



VISITING HOME

A NOVELLA
BY JON VASSA

MONOTONY AND PAIN CONSUME SHANE
AND CAROL'S LIVES.

BOTH OF THEM WANT TO ESCAPE AS
NEITHER KNOW HOW TO COPE WITH
THEIR SPECIAL BOY...

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I

The old wooden stairs creaked under the weight of her steps. They once held in place with a firm grip along each nail, but now they bent like a worn dock cast out to sea.

Carol paused midway down the staircase to look at the wallpaper curling from its edges. She hasn't changed them for some years now. She'd been planning to get to it, but she never managed to start the project. Life was hard enough to handle, let alone refurbish her home. It wasn't time that was holding her back. No. There was something else. The hollow shell that had become her home didn't fill her spirits like she'd hoped they would anymore.

The brisk night gathered around her neck as she climbed down the stairs. She tightened her sweater even more. She reached the bottom of the stairs and went to turn off the light, but stopped to push a little twisted piece of wallpaper down. It sprang back up each time she touched it.

"Damn," she said. "This has to go. Tomorrow."

She turned off the light and went through the kitchen towards a small narrow hall. "It has to be done," she said. "Tomorrow feels right."

The door ahead of her shone with a blue glow and spoke in a static mumble. Carol pushed the cracked door open and walked past the man planted in the couch. The TV spoke of nightly news and rambled on of products to be bought.

"And they'll think twice before they try to break into my home again," said a large woman on the television. The lady pat two growling Doberman pinchers on their heads. "This one here is Steel and the other is Knife."

Carol glanced at her husband. "What are you eating?"

"Nothing."

"You're eating something. What is it?"

The man tried to chew without moving his jaw.

"Shane? Did you eat those biscuits? Shane?"

"What?" he said with a mouthful of crumbs.

"I knew it. What did I tell you about that? Your blood sugar is going to go through the roof. For heaven's sake. I'm not rushing you to the hospital again."

"Oh, Carol, come on now. It's only a few."

"It's not only a few."

“Leave me alone. Aren’t I allowed a few comforts? I’ll take an extra shot tonight to balance it all out.”

Carol turned away from him, crossing her arms as she looked at the television.

“Go on boy. Go get those burglars,” the lady yelled on the telly. The two dogs chased a man covered in padded blocks. One of the dogs latched onto a circular pillow on his arm and jerked its head back and forth until the man fell to the ground.

The woman looked at the man with a stopwatch. “What was the time?”

“Eight seconds,” he said.

“I told you,” said the large woman. “My boys won’t stop to ask questions.”

“He asked about you tonight,” said Carol.

Shane seemed to miss this as he sank further into the couch with a grunt.

“I said, he asked about you tonight.”

“Okay, okay,” he said turning up the volume. “Can we discuss this another time?”

“When? Please tell me dear. When is it ever a good time to discuss this? I’d really love to know?”

Shane turned the volume up a notch.

The dogs chased after more padded men on a grassy plain. “THAT’S IT BOYS! DON’T LET THEM GET AWAY!”

Carol kept her arms crossed as she faced her husband. “He’s your son, you know. All he wants is a relationship with you. Is that too much to ask?”

“Carol please?” he said holding the remote. “Let me watch my show.”

Shane pulled a bag out of the crevice between himself and the couch. He slipped out a rectangular biscuit and shoved it into his mouth.

Carol turned away from him, trying to interest herself in the TV. “What the hell are you watching?” she mumbled.

“When I feel congestion building in my chest, I always reach for Fluzena.” A coughing woman picked up a tube from her purse. “Fluzena is recommended by professionals to help patients relieve flu-like symptoms. . .“

“The wallpaper needs redoing,” said Carol.

“Ha.”

“Don’t patronise me. I’m doing it tomorrow whether you help me or not.”

Shane ate more of his treats. “How are you going to do it tomorrow dear? Aren’t we forgetting something? Today is Friday.”

Carol looked at him with disdain even though she knew he was right. “We’ll do it Sunday then.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Carol shook her head as she tried to watch the TV, but she couldn’t focus on it any longer. It was all too much. She’d had it. Why the hell would she choose to sit in front of it with this dying man beside her. She stood to block his view and marched out of the room.

She walked into the narrow kitchen and touched the walls around her. The TV kept its static buzz blowing in the air. The moon shone through her window, mixing with the dim blue light from the other room.

Carol stopped to touch a framed picture on the wall. She took it down from the hanging nail and held it with care. On the back she saw the date written in the corner. Almost three years since they’d taken it.

A younger version of Shane smiled with his arms around her and their happy son. She touched her husband’s face. This was the last family portrait they had taken. She walked to the window, looked over the sink and placed the picture on the counter so everyone could see it.

“That’s better,” she said to the frame. “No need to hide.”

The door creaked open and the TV shouted in the background. Shane came stumbling out of the room with an empty bag in his hands. He opened the cabinet and ruffled around for more snacks. He stopped for a moment when he realised he wasn’t alone and looked over his shoulder.

“Why are you moving the pictures again?”

Carol hugged the picture to her chest and stood an inch away from the sink. “It’s my home and I can do whatever I want with it.”

Shane brought his head back into the cabinet in search of more snacks.

“What’s your goal tonight?” she said. “To go into a coma?”

Shane popped his head out of the cabinet, a new box of cookies in his arms. “It’s Friday,” he said. “I deserve a little snack.” He held the box of cookies against his chest.

Carol turned, shaking her head.

Shane waddled back into the room and shut the door behind him. Carol stayed in the moonlight staring at the old picture.

* * *

“Why do you always park three blocks away? I’m getting tired of this Shane. It’s ridiculous, you know? Who the hell do you expect to see us?”

Carol hated parking so far away from the therapist’s office. It didn’t matter to her what anyone else thought. It was her life and she kept to it. She was done with the pettiness of modern society. She would just as soon park her car in front of the office and take a picture of them walking in and pass out copies to all their friends.

Then again, she didn’t mind the brisk walk. It was one perk that she was glad for. Of course she never cared about it for herself. It was for that overweight husband of hers.

A little bit of exercise will do his blubber ass some good, she thought. We’re not living in the arctic circle you know? We have central heating.

She eyed him as they walked.

Shane wore a large hat, a large scarf, a large jacket, and a pair of sunglasses, even though it was getting dark. All to avoid the possibility of a neighbour or coworker recognising him.

“You’re not a secret agent you know,” said Carol. “If anyone sees me they’ll recognise you as well. Plus your beard is a dead giveaway.”

“There are plenty of men out here with beards. They won’t recognise me. I’ll tell them you’re visiting your distant cousin. I’ll tell them he’s mental and you’re just helping him get back on track. Of course I’ll say he’s not really related to you by blood, you’re just kind enough to visit him.”

They approached the entrance and Shane looked around to make sure there was no one he knew before he went inside.

“You look like you’re on drugs or something,” said Carol.

Shane snorted.

Carol stood with the door wide open and held out her palm for him to enter. “Shall we go and see our dealer?”

“Would you stop it,” he said.

Shane went to the receptionist and signed them in as if he’d been off his pipe for a few days. Carol had already planted herself in the waiting room chair and pulled out a magazine.

Shane slumped into the chair beside her and grabbed a fishing magazine. He threw each page open, reading the articles like an angry bear. He kept the magazine clearly over his face in order to keep wandering eyes from lingering on him.

One of the Psychologists stepped out into the lobby and went towards the receptionist. He had a pure white beard and a bald patch running down the middle of his head all the way to the back of his skull. The man picked up a chart from the desk and spoke softly with the receptionist for a moment as he looked at the chart.

Shane kept one eye over his magazine while his other eye watched the man like a potential threat. I'm not the mental one, Shane thought. Don't look at me. We're here because we're too sane.

The old man heeded him no attention and continued about his business.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bell?" said a red-headed woman.

"Good morning Dr. Horn," said Carol, standing to her feet. Shane slowly lowered his magazine and stood up with his wife.

"Are you both ready?" she asked.

"Of course," said Carol.

Shane slumped behind watching the bearded man at the counter. "I hope he doesn't know anyone we know," said Shane to his wife. She ignored his comment as they entered the cozy office.

They sat on a two seater couch as Dr. Horn sat opposite them.

"So. How are we this week?" she asked.

"Fine," said Shane.

"Okay," said Carol.

"Do you two have any plans for the coming holiday?"

"We're going to visit my family next month," said Carol.

"That sounds nice," said Dr. Horn. "And how do you feel about that Shane?"

Shane kept his arms crossed and sank further into the couch. "Fine. What's there to feel about it? We go up. Eat some food. Get a little tipsy and then right back we come. Nothing too difficult for me."

Dr. Horn paused for a moment resting her thoughtful eyes on Carol. "And how do you feel Carol?"

She tapped her fingers together a bit. "I'm happy to see them, don't get me wrong. I'm just a little concerned about my father."

"What's concerning you?"

"He's been a little pushy, more recently. He keeps talking about the two of us moving up nearer to them. And it'd be one thing if he'd mentioned it once or twice but it's every single time I talk with them. I suspect he senses something." She stopped and glanced at Shane.

Shane let out a snort.

"Well, is moving something you're opposed to?" said Dr. Horn.

"I like it up there. It's nice. But this is where we've lived for so many years. This is my home now." She patted her husband's knee. "This place holds too many memories for us. I can't bear to leave it. Plus Sam likes it here and I don't know how he'd take to a move like that."

Dr. Horn straightened her back and cocked her head. "Shane, you seem uncomfortable with this?"

He crossed his arms further. "The whole situation is a mess. If it's not from her parents then it's from someone else. I'm getting fed up. What more am I supposed to do?"

Carol looked down at him with disappointment. "You know he won't even talk with Sam. He spends his night watching television and eating himself to death."

Shane threw his hands in the air. "I'm so tired of this. Can't a man come home and enjoy his nights the way he wants? Honestly it's enough for me to commute to work every day and deal with stressful clients. Then I have to come home to what? This?"

Dr. Horn held up her hand. "Okay. Mr. and Mrs. Bell, let's take a step back here. I know we've been dealing with this for some time now but maybe we can try to discuss this with open hearts. Maybe the real focus here should be a small change? Sometimes my patients find that little steps can be cathartic. It gives them something physical to mark their new direction in life."

Carol shook her head. "I don't need to move. I've established a home here. What more do we need?"

"Okay. Let's look at it this way," said Dr. Horn. "Really, what we're looking for here is any type of change. Maybe a move would be too much right now. But if we could find something, no matter how small, to change."

"I don't want to push you before you're ready, but maybe there's something you wish could be a little different in your life? It doesn't matter how big or small you think it may be."

The room rang in silence.

“I plan to redo the wallpaper,” said Carol. “Is that change enough?”

Dr. Horn crossed her legs. “That’s a start, yes, but you’ve been talking about the wallpaper for two years now. I feel this project has snowballed into something too big to handle right now. Maybe the two of you might consider hiring someone else to do it for you?”

