

Phil's House
3,846 Words

Rocky snuck into Phil and Ma's bedroom, rubbed his palm against the cherrywood dresser, the one housing the .300 Winchester. He kissed the wood and walked out. Sam replaced half a bottle of Ketel One with cold water from the kitchen sink, mind that—better take what's left. Whose going to miss it? He poured from a pint of orange Fanta into three crystal glasses found in Phil's off-limits kitchenware cabinet, adding a dangerous amount of Ketel into each. Jack took three cushions off the sofa and placed them on the dining room floor. The boys called the drink a Russian Sunset. They lifted Phil's walnut dining table. Shoved it into the corner of the room. They drank their spiked Fanta, looking up at Phil's chandelier, sitting on Phil's leather cushions, in what used to be their Ma's house.

“Let's do away with all these pictures,” Sam said.

“What about the ones with Mom in them?” Jack said.

“We can cut Mom out. Keep her in a book, and burn the rest.”

“Still a ways away until the sun goes down,” Rocky said.

“Drink up.”

Rocky sipped his cup. “I think I'm drunk,” he said.

“You're not drunk,” Sam said. Rocky poured more vodka into his drank as if this was approval. “Did you take your pills this morning? Doesn't matter, you should be fine.” Sam took another swig and said, “We need to hitchhike to New Orleans. Ride in the back of old mens' pick-ups or mothers' mini-vans.”

“I won’t miss the snow coming, anyway, I threw those pills out. No way you can drag me from this snow,” Rocky said. He finished his cup and the older brothers weren’t far behind.

“We’ll have to go somewhere,” Sam said.

“Not leaving this snow,” Rocky repeated.

Jack poured another round. He said, “We could become Celtic fans and hop over to Aunt Casey’s in Mass.”

“Rocky, you really toss your pills?”

“Ma would get up and die all over again if she saw us cheering green. Those pills make my head feel like rock candy,” Rocky said.

They sipped their drinks. Jack hiccuped. Sam said, “Let’s do away with these pictures.”

They looked out the dining room window, into the driveway, and saw it had started to snow.

The boys had worked up a sweat, smashing and tearing and burning up photos of Phil in the fireplace: Phil and a group of men holding up a twelve-foot marlin, Phil and their mother on an African safari, Phil pointing an imaginary rifle at a disinterested lion. Sam and Jack had taken off their shirts while Rocky stripped all the way down to his boxers. They looked silently at a framed photo of Mom looking overjoyed; purple, green, and gold beads around her neck, a silver-sparkled top hat on her head, a beautiful blue drink in her hands, among a crowd of other sweaty men and women on

a littered street. They left the picture untouched and moved on to a picture of Phil and Mom at their wedding ceremony. The boys were all there, entering their early teens, all wearing child-sized suits kept from long-forgotten violin recitals, feigning smiles for the sake of Mom. They had married in the backyard, under a Huppah built the night before by members of the Synagogues' at risk-teens program. It was late July then, a real sticky summer, and the boys stood beside their mother while sweat glided down their backs like the sensation of eight-legged things webbing along their spines. The boys broke into the frame and ripped out Mom's half of the photo—her blushing in a charcoal dress, a second-wedding look the boys figured—and left Phil's to burn with the rest of their memories of him.

By the end of it, the bunch felt pretty satisfied with their work, and decided to reward themselves with Phil's New York strip marinating in the fridge. Sam poured canola oil into a smoking cast iron and smiled at the music of Phil's steak frying. Jack picked rosemary from Mom's window garden, and Rocky crushed up garlic under the heel of his palm. After a few minutes, Sam added the rosemary, garlic, and some butter into the pan, and with a spoon he basted the steak just like Mom had taught him. She had slotted him in as the future family chef, keeping him planted by her hip on Christmas Eves, watching how she folded the phyllo dough to make *tiropita*. Like you'd fold the American flag.

"It's getting smoky," Sam said, trying to repel the smoke with his open palms. He didn't bother turning on the vent.

Rocky walked over to Phil's handyman cabinet, just next to the sink, and picked out a hammer. He examined the hammer's eye and then the hammer's head, not sure which to pick. He was feeling lethal, electricity dancing in his head. He threw the hammer into the kitchen window and jeered at the site of exploding glass.

