

I.

The air is thick, chilled. I walk into town trying to find someone, *anyone* I know. It feels that, until I do, I won't be certain this is the right place. The town is gone. Gone! Ever hear of anything so stupid, so weird? Gone... or, maybe just empty since it is, after all, New Year's Eve.

Standing in the middle of the only intersection, I try to comprehend the emptiness that seems to have overtaken the place. Take it all in. The New Years' Eves of my youth never seemed this eerie. The buildings are all here; cars parked in neat rows on the streets; most of the Main Street businesses lit up, but, again, empty. Ronnie's not perched in the window of the old store, as usual, like every day of the year my entire life, and then some; old Mrs. Bertrand is nowhere to be found—not behind the counter of fabrics and notions, her home away from home; nor, Mac, behind the counter of the solitary gas station, reading some porn mag or comic book (he's not exactly the book club type). It feels weird but, really, it's just another night kicking the greying present year out the door and ushering in the top-hatted toddler to come.

Finally, with a feeling of anxiety overtaking me, not wanting to seek out answers to these mysteries, I walk west on Maple, away from the lights of Main, toward "destiny," but hoping for something, anything to act as a deterrent, a reason not to return to the "scene of the crime." That's what she called it: A crime.

"How can you be so heartless? How can you leave me here alone. *All alone.*

"Melodrama *oozed* from every syllable she uttered. She learned a lot from the endless hours of TCM weepies she pumped into her brain.

"This is no crime, *believe* me. This is salvation! Might even be for you, if you gave it a chance."

"Solitary confinement? How is that a blessing?! Where's the salvation in that?!"

I didn't have an answer for her. Not that she would have accepted one anyway.

I exit the memory staring down at the flat white surface beneath my feet. The roads, obviously plowed the last time it snowed (a couple of days ago, by the looks of it) are slick from the rush-minute traffic that has packed and buffed the snow to an icy sheen. *Stay to the drifts. It's a tougher walk but safer. Keep you from sliding under some yahoo's truck.* Words of wisdom from the old man. Of all the mutterings he rambled off over the years, that one has been the most useful. Hell, ten years after he's planted and I'm not only doing it, but letting him remind me to do it.

Another block. Turn right. There it is, on the left, next to the school. He lived and taught there for so many years the house felt more a part of the campus than the English building where he taught literature to the booksellers of tomorrow. He rolled out of bed on school days, spent fifteen minutes with his daily constitutional, then trudged through the back gate, another fifty or so feet to the front door of the Sourcroft Building, and on to his office. Entering, he would set his briefcase down carefully atop his

massive oak desk, plop into his desk chair while lifting his reading glasses from the desk to their perch atop his aquiline nose, pick up his trusty red pen and set to shaping the minds in his purview. He would leave his studied confines solely to teach class, hike home at noon and, later, bookend his day from office to home.

He always liked the compact nature of his life. The fact that he could go home for lunch every day was a win for him, since he grew up with a father on the road, selling insurance to a world that saw no need. Well, no need until after the war, anyway. By then, “ol’ Marty,” as he was known on the route, was packing it in. Figuratively and literally. The great mass of a figure he cut in shadow was falling away; by the end, he looked like a shaved dog. An *old* shaved dog. His body sagged, skin a mass of hanging wrinkles leaving him with a Shar-Pei-like countenance that, for all intents and purposes, could have been called “vibrant” before that. All of this happened within the span of a summer and fall. He was dead by the new year, helping his widow with future tax paperwork and nothing else. He left behind a high school-educated wife and three children below the age of twelve. My father promised himself to never end up like that, ergo, a personal world not much larger than a one of the granite pebbles that marked his daily travel.

His worldview influenced my own. I swore to get away from the small town that produced me and live a life that spanned miles, continents, rather than feet, blocks. To look at my family’s history is to believe that all of our adult lives are reactions to what

we were given in our formative years, I suppose. To be clear, it was in no way out of anger, spite, or hatred for my father that I felt the need to push myself beyond the whitewashed walls of Main Street, USA, but, rather, the need to *experience* what was beyond, where he was content to merely read about it. At the end of the day, I hate to admit, I actually miss the place. Now that I'm standing in the middle of it, though... I don't know. It feels a framework of its former self; façades hiding empty space filled with empty lives masquerading as fulfilled small-town "folks."

The emptiness of the town grows the further from the center I venture. I feel it through the new, light snowfall as I, standing before the family "homestead," look back down the street at the center of town. Minus the normal holiday bustle, the reality of its *Twilight Zone*-like emptiness saddens me, but also gives me a feeling of enormous superiority, something I haven't felt since leaving so many years ago. Did I do this to myself? To them? By leaving, living as I did, did I place more importance on myself than those I left? Is it unfounded, this feeling of supremacy? Could I have made a mistake in believing that I deserved to do this, attempt to come back, to be the bigger person... again? While I haven't ventured back here physically, I have tried over the years, when the void expands beyond comfort, to reach out, repair our shattered line of communication.