Carol pulled herself further into the couch. “No.”

Shane sighed and then let out a dry laugh.

“Is this something you’d be willing to think about though?”

Shane watched his wife knowing everything she felt. He let out another large sigh as he waited for her to respond.

“I’m not letting some stranger into my house. How do you think Sam would feel about that? What if someone were to see him? What if they were to accidentally walk into his room? You think I want to put my child through that kind of stress? Maybe you can live your life with some normalcy but for kids like him. . .”

Dr. Horn held up her hand up stopping her speech. “Mrs. Bell please. We’re going off topic here. This is about you thinking about change. You see?”

Dr. Horn turned from Carol to look at Shane. “Mr. Bell you have your part to play in this too. If you really want to help your wife then you’ll need to be there for her. What do you think about going to the store after this and looking at some new wallpaper together?”

Shane looked at his wife and then back at Dr. Horn. “We can try,” he said.

“And Mrs. Bell, would you be willing to go with your husband to the store?”

She looked at him with a tear in her eye. “Are you going to help me with it?”

Shane didn’t like being in a room filled with emotions. He was never sure of them. He thought it best to ignore them.

“Yes. We’ll do it together,” he said.

* * *

“These are our most popular patterns,” said the middle-aged woman holding up samples of wall paper. Her clipboard showed various options for their new interior.

Mr. Bell didn’t like spending his Saturday in a home and garden store. He looked around at the other men, feeling their deadened faces. Each man inside the store sent telepathic messages to the others saying: It’s okay brother, we’ll get through this, just hold on.

“It’s called Sea Side Erotica,” the middle-aged woman said with a bit of flush in her face. This was about the most excitement she has in life—saying the word erotica to customers.

Mrs. Bell also had a tinge of red fill over her cheeks. “Oh. I don’t know. It’s a bit daring?”

“It sure is,” said the sales lady.

“Let’s take a look at some of the others. I’m not sure I’m ready for this one,” she said, tapping the sample.

“All right. What do you think about this one?”

“Oh,” said Carol.

Shane rolled his eyes.

Carol then patted his arm and looked at him. “Shane what do you think about this one?”

The patterns all seemed to be the same to him. It didn’t matter what type of name they gave it, he couldn’t tell the difference. “It’s nice,” he said. Anything to get us out of this store, he thought.

Carol touched it. “What’s it called?”

“Meadows in a Stormy Night.”

Carol looked at the pattern. She picked it up and held it from a distance and then back closer again.

“Get out your microscope while you’re at it,” Shane whispered to himself.

“What’s that?” she said.

“Oh, just saying get at it. Pep talk.” He pat her back.

She smiled and held his arm for a second.

“So do you like it?” asked the sales lady.

Carol grimaced and hissed in a breath. “No,” she said. “I’d like to see some more,” Carol said.

* * *

Shane lugged three different rolls of wallpaper into the house. Each had its own eccentric name that Carol couldn’t decide between so Shane ended up purchasing all three.

He held his arms in the air. “There we go,” he said. “Now you can make the decision in the privacy of your own home.”

“You didn’t have to buy all of them,” she said. Carol went over to the three rolls leaning against the wall. “You know I don’t know if I like this one. Sleeping Sounds in the Estuary.”

Shane dug into his coat pocket. “No matter,” he said. “You don’t have to use this one because I’ve kept the receipt.”

He held a piece of paper in the air. “Whichever ones you don’t like I’ll take back on my way home from work.”

He saw his wife looking intently at the different rolls of paper. He turned away and went to the kitchen fridge. His thick fingers searched around the fridge like they were reading a manuscript of braille until he stumbled upon a glass container.

“Ahh,” he said.

He took out the container and threw it into the microwave. He grew hungry from standing and went to the cabinet to dig into some crackers. Shane ate them over the sink so that the crumbs wouldn’t fall to the floor and he wouldn’t get yelled at for making a mess.

As he munched, he saw the picture frame sitting by the sink. He let out a snort. He saw the empty nail where the picture had been hanging until last night. “Why is she moving this?”

Shane picked up the picture for a moment and saw how thin he used to be. He felt the nostalgic taste of memories rippling through his head. His wife had a wonderful smile. Her eyes were still bright and his were full of light.

He looked at their son in between them. He placed the picture on the counter, setting it face down.

The microwave dinged. Shane rushed over to his meal. He kept touching it with his fingers to keep them burning from the heat. After a few attempts, he grabbed the oven mittens and took it to the table, then covered the meal with salt and pepper.

He dug out a steaming spoonful and brought it to his lips blowing the heat from it. Steam curled around the wind but he couldn’t wait to eat and threw it in his mouth. It burnt his tongue and scalded his gums.

The phone rang. And rang. And rang. He waited to see if Carol would answer. He looked back down at his food and then the phone, but no one seemed to answer.

“For heaven’s sakes,” he said going to the phone. As he picked up the handle and put it to his ear he heard Carol speaking on the other end.

Shane placed the phone back in its cradle and took his steaming meal to the next room. He pulled out a little table to hover above the couch and turned on the TV.

“And if he’s able to hit his opponent’s head enough times then. . .”

He flipped the channel.

“I thought you wanted to go the park?” said the young kid. “I waited all day but you never showed up. All the other dads came except you. You were drunk again.”

He flipped the channel.

“Don’t you dare say that in my court. Do I make myself clear?”

Flip.

(“The boarder was raided by rebels causing further displacement. Refugees are looking for food and shelter as they’re pushed from their homelands. A documentary crew has given us permission to show clips from their upcoming film. Please be advised that the images may cause discomfort to sensitive audiences.”)

A large cave filled with scared faces appeared on the TV. There were children with missing limbs. Children with deformed faces.

Shane changed the channel. He sat on the couch breathing heavily as he tapped the remote in rapid fire. His angry thumb couldn’t hit the channel button fast enough.

“First you’ll wanna put on the glaze. I prefer my home made honey barbecue base. You can get this one at any of the participating supermarkets. . .”

Carol stood in the doorway. “That was your parents,” she said.

“And?”

“They’re coming for dinner tomorrow.”

Shane took a spoonful of his meal and shoved it in his mouth. His eyes were glued to the television before him.

“Then you let those guys cook overnight at a low temperature. And one more thing: I always make sure to put an extra coat of glaze on it before I go to bed. Here lemme show you. So what you’ll wanna do is to get your brush and . . .”

“Shane? Did you hear me? Your parents said they’re coming tomorrow for dinner.”

“Now when you wake up in the morning you’ll wanna apply another coat. . .”

Shane looked at her. “Wait tomorrow? I thought they were coming on the twenty-second?”

“They are. Tomorrow is the twenty-second.”

He sighed. “Fine we’ll make a roast or something.”

The television continued speaking. “Your fork should be able to pull the meat right off the bone. See? This is what it’ll look like folks. . .”

“We don’t have a roast,” she said. “We don’t have anything to prepare for tomorrow. See,

this is why I can never finish things in this house. Now I have to go to the store and make a meal for everyone.”

The TV continued. “Then you’ll wanna pick up my Smokehouse Barbecue Sauce or my Original Hometown Barbecue. . .”

Shane shifted in his seat. “Don’t do that. I’ll go to the store then. So, you can’t say I never help you fix things.”

Carol stood in the doorway refusing to leave. “You’ll get the wrong things though,” she said. “I should be the one to go.”

“No, he said. I’ll go. Let me finish my meal and I’ll head over. Okay? You said you wanted to finish that wallpaper so now you can.”

Carol waited in the doorway. She said something and then left.

“Here you go Mrs. Doctor. I’m putting in the effort. Can’t go and blame all this crap on me.”

The TV continued. “Next up we’ll show you how to whip up a desert that’ll have your guest stunned. Only on the. . .”

A small mummer sounded from upstairs. It wasn’t his wife. Shane turned up the volume.

Pictures of children with burns and other deformities showed across the screen. “Please, we seek your compassion to call this number on the screen. Every donation goes directly to the refugees affected by this horrible war.”

“Good god,” said Shane slamming the channel button.

More murmurs sounded from upstairs. A child’s voice. A child who wanted to play. He wanted someone to spend time with him. Someone besides his mom.

Shane felt his chest constrict as he listened to the child’s voice. He heard it echo but he refused to listen. He turned up the TV even louder.

“THE RIOT BROKE OUT AFTER THE DART CHAMPION WAS CROWNED. . .”

Carol came to the doorway. “Shane? What’s wrong with you? Are you going deaf?”

He turned down the volume. “Maybe I am.”

“Would you stop turning it up so loud? Why do keep doing this? Is deafness a symptoms of diabetes? Maybe you should go and get your hearing checked out too.”

Shane stood up from the couch and took his remaining meal. “It’s selective hearing. I’ve had it since I was a kid,” he said as he walked past her into the kitchen. “I’m going to eat in the garage. Then I’ll head out.”

“Do you know what you’re going to get? Maybe I should write down a list for you?”

“I’ve already got it in my head,” he said.

Shane ate his meal in the silent garage. He listened to the ringing in his ears as he ate. When he finished his dish he threw it into the outdoor fridge and slipped into his car.

* * *

Carol heard the car start and the garage open. She watched Shane pull out of the driveway and go down the road. She went back to her rolls of wallpaper, trying to decide which one to put on.

Carol touched the old walls and thought about the memories they held. “These were here when we moved in,” she said with a smile.

She picked up another roll, Essences of Love, and sighed.

“Mooommm?” she heard coming from upstairs.

“Being a mother comes first,” she said putting the rolls down. She rushed up the stairs and to the end of the hall. “Sam? Are you okay?”

“Did dad leave?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “He needed to pick up dinner for tomorrow night - your grandparents are coming.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Why won’t dad talk with me anymore?”

She picked up a small stuffed toy on his bed and sat on the edge. “Your father loves you - he’s just not very good at showing it.” She squeezed the stuffed toy in her hands. “Work has put more pressure on him and he doesn’t know how to cope right yet.”

“Oh,” he said. “It’s not because of me?”

She scrunched the stuffed toy even more. “No.”

“It’s hard not to feel that way though. He stopped talking to me after it happened.”

Carol had a difficult time looking at her child. She couldn't look into those eyes of his - no matter how he looked now. Those eyes never changed. And they were too much for her to bear.

“Your father doesn’t know how to handle these types of ... situations. You know how he is. He’s always been like this dear. It doesn’t have to do with - you.”

Sam sat quietly in his bed. He didn’t make a peep. The night came earlier this time of year and the moon seemed to burn brighter in the sky.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Are you redoing the wallpaper?” he asked.

She glanced out the door for a moment, “I was thinking about it, yes.”

“Oh. . . I see.”

“Did you want to help me pick out a new pattern?” she said.

“No, that’s okay. . . but Mom, if you’re redoing the house can you - umm - not redo my room? I don’t want it to change. It’s still my favourite.”