"You see that shit?" Rocky looked at his brothers. "The beauty went right through!"

Wind trickled snow into the house, one flake at a time, and the boys felt their skin shrink against the touch of cold.

Sam filled up Phil's spa tub with hot water while Jack dragged Phil's record player into the bathroom. Rocky was busy doing pull ups, hanging from the bathroom door. When he got down, his face was bright red and his hands ached, the skin on his palms threatening to tear.

"Don't worry," Sam told him, "you won't be so small for long. You'll grow as big as Jack and I."

"I'm plenty big as it is," Rocky said. He pulled down his boxers and showed off his pecker.

"What in the fuck are you doing?" Jack said, the two older brothers couldn't help but laugh.

"We're going into the tub, aren't we?"

"We were going to put on our swimsuits."

“Who wears a swimsuit in a bathtub? What’s the matter with you? We’re brothers.”

The two older brothers couldn’t argue, so they both pulled out their peckers, too. Jack played a Nirvana record and the three of them jumped in while Cobain sang.

“This is fucking beautiful,” Rocky said.

When the water started to get cold, Sam turned the faucet on and let it run and run to the point water came overflowing onto the bathroom tiles. Didn’t matter. Just water. Jack put shampoo in his hair and Rocky found his Ma’s old nail filer on the edge of the tub. He started filing his nails like he’d seen Ma do, filing down the nail then blowing away the loose bits. She’d taken to the obsession around the same time she’d been prescribed the pills.

“This keeps the mind focused,” she’d tell Rocky as her nails whittled down closer and closer to the cuticle.

But who needs focus? Rocky figured. He wasn’t slow or inattentive or hyperactive—well, he was lively—he just saw a world going by faster and faster, and he always felt the need to chase it down with all his might. And, he felt, if Ma had done the same, instead of letting Phil seize all her power, she may still be around. Not staring down at her fingernails, but pacing back and forth in the kitchen, alive with words and thoughts, twirling a paring knife between her fingers and a Bloody Mary in her free-hand, listening to Rocky as he sat on the kitchen rug, following her feet with his eyes, telling her about his suspicion of a 33rd tooth in his mouth. “You’re so different than your brothers,” Ma would laugh. It was true, after all, Rocky was

different not only because Rocky was *different*, but he was Phil's only son, too. For this reason, he hated Phil even more than his brothers could think.

Rocky slid his lips under the tub water then bobbed back up. He said, "How long do you figure it takes to drown?"

"I wouldn't drown myself," Jack said. "It's the absolute worst way to go. I'd find a cloud of snow and nestle myself deep in the powder and sip on some Vodka until I fell asleep."

"And freeze to death."

"I heard it's like dreaming your way into Heaven."

"Who could tell you that? Who could report that back to you?"

"Don't poke holes."

Sam reached out and flipped the record. He said, "I don't know how I'd do it."

"Guess at it," Jack said.

"I don't know. Mom and Kurt did it the right way. I wouldn't change it much."

"You're a rip-off artist," Jack laughed.

"I could just about die in this tub," Rocky said.

"Rip-off artist."

Rocky laid his head back and let his toes point out the water. He said, "This tub. I could die in this tub."

Sam said, "Hitching to New Orleans wouldn't be too hard."

"Now there's a way to get yourself killed," Jack said.

Rocky stewed in the water. Eyes closed.

“New Orleans wouldn’t be too bad.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad.”

Rocky sighed. “The suns almost gonna go down.”

“I’m pruning up anyway,” Sam said.

“Rip-off artist,” Jack repeated.

Rocky wanted to punch his two brothers in the jaw to shut them both up, but figured it wasn’t worth wasting what they had going. Plus, his muscles felt emulsified with the tub water, tender and powerless. He wasn’t sure if he could even throw a punch, he was feeling so drained with the vodka hitting his heart and his body soaking up all this hot water. But it felt good, he felt settled for once, not even the bickering of his brothers could turn him violent right now.

