The Reinvention of Tony Stark

by losingmymindtonight

Summary

"There are a lot of things you worry about when meeting Iron Man, and there are even more things you worry about when meeting Tony Stark."

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From playboy to the pinnacle of heroism: Tony Stark's life has been anything but quiet. In his first face-to-face interview since wielding the Infinity Stones, Iron Man lets the public in on a glimpse of his life as a retired superhero and stay-at-home dad.

Notes

A little background before you read: this is set in a post-Endgame universe where Tony survives. It’s written as if it’s an interview article for a blog/magazine. I kinda wrote it in a style that I see used a lot in Rolling Stone and Vogue. I have no idea if it has any kind of formal name, but I love how this kind of article reads more like a story and internal monologue than a plain interview. It also happens to lend itself really well to what I wanted to convey. I really enjoy character studies through an outsider’s POV, and I also enjoy playing with different genres. I hope you enjoy my little experiment too!

Some people have done some wonderful art about this concept as well, all of which have really inspired me to get my ass back to writing this! Here are some links if you're
There are a lot of things you worry about when meeting Iron Man, and there are even more things you worry about when meeting Tony Stark.

I worried about my clothes, my greeting, how he would perceive me. Despite my friends’ and coworkers’ near constant reassurances, I felt justified in my anxiety. Not only was this one of the richest men in the world, but he’d held the fate of the universe in the palm of his hand. What could he possibly think of me?

The morning of our interview, he texted me (yes, Tony Stark actually texted me, himself, on his own), and asked me to meet him at a park near his house. He said we could talk there, before meeting his family, because that was, of course, the whole point of the interview. I was going to be the first and, possibly, the only reporter allowed within ten feet of Stark’s personal life since the Decimation was reversed.

He was five minutes early. He drove an Audi prototype that I knew wasn’t on the market yet, and my nerves were instantly reignited, if I could claim that they had ever even remotely began to settle.

I had a lot of expectations for that first meeting. I’d built this man up in my head, and I wasn’t the only one. There were murals of him littering the streets of New York, statue after statue being erected in his honor across continents. The admiration of Tony Stark transcended differences in ways few things could. Political, racial, gender, religious, or any other number of societal divisions: Tony Stark built bridges between them all.

What could a man like that possibly be like? He had been ready to sacrifice himself for me, for us, for everyone. There must be something that set him apart, something in his demeanor that was just as awe-inspiring as the looming monuments built in his name.

Except the moment that he stepped out of the car wasn’t grand. I’d expected to be immediately overcome with a sense of his superiority, but he was shockingly unassuming. That isn’t to say that he didn’t carry with him a sense of easy confidence, which he did, but it was the kind of self-assurance that built my own up instantly.

He wasn’t dressed like I’d expected, either. I’d been looking for Armani suits or, at the very least, a set of street clothes that looked like they cost more than my entire wardrobe, but instead, he was wearing a worn leather jacket and dark wash jeans.

He shook my hand, and I ended up staring at his t-shirt for just a few seconds longer than I should’ve. It was light blue, which was, for some reason, not a color I’d expected the savoir of the universe to wear, with a cartoon Earth on the center, the words the rotation of the Earth really makes my day circling it.

I let out a little laugh before I could even consider the repercussions, and he smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. In that instant, he didn’t look like a man who had built an empire on military
funding and war profiteering. He didn’t look like the richest man on the planet. He didn’t even look like a superhero: the man who had cradled destiny in his palm and forced the scales back into balance.

Instead, he reminded me, strangely, and a little embarrassingly, of my grandfather.

“It was a gift,” he said, shrugging, gesturing almost lazily around the shirt’s graphic. “from one of my kids. A, uh, I’m glad you didn’t die saving the entire universe kind of thing. You know how it is.”

I definitely didn’t, but I nodded anyway.