She grit her teeth and felt her eyes grow warm. “Of course I won’t dear, whatever you say. You know I always respect your opinion.” She turned to look at him, then took the little stuffed toy in her hands and placed it beside him.

“Well. I’d better go clean the house if your grandparents are coming tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll be right downstairs if you need me. All right?”

“Okay.”

* * *

Shane grabbed a rack of ribs from the lady standing behind her counter. “How much?” he said. “Wait a minute. Wait a minute,” He turned them around to the price tag and said, “Ha. See right here it says two-thirteen. . . oh - per hundred grams.” Shane handed the rack of ribs back to the cashier, “Sorry. I misread the label.”

The young lady took them back and averted her eyes. “That’s all right,” she said.

Shane paid the total without anymore fuss and took the bags in his hands. He walked out the door and loaded up his car. He turned on the ignition and drove back down the wet road. Tiny pellets of rain had started to form in the sky.

He turned on his wipers and then his lights. Shane tried to reach inside a bag in his passenger seat. He used his blind hands to search inside the grocery bag. His other hand stayed on the steering wheel and his eyes went back and forth between the road and his groceries.

He rounded the bend and jerked the wheel as another car passed by. "Can you drive any more reckless you ass?" he said to the other car. Shane continued searching in the bag. "Ahh!" he said, pulling out a candy bar. "Come to me my dear."

Shane delicately unwrapped the sensual bar and kissed it with a gentle peck. He turned the car into the driveway and checked his mouth in the mirror. He discarded the candy wrapper into the outdoor bin and carried the groceries inside. He walked through the front door and saw his wife sitting on the floor with three rolls of wallpaper.

"Have you decided?" he said with a handful of groceries.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not sure I even like them anymore. Maybe I was being too impulsive when I bought them."

Shane left the room and dropped the bags on the kitchen counter. He went over to the notice board and took down the receipt for the wallpaper. He laid it on the kitchen table and put a pen on top of it.

"I'll believe it when I see it," he said to himself.

He heard Carol ruffling through the bags. "What do you expect me to make tomorrow?" she said. Carol pulled out a bottle of honey glaze sauce.

"I'll do the cooking," he said. "Remember what the Doctor said, you just worry about making your first step. I'm here to help you with that."

"Do you even know how to cook? I don't think this'll work. Let me do it," she said.

"No, really I insist. You do the walls and I'll make the meal."

Carol didn't back away from the grocery bag but stayed there picking through the items. Shane came over and pulled out the ribs and the honey glaze. He then began to search the kitchen for the right type of dish to cook them in. He opened every cabinet and gazed inside them with abandon.

"What are you looking for?" Carol asked.

He had his head buried in one of the cabinets. "A large pan - or a dish - for the ribs."

She went to the drawer beneath the oven and pulled out the perfect match. "Like this?" she said.

He rushed over to it and snatched it from her hands. "Yes, this will do."

"See you're going to need my help in here after all. Let me do it and you can go and watch TV."

“Oh no,” he said. “You’re going to do the wallpaper. I am going to do the cooking. I am helping you along here. Don’t you see? I’m being the good supportive husband I’m supposed to be.”

Carol lingered in the kitchen as Shane rubbed glaze on the uncooked ribs.

She watched him over his shoulder. “I’ve never seen anyone do that before,” she said.

“Ha. This is the professional way of doing it.”

Carol fiddled with the door as she slowly left the kitchen. She went back into the front room and looked at the wallpaper rolls again. Sage Blooms on Summer’s Night. She held the roll in her hand and then picked up a new one, and then picked up the other.

* * *

Shane worked step by step on the ribs, following every step of the instructions to the tee. He heard a creaking sound above the kitchen. His spine curled back. He looked up to the ceiling and waited for the next creak. Something large moved across the floor. He stopped working on the ribs and turned on the tap. His hands were covered in sauce and pork skin and grease.

He opened the door to the garage and took an old radio sitting on one of his unused benches. Shane plugged the radio into the socket nearest to the kitchen bar and turned the volume on full blast.

“ERRRREEEEEEERRRREEEEEE. . . “ sounded as he turned the dials to get the right station.

“For that smooth Jazz feel on those cold winter nights, you’ve found us, one-o-seven point five.” A nice soft song started to play. Shane stood over the radio, pivoting back and forth. He didn’t know if the music would be loud enough while he cooked.

Shane went into the living room and turned on the television. He left the door open so that its blabbering could be heard throughout the kitchen.

“Not listening to any of that nonsense tonight,” he said. Shane went back to his cooking station and turned on the oven. He slid the rack of ribs inside and then clicked on the timer. A bead of saliva started to drip from the corner of his mouth.

II

“He’s very bright for his age,” said an older woman. “He really knows how to give the audience a charge. Even at this age. It’d be a pity for him not to join in with the others. If you hesitating because of financial reasons then you have nothing to worry about. We can easily round up the funds from last month’s charity drive.”

A young, skinny Mr. Bell stood in the empty classroom trying to make his best guess as to why they were there. His wife had a large smile across her face while she threw him telepathic glances.

“What seems to be the issue, Mr. Bell?” said the older lady. “I’m having a tough time understanding, that’s all.”

“It’s not an issue per se. I don’t know if we can make it up there that weekend. I’m supposed to be three hours away in the opposite direction at the same time this. . . play, contest, thing is taking place. Don’t they do these every year or something?”

“Not this one. It’s brand new. There’ll be tons of other schools competing this year. And personally I believe that our school has a chance at winning. Well, that is if we have Samuel.

“Please think about it Mr. Bell. This could be the start of a lifelong career for your son. Think about how that would feel as a parent knowing your child is already eons ahead of his peers. Even before he reaches ten!”

Shane put his head down a little and then back up. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit rash about this? Let’s calm down for a moment, we don’t need to decide his life’s path based on some chance. But the point is that it’s not convenient for me or my wife to be there. If they do this again next year then, yes, by all means we can go with him. As for now, we’re not in the right position for this event. Sorry to say.”

The old lady clasped her hands over a permission slip and then looked both parents in the eyes.

“These were due today but if either of you change your minds,” she said holding out the slip, “I’ll accept it. Even on the day of. We have plenty of other parents willing to have him tag along with them. Please keep it mind.”

Mrs. Bell took the slip and placed it in her purse.

* * *

“I wish they’d just be frank and tell you why they want to speak with you,” said Shane. “I don’t like driving all the way here thinking my son’s beaten up another kid, or set the library on fire, or - god knows what?”

Carol stayed silent as they walked down the school’s corridors.

“I mean for christ’s sake, how important is this play anyhow? It’s far from the crisis that she’s making it out to be.”

“Are you against him going?” she asked.

“Why would I be against it? The timing is off this year that’s all!”

“It’s not because you don’t want your son to be a starving artist?”

Shane let out a snort.

“Be serious here! Everyone keeps talking like this child is some - some prodigy. It’s getting silly. The child is good at it. He likes performing in the little plays. But how am I going to go and say he’ll be the next great thing on the stage? It sounds a bit delusional if you ask me.”

“I’m not saying that,” she said. “All I’m asking is if you’re keeping this from him on purpose. I’ve heard your thoughts on these subjects before, like our neighbours daughter for instance. You didn’t have anything nice to say about that.”

Shane stopped before he opened the exit doors. “That’s completely different. You can’t compare the two. That girl is a snooty little brat and you know it.” Shane caught Carol’s eyes and lingered over them for a moment.

“Her paintings weren’t terrible,” said Carol. “I mean she had some sort of skill.”

“Ha! For all that money they spent on her education and how long they gave her a chance to make something of it? Come on you know she was just downright lazy. I saw her stumbling back in late at night high as a kite.”

Shane opened the doors and Carol followed him. He looked down at his watch and went to stand near the parking lot.

“She was lazy,” said Carol.

“See?”

“But Sam isn’t. He loves it. He works on it all at the time. You should see him when he gets home. He always wants to run through lines together and you wouldn’t believe how serious he is. He says, ‘No mom, you’re not doing it right. You’re supposed to say it like this!’ It’s all he talks about Shane and it would mean a lot to him. I’m not trying to say he’s some messiah but he has a knack for it.”

Shane glanced at his watch again. “He’ll be out soon?”

“In ten minutes,” she said.

“Let me see that form,” he said holding out his hand.

Carol gave him the permission slip. He cleared his throat a few times and let out some grunts.

“Here he comes now,” said Carol.

Shane put the form away before his son could see. “We still have time to decide.”

* * *

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” she said.

“What is it?” asked Sam.

“It’s upstairs in your room. You’ll see when you get up there.”

Sam had a big grin on his face. “Is it the trip? Did Dad sign the permission slip? Can I go?”

Carol looked to the floor, “Umm. . . no it’s not that but something else. I thought you might like it.”

“Oh,” he said. His small shoulders drooped at the side and his face looked disappointed.

She came around and kneeled down to be at eye level with him. “Don’t worry about the trip. If it’s meant to be then it’s meant to be. And if not well then it’s for the best. Your father isn’t trying to be mean. He has his reasons.” She looked outside the kitchen window for a moment wondering what his reasons were.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I wanna go see the surprise.”

“Great!” She stood up and pushed him towards the stairs. “I can’t wait to see your reaction.”

The young child walked-leaped as he went up the steps. Carol did her best to catch up with him before he opened the door.

“Wait! Wait! I want to see -“ she said but he’d already reached the door.

She went inside and kneeled down to see his face. It was one of confusion, bewilderment, and misunderstanding. The child’s emotions were caught in a traffic jam looking for the right signal to go.

“What do you think?” she said with a nervous voice. “You don’t have to keep it.”

“What is it?” he said.

“It’s the comedy and tragedy masks,” she said, standing beside the fresh new wallpaper in his room.

“What are those?”

“They’re famous symbols. They represent the theatre - you haven’t seen them before? Even in your classes?” She touched the patterned masks on the wall wondering if her surprise had been a tragic mistake.

He continued to stare at them.

“Oh well we can take it down. It’s easy enough,” she said. “I went to the store the other day looking for some new wallpaper and chanced upon it.”

He touched her sleeve and then held onto her arm. “No,” he said. “Don’t take it down.” Sam went over to the wall and touched the patterned masks. “They look a little creepy,” he said with a laugh. “But I like it. I like it a lot.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s much better than the flowers,” he said. “Thank you. It was a great surprise.” He went over to his mother and gave her a hug.

“You’re welcome. I just went on a whim when I saw it.” She had a proud mask on as she glanced around the room.

* * *

The moon reflected its blue lights onto the earth below. Carol looked at the mirrored orb hanging outside her kitchen window as she watched tiny black and white clouds pass over it. Two artificial beams shot through the front window and scrapped across the wall in a long thick sliver. She heard the garage door open and then close back again.

Shane walked in through the side door with his bag in hand. “Sorry,” he said. “They wanted me to stay and run through a few more things.”

“It’s fine,” she said.

