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In the House

Anger and anxiety arrived exactly four weeks after their death, following the nightmares and hallucinations. I remember; it was a Monday. I was in the house after having one of the most frustrating days of my life. I was so exasperated that apparently I scared the new copy boy at the office, the one I encouraged to apply for the internship. Poor kid. I don't know what happened. All I recall is my co-workers pulling me aside and asking me to go easy on him. There are many people to whom I still need to apologize.

Anyway, I was exhausted so I went straight to bed. It was cool outside. But, with the unpredictability of the spring weather, the house was struggling to maintain the temperature I wanted. The thermostat kept reading low seventies but it felt like it was above eighty degrees. I could tell. The house was making the same effort as the previous month, when it was barely above freezing, as if assuming it was still filled with voices, with my three kids and wife. It was not the only one stuck in the past. Having lost everything, my mind was in a fog also dwelling on memories instead of the present.

Only when the house is cold inside I can sleep solidly thru the night. So, that evening, the internal heat only exacerbated the irritation that had been bubbling up in me all day. I did not have a peaceful night. I still recall my nightmare: I was awakened by the tumultuous activity in the hallway in what seemed to be too early in the morning. I could hear my kids running and tossing bags down the stairs. MaryAnn, my wife, was seated on our bed staring at me as if I had

overslept. I recognized that look. She knew how to be soothing while making me feel as if I were four years old and completely clueless.

“Honey, please look at me,” she said while touching my cheeks with her hands. “We must stop by the post office and send those payments. Please, please, let’s not forget!”

So, I got up to get a cup of coffee before showering and packing the bags in the car. Suddenly, I found myself with my whole family in the car already driving and reaching the intersection where our street meets Yates Avenue in one of the busiest areas in Clarskville. The plan was to top off the fuel tank, drop the payments in the post office and drive on. But, we never came even close. The car was unnervingly stuck in the intersection regardless of how hard I pushed on the pedal. I kept pushing, so hard in fact, that the pedal dropped to the floor. That is when I realized I had been pushing on the brakes rather than the accelerator!

I woke up to my own piercing, desperate scream while engulfed in a cold sweat. As my eyes tried to adjust to the darkness, I heard the gentle sleeping sounds of my wife. Her soft exhalations created an entrancing, pulse-like muffled drumbeat. My hand anxiously tried to find her face, or maybe her hair. You probably know of the feeling I am talking about; when you have a nightmare involving a loved one, you immediately want to confirm that it was all just your imagination. But in my case, there really was no one to touch. Naïve and unconvinced, I reached for the lamp switch to turn it on. Blinded by the sudden brightness, I forced my eyes to open. Only a cold, unused pillow met my gaze. My eyes flooded with tears I couldn't control. I felt my gut on fire. I found myself kneeling in front of her pillow, hitting it with such rage that my fists were shaking uncontrollably and I couldn't open my hands. I stared as feathers filled the room like falling snowflakes. I don't know if at that point I went back to sleep again. But, when it was

almost five thirty in the morning, I felt extremely disoriented getting up and seeing down feathers on the floor.

That afternoon, while on my way home from work, I could see the sun casting long shadows on the asphalt and the lawns as I approached. My house dwarfed everything in the street; its shadow so large, it gave the impression that a giant rain cloud was above me. MaryAnn always commented that the house's enormity scared people away from using the front door. I always dismissed it as nonsense. But now, I too could only use the side door, by the mudroom next to the garage. For several days now, I was greeted with visions and memories as soon as I entered my home. And, I kept hoping that, by using the side door, maybe the house and my mind wouldn't realize I was there. I just couldn't face the loss head on. So, on that afternoon, I entered thru the side door.

Dropping my briefcase on the rug, I untied my shoes. I rubbed my face, trying to take a deep breath while my eyes settled on the hallway. Suddenly, I realized I could hear Peter in the library playing his saxophone. Sarah and Jane ran in and out of their rooms. When they saw me, they smiled and walked back to their studies. My mind was making every attempt to deny what it saw when I turned to the right and found MaryAnn preparing supper in the kitchen. She was on the phone talking about her disappointment for missing some event. She proceeded to put lasagna in the oven, nearly dropping the phone inside. She winked at me the same way she did the night prior to the accident. And, regardless of how often I saw that vision, it always made me lose my bearings. That night, I could hear my pulse on my throat and felt increasingly nauseous.

I managed to continue cautiously down the hallway to the bedroom. I sat on the bed waiting for my mind to settle and the visions to stop before venturing back out. I pulled my cell phone out and noticed I had a voicemail message. As I looked at the number I realized it was my

older brother James. He came to stay with me during the first two weeks when I arrived home from the hospital. Like old times, he took care of me. I listened to his message.

