

Sunny Grove

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He's thinking of her as he scuffs through the fallen leaves on the path from the driveway, and he doesn't even know why. Well, that's not true, he knows why. It's her birthday. The date has taunted him from the dark corners of his mind all day, blunting his edge at work, saddening his solitary lunch hour, compounding the frustrations of traffic coming home.

He pulled the mail from the box on the way by, and he's flicking through it as he walks, but when he reaches the back of the pile, he has no idea what came. He's thinking *what a waste, what a colossal waste of soul*. She was so true, so loving, and he loved her so much.

He will not cry! he will not cry! but he can feel the tears sliding down the back of his mind, and he stabs the lock a vicious thrust, half-blind with the tears he will not cry. On the third try, he gets it in the lock, but it won't turn. He's tried to open the front door with the back-door key again. Getting it out, he turns the knob by chance, and the door opens. He must not have locked it this morning? Closing the door behind him, he smells her perfume somewhere in the drifting ghosts of memory.

First the mail and then one shoe and one shoe and his tie and his coat in a fast straight line on the floor to the patient bottle on the old buffet. Slam the first one back, and a gulp straight from the bottle doesn't count, and carry the second to the old blue chair, sag into this grasping melancholy again.

It's an odd god, this demon we call memory. Six years, and he can still feel her fingertips on his skin, but he can't feel the fear anymore. He can still map every tiny brown fleck of her eyes, but he can't see the rage in them. He can hear her love for him, still whispering in the tilted alleys of his mind, but he can't hear the haunting calls of that final horror. He sits in the house they shared so long, feeling her presence like a comfort, like a dread. If the house hadn't been so isolated, so far from everywhere. . . If he hadn't been at his mother's. . .

There are things he should be doing, but he can't even move, victim of a number on a calendar. He sits in silence, the house ticking morosely around him. What could he ever have done differently? Dr Stevens said never blame yourself, but he does, of course. The survivors always do. If I'd done *this*, not done *that*, she never would have– snapped. She never would have– but he can't say it, even now, even in his mind. He knows what she did. He doesn't have to have a word for it.

Now he's on his feet, but not to get another drink. That's not why he got up, at least, and anyway, it's still only his second, because he hasn't finished that one yet, he's just topping it off, as long as he's here by the buffet. He came over here to look at the pictures. Emily. She'd be twelve now, thirteen in less than two months. And her, of course, pictures of her, too. He turns away from the buffet, sees his good grey suit coat lying there on the floor. He's not quite sure how that happened, because he distinctly recalls hanging it up, and there's his tie beyond it, and someone's moved his shoes out from under the coat-rack, and he wobbles a little, going down on his knees to straighten them, to gather the mail together again. The top letter catches his eye.

Sunny Grove. Sunny Grove, that's– that's where she's living, isn't it? Why are *they* writing? He scans the short letter with growing fear, dulled somewhat by the drink. Fortunately, he's only had a little, and it hasn't affected him much. Actually, he hasn't had enough, and he turns back to the buffet. Escape. The killer's escaped. But as he pours the drink, the truth hits with a copper rush of terror – *she's here!* When he smelled her perfume, it wasn't memory, it was real. She's here. She's in the house with him.

He drops the letter, weights it down with the drink, well, with the empty glass. The letter carefully doesn't say *crazy, insane, psychopathic*. It skirts around the issue, full of touchy-feely words. Delusional. Transference syndrome. Compensation fantasies. It means the same thing. It means the crazy, insane, psychopathic killer who smiled so winningly on all those hours of videotape, explaining the whys and wherefores of all that slow carnage,

the murderer who finally sliced a little girl's pain-riddled body in seventeen precise pieces, the gruesome fiend who chuckled and wise-cracked at the trial, is loose.

And she's here in the house with him. He's listing badly to port now (well, no, some part of him wants to say – he's drinking bourbon), but he tacks toward the kitchen, trying to fight off the drink, trying to wake up. He'll need all his wits about him to get through this. Call the police? he thinks, taking up the biggest knife. No, look, someone's cut the phone cord. He beats slowly upwind to the stairs, sneaks up one step and one step and one step.

She's standing in the upstairs hall, brushing her long red hair, slowly, methodically, like she did so many things. Control. Precision. Be a machine. She'd always been like that.

She sees him in the mirror, spins startled and starting. "What are you *doing* here?" Her voice is loud in the dim hallway, shaking somehow, as though she's the one to be afraid. "What do you *want*?"

"Shelly. Can we talk? Can we just– sit down and talk?" He's shaking badly, but he thinks his voice sounds ok. "We don't have to do this, you know. We can– just talk."

She's backing away down the hallway, brush held at port arms like she'll shoot him with it if he comes any closer. "Eddie! Eddie, stay where you are! Don't come any closer! I'm warning you!" But she can't hurt him with a hair brush, and he has the knife, and he really needs to get to the phone before she does. His big problem is it's in the the bedroom, behind her. He feints left, thinking she'll move to block him, but she takes him by surprise, dodging to his right. He's already shifting his weight to go to that side, and he has to catch himself, stumbling awkwardly. Before he can recover, she's turning, running down the hall, and he sprints after her, throws himself on her back, drags her down.