I look up toward the house, at the lone light beaming through the stained glass that dominates the front door. I gingerly ascend the unkempt front steps, reach for the

door. I turn the knob slowly, pushing, allowing the blast of warm, homey air to hit my face. The smell of holiday baking still hangs in the air, encircles me. It's mixed with another, less defined aroma. Acrid. Almost acidic. I stand, taking it in, wondering at the reality of it, as I slowly close the door behind me, turn the deadbolt without looking as I pitch my duffle toward the bottom of the stairs.

"Mother?" the ensuing silence is punctuated by the grandfather clock in the hallway, its ticking filling the noiseless main floor. No answer.

I peek around the corner into the living room—dark, empty, but still warm from the glowing embers in the fireplace. No tell-tale signs of previous life—no empty drinks glasses left by friends who stopped by before heading out to a party; no book left open, upside down, the arm of her favorite chair, her 'reading chair', showcasing its bookmarking qualities; no olfactory gut punch of geriatric malodorousness.

"Maybe she's asleep already." I mumble with no idea who I'm talking to. The words seem to fall out easily, simply, arbitrarily; letters littering the carpet around my feet. I kick them aside.

I turn on the light as I mount the stairs, calling, nearly breathlessly, into the darkness of the second floor. "Hello? You here?" The scent of baking diminishes with each riser overtaken, a wall of aromas common to the widowed keep them at bay. One more step; one more step. Slowing as I rise, the homeyness is all but broken as I reach the top. Her door is closed to the landing. This is only an anomaly now as it was always

closed while he was alive, never after. It gives me pause to think of what might be happening—might have *happened*—behind that door, as I really know nothing of my mother's life over the past decade. We were never close before his death, but in his absence, the chasm has grown exponentially each year. I have spoken to her very little during these years. The decade of my near-solitude was self-imposed; I own that. It was not, however, without cause.

She's been... difficult... my whole life. (I think that's a sufficiently diplomatic way to say she's a narcissistic bitch.) She has never supported my choices, hopes, or dreams, nor did she offer alternatives, viable or otherwise. She is a sad, jealous, self-centered, small person who believes I should not be allowed anything she's been denied. The examples are numerous, all equally and sufficiently juvenile and hurtful, demeaning. But it was the callousness she showed in diminishing my grief with, "What do you know? He was just your father. *I lost my husband!*" that finally brought the edge into view. I jumped. I cut her out with a swift, clean slash of the phone cable.

It worked well enough that I just wouldn't answer on the rare occasions she called me. Every six months or so, though, I'd feel guilty and try to repair the relationship. I was, every time, rewarded with a rock solid kick to my nethers causing me, each time, to extend the communication blackout an extra month or two (or until I regained some sensation below my equator, whichever was longer). Each time, without

fail, I regretted the call, the attempt at reconciliation, a teary-eyed reunion. I have come to realize the absolute impossibility but still felt the need to be standing here.

All I can do now is wonder why I'm here at all. The quiet of the house only amplifies the questions and doubts, multiplies them beyond conceivable limits. I stand, look at the door, still closed, holding at bay any sounds or visions behind it, creating a chamber for which I cannot muster any investigative interest. Frozen, arguing with myself at the top of the stairs, I stare at the wall, then look down past the edge of the single bulb's oblong border of light, my gaze landing on the vertical rectangle of glass in the front door, the darkness beyond, the freedom it offers with silent winter screams.

The debate lasts a few seconds only, after which I descend through the light, returning to the darkness of the entry hall. The debate has again given rise to inaction as I stand at the foot of the stairs, my foot resting against my bag, my finger on the light switch, my eyes sliding down the hall to the kitchen where, in the dull light from the stove's hood, I see the remnants of her earlier activities. Stepping over the bag that's not just prepared for action but begging my exit, I head toward the back end of the hall. As I move away from the wall, my finger slides down the wall flipping the stairs' light switch to the off position.

Standing in the middle of the room I see the baking sheets, pans, cooling racks, and other accoutrement littering the counters, sinks, floor (an anomaly in her kitchen). I grab the ever-present towel hanging halved over the stove-door handle and flip it on to

my left shoulder, where she taught me it belongs when returning the kitchen to its pre-use splendor. Her voice, strange to me of late, fills my head, dredging up all too well-remembered emotions. These are only eclipsed by the fact that, though I cook at home very little now, I have not forgotten each step of her outline of the proper procedure to complete this, one of my many chores, satisfactorily. Though she stated many times that cleaning up after was a most important part of baking, it was a part she had absolutely no problem outsourcing to me. After all, why should she stoop to such menial tasks that only served to stunt the time she had to collect accolades for her successful completion of one of the two things she does well.