Jack finally turned the faucet off. It became silent for a moment too long, the kind of silence which unsettles a bath, so quiet the boys could hear air bouncing off the tiled floor, droplets of water still leaking out of the tub. The three boys stood up and dried off with Phil’s towels, their feet still soaking in the water below.

The brothers sat on wet grass and hoped for their mother to rise on out the grave.

Rocky bundled blades of grass in his fists and tore out the earth, softened by the day’s sun. Sam and Jack opened up a few cans of tuna fish, a jar of mayonnaise, some rye bread, and a jar of pickles. Jack used his pinky to open up a well in the center of the tuna and Sam put in a dollop of the mayonnaise. Rocky lifted his hands above his head, opened his tightened fists, and let wind blow the grass into Ma’s gravestone.

Jack took out his pocket knife and spread tuna fish onto the rye while Sam offered a pickle to Rocky. For once, the boys ate their sandwiches in silence, just waiting for the sun to shut up. Maybe they felt like paying some kind of respect with their silence as a token, maybe they just had their tongues balled up in their throats because each were doing all they could to hold their tears back for the sake of each other. Who will ever know why boys choose the moments they do to stay quiet?

Rocky walked off alone. The sky had lit up a few more stars. He walked all the way back down the hill, across the street, down his driveway, and into Phil's house. He walked into Phil's bedroom, once Ma's bedroom too. He opened up the cherrywood cabinet. He shuffled around Phil's old suits, he threw ties and unused coat hangers to the floor; a pair of Ma's old flat-tops flung across the room, but he didn't find what he was looking for. Rocky hadn't realized Phil must have dumped the rifle, or more like him, sold it off for cheap. It made sense, after all, it was the only thing left in the house, besides the boys, who could put him at fault. Rocky bit down on his tongue until he tasted blood. Did Phil think he could clear himself as easy as this? Did he think he didn't have what was coming to him? After all his lectures on how it's a tool for hunting, for protecting, and these two things are very different than killing--no--they're not killing at all. And he likely sold it off. And he knows why he did, too. Rocky wanted to ensure a Universe in which Phil got what was coming. Rocky believed in the Universe working its ways. Ma and him had talked it over all the time, back when he'd sit at her feet on the kitchen floor: they talked about hurricanes and wildfires, garbage shot out into space, and whether or not the New

York Knicks had another championship coming their way. They talked about how wind could blow in good luck, how it was actually light from the full moon that fed the Lamb's Ears in her garden and not the sun. Ma played friend to the Universe, said it always dished out what needed to happen, like a law, like gravity, there was no stopping it. Rocky believed her words, he ate each one of them up.

And then she left him.

A half-hour passed, maybe a full hour—Rocky walked back to Ma's grave, up the driveway, across the street, up the hill. His brothers would be calling him by now. By now, the moon was out and the sky was all stars and ink, and his brothers met Rocky halfway down the hill where they tangled their arms around each others' shoulders in the way brothers do.

The boys sat back down under the dining room chandelier, waiting for Phil's car to pull into the driveway. It had gotten late, and the boys couldn't imagine where he was, but they'd be waiting.

Rocky crossed his legs while Sam pulled out a deck of playing cards. He cut the cards, then made a bridge and shuffled them together. He dealt them out, one at a time, and they played Texas Hold 'Em just like Mom had taught them, using Phil's model car collection as betting chips. Jack had taken a cigar from Phil's humidor, and kept it unlit between his teeth.

“There are po’ boys, racing tracks for horses, and people can bring their drinks on the street,” Jack said. He was going on about New Orleans again. A place he’d never seen besides one photograph.

“We need a car to get down,” Sam said, “nobody, except someone more dangerous and crazy than us, is going to hitch three boys all the way down south, yet alone down the street.”

“There’s the Mississippi River running through, too. And sun nearly all year round.”

“You’re obsessed.” Sam wanted to shut Jack down, but he was smiling through his teeth, and the two brothers knew it, knew the excitement they all shared.

“I raise your Aston with my GT,” Rocky said, slamming down the model car with real confidence. He didn’t have a hand, but he figured he could bluff at it.

“Doesn’t seem of equal value,” Jack argued. “A GT and an Aston.”

“It’s American made, of course it’s got value,” Sam said. He wanted to shut down the argument before it started, but Rocky was already standing up.