He asked me if I’d like to take a walk around some of the hiking trails, and I quickly agreed. As we set out, he offered me his arm, and I took it. There were a few bizarre seconds when I forgot to interview him, too overwhelmed by the fact that this was probably going to be one of the most surreal experiences of my entire life.

Eventually, he was the one who reminded me.

“I suppose you have questions.”

I jolted, letting out a nervous laugh. “Right. I’m so sorry.”

He waved a hand around in the air, dismissing the apology right away. “Don’t sweat it. I’m used to it.”

I imagined that he must be. He’d been striking people dumb since childhood. On paper, it looked like Tony Stark had always been destined for greatness. Born into riches, raised in the cradle of a patriot’s legacy: there was nothing out of reach for Howard Stark’s heir. He’d graduated MIT at just 17 years old, long before most children had gotten their high school diplomas, and been thrust straight into the life of a celebrity. Even after his parents’ deaths, Stark Industries only grew under his leadership.

And then, of course, came Iron Man.

The kidnapping, Afghanistan. The press conference that ushered the world into the age of superheroes. Tony Stark was at the forefront of it all, pioneering in every field he dared touch. Of all the Avengers, he was the one we knew. The one we recognized. Despite the suit of armor, every single one of us knew that underneath the exoskeleton, Tony Stark was painfully human.

Just like us.

And yet somehow, it still managed to be a surprise that, at the climax of it all, he was the one to offer the final sacrifice.

Except… it hadn’t been a sacrifice.

Or, at least, it hadn’t been as large a one as he must’ve imagined it would be, when he wielded the universe on his fist.

And, for the second time in our very brief acquaintance, I found myself torn back to reality by Tony Stark’s gentle voice.

It wasn’t until the moment he spoke that I realized that I had been staring at the red and gold prosthetic that sat in place of the man’s right arm. Stark held it up with a wry smile, letting the
sleeve of his jacket slip down to give me a better view.

“‘Yes, well,’” he regarded the metal with a hint of amusement, “‘suppose we ought to get that out of the way, too. Yes, the rumors are true: it’s very much gone. A shame, really. I had a fun little scar on my thumb. It looked a bit like an upside-down squirrel.’”

I laughed despite myself, then sobered. “I… I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine…”

He shrugged, as if the loss of his arm was a minor inconvenience instead of a life-altering change. “Small price to pay. The prosthetic is a lot more durable than the real thing, anyway. Built it out of the same stuff as the suit, stuck with the color scheme, too.” He grinned. “Branding, y’know?”

“Now you’ll always be Iron Man,” I said, not thinking.

I’d been mortified the moment the words had left my mouth, but Stark had just nodded, as if it was the most obvious comment in the world.

“Funny,” he murmured, “that’s almost exactly what Peter said.”

A part of me knew that I should be prying for more stories from that final battle, gathering the blood-stained details that would get readers’ hearts pumping, but I was suddenly far more interested in Tony Stark, the human, rather than Iron Man, the hero.

So instead, I asked him how retired life was suiting him, and he seemed pleased by the question. He gestured grandly around the path we were taking, at the lake and the trees and the sloping landscape: the violent reverse of the concrete jungles we had both been raised within.

“As you can see, I certainly can’t complain about the views.”

“Are you bored?”

He chuckled to himself, as if I’d just hit on an inside joke without meaning to. “Bored? Never. Even if I wanted to be, I can’t imagine how I’d find the time.”

“Some people call you Pepper Pott’s trophy husband,” I joked, and I was surprised by how easy it was to talk to him. “I’ve always found that amusing.”

This time, he laughed full-out, open and bright. “Oh, it’s very accurate. These days, I leave nearly all the business to her. I’m just a stay-at-home dad.”

“And that works for you?” At his questioning look, I scrambled to clarify. “It’s just… I can’t imagine going from the life you’ve had to the life you have now. It’d give me whiplash.”

“It is hard, every once in a while,” he admitted. “But, mostly, I enjoy the peace. Or, the peace that the kids let me have.”