“No, it’s not. They’re doing it on purpose,” he said. “This is what they do to the younger guys. It’s all part of their little tribal game.” Shane took his tie out from his collar and threw it onto the table.

“Why don’t you go somewhere else then? Is it really worth it? How long are they going to keep doing this?”

“It’s a good company. It’s just a matter of putting in your time like everyone else. My day is coming. I know it. I’ve gotta keep my head down and plough through. There’s no reason for me back out now. It’d be stupid to start this crap all over again somewhere else.”

Carol opened the oven and pulled out a dish. She took it over to the table and lay some utensils beside it.

He sat down at the table and picked up a fork. “Thanks,” he said. “It looks really good.”

She smiled and pat him on the hand.

Shane paused from filling his plate and juttred his chin up towards the ceiling. “He’s already asleep?” he said.

“Yeah.”

He spoke through a mouthful of food. “What did he think of the masks?”

“It shocked him,” she said with a laugh. “But then he took to them pretty quick after that.”

“Ha.”

He paused from his meal and fiddled with his coat’s pockets. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and set it flat on the table. “There you go,” he said. “I told you I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Carol dragged the permission slip closer to herself and eyed it for some time. “You know he’s gonna be so happy when he see this,” she said. “How’d you manage to get out of the meeting?”

“Well - I’m paying for it for the next two weeks,” he said. “As you can already see. All I can say is this had better be a damn good play!”

She held his wrist and smiled at him. “It’s a good one. I’ve been running through lines with him again and again. I’m thinking at this point they’ll ask me to come up on stage.”

“Ha! That’d be the day.”

III

Shane kneeled on the floor as he poked at the rack of ribs inside the oven. “Come on you bastards - fall off the damned bone.” He stabbed at them with vigour as he tried to break them apart. Eventually, he stopped and closed the oven back. He stayed on the floor and looked at the temperature for some time, trying to see if it was off. It wasn’t.

He grabbed the counter and struggled to pull himself up. When he managed to get to his feet he pat his chest and coughed into his fist. “There we are,” he said hitting at his chest.

Something moved upstairs. Shane turned his head up to the ceiling while holding the left side of his neck. “Errr,” he said.

The noise stopped. He looked around the corner through the door where he saw his wife holding three rolls of wallpaper.

Footsteps sounded upstairs again. Then a loud prolonged scratch riffled in the air. It sounded as if someone were moving a heavy desk or a very large chair.

Shane watched the ceiling like a weary cat. His eyes were growing sharp and his slits were growing thin. “Why does he insist on moving everything?” he said to himself. “I know you’re up there. It’s duly noted.”

Carol walked through the kitchen with her arms full of wallpaper. “Shane can you help me with these?” she said.

“I’m working on the ribs right now, they’ll be here any moment. I can’t leave them. . . where are you taking that?” he said pointing to the wallpaper.

“I don’t want the house to look like a mess when your parents get here, so I thought I’d get you to store them in the garage - just for now?”

Shane rolled his eyes and held his arms open. “I’ll just put these with all the rest then?” he said.

She nodded her head and placed the rolls into his arms. “Thanks!”

Shane went to the side door and walked down to the garage. He walked along the side of the car and to a corner full of unused wallpaper that’d accumulated over the past few years.

Shane stacked the new rolls along with the old ones, and a billow of dust to sprang from them. Tiny particles traveled up his nose and into the top of his throat. Shane coughed and coughed and coughed until his face turned red. “Damn paper,” he said.

He turned away and then turned back, taking hold of the old wallpapers. He gently unrolled a few and took a look at the various patterns his wife had bought over the past three years.

One stood out to him in the far corner—it was the thinnest roll of the bunch. He unravelled it and looked at the theatre masks printed on it. Shane touched it a few times, holding it and letting it go again. He felt a red blotch surging into his eyes. His nose then began to drip. He sniffed those beads back in and rubbed his eyes with his fat digits.

“God damned dust,” he said wiping a lone tear from his eye. “Damned allergies. . .” He turned away from the wallpaper in the corner and then glanced over his shoulder at them again. “Damned dust getting all up my nose.”

Shane stopped at the outdoor fridge and opened it. He rummaged his hands all the way to the back. He pulled out a dark box labeled: Veggie Snax!

He opened the package and pulled out a few hidden candy bars and tore into them like a wild animal. Shane threw the chocolate bar into his mouth and almost forgot to chew.

When he finished devouring the snacks, he let out a great sigh and wiped his face again. He straightened his shirt and looked at his mouth in the car’s side mirror.

A ring came from within the house. He perked up and heard Carol answer the door. Loud voices mumbled within and without and Shane hurried back inside.

* * *

She stepped into the house and lumped her coat into Carol’s arms. “Oh you know how those people are?” she continued. “Honestly I never thought they’d figure it out.” Shane’s mother then patted Carol’s arm and walked by her. Carol went over to the nearest closet and hung her mother-in-law’s coat up.

Shane’s mother lingered by the stairs before going into the kitchen. She touched the railing and then picked at the peeling wallpaper curling off the light switch. “Hmm,” she said.

Shane appeared in the doorway with a red apron tied around himself. “Hello,” he said. “Good evening.”

She let go of the wallpaper. “Oh, hello dear. You’re looking - well.” She looked at him for a time and then focused on his midsection. “Have you gained weight since we last saw you?”

Shane touched his belly without thinking. “I don’t know. Haven’t really noticed.” He gave a fake laugh.

His mother narrowed her eyes and nodded her head.

“Well, come in,’ he said. ‘Come on don’t stand in the hallway all night.”

His father stepped through with his nose scrunched into his face. “What’s that smell?” he said.

Shane’s cheeks quivered and then he tried to smile. “It’s a new recipe,” he said. “I made some ribs.”

His mother let out a small laugh. “Shane I hope you didn’t go to too much trouble for us?”

He glanced at the slab of meat. “No. Not at all.”

Shane’s father walked over to the ribs and sniffed a few times and then turned away. “So how’s work? Have they promoted you yet?”

Shane tapped his fingers together. “Uhh - not yet - no but it’s around the corner. They like to play these little games you know. They want to see who’ll stick it out for the company before they can trust them.”

His father fixed his glasses and stared at his son in silence. “You know I’ve never heard of a company like that. By your age I’d already been given six promotions and a few holiday bonuses.”

“I’m not lazing on the job,” said Shane.

“I was just saying. You know they put me up the ladder faster than I could sit down at a new desk. I nearly had to tell them to stop for the sake of the company. I didn’t want the others to lose morale.

“I mean one day I went to visit the toilet and by the time I came back they’d given me another promotion. They knew talent when they saw it. I’d put in my hard day’s work and they punched me up those rungs faster than you could imagine.

“They didn’t like those sissies who stayed in the corners just working to get by. Oh no. They knew what those clowns were up to. I’d gone into the company around the same time as one my friends and you wouldn’t believe the difference between us. After the first three years they’d already put me over him with another boss between us.

“He’d always slacked off since I knew him. I heard he did terrible in University too. Apparently he was under the impression that getting a degree from a nice school would give him a free ticket to life. Was he wrong or was he wrong? Mr. Snooty running around showing off his little piece of paper thinking he’d pulled a big one over the rest of us. HA - soon after a decade I’d been using that degree to wipe my -“

“OH! Shane!” his mother said. “I forgot - we brought a little something to eat after dinner.” She pulled a box out of a paper bag and thrust it into his arms.

He examined it for some time. "That's great," he said.

"It's a log cake. Your favourite since you were a kid."

Shane opened the box and felt his tongue growing warm.

"Sam loves log cake too," said Carol.

Everyone kept silent and shifted in place. Shane stared at the cake, refusing to look up at his mother and father as they eyed his wife.

"Why don't we sit down and get dinner underway?" said Shane.

"You're trying to rush us so you can dig into that cake?" said his mother.

He spat a feign laugh. "You know me," he said.

* * *

They gathered around the small round table and looked at the food spread across it. He clapped his hands together and gave them a rub. "Here we are," said Shane. "Are we ready?"

"This looks wonderful. You've done so much for us," his mother said.

"It was nothing - really."

His father stabbed his fork into the ribs. "I thought you said the meat would fall off the bone?"

"The taste is what's important," said Shane. "Here try these. They're supposed to go with it."

His father took a plateful of food and then started chewing on the ribs. "They're tough," he said. "Is this the pig's hide?"

"Mine are fine," Shane's mother said. "They're really good."

"Ehh - lemme try yours then," said his father reaching his fork to her plate. He chewed with a painful expression. "Yours are tough too. Son, are you sure you cooked these things right? They're like a strap of leather."

Shane looked at the ribs and then back at his father. "I - uhh - I did what the instructions said?"

Carol took a few bites. "I think they're fine. Maybe your teeth are getting brittle - " She held her hand over her mouth.

“Hahaha!” The table erupted in laughter except for Shane’s father. Shane’s father refused to look at the rest of them as he poked the ribs on his plate. “Damned teeth aren’t brittle - disrespectful woman -“ He said under his breath.

Shane’s mother kept a grin across her face trying her best to suppress it. “Carol? Do you have anything stronger to drink?” she asked with a smirk.

“Let me see.” Carol rose from the table and went through her top cabinet. “There’s an old bottle of sherry? Or a bit of scotch?”

“I’ll have some sherry then, thanks.”

“Anything for you?” she asked Shane’s father.

He let out a grumble that couldn’t be heard. “Fine thanks.”

Carol grabbed an old glass and poured some sherry for her mother-in-law. She paused a moment before returning to the table to look at the old family photo on the kitchen top.

* * *

She remembered a boy. His gentle face without any blemish. She gave him a tie. It had some lizards on it. Silly creatures, singing, dancing, and reading lines. She remembered the tie.

She didn’t know why it came to her now. Why she had to think of it. She didn’t want to. Even though the memory was warm her reality felt too dark and cold.

The tie lay across the black asphalt. Discarded. Tattered. Torn. That was painful. That thought slowed her heart.

* * *

“Ice? Carol? Carol? Dear is everything all right?”

Carol felt the sherry pouring down her hands and out of the over filled glass. She hissed a curse at herself and flicked the excess liquid into the sink nearby. “Damn,” she said.

“Carol?”

She held onto the side of the sink and grit her teeth. “Yes,” she growled. “I’m fine. What the hell do you want?”

Shane dropped his fork to the table and scooted out of his chair. “Carol?”

Shane's mother furled her brow and swished the back of her hand in the air. "Never mind," she said.

Carol turned on the tap and rinsed her wet hands in the cool water. She breathed in and out and scrubbed her hands until they looked red.

"Maybe you should go help her," said Shane's mother. "All I wanted was a few ice cubes in the drink."

Carol turned off the tap and the room went silent. She held onto the sink with a white grip and then turned to her mother-in-law. She saw her whispering at the table. "I'm sorry Ava. You were saying?"

Shane's mother paused from her murmurs and looked up at Carol. "Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter."