“Are you stupid?” He was going on, when the motion lights out front flashed.

Rocky planted himself down to the floor. The boys sat silent.

“Mom would see this coming a mile away,” Rocky said. He pushed his GT around the hardwood with the tip of his pinky finger, his eyes looking down at nothing.

“She’d be expecting it,” Jack said, the dumb grin of a boy on his face.

The brothers could hear footsteps getting closer and closer to the front door.

“She was always more afraid for him than she was for us,” Sam said.

The front door opened and the boys stood up.

When Rocky saw it wasn't Phil — wasn't the person he'd expected to walk through that door — he almost fell limp.

There she was, standing tall, a little shaky at the knees like one might expect from a corpse. She didn't exactly look her finest, but the boys recognized grandma's silver pendant around her neck, the way the morticians had done up her hair to hide the bullet wound, and that suspicious grin on her face when she caught her boys in one of their many acts.

“You aren't here to take our souls down to Hell, are you, Ma?” Rocky asked in a respectful, but assertive voice.

Everyone stood quiet for a moment until the corpse burst out laughing.

“You left all the lights on,” she exclaimed. “You have the heat blasting and the windows open. I hear a faucet left on in the bathroom, I smell burnt rosemary in the kitchen. I couldn't abide by it.”

The boys welcomed their mother in. She took Rocky's hand, who she saw was shaking, and they went into the kitchen for a glass of water.

“You don't look your finest,” Sam said.

“I feel great,” said the corpse.

“We were just up visiting you,” Jack said.

“How'd you dig out of all that dirt?” Rocky said.

“Your mother still has some tricks up her sleeve,” said the corpse.

The boys watched as the corpse chugged a glass of water. They were expecting to see liquid seep out of her skin, out of her eyes and ears, and drip down unto the floor. Instead they watched her throat swell as water spilled down to her stomach. Her hands shook a bit. Dirt lodged under her fingernails. Otherwise, she looked refreshed, satisfied.

“We should get to cleaning,” said the corpse.

The boys didn’t know what to say. They never had a problem speaking back to their mother, but this of course felt different. They weren’t even sure how much of their mother still existed in the flesh presented before them. Was her soul snug in the confines of this skin, this bodily figure?

“By the way the three of you are looking at me, I can see I’ve frightened you all,” said the corpse. “But really, it’s making me uncomfortable. I mean, get over it. There are crazier things happening in this world.”

Sam, being the oldest, decided he should chime in: “The thing is, Mom. We don’t want to fix the house.”

“What he means to say is, we did it all intentionally,” Jack said.

“We wanted Phil to feel our wrath,” Rocky said.

“Phil,” the corpse let the letters slide off her slimy tongue, round out on her lips like she was practicing a foreign language. “Where is Phil?”

“We don’t know,” Rocky said.

She didn't seem to hear Rocky. In fact, she was glancing off, into the hole in the window. She shook her head. "You know, I learned a lot while I was away. Look what you boys have done to this house."

"We didn't expect you coming back," Jack said. "We were planning on taking off."

"To New Orleans," Sam said.

"Or Massachusetts," Rocky said.

The boys agreed to clean the house. Jack got to mopping up the bathwater, Sam re-organized the dining room, and Rocky closed up the hole in the window with some cardboard and duct tape. The corpse took out a batch of Chestnut soup she'd frozen from Christmas and began to heat it on the stove top. The aroma warmed the house. The boys didn't realize how exhausted they were until they all made the table, lit a pair of candles, and watched their mother serve bowls of soup.

"Are you going to stay for long, Ma?" Rocky said.

"Frankly, I don't know," said the corpse. "I'm new to this."

The family ate in near silence after. There was an air in the room, something beyond delicate. A pressure limiting the boys' movements, how they ate, how they spaced out each breath. They feared anything too sudden, and their mother might disappear all over again. Rocky began to cry.

"I don't want you to leave."

He said what all the brothers were thinking.

All the corpse could do was smile and serve more soup. In this, there was some comfort — the steam rising from the bowls, the warmth it brought into the house.

“I want to pat myself on the back,” the corpse said, “this is good soup.”

There was some comfort in the house after all.