That was the money topic, perhaps even more so than Thanos’ defeat, and it was something he’d brought up himself at least twice now: his children. When I had been preparing for the interview, I hadn’t known how to approach it, but it felt surprisingly natural in the moment.

“How is your family? I assume by kids, you mean Morgan, and, well…”

He paused at a picnic table, and gestured for me to sit. I did, and he settled down across from me, finishing my sentence.
“And Peter.”

“Right. And Peter.”

Peter Parker. The child that Tony Stark created a memorial fund for in the wake of the Decimation, and the child that, on the few occasions when he’d ventured into the city since using the Stones, he always seemed to have trotting along at his heels.

Before Thanos’ defeat and Stark’s resulting dance with death, all questions about Peter had been answered with the same harsh response: that the kid was his intern, and nothing more. Afterwards, however, there had been a sudden switch. In the few recent press releases that had mentioned Tony Stark and his family, Peter had been unanimously included.

I decided to inquire specifically about the health of his children at this point, careful to use the plural to watch for his reaction, and everything about Stark seemed to soften. A layer that I hadn’t even realized he’d had raised suddenly dropped away, revealing an adoration that was entirely uncensored. It was as if I’d just hit on his favorite topic in the world.

It was nothing like I’d imagined from him, but it also felt as if this was his most natural form. The superhero, the weapons dealer, the playboy: these were all just facades.

I wondered if I might be one of the first outsiders to truly catch a glimpse of who Tony Stark actually was.

“They’re both brilliant,” he breathed. “You’ll meet them later, when we head back to the cabin. Peter’s, uh, Peter’s 16, which I’m sure you already know. He’ll go back to high school in the fall, as a junior. We’re waiting for the College Board to get their shit back together so he can take the SAT. Morgan just turned 5. She’s in preschool, kicking ass. She’s already reading way above her level, because she’s just that smart, and we’re in a phase where I have to pretend to like something from her Easy-Bake oven nearly every day. They’re both a lot nicer than me.”

I knew that my next question was verging into dangerous territory, but I asked it anyway.

“Peter was one of the Vanished, wasn’t he?”

He regarded me with a sharp gaze, and I suddenly felt like a bug under a microscope. This was the look of a man who had run a multi-million dollar business for the entirety of his adult life. It was calculating, cold. The switch happened so suddenly that it made my head spin, and I felt the loss of his warmth keenly.

“That’s not a secret.”

I stuttered out an apology, but he pushed it aside. Instead, he shot a question back, which wasn’t uncommon but certainly wasn’t usual with these kinds of interviews.

“Were you?”

I nodded my affirmation, and he seemed completely unsurprised.

“Yeah, I thought so.”

“Did you look me up, before today?”

“No, I can see it in your eyes.”
I asked him what he meant by that.

“The people who didn’t Vanish are colder,” was all he said in return, but it was enough to send chills down my spine.

“You don’t seem colder.”

“You don’t know me.”

I dropped it. I just wanted to stick to the script, for a while. Tony Stark was proving to be even more complex than I’d imagined, and that was saying something. He seemed to bounce from guiding warmth to flinty steel in the slip of sentences, and the changes were as predictable as the summer thunder storms that used to tear through my grandparent’s Georgia lake house. One second the skies were sunny, humid heat beating down on your sunburnt shoulders, and the next the trees were quivering under the weight of wind-howlis and lashing rain.

“Can I ask about the battle?”

A tiny smile pulled at his face. For such a sensitive topic, he seemed to relax. “Which one?”

Which one? It baffled me, for a moment, that the man sitting with me at a splinter-heavy picnic table, wearing a science pun t-shirt that looked like it had been ordered off of Amazon Prime, had been in enough life-or-death conflicts that he had to make me clarify which one.

“The… The final one.”

“You want to know about the gauntlet.”

And, yes, that was exactly what I wanted to know. It was exactly what my editor wanted me to know, too, what we knew our readers would gobble up. The Infinity Stones were fascinating, in the way the human species tended to covet and idolize the things that filled us up with horror.