Carol exhaled a loud breath. "No, jus-just tell me what it is."

Ava brushed her hair over her ear and pursed her lips. "All I wanted was some ice for the sherry. If it isn't too much?"

Carol shook her head and picked up the drink. "Not at all," she said. "It's fine."

The tie lay upon the ground in her mind. She'd bought it full price. And there it lay, torn right along the side.

Carol dropped two cubes of ice into the thick drink and set it down on the table before her mother-in-law. Ava picked up the glass and took a big sip and set it back down. "That's better," she said to herself.

Shane's father harrumphed and dug his knife into the ribs. "You kids are still young you know?" He didn't look up from his plate. "It's different for your generation. With all these medical advancements and everything."

Shane raised his eyebrow at his father and glanced at the table for a second. "All right," he said.

Shane's father kept sawing the bones and meat. "You two might think about having another kid one of these days," he said. "Take your mind off of things."

Carol began to rub the table with a cloth napkin even though it was clean. "We have Sam to take care of," she said. "We don't have time for another child. And our minds are busy and fine without another life to take care of."

Shane opened his mouth to say something.

Carol pushed her seat back and took her plate. The fork flung off her dish and dropped to the ground. It clattered in a wobble and echoed through the tiny home. "Shit," she said. "Damn."

“Don’t worry about it,” said Ava. “I’ll help you dear.”

“No. It’s fine. It’s fine. I can handle it myself!”

Ava backed in her seat and widened her eyes with horror.

Carol snatched a small rag from the counter and wet and then kneeled down to wipe the floors. When she stood back up and threw it in the sink, she saw the picture of her family again. The three happy faces staring back at her.

She grabbed the picture frame real fast and slapped it down in the middle of the dinner table. The glass cracked inside the frame and a long shard cut into her hand. “Why would I need another child when I have him?” she said. “And what does it matter to you? When is the last time you came to see your grandchild? New Year’s? Christmas? You won’t even go upstairs to see him now. So don’t you march up into my house and tell me that I need to pop out another child when you can’t be bothered with the one up there!”

She held onto the picture with blood running down her finger, along the wooden frame, and onto the table. Carol then ripped her hand off the photo and squeezed her bleeding finger. She shook her head and growled and went up the stairs to tend to her wound.

The table kept silent. Shane’s mother didn’t even touch her Sherry. A creak sounded across the ceiling from the floors above. Shane looked upstairs with a grimace and then back at his parents. Their faces were pinched and their eyes narrow. Shane’s father cracked his fingers and let out a snort. Shane's mother kept casting glances upstairs.

Carol peered her head through the kitchen’s door. “He’s heard you,” she said. “Don’t worry about that. I’m sure he’s heard everything we’ve said tonight.”

Shane widened his eyes at her. Carol left the room with a snap and went back up the stairs. Shane looked around at his parents and they refused to look at him. They sat in silence around the rack of ribs.

Small murmurs sounded upstairs. A little boy’s voice with a tremble in it. A loving mother’s comfort.

“I’m done here,” said his father. “Ava, you ready?”

She had malice in her eyes. She nodded her head and took her purse in hand. Shane stood with them and walked to the door behind them.

His father stopped him in the front room and put his arms around his shoulders. “We’re not avoiding anyone,” said his father. “You know what I meant right?”

“I understand,” he said.

“It’s no a situation any of us like to face,” said his Father.

Shane nodded his head up and down a little.

“All I asked for was a bit of ice,” said his mother.

Shane grit his teeth back and forth.

Ava snorted with an angry laugh.

Shane’s father let go of his son and turned to Ava and put his arm around her. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Ava nodded and walked down the stairs. She then turned at the last step to look at Shane. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what I said.”

Shane shook his head. “Drive safe,” he said.

She watched him for a moment longer. “Bye son.”

He put his limp hand in the air. “Bye.”

They went down the last step, whispered along the footpath, and then climbed into their car. It remained dark for a time then cranked and flashed its lights.

Shane stood in the empty doorframe watching them. The car pulled away from the kerb and hummed out sight and around the bend.

Shane remained in the doorframe with a faint lamp shining behind him. He moved away from the threshold and picked at the frayed piece of wallpaper along the way back to the kitchen. He threw himself down at the kitchen table with the rack of ribs laying before him. He tried to break off another rib but struggled to do so. Eventually he abandoned his fork inside the ribs and stood up to open the fridge. He dug out the uneaten log cake and set it on the counter.

The murmurs upstairs sounded through the ceiling. Shane growled at them and took the desert into the living room and punched on the television. The volume rose higher and higher until he couldn’t hear anything else.

IV

Shane fixed the belt strap over his shoulder and chest and then put his hands on the wheel. “Seat belts everyone?” he said.

Sam clicked his in the back and grinned in the rearview mirror. “Check,” he said.

Carol smiled. “Check,” she said.

Shane smiled a bit and clicked the gear in place. “Well, then next stop is theatre city?”

The little car drove with a puff of mist from the brisk cold and dragged along the dark road.

“Don’t drive so fast,” said Carol. “What if there’s ice on the roads?”

Shane eyed the black road ahead of him and began to chew on his lip. “There’s no ice,” he said. “It’s not that cold yet.”

Carol glanced up out of the front windscreen and said nothing more.

“Will we make it in time for the play?” said Sam.

Shane looked up in the rearview mirror then back to the street ahead. “We’ll make it. Just barely though.”

Sam nodded his head and held a stack of papers in his hands.

A car approached them on the other side of the road. Their lights shined bright and then clicked down into a lower setting and passed by them.

Shane narrowed his eyes and gripped even tighter at the wheel. “We’ll make it,” he said. “Just barely though.”

* * *

“They don’t love me. . . do they?”

Sam lay under the covers of his bed and pulled the sheets close to his face. He held a little stuff animal next to him as if it were his only friend.

“They don’t know how to show it very well,” she said. “I shouldn’t have said anything to you dear. These really are adult conversations. You’d understand it if you were older.”

“But I heard what they said. They wouldn’t even come up here.”

“They’re miserable people. It has nothing to do with you sweetheart. It’s them. Trust me. I’ve known them longer than you’ve been around.”

“Does Grandpa James and Grandma Anne feel that way too?” he said.

She put her hand down on the bed. “No dear. My parents are very different.”

“Are you going to see them?”

She paused a second. “Well, of course,” she said. “We always go up there for Christmas.”

Sam kept quiet for a moment. He pulled the covers over his face a little more. “Do you have to go there this year? Can’t we stay here?”

She sighed then hesitated her words.

“Maybe we could stay this year?”

She stood up from the bed and bit her upper lip.

“It’s very tough on me you know?”

She began to nod. “I know,” she said. “I know.”

* * *

Shane looked around the side of his cubical to see a vacant office. Everyone had left for lunch except for him. He grabbed his phone and dialed up a number.

A few rings sounded before anyone answered.

“Hello?”

“James? It’s Shane.”

“Oh,” he said. “Is everything all right?”

“Not entirely.”

“Uh-huh?”

“I’ve run into a dilemma over here,” he said.

“What kind of a dilemma? Is Carol okay?”

Shane put the phone on the other side of his face. “Yes and no,” he said. “She told me yesterday about her plans to cancel our trip up your place this Christmas.”

“What? She hasn’t said anything to us about it.”

“I know,” he said. “I don’t know if she plans on telling you. So I thought I’d get on the line and let you know.”

“Oh boy. . . “

Shane sat at the phone listening to the silence lingering between them. The office hummed its florescent lights and the air conditioning blew a little whir in the background.

“Are you at the house?”

“No. I’m calling you from work. I didn’t want her to overhear our conversation.”

“That’s smart,” said James. “Okay - umm - Shane I need to talk with Anne before we can do anything but I’m glad you’ve called. We’ve been trying to reach her for the past few weeks to arrange some plans for when you two came.”

Shane heard a sigh over the line.

“You know maybe we should come down there this year? I don’t know what you think about it but. . . we might be able to talk with her? Especially if we have a good amount of time.”

“Sure. We have the spare room upstairs.”

“Okay. It’s not the car ride keeping her - is it?”

“No, we’d planned to take the train,” said Shane.

“I see,” said James. “Listen, let me call you back once I talk with Anne and we’ll figure something out. Should I call you at the office?”

“I’ll call you back the same time tomorrow?”

“That works,” he said. “I’ll talk with you then.”

“Okay, bye.”

* * *

“You really think so?” said Sam.

“Of course,” said Shane. “I even saw a woman cry after your monologue. There are professional actors out there who couldn’t get the saddest person in the world to shed a tear. And you did it like it was nothing!”

A car whipped by them on the other side of the road.

Carol put her hand up in the air. “Watch the road,” she said.

Shane jerked the wheel an inch and corrected it back. “I’ve got it,” he said. “Don’t do that while I’m driving.”

She put her hand down on the dashboard. “Just watch the road,” she said.

He closed his mouth down and focused on the path before them. The night left an icy breath upon the roads and the trees hung low above them, blocking out the blue light of the moon above.

“It’s never fogged like this in the city,” she said.

“What did you think about the part when I asked the man for another dollar?” Sam asked in the back.

“It gets worse in the city,” said Shane.

“What did you think about the part when I asked the man for another dollar?” Sam asked again.

Carol turned back to look at him. “That was very funny. The whole audience laughed.”

“I thought about asking for another but then I didn’t. Maybe I will if we do the play again.”

“It’s worth a try then.”

Lights passed them by on the curving roads and the clouds grew dense as they clung further below. Shane watched ahead and occasionally wiped the window. The heat inside caused a wet dew to form on his windshield.

“Should we stop somewhere for the night?” Carol asked.

“No,” he said. “I’ve driven in worse.”

“. . . then when Jill tried to say that we were going to. . .”

“I’m sure we could find a nice place along the way? We can leave early in the morning and drive back home. Maybe you could call in sick for work or something?”

Shane kept wiping the windshield with his hands. The fog crept around the car like a dense blanket. Little billows kept his lights from traveling more than a few meters ahead of them.

“Hold on - let me focus,” he said.

“. . . I didn’t even know she would do that. Then my teacher said that if we win, we could go on to the bigger. . .”

A pair of bright lights jumped around the bend and caught their gaze upon the car. They slipped their way closer in an instant. Shane watched it slowly happen. One moment he turned the car and the next the yellow lights were right at them. They barrelled into their car with a smash. A scream escaped the car and life froze and then went dark.

* * *

The lights were blurred inside his eyes. He didn’t know where he was. All he knew was the present moment. There was no pain. There was no cold. Just some haze and lights around him.

His mind couldn't process the shattered glass. His eyes couldn't see his bloody hands. His ears couldn't hear the men rushing around him stomping their feet at a frantic pace. He couldn't feel the crushed bones inside his neck. The taste of a night so cold didn't leave its scent. Then all went black again.