She slams one knee on the hardwood floor pretty hard, and while she's still down, rocking a little, moaning a little, he scoops her up like a baby, like a six-year-old little girl, bursts through the door, throws her on the bed. Two steps to the bedside table, snatch up the phone, one swift smooth stroke and slice the cord, watching her eyes. Her crying eyes, like she cares all of a sudden.

"Shelly, why? That's the one thing I never did understand. Why'd you do it?" There are tears in his eyes, now, but he still won't cry.

She stares at him in disbelief. Six years. Six years he's been in that horrible place, talking every day to Dr Stevens, and he still won't admit it. She was at her mother's, in Connecticut, remember? She'd been gone! And the videos, the hours and hours of video. Did he think they'd believe his claims of innocence, after the videos?

The videos. He laughed and joked in the dry, sterile manner of a college professor, telling the same old gags in the same old places in the same old lectures. Pretty grisly course. Little Girl Skinning 101. He'd kept her awake, all through the long process, with that stuff in the glass capsules, except he had a big jar of it. The perfectly rational logic of the explanation he believed he was giving never did make it through, and she'll go to her grave wondering *why*. *Why* seventeen pieces? *Why* did he have to skin her first? *Why*? *Why*? *Why*?

Only her own long hard sessions with the various doctors and specialists have enabled her to reach this point, where she can see it as a simple horror, something done and over with, something she can't stop or take the blame for. She's sobbing now, tears and snot and slobber messing up her freshly done date face, and the thought goes through her mind that this may be the day she *does* go to her grave, and, yes, she'll take those questions with her.

She's crouching on the far side of the bed now, down between the bed and the wall, blubbering and wailing, wishing she was a more graceful crier. Wishing her last moments weren't going to be like this, disgraced and humiliated. Seeing the huge kitchen knife in his hand as he closes on her, she suddenly hopes and prays with all her heart that they will, in fact be her last moments. He could make this take a long long time.

He's still talking, still asking her all the questions she asks him over and over in that place in her mind where she can still talk to him, that place where he's still someone she could have loved so much, so deeply. He's slipping again into that pedantic psycho-prof he was in the fourteen hours of video she watched only minutes of, and she knows this won't be quick. He's even telling her now how long it will take, how she'll be atoning for all of Emily's pain.

In some instinctive attempt to dig, to scabble her way to a better place and time, she roots under the bed, her eyes on his, and her hands close unexpectedly on cold smooth steel and hard varnished walnut and she drags out the shotgun she'd forgotten was there forgotten he put there so long ago and she aims it at him and she doesn't even aim it she just points it at him and her terrified gropings find all the little fidgety bits he showed her and there's a hideous blast of fear and rage and light and someone slams something into her side under her arm and the window across the room comes apart and he falls slumping into the sudden booming silence.

It may be hours later, she's not sure. She just waits there behind the bed. She's through crying now. She cried so long, so hard, she thought she'd never stop, and now she thinks she may never start again. Emily came to her, there behind the bed, and they cried together into the long cold night. Finally Emily moved on, down a long white movement that came for her. She's been trapped here in her mother's mind for six years, and she can go now. Well, that's how it felt, anyway.

The room is very cold. The window's gone, the curtains moving in the breeze like they would come comfort her, but they can't, and they sag back again, wishing. She's almost kneeling, almost sitting, almost lying on the bed. Sometime in that long blast of noise that ended him, she wet her pants, and she's sitting there now wishing she could go and clean up, but she has to wait some more.

If Tom called to see why she didn't show up, all he heard was ringing. If he drove out here and knocked, she never heard him. Perhaps he didn't call, perhaps he didn't come, and perhaps that was part of why she's waiting.

She can hear the first sleepy comments of the waking birds, and the sun's beginning to lighten the dark room, when she knows she's waited long enough. She's still not sure what she's been waiting for.

She tiptoes past him, afraid to wake him from his dark puddle, slips down the creaky stairs in the silent house. Her phone is in her purse, on the buffet in the dining room, and as she calls 911, she picks up the letter he must have opened.

Dear Ms Grinnell;

It is our duty to inform you of the escape of your ex-husband, who has been housed in our maximum security ward since his psychotic break in 2001. We feel he has made significant progress in the intervening years, and it is our considered opinion that he poses no threat to anyone at this point.

However, he is still delusional, still showing signs of transference syndrome, and still using compensation fantasies to explain his institutionalization and your freedom. Although he poses no danger to you, it is of the utmost importance to his eventual rehabilitation that he continue his treatment here.

If he contacts you, please do everything in your power to persuade him to return to us, and please let us know immediately.

Sincerely,
Houston Stevens, MD, Chief Medical Officer,
Sunny Grove Residential Treatment Center.