“I do. Why did you put it on?”

“I knew that I had to,” he said, like that one decision hadn’t been the most monumental of our generation.

“Did you know you were going to survive?”

There was a profound sorrow in his eyes that told me my answer before he even opened his mouth.

“I thought I was a goner, actually. Thought I still was afterwards, too, although I barely remember it. My memories really start back in the hospital, about a week later.”

“Were you scared?”

It was such a childish question, but it seemed appropriate. He must’ve been, of course, but my mind couldn’t quite grasp the concept of someone like him experiencing the same reality that I did. I felt fear, but did he? He seemed so much more than human, now, so much more than me.

He smiled. “Terrified.” He shifted, fiddling absentmindedly with his watch. “The thing is, everyone thinks that I did it for the greater good. And… maybe I did, to some degree. But when I snapped, I was only thinking about my family. You can judge me for that however you want.”

“I don’t think that’s wrong. I think that’s… I think that’s just human.”
He watched me quietly for a few breaths, studying. “You know,” he finally said, “you really do remind me of Peter.”

It wasn’t long after this that I finally got to meet the teenager in question. Stark brought me back to his car and, as soon as I was settled in the passenger’s seat, handed me a security badge.

“Here, put that on. Don’t take it off.”

I did as I was told. “Does everyone who comes to visit you have to have one of these?”

He pulled out onto the road with a tiny smirk on his face, eyes obscured by a pair of sunglasses he’d slipped on once we’d gotten into the car. “Most of the people who visit me are already in my AI’s systems. But, yes.”

“Are you worried about your safety?”

He shrugged. “Not necessarily my safety. Despite retiring, my AI can operate the suits, and so could I, given enough reason, although I’m sure that this,” he held up his prosthetic again, “might make things a little more difficult.”

“So why all the security?”

“Reporters,” he said, glancing over at me, and I suddenly felt a strange sense of shame. “I want Morgan to grow up as normal as possible, and I don’t want Peter’s life ruined anymore than it already is. The least I can do for them is make sure that no paparazzi can get within range to take photos of them at the house. That’s a safe space, for all of us.”

And yet he was bringing me there: directly into their safe space. I couldn’t help but wonder why, so I asked, hoping that I wasn’t about to drop yet another dark veil over the atmosphere.

Thankfully, Stark took the question with ease, as if he’d been expecting it, eventually. “People are fascinated with forbidden things. If I make my house and my family entirely off-limits, the public’s interest only grows. But if I let a few people in, people we’ve carefully chosen, then it starts to lose its appeal.”

“That’s clever.”

“I’ve been playing this game for my whole life. I know how to gain the upper hand.”

I paused. “Do you want me to print that?”

He hit the brakes at a stop sign, and turned to look at me over the rim of his sunglasses. Maybe I was imagining it, but I swore that I saw a flicker of respect in his gaze. “You can print anything I say. I’m not afraid of public opinion. It’ll swing whichever way it wants, and it really doesn’t matter what I do about it.”

“It’s pretty in your favor right now.”

“The key words of that statement are right and now.”

“So you don’t think it’ll stay that way?”

“I know it won’t.”

I didn’t know if I agreed with him, but I stayed quiet. I imagined, though, that it would take a truly ungrateful world to tear down the man that had saved it. I wanted to think better of humanity than
that, even if Tony Stark himself seemed to struggle with the optimism.

We drove through three security checkpoints before pulling into the cabin’s driveway. It was smaller than I’d expected, but that still made it larger than an average house. In fact, its size made Stark’s designation of it as a cabin seem almost comical. Dark brown siding melted into stone accents. A chimney rose up through the trees that clustered around the front porch’s carefully-maintained railing. In the distance, I could see the sunlight playing on the lake. There was a boat in the dock, bobbing peacefully in the morning waves.