* * *

A rhythmic beep glided through the room. A gentle buzz left its hum inside the walls. Everything blurred around the bed. Nothing made sense in her head. "Shane?" she whispered. "Samuel did good didn't he?" she said. "He was so good tonight. . ."

* * *

A nurse ticked a few boxes on her form for the night when she heard a shout bellow from one of the rooms down the hall. She'd heard such yells before and ran to the room knowing which drug to administer.

"WHERE IS SAM! WHERE IS MY SON! YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE DONE WITH HIM! WHERE THE HELL IS HE?"

"It's okay Mrs. Bell. Your son is fine. Please calm down. We need you to stay calm. Otherwise we won't be able to help you."

"YOU BASTARDS WHERE IS HE! WE WERE TOGETHER WHEN WE LEFT! WE LEFT THE SHOW TOGETHER! HE WAS WITH ME AND NOW HE'S NOT!"

The doors burst open.

"Mrs. Bell. We need you to stay calm please."

Her shouts continued and the nurse moved out of the doctor's way.

The doctor took out a needle and added some fluid into her IV. "That'll calm her down," he said.

Slowly, Mrs. Bell went loopy and her eyes swirled around her head. Then she went back into sleep back into the darkness again.

* * *

"How about my wife?" he said with a slurred voice.

“She’s fine sir,” said the nurse. “She’ll be alright.”

“Oh, that’s good. . . I saw the headlights but I couldn’t turn. . .”

The nurse fixed his pillows and check his neck brace.

“I tried to turn. . . I couldn’t. . . did you tell them that I tried? Are they mad?”

“No, no one’s mad at you. They just want you to focus on getting well and to get your rest.”

* * *

Shane stumbled into the house and dropped his briefcase up on the small counter. The lights were off inside and a cold air lay heavy in the room. He rubbed his arms a few times, then let out a deep breath. A wisp of vapour poured from his lips. “What is this?”

He walked to the thermostat on the wall. “Why is it off?” He clicked the heat back on and kept his coat tight around himself. “Carol?” he said watching the little wisp of cloud from his mouth. “Hello?”

The stairs creaked in the other room. Shane leaned his head to the side to try and glance at the stairs.

Carol emerged from the corner. “You’re back,” said Carol.

Shane started to rub his hands together. “Did you know that the thermostat was off?”

She laughed. “No.” She went to examine it in the wall. “That’s why it’s so cold,” she whispered.

“You didn’t turn it off?” he asked.

“No,” she said touching it with her hand. “Must’ve been Sam.”

Shane watched her caress the thermostat. Her body shivered a twitch.

“I’ll go and get the heater from the garage then,” he said. “That’ll keep us warm until this thing kicks in.”

He walked out into the garage and looked for the old heater amongst the mounds of junk. He brushed some cobwebs from an old dusty tarp. Small rodents fluttered inside.

Shane paused to listen to the rodents. He then lifted the tarp and saw a pile of deflated pool toys atop a rusted bike. He put the tarp back down. He went beside it and dragged a few cardboard boxes to the side. An old picture album fell to the ground. It casted a plume of dust

into the air. Shane whacked his fingers up on his trousers and then bent down to pick it up. His neck rang with a sharp pain.

He slapped his hand to his neck and bent a little further and picked up the album. He stood back up and tossed the album atop his car hood. The old cover opened up and showed a newspaper clipping at the front.

The article read: Fatality occurs as drunk driver crashes into another car. Jason Mears, 24, and Lily Harth, 22, were reported to have collided head-on with another car while Mears was driving under the influence of alcohol. Mears had apparently been out with his girlfriend Harth at a local bar before the crash took place. They collided head-on into the driven by Shane Bell as they were leaving their son's school play.

Mears and Harth were thrown from their vehicle as they had neglected to wear any safety restraints. Mr. Bell, 34, was taken to the emergency room with a broken neck and a fracture to his skull. Mrs. Bell, 31, had sustained a broken finger and a few lacerations to her face. Their son Samuel, 8, suffered a broken ribcage, crushed jaw, and internal bleeding. Samuel is currently in intensive care and his prognosis is still uncertain. . .

Shane held the article in his shaking hands. His breath slowed as he lapped in the frosted air. Every string inside his neck clinched with painful stints. He couldn't move. He couldn't take his hands off his neck. He placed the article down beside another clip.

Samuel Haden Bell, 8, was pronounced dead this morning as doctors did their best to revive him. Samuel was a victim of a drunk driving accident after leaving. . .

Shane stopped breathing for a moment.

V

The doorbell rang. Carol opened her front door and said, "Merry Christmas!"

Her mother and father stood on the doorsteps with a some wrapped gifts in their hands. "Merry Christmas Dear," said Carol's mother. "Are you feeling better that we came down here this year?"

Carol nodded her head. "I didn't like the idea of taking the train," she said. "No mode of transport is entirely safe."

Anne pursed her lips and nodded her head.

"Don't worry we're all here," said her father. "So let's enjoy ourselves. Now where is your husband at?"

Carol cocked her head back towards the kitchen. "He's cooking the roast," she said.

James lifted the gifts up in the air. "Great," he said. "I've got a nice bottle of scotch with our names on it."

She stepped back to let them in. "I'm sure he'll be happy to see it," she said.

Her parents entered the house and slipped in through the kitchen.

". . . You shouldn't have brought it! Ahhh! Two drunk old men. . ."

Anne waited for her daughter at the entrance of the kitchen. Carol made eye contact with her, smiled, and shut the front door back. She then went over towards her mother and grabbed the presents from her hands.

"How was the trip?"

Anne nodded her head. "The trip was fine. We made better time than we expected and the roads were -"

"Do you want drink?" said Carol.

Anne paused. She left her mouth open a sliver.

Carol placed the gifts down and went over to the fridge.

"I'm not thirsty right yet," said Anne.

Carol left her hands on the fridge.

Anne then looked at the wall paper near her. A piece had begun to curl from the edges.

"Are you sure you don't want anything?"

Anne drew her eyes away from the walls. "I'm sure," she said.

* * *

Dr. Horn sat in her office, jotting down her daily notes. Still holding on to the belief that her child isn't dead. The delusions are getting worse as time passes. Mr. Bell isn't progressing much either. He seems more withdrawn likely due to his poor coping mechanisms. They've yet to start on the wallpaper project. Will work further to find other steps of progress.

She took the note and placed it inside their case file. It has been a long road with these two. When they first came into her office almost three years ago, she'd been prepped to help them through their grief. Her training worked specifically with those looking to move past traumatic events and to find a new beautiful life for themselves.

Years of work had shown her that although people often said they wanted to move on, they would hold fast to their neurotic tendencies. At some point she felt like a parent trying to take a toy from child, or to get those children to change their ragged clothes to something new. Looking at case files and reading textbooks for years upon years had done little to give her the fortitude she needed to stick with patients like she did.

It all seemed so easy, very cut and dry when she read the books. If Patient 1 has Problem B, then give Patient 1 Solution B. It only took her a year of practicing to realise this wasn't the case. If she could go back and re-write those textbooks, she'd probably say something like this, "If Patient 1 has Problem B, and Patient 1 also loves Problem B, then expect to spend various years talking about Solution B, even though the patient secretly loves living life with problem B.

There was a term somewhere in one of those textbooks laying in her shelves but she couldn't be bothered at this point. Therapy became an autopilot of listening to the same story for years while giving the same advice, just in different ways. She'd talked about wallpaper more times than she'd ever imagined she would at this point in her career.

"Let me do the wallpaper for you," she said.

She wanted to help them. She really did. It seemed her profession got in the way of that. For one hour each week they'd come and talk with her and then spend the other one-hundred and sixty-seven hours sleeping with their neuroses.

At first they started out with normal forms of grief. Anger, denial, acceptance, and the like. Then something derailed their progress and it was as if they'd leaped back into denial all over again.

This story came up about their Son speaking to them at night, first in dreams, and then in form. Mrs. Bell talked about it all the time and Mr. Bell had similar occurrences at the beginning, then slowly he didn't speak about it either way.

He complained about the pain in his neck saying that he couldn't work or exercise like he used to. Carol and him grew distant from each other in slow gradual steps.

Dr. Horn had seen it all happen right before her own eyes. Mr. Bell got fatter and Carol talked more about her ghost of a son.

* * *

James wrestled with covers in the small bed. "He's gained even more weight," he said. "The poor guy needs some help. He all but told me that tonight. After we downed a bit of scotch he hinted around about moving up north. More than once at that."

Anne lay in the guest bed beside her husband and propped her pillow up under her neck. “I picked up on his comments during dinner as well.”

James made a hissing sound. “See? I told you it was her. Did she say anything to you tonight?”

“No. She didn’t want to talk about anything related to it.”

“Maybe you should try and talk with her a bit more then. Just drop some hints.”

“She doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Anne. “I know my daughter. When she puts up her walls, she’s not gonna listen to anyone. You’ll only push her further away if you try and ask.”

James repositioned in the bed. “I’m not trying to push her. I’m only saying what I think is best. I just think if she can get away from this place for more than a week, she’d be able to clear her head. We don’t even have to push them to move up there all at once.”

Anne closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. “She won’t even leave for a vacation James.”

James cleared his throat. “What if we offer them a place right outside the city?” he said. “Tell them to use the other place as a weekend home?”

She shook her head. “She won’t use it.”

James clenched his fist and growled.

“It’s true,” she said. “And you know it.”

He turned away from her and lay his face on the pillow. “I’m about kidnap this girl,” he grumbled.

“I’m turning off the lights,” said Anne.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said.

The lights shut off. The room flooded with dark. Soon a blue glow reached into the windows and spread across their bed. James turned in the bed. He faced his wife and listened to the television humming downstairs.

After some time he heard murmurs coming from down the hall.

“They’ve left the TV on,” he said.

“Huh?”

“I think they left the TV on,” he said. “I can hear them talking in the other room.”

“Then go turn it off.”

He let out deep moan and got out of bed. He went to the door. When he stepped out into the hall he heard two distinct voices coming from Sam's old room. James waited a minute in the dark hall. He thought he recognised them.

* * *

Sam scrunched his face and pinched his eyes. "Log cake was my favourite," he said. "I wish I could have tried it tonight. I can't taste anything like that anymore though."

Carol sat on his bed and pat the covers with her hand. "Sorry dear," she said. "If I could make a cake for you, you know I would."

"I know," He said.

She drew in a deep breath and felt her throat getting cold. Carol touched her neck and then pulled her coat around her chest even more. "This room doesn't keep warm," she said.

Sam looked down at his hands. "Is it me?" he said. "Do I make you feel that way?"

"No, it's not you," she said. "This room has always been that way."

Sam sat in his bed and sank into the covers.

Carol watched him with a sense of unease and comfort. The symbol of her child lay before her. There in his bed. Of course it's him, she thought. Of course it's him.

"Mom?"

She sat up. "Yes?"

Sam looked her in the eye. "Mom, what happens after this?"

She leant towards him. "After Christmas?" she asked.