“Carl, it’s James. I called you yesterday afternoon.... how are you doing? I guess you are still busy with that project at work” said the bass voice on the recording. “I have a few days off from work and I would like to stop by to see you again,” said James. “Please call me back. I will send you more details later today. Love you bro!”

He had been expressing concern about me being alone and promised to figure out a way to come and check on me. How could I explain to James why I was still living in this house? I knew it wasn’t healthy, and yet, my gut kept telling me that I needed to be here.

Once I regained my composure, I ventured into the foyer on my way to the kitchen. I noticed something blocking the main door. Opening the door, I saw two boxes. The label on the first one said it was “one of six,” containing pieces for building the garden beds that MaryAnn convinced me to get. She said it would help us eat healthier. She should see me now, unable to taste food. All sense of flavor is gone. I could be eating cardboard or Styrofoam at this point for all I know. What I can tell you is that I will never forget the last time I saw her eyes. Her hazel eyes met mine as light was leaving them. She was pinned between the airbag and the entire second row seat, which crushed the rest of her body. That is the last image I took with me.

I recognized the second box right away. It was the set of power tools I had bought for Peter’s birthday. We were building a canoe together and my tools were not suitable, so I figured I would surprise him with his own set after our family’s trip. We had agreed during our prior holiday in the cabin that we would venture farther upstream to fish in our next visit. Peter had bought a new fishing pole with allowance. My son liked to sit on the third row by himself, and

let his legs have extra room. With the force of the impact, a large piece of glass virtually decapitated him. His was instant.

Slowly, I made it back to the kitchen. I peeked from the doorway and saw that MaryAnn was gone. I felt like the air had been pulled out of my lungs. It was curious because I swear I had felt the same way back when we were dating and she would leave a room. Back then though there was exhilaration when I hoped for her return. Now, only hopelessness came from knowing that my soul had left with her with no chance of ever coming back.

I warmed one of those frozen ready-made meals. I opened a beer bottle as I sat heavily on my chair in the dining room. Out of thin air, I saw the girls' silhouettes materialize. I saw them take their seats and begin passing the salad and bread to their brother who appeared across the table. Incredulous, I felt like Scrooge, reliving what I had already experienced, and yet seeing it like an outsider peeking into someone else' story.

“Have you finished your homework yet?” asked MaryAnn coming out of the kitchen.

Gingerly, Sarah replied, “Almost, only one more project and we will be done.”

“You know you will be busy and won't have time to finish projects. So remember, I will not let you pack unless you complete everything,” MaryAnn warned.

“Yes mom,” said Jane, rolling her eyes.

Almost by reflex, I raised my palm in the direction of Jane. That is when I realized I was replaying what had been my original response to her. This time, although I knew what I had to say, my mouth opened but no words came out. Yet, as if on cue, she apologized to MaryAnn without even raising her head. At that moment, I wished I could have said something different than the usual reprimand about being respectful to her mom. But, somehow the way this memory presented itself, precise and intact, without manipulation and deviation, made it clear that I was

forbidden from tampering with it. I was to live that moment again and burrow regret until I could react no more.

I saw then Jane gently look at her sister, Sarah, who was the quieter one. I could see love and recognition exchanged between them. MaryAnn and I always noticed with fascination how addressing the twins was more like talking to a single person. Sarah knew the severity of Jane's stomachaches, and Jane would be the one screaming when Sarah had nightmares. They did everything together, even more so now in middle school. The report from the coroner mentioned he had difficulty separating their hands. Their hands had been interlaced at the moment of impact.

Without warning, I saw Peter glance across the table and smile at me. Now, it is one thing to know you are hallucinating and waiting for the visions to cease. But, when suddenly your son's gaze, his eyes, reach your own breaking all boundaries of time and space, you begin to wonder if your heart and lungs are exposed. You feel the opposite of a crab; your innards are out and vulnerable, and any sense of shelter is an illusion. I felt so naked then, with no armor to somehow retreat into, that I cried inconsolably. I heard my own loud sobs and tried to figure out if the loudness could make everything go away. My fists were pounding on the table as if begging the house to help me bring to an end this agonizing remembering. When I looked up again, I was alone.

I did not eat my dinner that night. How could I? I thought about staying busy, so I sat at my computer to check on emails. I saw that James had sent me an email with the day and time he was expecting to arrive here. But, I didn't get to read further because I was distracted by the sounds of the girls, and then, the start of a movie. That is what they did the night prior to the accident. So, I took the time to turn on the air conditioning before swallowing a couple of pills. The house was not going to trick me that night; I made sure of that.