It didn’t look like a museum, or the palace of a king. It looked like a home.

Morgan Stark herself was waiting on the porch. She looked smaller in person, but more lively as well. In the few paparazzi photos I’d seen of her, she’d always seemed frightened and unsure. Now, though, she came barreling down the porch steps like a rocket, overexcited shouts of Daddy! filling the air.

Stark scooped her up as soon as she got to us, face melting into a smile. He looked calm, again, and perfectly in his element. It hit me rather suddenly that the savoir of the universe was, at the end of the day, just a father who loved his children enough to lay his life down for their futures.

I liked Tony Stark better as a man than as a god, I decided. And from the look on his daughter’s face, she agreed with me.

I was introduced to Morgan right there in the driveway, and it seemed to take her all of a minute to decide that I was a perfectly acceptable addition to the scenery. I’d been expecting more resistance, more of Stark’s wariness, but in the end all I got was a childlike acceptance.

I met Pepper Stark next. Her new last name still tripped me up, even four years after her wedding. No matter how much I tried to condition myself, I could still remember her as Pepper Potts: a lingering presence over New York, formidable CEO and, by all accounts, the only person on Earth who could control the great Tony Stark.

She was sitting in the living room, which happened to be the first space I saw when Stark ushered me through the front door and into the cabin’s cozy warmth. There was a fireplace against the wall, leather couches and armchairs tucked up against it’s glow. A simple staircase led upstairs, but we walked past that, further into the house.

Mrs. Potts was kind in a controlled, well-groomed sort of way. Her demeanor wasn’t fake, necessarily, but I recognized the carefully prepped exterior of a woman who had learned to fight battles in a man’s arena. Besides that, I could also see that she wasn’t certain of me. There was something in her eyes that told me that while she didn’t dislike me, she didn’t necessarily want me in her house, either.

I could understand the trepidation. She and her husband had fled the public eye five years ago, when the Decimation had turned all gazes to the Avengers for answers, for someone to blame. Then, six months ago, her husband had very nearly become a sacrificial lamb.

She had very nearly been forced to raise their child all alone. Staring that in the face must change a person. It had to.

After the introductions had faded into idle conversation, Morgan declared that she was going to go “get Petey,” and raced off up the stairs. A minute or two later, she returned, dragging a teenage boy along by his hand.
Peter Parker was, for lack of a better word, shy. When he met my eyes, usually by accident, he immediately darted them back down to the carpet. He was a little awkward, a little nerdy. His hair was curly, and way too long. A few strands stuck out from the rest, and he stuttered over himself when he spoke. In many ways, he didn’t seem to have any of the suave, easy-going charisma that Stark did.

But Stark loved him. That much was clear from the moment he stepped into the room. Tony Stark looked at his children as if it was a new experience every single time, and it only got more and more breathtaking as the years wore on.

Once we’d finally made it through all the necessary greetings, Morgan tugged on my sleeve and asked if I could give her an interview. I looked to Stark for permission. He went to sit on a couch a few feet away, guiding Peter along with him by pressing a hand against the small of his back, and made a lazy gesture for me to go ahead. He propped his feet up on a crayon-stained ottoman as he watched me, calculating.

I had never interviewed a child before, although I knew at least one of my colleagues who had. Still, she seemed like a smart kid, eyes blinking up at me with barely-contained excitement, so I proceeded just like I usually would.

“How old are you, Morgan?”

“Five!”

“Do you like school?”

“Yeah!”

“What’s your favorite thing to do, there?”

“I like art.”

That was surprising. The daughter of Tony Stark, an artist. It wasn’t what I’d expected at first, but the more I considered it, the more it made sense. What were the Iron Man suits, if not a work of art?

“Do you do a lot of art at home, too?”

“I do! I like to draw portraits of Mommy and Daddy and Peter.” Her face lit up, and she bounced to her feet. “I can draw you one now, if you want!”

“I’d love that.”