Sam paused to glance at his hands. "No," he said. "After this." He held up his white hand. "What happens next?"

She swallowed hard and squirmed on the edge of his bed. I don't know any better than you, she thought. Isn't that the great question? What can a fleshy woman like me tell a boy like you? Shouldn't you know? Haven't you already made the slip?

He set his cold hand upon hers. "Mom?" he said.

She jerked with a cold shiver. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know Sam. Maybe this is the last step? Maybe you've finished it."

Sam took his hand off of hers.

She slid her hand back and held it with her other. It started to warm.

Sam pushed the blankets back and sat up further in his bed. "Mom?" he said.

She looked up from her hand. "Yes?"

He glanced at her hands. "Mom, if this is it, then what happens when you pass as well?"

She left her mouth open. She held her hand. "I-I don't know," she whispered. "I'm not sure. . ."

Sam bowed his head a bit.

She grimaced.

The room kept quiet for a time.

She swallowed her breath. "I might be able to join you," she whispered.

Sam lifted his head a little. "And Dad?"

Her eyes narrowed with confusion. Her brows went slant on her face. "I'm sure he could join us too."

The young child smiled to himself. "I'd like that," he said.

She felt a tiny spider crawling down her spine, its icy legs piercing hairs upon her back. "Do you remember anything?" she asked. "Do you remember anything about the car - after the play?"

The boy folded his hand together. "I remember being on stage," he said. "I remember the audience laughing and I remember everyone clapping as I bowed. Then we went to the car and drove. There was a man who helped you and dad up onto stretchers. Then I saw myself on the ground. I felt as if my feet were glued to my old body laying down there."

She thought of his tie laying in tatters on the ground.

"There was a hospital and you called for me," he said. "I went back into my body but a bright white pain forced me out again. Then I thought of home. I thought of the wallpaper in my room."

Sam started pointing to the masks. Carol gazed around the room.

He touched the bed with his hands. "I thought of my bed instead of the hospital's mattress."

She chewed on her lower lip.

"And then I was alone," he said. "I couldn't find anyone. I searched the house for someone but it was just me in this lonely home. I was scared. Storms came and bashed on the roof and lighting sparked through the windows. I could hear voices but they weren't yours. They told me things, secret things, that I couldn't know."

Carol's lip started to bleed.

"I waited for you both," he said. "But you didn't come home."

Carol put her hand over her chest. Her eyes filled with horror as she listened to her son's account. Her lip pained her. It hurt with a sharp pinch.

"But you're here now," he said. "I only wish dad wasn't so far all the time. He doesn't love me anymore. I know he doesn't. I saw it in his eyes."

Carol didn't say anything. The room had frozen down her throat. Her chest felt constricted and her eyes were burning in their sockets. "I'm sorry - " she tried to say.

The door opened and her father inched into the room. "Carol?" he said. "Who are you. . ." He stopped and looked at the child's bed.

"That was the look Mom," he said. "That's the look that Dad gave me."

* * *

James sat downstairs with the bottle of scotch in his hands. He took a sip and passed it towards Shane.

Shane shook his head and kept his eyes on the television. "You go ahead," he said.

James took another warm sip. It burned down his throat and into his chest. "You have to get out of this place," he whispered. "It's not right up there."

Shane flipped the channel without comment. James glanced up at the ceiling. He hissed had another swig of the bottle. Shane eyed him for a second then continued with the television. The blue glow smeared across their faces, leaving dark shadows underneath their eyes, and etches of where their wrinkles lay.

James lowered the bottle to his side. "How can you live this way?" he said. "Doesn't it get to you?"

Shane cleared his throat with a dry laugh.

"I don't understand," he said. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Shane snorted. "Say what? Our therapist already thinks we're a couple of schizos."

James curled his upper lip into his teeth. He started to tap his finger on the armrest. "I've heard of this before," he whispered. "About demons taking form. She's being tricked. That's not my grandson."

Shane lowered his head and looked out the top of his eyes. "You tell her that," he said. "Go on."

James wiped his face a few times. "We have to leave," he said.

"That's up to you then."

James sat up in the couch. "No," he said. "I mean all of us." He laughed. "I mean everyone. Tonight."

Anne walked into the room with her eyes glazed over and her purse half-open and dangling loose at her shoulder. "James - I think I'd like to go home now," she said.

He stood up and walked her to the couch. "I know dear we're figuring that out," he said. "We all need to get out of here. Especially Carol."

"Can we go now?" she asked.

"Not without Carol," he said. "She's not thinking straight. She doesn't know what she's gotten herself into."

Shane shifted in his seat. He licked his lips and stared at the TV. "What if it's really him up there?" He swallowed his breath and looked at them both. "I don't like it. I never have. But it's the nagging question. . . "

James shook his head. "You don't believe that do you? You don't honestly believe that's your son up there? Shane?"

Shane sat back in his seat and looked away.

"Your child wouldn't do that," he said. "This is something else. Something we shouldn't be messing with."

Anne's eyes began to tear up with fear. "I don't feel well," she said. "This doesn't feel right. I knew it when I stepped into this house something was wrong."

James pat her on her knee. "It doesn't matter," he said. "All right? We're going to do something about this. Okay. Here's what we'll do. We get her downstairs away from that room. Then find a way to get her out to the car and lock her in and drive until we run out fuel."

Shane looked up through his swollen face with a glint in his eyes. He looked as if he'd understood something in that moment. A hope that he might escape. "We kidnap her?"

James glanced over at Anne who put her head down and nodded her head. He then licked his lips. "It's for her own good," said James.

The TV started to flicker.

Shane hit the remote and it came back to the station.

“What’ll we do with her after we’ve gotten to your place?”

James scratched his chin and stared at his wife for more advice but she seemed even more lost than him.

“We we’ll keep her in the house until she acclimates and. . .“

The TV flickered again.

“Piece of shit,” said Shane as he slammed the remote again. The TV came back to the station. “You were saying?”

James rubbed his temples and then his eyes. Large swelling bags grew under him as he tried to think through this mess.

“We could take her to the lake?” said Anne.

James clapped his hands together. “Great! Yes. We’ll go to the lake. No one’ll be there at this time of year. We can have the whole place to ourselves. We can stock up with food and supplies and keep her in the house until she calms down. That’s a great idea.”

The TV flickered.

Shane smacked the remote without any stations returning this time. He then threw the remote at the TV and hit it square on its face. The hit with a clunk then fell to the ground.

Shane growled and climbed out of the couch with all his might and ran to the TV to hit it a few times. Then it went blank and something shined in its reflection.

The door lay open behind him and his son stood inside its frame. The TV started to blink again, going from channel to channel. It coursed to static then to station then back to static again.

“What are you going to do with Mommy?” the boy whispered.

Shane backed up against the erratic television and faced his son.

“We’re taking her on vacation,” he said.

The boy slowly shook his head. “No. You’re not.”

Nobody moved in the room. They all watched the child. Their eyes wide and their hearts cold.

The little boy gazed around the room and the lights went from dim to dark. The TV cut off and only the blue ghost lit the living area. “I’m scared of the dark,” it said. “But then - aren’t we all? You wouldn’t like being left behind in this home. Would you?”

James and Anne backed away from the door to where Shane stood.

The boy watched them with keen eyes. “We could all be a family,” he said. “Every one of us.” He took one step into the room. The temperature decreased. The window edges began to glaze with an icy residue. “You left me once, Father. You didn’t do your job.”

Shane felt tears boiling out of his face. They ran down his swollen scars and into the corners of his lips. “I - I - I TRIED,” he shouted. “I DIDN’T KNOW! THERE WAS TOO MUCH FOG THAT NIGHT! IT WASN’T MY FAULT! DON’T YOU KNOW I TRIED?”

Shane fell to the ground weeping between his knees. The TV flickered back on, jumping from static to stations. People’s voices could be heard through the stations, announcers and sitcoms, and other hallows beckoned from the static burns. Wispy voices that spoke deep within their chests crawling through the television set.

“... in the news today ...”

Another wheezing breath.

“... don’t need to put ...”

The wheezing spewed again.

“... take your standard ...”

Static with its tracking winds.

“STOP! STOP! STOP!”

Shane lay on the floor covering his ears in between his hands. He couldn’t take the static words anymore. He rocked back and forth trying to keep the sounds out. He wanted it to end. He wanted it over for once and all. “STOP IT! STOP IT NOW!”

Then the lights dimmed and the door shut. The TV resumed its normal speech.

“... Now you’ll need to take your two-by-two and place it. . .”

Anne ran over to Shane weeping on the ground. “Come on dear. Come here,” she said patting him on the back. “It’s okay. Come on. You’ll be all right.”

James stood frozen as he watched his wife comforting the grown man on the floor. “Where is Carol?” he whispered, but no one heard him. “Where’s Carol? We need to find her.” Still no one heard.

VI

Shane watched the little phantoms leaving his mouth. The moonlight caught the small spectre leaving his breath and illuminated their form. He stood outside his garage, watching and waiting for a car. There were two headlights creeping down the road, coming towards him.

The car turned off its beams and switched to the orange parking lights underneath as it crawled up to his driveway. Shane turned to the house and then back to the car. He moved away from the garage and looked up into the window. There was no movement. Nothing.

The car stopped in front of him and James went to it. “Did you find any more gas cans?” he whispered to Shane in the cold.

“No, that was the last of it,” said Shane rubbing his hands together.

“Okay. Well then that’s it. I think we can make it up there with all of this. The car’s full and if we need to refuel we’ll pull over and use the spare gas cans along the way.” James rubbed the back of head as he looked down at his car. “Right so -“

Shane clenched his teeth. “Mmm,” he said.

“We have to do it,” said James.

“Is Anne staying in the car then?”

“She won’t leave it.”

Shane nodded his head and looked to his house again. He touched the garage door and pulled it open. It sounded like a roller coaster backing up into his house.

“Let’s try talking with her first,” said James. “Bring her to the living room.” He grabbed Shane by the arm. “Actually. . . if we can get her out here instead?”

Shane looked down at James’ hand. “It’s for the best.”

James let go of him and nodded. “Right,” he said.

Shane sighed. Then stepped into the garage. A few rats scampered within the piles of junk and tiny spiderwebs glistened in the faint moon light. The two men walked into the cluttered garage careful of where they stepped.

A loud bang hit the floor and caused them to freeze. James had knocked over a metal bin. He picked it up and brushed his trousers a few times. Shane grimaced at him. James whispered an apology and set the bin aside.

The house ran quiet. The rats had stopped their murmurs. Shane swallowed his breath and stepped up onto the old stairs. They creaked with a loud groan with every step he made.

When he reached the side door he clicked it open and reached for the light switch along the wall.

It shot on above him with a dull flicker. The lights whipped in and out and kept snapping with a repetition that allowed neither of them any true light to see within.

Shane moved inside the kitchen. They sounded like that of dead flies smashing up against a glass window. Shane moved cautiously under them and slid over to the sink. He saw the picture frame his wife had cracked sitting on top of it with fresh blood running down its lines.