Piling all of the pans, dishes, utensils in and about the sink currently filling with hot soapy water, the room is taking shape quicker than I'd imagined. It's always this way, the seeming ease of cleaning signified by the clearing up of large items, tools of the trade; all of a sudden, there's no way to continue with the most recent activity and, after cleaning, we certainly wouldn't want to bake again anytime soon. This being the holidays, though, she no doubt went through this rhythmic pattern—creation, completion, apportion, renewal—many times over the previous weeks.

My activities force the sterile scent of godliness to overtake the aroma of human comfort. I feel it slowly retreat, my hands warm in the soapy water; the utensils, pans, plates, entering caked, returning gleaming, catching the light as they dry, the water evaporating as it gently slides from the surfaces onto the pad below. Placing the final

dish in the drying rack becomes a symbolic gesture of which brings about the end of the season; the end of many seasons which have, for eons (her favorite way of stating the passage of time), played out the same way, under the same calendric pace, punctuated by the overwrought 'ooos' and 'aahs' of those who have, for the aforementioned eons, been recipients of her beneficence. No doubt, she sees it that way, that she is performing some sort of pastry charity which not only reminds others of the time of year, but also sparks the need within them to take the steps to redeem their souls at this 'most holy time of the year.'

See, this is what happens when I spend any time beyond the retrieval and packing of my past. There could be, in fact it's my true wish there is, something within her that sees it all as the mere sharing of her talents with those around her in the hope that her love of the world in that time of the year will warm others' hearts and souls. However, my experience with her, *especially* at this time of year, makes it impossible for me to see it as anything but her desire, her *need*, for praise of any kind. She never did anything that might leave her lacking the accolades she knew she so richly deserved. Her 'Christian heart' was always on display for those to acknowledge, to praise her magnanimity, her magnificence. Lost in this thought, I stare out the window at the dense black of the new year's commencement.

II.

I have no clue how much time passed while in my reverie, but the water had grown cold, the suds a gossamer layer upon it, the dishes nearly dry in the rack. I turn to look at the clock and realize, for the first time, that it is not in its accustomed place over the door leading to the dining room. A sudden panic fills me as that clock—a gift from my mother’s parents with my birthdate and the words ‘There’s nothing so precious as the passage of time’—had been there since I was born. They had hung it as they prepared the house prior to our return from the hospital. She told me many times as a child how she would sit and look at it, lit by the moon, as she fed me late at night, in the kitchen, so as not to disturb my father. The last time she told me that was some time around the fourth grade, around the time she stopped spending time with me, withdrew her affection, began to openly despise me—outside the view of others.

Having to hear from others just how special, how wonderful it must be to have such a kind, helpful, loving mother made my private interactions with her all the more crushing. I was taught at a very early age that to share outside what occurs within the walls of our home was tantamount to a betrayal of the family. (To be clear, there was nothing sexually inappropriate happening, however, I did endure more than my fair

share of mental, emotional, and good old parentally-inflicted physical abuse, all at her hand.) It made growing all the more difficult; it initiated, fostered the hate in me that makes it impossible for me to care exactly is happening, or *has* happened, in the master bedroom above me.

I close my eyes, breathe out slowly as I instinctively reach for the plug and listen to the water make its way down the drain, awaiting the slight gurgle which signals its completion. I open my eyes and clean the sink with the minimal remaining soap residue, rinse it down as well, return the towel from over my shoulder folding it in half over the over door handle. One last look about the kitchen to ensure all is in its rightful place; the remnants of the pumpkin loaves, magic bars, snickerdoodles, et al, have been successfully relegated to the memories of holidays past.

Flip off the light as I exit walking lightly through the dining room to the living room arriving, again, at my bag keeping watch at the foot of the stairs. I vacillate with regard to what lies atop the stairs, behind the abnormally closed door, and my need or lack thereof (whatever the case) to know what lies ahead.

The debate doesn't last long as I meander about the living room reliving memories pictorially represented over the bookshelves, piano, mantel, tables. Too many

to remember completely or, for some, clearly, but the memories that bring warmth are fully formed and, I realize, lacking her. What more do I need?

I take a photo from the piano, the one in the gilt frame; it's the last of me and my father, from one the last times we were together. It was nine months or so before he died and we were singing together at my grandmother's (his mother) funeral. We didn't perform together often, even more rarely in the later years as I spent less and less time visiting my past, but the times we did were experiences that I cherish; this was no exception.

Back to my bag, I quickly unzip it and slide the framed picture in zipping closed just as quickly. One last look up the stairs into the silent darkness reinforces my decision. I turn the thermostat down a bit, pick up my bag, and cross to the door. My movement is fluid as I have no compunction regarding my decision, unlock, walk through to the icy early morning. Out of habit I reach back in and turn on the porch light, then lock the door again, even the deadbolt.