As she raced off towards her bedroom, presumably to gather up what were sure to be absurdly expensive art supplies for a five-year-old, I marveled at the fact that she seemed so… normal. Perhaps that was another way that my warped concept of Tony Stark had led me astray. I’d expected his children to be, well, more than normal children. Different, somehow, more serious or solemn or conscious of the power they wielded in the world, and yet even Peter seemed detached from it all. In the few moments when I managed to forget that I was sitting on Tony Stark’s couch in Tony Stark’s living room, the family life sprawling out around me had the same domestic taste as my own childhood memories.

Maybe that was a testament to the Starks’ parenting techniques, or maybe it was a testament to the power of hero worship. The human race could, it seemed, build any man into a legend.
The next few hours slipped by in a domino chain of normalcy. Morgan came back downstairs and covered the floor with crayons and pencils and three different sketchbooks. She drew me a portrait of her family. I’d been expecting stick figures from a child her age, but she drew a series of people that were so well-formed that I could point out which person was which without her telling me first.

Stark got up and made sandwiches for lunch, and everyone ate in the living room except for Peter, who disappeared for the meal but came back in just as it was finished. Nobody else seemed to think that his vanishing act was atypical, so I didn’t comment on it.

As the day crept forward, and my awe at the unexpected normalcy faded, I started seeing those kinds of gaps in greater frequency. Yes, this family wasn’t as abnormal as I’d originally anticipated, but they weren’t entirely normal, either. And the more I looked, the more I saw those blips. Even as Stark worked so hard to leave the superhero life behind him, it still bled through the cracks.

Morgan Stark didn’t seem to notice her father’s prosthetic arm, or the ugly scars that marred half of his face, but Peter Parker did. He danced around the man’s injured side, always brushing shoulders with the left but giving the right as wide a berth as possible. Every once in a while, when he thought I wasn’t paying attention, his gaze would linger just a little too long on the back of the prosthetic’s hand: the space where, according to rumors, Stark had born the Infinity Stones.

Pepper Potts gave less obvious signals, but they were still there. When she handed Stark a new mug of coffee, she went out of her way to place it in his flesh hand. Even more than that, she was always half watching her husband, as if a stray wind might tear him away from her.

The paranoia was in Stark, too, although that was far less of a surprise, considering his reputation. He was almost predatory about the way he guarded his children, and Peter in particular seemed to spark something fierce and mother bear-ish in him, which was a phrase I never would have expected to use in relation to one of the most powerful men in the universe.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Morgan or Peter understood that: the concept that their father, the man who fixed the broken wheels on Morgan’s doll carriages or shamelessly bragged about Peter’s intelligence to anyone who would listen, had the whole world, the whole universe, breathless in awe. His endorsement or censor could build or topple political campaigns. His name made people pause mid-step. The very concept of his existence was enough to influence the unfolding of strangers’ lives.

I doubted that Morgan knew, but I had an inkling that Peter might. But even more than that, I had a pretty solid suspicion that even if Peter did know, he just didn’t care.

Peter fascinated me, both as a human and as a reporter. He was sweet and shy, and yet I knew that there must be something else underneath it. The way Stark looked at him was unique, and unlike Morgan, he was old enough to perceive that.

I wanted to talk to him. So, I jumped on it.

“Do you mind if I talk to Peter, before I leave?”

I’d deduced that Stark was fiercely protective of Peter, and the man’s reaction to the question did little to contradict that conclusion. I supposed that it made sense, considering the Decimation. To lose a child and gain them back was a complicated thing, and he wasn’t the only parent struggling through life in the aftermath of that whiplash.
“If Peter wants to talk to you,” he finally said, jaw tight.

As it turned out, Peter did want to talk to me, much to Stark’s barely concealed displeasure. In fact, it seemed like he’d prefer an emergency root canal to letting me go just about anywhere with the teenager, but he didn’t stop us. From the surprised look on Peter’s face, that was probably some kind of progress.

