me, but Dad got me on weekends. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. You see, in my mind I still had them. In my mind we were still together. It was only until I found the letters that things began to change.

INT. DOUG'S HOUSE - DAY

Twelve-year-old Doug creeps inside Judy's

BEDROOM

On tippy-toes in the closet, he pulls down a box and places it on the floor and lifts the cover off.

Inside are numerous envelopes and letters. He checks over his shoulder, picks one and opens it.

INSERT: LETTER

DEAR H.

Several phrases and words are highlighted:

"I've missed you," "I love you," "our secret love."

The letter finishes with:

LOVE P.

Doug carefully scans through the other letters. He slowly raises his head, his eyes the size of full moons as the realization creeps across his face

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Judy, in her apron as usual, checks the wall clock while a solemn Doug sits at the table.

JUDY

You better get ready. Your father'll
be here soon.

Doug doesn't budge, nor change his expression.

A car horn HONKS.

EXT. PETER'S HOUSE - LATER

Peter holds his cake, strolls up the front walk. Doug follows a few paces behind.

PETER

You all right? You're pretty quiet.

DOUG

I'm fine.

PETER

Well, I have a little surprise for you
today. I thought we'd take a ride up
to the pool, but that's not all...

A handsome chap in his early fifties, bathing suit and towel, steps out of the house. This is HERMAN.

PETER

Doug, I want you to meet my friend,
Herman. He's gonna come with us.

Herman smiles politely, extends his hand.

HERMAN

Hi, Doug. Boy, I sure heard a lot
about you.

Doug scowls, takes a step back.

PETER

What is it?

DOUG

What's he doing here?

PETER

I thought it'd be nice if he came with us today.

Doug retreats even further.

DOUG

I don't want him to come with us. It was supposed to be just you and me.

HERMAN

Maybe I'd better go...

PETER

No, wait...

Doug's on the verge of tears.

DOUG

No. He goes. He goes!

Herman steps back in the house.

Doug runs to the car. He pulls furiously at the door handle, but it's locked.

He *POUNDS* the side of the car with his fists. His face a bright red, hands swelling, hair flying. He hits the car over and over again. *THUMP. THUMP. THUMP!*

Finally, he takes off down the street.

PETER

Doug!

Peter sprints after him.

Doug runs as time slows to a crawl. Arms pumping and desperation on his young, troubled face.

DOUG (V.O.)

Only in later years did I realize what I was running from. But back then, I hadn't a clue.

Peter catches Doug from behind, both out of breath.

PETER

Wait, wait.

Peter wraps Doug's flailing arms in a tight bear hug until they go limp. Doug finally collapses into his father's embrace, and cries into his chest.

PETER

Dougie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It'll be just us, okay? Always. Just us.

DOUG (V.O.)

And all I could do was cry. I hated him at that moment. I hated him for everything I didn't understand. I blamed him. The divorce, his secret life... everything. Eventually, the weekend visits dwindled and the days grew short. The times I did see him just weren't the same anymore. It was as if everything had stopped.

Father and son in the middle of the street, in each others arms. Frozen. A moment in time.

Peter picks him up and shuffles slowly back to the house.

DOUG (V.O.)

Damn. What I wouldn't give to have those years back.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The sun's out, greening tree leaves. A small group of people huddled inside a tent. A recording of TAPS plays.

Judy and Doug in the front row. Now eighteen, his piercing eyes and sculpted face are primed to break a thousand hearts.

But not today.

A young HONOR GUARD MEMBER presents Judy with a flag, tears sliding down her rouged cheeks.

HONOR GUARD MEMBER
On behalf of a grateful nation...

DOUG (V.O.)
And, just like that, he was gone.
Massive heart attack at the age of
fifty-seven. I think it's safe to say
that my mother never really stopped
loving him. I just figured she was
upset she'd have no one to make those
damn cakes for now, but... deep down,
I knew better.

EXT. CEMETERY - LATER

Doug, carrying the meticulously folded FLAG, escorts his mother along a stone path. He sneaks a glance behind him.

Further back, looking distinguished in a suit, is Herman. His hair thinner, big old glasses on his somber face.

DOUG
I'll be right back, Mom. You go on
ahead.

Judy dabs at her eyes, nods.

Doug meets a solitary Herman along the path. They continue on in silence. Herman looks up to the sky, shades his eyes.

HERMAN
At least we have the weather on our
side today.

Doug presses his lips together, nods.

DOUG
I wanted to thank you for coming.

HERMAN

I wouldn't have missed it.

DOUG

And to say I'm sorry.

HERMAN

I'm sorry, too, Doug. Your father was a great, caring man.

DOUG

No. I mean for how I acted... that day. The day we were supposed to go to the pool.

HERMAN

Oh. I think I should be the one apologizing to you. We should have known better, your father and I. We should have known you weren't ready for that.

They march a bit further. Herman puts his arm around Doug's shoulder, gives a gentle squeeze.

DOUG

Well, I... I guess I better get on back to my mom.

HERMAN

Sure. You take care, Doug. You know, maybe one day, down the road, I'll... I'll get to see you again.

Doug acknowledges that, and trots on ahead.

HERMAN

Hey... Doug?

He stops, looks back.

HERMAN

(winks)

I really miss your mom's fruitcakes.

Doug can't resist a smile.

Ahead, Doug's mother is now in the company of a RELATIVE. He slows his pace.

One last look at the tent. The white folding chairs, the flowers, and of course... his father.

He caresses the soft cotton of the flag in his hand.

DOUG

(quietly singing)

Song sung blue, everybody knows one.

*Song sung blue, every garden grows
one...*

END FLASHBACK

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

A car pulls in front of a simple house in a pleasant enough neighborhood.

Kate and Doug exit the car. Together they head up the path, the white box under Kate's arm.

MARTA, a Jamaican woman in her forties, greets them at the door and shows them in.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Marta leads them on. The house is well kept, trinkets on shelves, family photos on walls.

DOUG

How's he been?

MARTA

(accent)

Oh, he on and off. Right now, he on.

She brings them to a back

BEDROOM

Marta raps on the open door.

MARTA

Herman? You have visitors.

Herman lies in bed, covers to his chest, head propped on a pillow. He's thin, tired looking. His mouth hangs open, his hair reduced to peach fuzz.

MARTA

Not too long now. He needs his rest.

DOUG

Sure.

Marta leaves them.

Herman's eyes flutter open as Doug takes a seat at the foot of the bed. Kate pulls up a chair.

HERMAN

Hey.

DOUG

Hey yourself.

HERMAN

(slow, careful speech)

I'm glad you came. And who might this beautiful creature be?

DOUG

Herman, this is my wife, Kate.

KATE

It's my pleasure. Doug's told me so much about you.

HERMAN

Not everything, I hope.

She blushes.

DOUG

Marta says you need your rest.

Herman coughs, clears his throat.

HERMAN

What does she know? The woman knows how to make my soup and take my temperature. That's about it.

DOUG

We brought something for you.

Kate hands the box to Doug.

KATE

I'm not quite the baker Doug's mom was, but...

HERMAN

I'm sure you acquitted yourself admirably.

DOUG

Not many people were the baker my mom was, eh?

Doug opens the box, takes out a plastic knife and fork. He slices a piece of the fruitcake, sets it on a plate and holds it out.

Herman tries, but age has left his hands unsteady.

Doug takes the plate, cuts off a small piece and feeds it to him. Herman chews slowly. One piece, then another...

FADE OUT.