

Cringe

a *Forever* ficlet

by Rodo

for *Major*

“I SWEAR TO you, it was the most embarrassing thing I can remember off the top of my head,” Abe said over *tagliatelle al ragù*. It was ‘quite proficient, but lacked a certain Bolognan *je ne sais quoi*,’ by his description.

“Are you sure about that?” Henry Morgan replied.

His son’s look said it all. Nobody could deadpan like Abe.

“Trust me, Dad, there’s no age where a child loses the ability to embarrass their parent in a way no one else can – even if you’re past one hundred and they’re pushing eighty. This just proves it.”

“If you say so,” Henry replied, dedicating himself to the meal. He didn’t see the look Abe gave him, but he could feel it. Never mind, he thought to himself. Tomorrow, it would all be forgotten. And indeed, he would hear no more of it the next day, or the one after. Until Henry had all but forgotten about the conversation...



“Well, would you look at that, another mysterious package for our mysterious chief medical examiner,” Lucas drawled.

Henry tensed. In the past months, he’d seen far too many mysterious packages not to. They’d been filled with anything from dark promises to body parts. He was in no hurry to find out what this one contained.

“Put it on my desk, please,” he answered, a little too curtly. He was elbow-deep in the chest cavity of a young man who’d dropped dead at the park – so far, all signs pointed to an entirely natural cardiomyopathy as the cause of death. Detective Hanson would no doubt rejoice to hear it; he and Detective Martinez were currently pacing next to Henry’s office.

“Oh, I’ve got to see what’s in this one,” Hanson said, which finally made Henry look up. The package looked – foreboding. There was no other word for the ominous square shape

the size of a small speaker, covered as it was in wrapping paper better suited to a ten-year-old's birthday present. Nothing good could come of opening it. He knew it, as sure as he knew the sky was blue.

"So do I," Lucas agreed. Now they were all looking at him, so Henry had no choice but to finish with the body and get cleaned up. When he was done, the package seemed to be staring at him from its perch on his desk. Henry stared back.

"It's not going to bite, you know?" Jo said in a gently mocking tone. Even she was betraying him, it seemed.

There was nothing for it; Henry unwrapped the package, peeling off the paper first, then opening the lid. There was no bleeding heart inside – thank God – but what he pulled out wasn't much better. The mug looked like it had been hand-painted by a preschooler, awkward letters sprawled across its dappled surface in dripping, psychedelic swirls. But despite the atrocious brushwork, they were clearly legible.

"WORLD'S BEST DAD?" Lucas read, "I feel like I'm missing some information here."

"Yeah," Hanson agreed. "Didn't know you were a father."

Yes, that was rather the point, Henry thought. He was mortified, and he knew exactly who was responsible. The conversation came back to him in bits and pieces as he was staring at the world's worst mug. He gingerly put it down on the desk and turned to his audience, forcing a smile on his face.

"It's a joke, I'm afraid," he explained, "and not a very good one."

Martinez looked at him, eyebrow raised.

"Keep telling yourself that, man," Hanson said.

"Now, do you want to hear the good news or the bad news?" Henry asked to distract from Abe's little gift. Hanson did, and he was only too happy to hear that all he needed to do was tell some grieving parents that their son had had a heart disease – rather than telling them he'd been murdered. But when Hanson walked out of the morgue he still felt it necessary to tell Henry to congratulate his son on his fine work.

"I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?" he asked Jo when she moved to follow her partner.

"Nope," she said, patting him on the shoulder.

Henry sighed and vowed to find a way to get back at Abe, even if deep down he knew he'd forget all about his ire when he saw how proud his son was of his prank.

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