The sink turned on. The tap began to spurt a few dark bursts of liquid then poured a red sludge into the basin. Shane backed away from the sink and threw his hand up near his chest.

James grabbed him by the shoulder. "He knows we're here."

Shane nodded his head. The TV turned on in the dark living room, flashing back through static and stations again. The light above them continued in strobes and the tap continued to pour its stream.

". . . Rid yourself of nasty pests. . ." The static voices howled indecipherable words. ". . . Take two pills for that ease. . ." Static voiced from the void shrilled. ". . . Then I asked her Molly. . ." Static voices wailed in a haunting course.

Shane passed by the kitchen counter where the cooking knives lay strung across floor.

"Upstairs?" James asked.

Shane nodded his head. The men pushed in through the door, leading them to the front area. Shane moved along the walls and caught the little frays of wallpaper in his fingers. He reached the stairwell and saw the wallpaper peeling off before his eyes. The paper slowly ripped itself off from the walls, shredding and floating back and forth to the ground.

The light blinked above him in the same manner as it did in the kitchen. Small shreds of wallpaper fell onto the stairs as more and more pieces joined them. Shane looked up the passage with his light and then back at James.

"Carol?" he said up the stairs.

No response.

"Honey?"

Silence.

Shane touched the first step with his foot. It let out a loud moan. The next step creaked the same. James climbed behind him unable to avoid the stairs sounds.

The paper rained from the walls upon them and the light strobed its tapping for them. When Shane reached the top of the stairs he looked down to the end of the hall. The door stood open with a crack and a blue glow emanated from within.

Shane heard murmurs creeping down the hall. A young boy and a mother speaking. He stepped onto the carpet in the hallway and lost his balance. James caught him and pulled him back. The carpet moved beneath them. Large black masses scurried across the floor.

Shane backed up a step. He caught sight of a giant rat's glass eyes staring up at him. The lights flickered behind him. He saw even more looking at him. The black masses quit moving along the floor.

The lights flickered. More eyes shone. Shane felt something heavy on his pant legs. Sharp pins began to climb up his leg. Shane threw his foot out and reached down to smack the large rat clinging to his trousers.

The rat shot across the hall and against the wall with a dull thud. The eyes grew closer. They sank their fangs into his shoes and nipped at the back of his ankles. He kicked the rodents and stomped upon their bodies with crunching sounds and faint yelps.

James pushed him on down the hall. "Get into the room!" he said. "Can't you hear what they're saying?"

Shane kept kicking at the rats and moving towards the door listening to the child speaking.

". . . do it mom," it said. "Go ahead. You won't feel it. Then we can be together forever. You won't leave me again. Not like you did."

Shane threw his shoulder into the door and lumbered in. He saw his wife holding a large kitchen knife up to the side of her neck. "CAROL!"

She turned to him with lifeless eyes. His son stood behind her peering at them with half of his face hidden.

James broke into the room and shut the door behind. The rats clawed at the door and screeched outside.

"Don't listen to them," said the boy. "You focus on me and what I say."

James threw his back on the door and looked at his daughter. "Carol?" he shouted. "What the hell are you doing? Put the knife down please!"

She turned to her son glowing behind her. She looked back at the two men standing in the room with her. "I left him behind," she said. "I can't leave him again. Not my baby." Tears ran down her face. "This is the only way. He needs me. HE NEEDS ME!"

Shane moved towards her. Carol put the knife up against her jugular and cocked her neck to the side.

Shane waved his palm in the air. "WOAH! WOAH! WHAT ARE DOING?"

The boy put his finger into Carol's other hand. He glared at Shane from behind her. "You didn't love me," he said. "I saw your eyes that day you stepped in here. And I knew your exact thoughts."

Shane shook his face and trembled at he spoke. "You're not my son," he said. "My son has died! You're some - visitor - no longer welcomed here!"

The little boy started to cry. He stayed behind his mother and then hid his face from them. Then he slowly moved away from his mother and tossed himself upon his bed. He buried his face in his pillows and cried the same as a real child would.

Carol snapped at him. "What are you saying Shane? HE'S JUST A BOY! DON'T YOU COME IN HERE YELLING AT HIM! HOW DARE YOU SAY HE'S NOT YOUR SON! YOU HATEFUL MAN! I HOPE YOU ROT YOU SICK PIECE OF SHIT!"

Shane felt his eyes grow soft.

Carol jabbed the knife up at her neck again. "It's time for a fresh start," she said with tears in her eyes. "Time to be there for my son. Not leaving him on the asphalt like you did!"

The sounds of the child's cries bounced off the walls and amplified and pulsed through each of their chests. "You don't love me?" screamed the child. "Why don't you love me? I can do the play! I can do all the same things! I'm still the same!"

The room started to shake and the lights flickered with a rapid stream. The theatre masks upon the walls began to burn with red eyes as they laughed and cried with an unnatural pitch. The horrid laughs shrilled and the tragic cries wailed in death.

Shane covered his ears as James did the same. Carol then dropped the knife and fell to the floor down upon her knees. Sordid voices rang through the house, screaming and cursing with shrieking laughter and screeching cries.

"STOP! STOP IT! I SAID STOP IT AT ONCE! YOU LISTEN TO ME!" Shane tried to yell but he couldn't reach his voice over the cries and laughter. The masks blazed with red eyes that filled the room. James ran to his daughter cowering on the ground and drew her towards the door.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?" yelled Shane. "WILL YOU TELL ME SON? CAN WE REALLY KEEP ON LIKE THIS FOREVER?"

The laughs grew louder and louder and the cries grew stronger and stronger. James slipped out of the door with his daughter and Shane started to follow.

Red eyed rats nipped at them as they ran down the hall and jumped upon the stairs. Each step started to break apart. James reached the slapped into the front door and tried to pry it open. The flickering lights within the house burst into tiny shards that rained onto the floors.

James struggled to open the front door as it kept shut. Shane ran behind and kicked at it until it cracked off its hinges. They all rushed outside into December's coldest night and fell across the lawn and dragged their bodies to the car parked up at the kerb.

Each one of them turned back at one point and looked up at the red glowing room and listened to the shrieks coming from it. Some lights were igniting around the neighbourhood as the house grew red.

James jumped into the driver's seat, and Shane slid into the back with his wife. The house shook before them and the room shone red. The car whipped into reverse and screeched its tires and it hit the road with smoke. James clicked the vehicle into drive and shot them out from the house and around the bend.

No one spoke in the car.

James peeled out of the neighbourhood with another cloud of smoke.

Silence tapped inside the car.

The engine snarled under the pressure and shook up to a dangerous speed. Thunderclouds gathered above their heads and sparks of lighting sounded within. Tiny patters of rain dropped onto the windshield and gradually larger beads mixed in with giant slaps.

James eased his foot off the pedal. The engine sighed.

Carol's bit her nails in the back. Her eyes were red. Her head kept swaying back and forth. "My baby," she murmured. "Left my baby. My baby. Left my baby. My baby. Left my baby. I'm sorry baby. He killed my baby. They killed my baby. I left my baby. I loved my baby. They left my baby. I love my baby. . ."

Shane couldn't feel his neck from the stifling pain. He tried to breath in the artificial warmth of the car's air, but his chest wouldn't contract.

Anne turned to Carol from the front seat and tried to hold her daughters hand. She hopped over the opening and into the back holding her daughters sobbing face.

"Shhhh - Shhhh - it's okay dear," she said. "It's okay. We're here. It's over dear. It's okay. You're a good mother. You did what you had to. You did the best you could. You're okay dear. We're here for you."

The car sped onto the freeway. The other cars drove alongside them on their way to anywhere or nowhere, without the understanding of what'd just happened. No one around them knew. They didn't know why four adults cried in the car beside them. They didn't know

what those tears meant. They didn't know. They were leaving their movies or rolling home from a late night's work.

What difference did it make to them? All the cars were piling up for the next green light. It felt so surreal driving amongst them. The contrast of horrid traumas sat in the average car, on the average highway, but no one else knew, only them.

James turned onto the ramp heading North. "Where are we going?" whimpered Carol.

"To the lake," he said.

VII

Carol stood outside her garden picking out some tangled weeds. They never seemed to die. If it wasn't weeds choking her plant's life away then it was hidden moles digging to her precious veggies.

She liked working in the garden. She liked working with her hands. It gave her mind a rest for once. Pulling weeds took so little brain power that she could cruise on autopilot while soaking in some sun.

She brushed her gloves on her dirt covered jeans. This pair never stayed clean. Shane passed by her on a riding mower. He gave her a slight wave and continued on his with his duty.

She half-smiled and then decided to go into the house. She went into the laundry room straight away, patted down her pants, and threw them in the laundry basket. Carol then stood and turned to look in the mirror beside her. She saw a few specks of dirt on her face.

"Don't leave me mom. Don't leave me again."

She wiped the dirt from her forehead.

"I was so scared in the house - all alone. I didn't like the lighting. I didn't like the rain."

She wiped more dirt from her face with a growl.

"Why did you leave me? Promise me you won't ever leave me again? Okay mom?"

She took a wet towel from the sink and dabbed it on her cheeks. After she wiped her face clean she set it back down and looked over her shoulder and then into the mirror.

"I still think about you," she whispered. "I wonder if you're okay. Mommy loves you. I didn't mean to leave you again. I didn't mean to. . ." her eyes began to tear as she looked in the mirror.

She shook her head. "No."

Carol turned from the mirror and went into the next room. She stood with her palms on the kitchen counter. She took some water from the tap and cupped it in her hands. She had a sip and then splashed her face a bit.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. We're okay. Everything is okay."

She left the kitchen to go to freshen up. Carol walked up the stairs into the bathroom as she turned on the shower. Wisps of steam drew together as the warm water hit the tub.

She batted her hand through them pushing them away.

“Mom? Won’t you come back for me? Please? I’m all alone. How can you leave me there on my own?”

Carol shook her head again. “No!”

“I only wanted for us to be a family again.”

“STOP IT!”

She turned off the shower and rushed down the stairs. She threw open the door and went back outside.

Carol sat on the little porch holding her palms out to the sun. She had a difficult time being inside alone. The warmth made her feel more comfortable.

Shane turned off the mower and slowly approached the porch. “Everything all right?”

Carol looked out at her garden. “Oh, yes, everything is fine. I just felt the urge to soak up some more sun. Especially while the weather’s good.”

Shane wiped the sweat off his forehead and took off one of his gloves. “So you’re not going to meet with your book club then?”

She shook her head looking out at the plot of land before them. “No. Not today. It’s too nice outside.”

Shane put his glove back on and pushed off the porch. “You can always change you mind.”

She nodded with a smile and Shane went back to the mower. He cranked it back on and continued his task.

Carol liked it. The loud static made it hard to hear. It made it tough for her mind to wander too far back.

- End -