Somehow the house had shifted its role from being my shelter to being my therapist instead. I know you will think it crazy, but every corner I looked in it was filled always with the possibilities of glancing at my grief through the lens of what had already passed. And, after a while, I think the house's plan of treatment became convincing. In fact, I had always considered myself a matter-of-fact, logical and objective person. But now, I began to question whether medication, staying busy, and allowing time to pass, would be enough to help me pull through this. For instance, the doctor said that, for a little while, I could take sleeping pills every night. But the pros and cons of it remained a matter of debate to me. On the one hand, the mornings flowed smoothly, without rage. But, I wouldn't hear MaryAnn next to me in bed. What they say is true. When you lose a lifelong lover, your heartbeat is agitated all night long. Without its mate to help keep tempo and rhythmic pace, it is lost and cannot regulate. The movements within your own body become incoherent. You know how lizards would allow their tails to be severed so they can escape a prey while their tail keeps wiggling and distracting it? I feel like that. MaryAnn left with everything, except me.

It was on Wednesday afternoon that it all went down.

I remember swearing loudly as the road construction crewman signaled that I needed to use the detour route. Considering what it could trigger in me, I still cannot believe how I managed to forget that I couldn't use Carver Street that day. The sign left on Monday was clear, starting midweek fiber optic cables were going to be installed underground on Carver.

But, it was too late. I had no choice. I would have to go on Yates Avenue and use the intersection instead. My car reached it quicker than I had hoped. My eyes glazed over and my heartbeat was racing. Something inside me made me stop the car completely at the traffic light.

My mind was trying to fire coping mechanisms that could make logical sense, but there is nothing logical about the way your body reconnects with the internal traces of loss and shock. In the same way that when you visualize a lemon you begin to salivate even if you are not actually tasting one at that moment, my senses recalled everything about the accident with perfection. There was the smell of burnt skin and tires, and the hearing of things muffled as if listened to while underwater. There was the brightness of sunrise on my eyes, and the taste of mouthwash turned sour in my mouth.

I closed my eyes and recalled everything at last: MaryAnn was retrieving the payments we were mailing out. My cellphone rang so I glanced at the number as we were crossing the intersection. I hadn't even considered answering, but that was irrelevant. The second when everything happened seemed to have been carefully calibrated as if predestined. The kids had their tablets and headsets on. No one in our car, or in the delivery van that was also crossing the intersection, noticed we were headed towards each other. The van was carrying new windows for a house under construction several blocks away. The collision had been deafening in a literal sense. But, I myself don't remember hearing anything at all. A severed hand landed on the dashboard. It was Peter's, I found out. I watched the flames consume the van as the driver managed to crawl out, while my mind was working overtime trying to let thoughts trail away, far away.

As my memories finished unfolding, I opened my eyes and noticed the light had turned green. My eyes did a double take of the drivers and cars that had stopped for their lights. No delivery van. My phone was silent. My foot felt its contact with the accelerator. In the midst of honking horns, uncontrollable tears rolled down my cheeks. I felt heat rise on the back of my

neck. I gripped the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turned white. Slowly I let my foot guide me. Crossing that intersection felt like an eternity in hell.

Making it across the intersection that day was significant. As I looked at my surroundings, and myself alone in the car, I noticed the space where I was seated on the driver side and ponder how it had being nothing short of a miracle that I had made it out alive from the crash while everyone else died. Could it be possible? The message seemed clear: I was meant to go on, to be fearless, to carry my memories on my back while attempting to find a smile somehow.

From the house's second floor, the view of the neighborhood is magnificent since the lot sits on the top of a hill. This means that anyone about to reach it can appreciate its grandeur from at least three blocks away. I have also been drawn many times to look at it. But, that afternoon, instead of pride, I only felt dread. This house was the only place where MaryAnn and the kids were still smiling at me. They were whole and happy there. And yes, I knew nothing was real. But now, the time was coming to make a decision. As I arrived, my hands shook again. The house was watching. It knew.

I saw my brother's car parked on the street. James was outside, leaning on it. Quietly, as if a thief, I parked my car in the garage. I suppose I thought I could fool the house into thinking I wasn't quite there. But, out came the twins. Sarah signaled me to roll down my window, which I did, moving the lever ever so slowly as chills ran down my spine.

"We are going for some ice cream, do you want some?" she asked excitedly. I nodded affirmatively so they would leave. I squeezed my eyes shut, got out and headed to the street. I remember exactly what I said to James: *I cannot do this alone. It is time. I think they want me to live, but I need to learn how.*