We went onto the front porch, at his request, and sat on the wooden steps rather than the rocking chairs carefully placed to offer views of the lake.

“So,” he said as soon as we were seated, “how do we do this?”

“I ask you questions, and you answer them.”

I didn’t mean for the explanation to sound so sarcastic, but he grinned, eyes twinkling.

“Yeah, okay,” he laughed, a hint of nervousness in the sound, “I probably should’ve guess that bit. Well, ask away, then.”

“Do you live here now?”

He shrugged. “Kinda, but kinda not. When school starts I’ll have to spend a lot more time at my aunt’s place, but for now I try to split it fifty-fifty.”

“You’re not Stark’s secret biological kid, right?”

That question earned me a sly glance. He seemed to toy with his answer, mischief growing with every passing second.

“I think I’ll let people keep wondering about that, actually. Mister Stark thinks it’s fun to watch them stew.”

“And Stark said you were nicer than him.”

Peter snorted. Obviously, that piece of information wasn’t a surprise. “Yeah, he does that.”

“And you don’t agree?”

“You’ve met him, right? You know he’s wrong.”

“He’s… a lot nicer than I expected, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah. A lot of people say that, if they actually give him a chance.”

I could tell, just from that minuscule exchange, that Peter loved Tony Stark just as much as I’d seen Tony Stark love him, that the teenager saw something in the man beyond what I did. That knowledge wasn’t necessarily surprising, but it was refreshing. In some ways, it made the savoir of the universe that bit more human.

“Stark told me you’re going to be a junior in the fall.”

Peter’s face turned a little red, every bit the embarrassed teenager who just found out that their parent had been bragging about them behind their back. “Oh, no. What else did he say?”

“That you were brilliant.”
“Ew.”

I laughed. “I assume you like school?”

“Uh, I mean, yeah. I like learning.”

“You must be very smart, to have caught Stark’s attention in the first place.”

“I’m alright, yeah.”

I knew that he was being modest. All of the information I had on Peter Parker told me that he was a proper genius, rivaling even Tony Stark’s IQ.

“Do you remember coming back, after the Decimation?”

Peter’s shoulders tensed, and I wondered if I’d just crossed a line. There seemed to be a lot of those, in this house, in this family. An unspoken guidebook of limits and cautions that I hadn’t been made privy to.

“I do,” he finally said.

“I assume that you don’t want to talk about it?”

“No, not really. Sorry.”

“That’s fine.” It was, too. Talking about the Decimation didn’t bother me, but it did bother some of my friends. It was just different coping mechanisms, I supposed, and I understood not wanting to go into such a traumatic experience with a stranger. “When did you find out what happened to Tony?”

He seemed to choose his words carefully. I’d been interviewing people for long enough to know when an answer had been rehearsed, and Peter just wasn’t as good at lying as Stark.

“Pretty soon after.”

“And the first time you saw him was in the hospital?”

“Yes.”

Another lie, which was interesting. In any other interview, I probably would’ve tried to pry for the truth, but I had a weird feeling that Stark would know the second I so much as mildly upset Peter, and it wouldn’t end well for me if he did.

“It must’ve been hard, when you heard about what he did.”

Peter watched me carefully for a few seconds, and my previous evaluation of him gave way to something new. He was shy, yes, but he was smart. Even smarter than Stark, maybe, or maybe he just wasn’t as good at controlling it yet. Still, I could see the raw, borderline brutal intelligence in his eyes. He was running every inch of me through his brain like I was an equation to unwind.

“It wasn’t my favorite day of my life, no.”

“Is that why you spend so much time here, now?”

A pause. He was still sizing me up. I could tell.
“Sort of.”

“I never thought of Tony Stark as a father, you know,” I said easily, testing his reaction. “Even after we heard about Morgan being born, it was hard to imagine.”

“That’s because everyone thinks that they know him, but they don’t.”

I was caught off guard by how quickly he said it and, from the look on Peter’s face, so was he.

I asked him if there was one thing that he wished people did know about Tony Stark.

“He’s complicated, but that doesn’t make him bad,” is all Peter said.

Stark was lurking by the door when we come back in, and Peter didn’t even try to hide his eye roll. He made a joke about having survived the interview without spontaneously combusting, which didn’t seem to land all that well with Stark. For a second, it looked like he was about to scold the teenager, but then his eyes darted over to me and he silently glared instead.

My last hour at the Starks’ cabin was spent getting a tour of the house and surrounding acreage. The kids stayed back in the living room with Mrs. Potts, so I found myself alone with Tony Stark once again.

I’d seen photographs and videos from inside the Stark Tower penthouse, and the décor in his cabin was as far from that style as I could imagine. Where the Tower was sleek and steeped in modern, minimalist designs, the cabin was more rustic. It had a farmhouse vibe, and the furniture was worn and used. It was, without a doubt, a lived-in space.

I only saw a single room upstairs: Stark’s office. Otherwise, I was told that the floor held his and his children’s bedrooms.

“Peter would disown me if I let anyone into his room, and, besides,” Stark said, leading me back down the stairs and away from the hallway of locked doors, “some spaces ought to stay private.”

We spent the rest of the house tour chatting about superficial topics, like the Yankees’ most recent loss and how awful it is to drive in New York at rush hour. Once we stepped outside, however, the conversation got a little more interesting. One of our first stops was a half-downed tree, which Stark pointed to while looking unexpectedly somber.

“The roots gave out during a few days of pretty bad storms about two weeks ago,” he said. “It’s a shame, I guess. Morgan and Peter used to climb all over it. Gave me a good few heart attacks while they were at it, but at least they were having fun.”

He took me down to the dock, where he showed me the boat they kept tethered there. I asked him if he did any fishing, and he laughed.

“Not a chance. I’m rotten at it, Peter’s too nice to kill anything, and Morgan just doesn’t care.”

“And Mrs. Potts?”

His smirk was fond and knowing. “If she ever slows down long enough to even consider fishing, I’ll let you know.”

The cabin’s ground were nice. They weren’t immaculately well-kept, but they weren’t entirely wild, either. It felt very natural, and when I asked Stark who did the landscaping, he told me that he took care of most of it himself.
“Don’t look too carefully at some of the details,” he warned. “I’m an amateur at best, and it doesn’t help that I’ve usually got at least one kid quote-unquote helping while I work.”

“It seems to me like you’re good at just about everything you do.”

“That’s because I rarely do things that I’m not good at.”

I couldn’t help but ask if he was at all grateful for Thanos as we walked back to his car. I knew that it sounded a little perverse, a little brutal, especially considering the prosthetic arm that was a constant reminder of the physical losses he endured, but it was a curiosity that I couldn’t scratch. At the end of the day, it seemed like Stark had come out of that tragedy far more solid than he’d gone in. He had a family, a wife, a beautiful cabin on the lake. He was living in a paradise.

“Maybe,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say I’m grateful for something that resulted in five years of grief for a universe, but I am grateful for the way it ended up. There are worse things to lose than an arm.”

He drove me back to the park, where we’d met so many hours before. My Chevy was the only vehicle left in the lot, that late in the evening. He got out once we parked, came around to open my door, and walked me the few steps it took to get to my car.

“Any last words?” Stark asked, and while he didn’t seem to get the irony of that question, I certainly did.

This was a man who once had chosen his final words. It felt ridiculous to compare that moment to this one: a dusk-stained parking lot, my 2008 Chevy Cobalt, and the biggest problem in my future being late-night New York traffic.

“Why did you choose me?” I asked, hand paused on my door’s handle. “You’ve denied every other reporter’s request for an interview, so what made you pick me?”

He smirked. The streetlight glinted off his metal arm.

“I didn’t,” he said. “Peter did.”

He patted the roof of my car, then stepped away.

“Drive safe.”

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