

## FOR HER

2.900 words

It was the first night that Larry Foster spent home alone in a very long time.

He looked at the two ice blocks that were melting inside the warm golden whisky in his glass. Soft whirls of water revolved in the alcohol making strange shapes, like transparent smoke rising in a nearby distance. Larry held the glass in front of his eyes as small drops of condensation ran down the creases that adorned it. He felt two soft pinches in the back of his tongue in anticipation to the smoky taste he was about to feel. He took a short sip and was not disappointed at the dry flavor that filled his mouth with a light, itching sensation, like if tiny little ants had bitten his gums all at once.

The aftertaste brought him back to reality. It was the first time that he allowed Amanda to spend the night over with some friends. He thought of how wide her smile had been when he said she could go; one of the very few smiles his daughter had casted at him since Cynthia had been taken away three

years ago. The whisky glass was his small, personal treat after all he and Amanda had been through in these last years. He raised the glass in a fake toast with himself.

He dropped his body on one of the soft leather armchairs in the big living room. The warm air of North Carolina's summer was blowing through the terrace's open glass-door, bringing hot humid air that felt full and alive around him. He listened to the sound of the waves beating against the beach a hundred yards from the back of the house. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of silence and quite.

His eyes opened wide in an unexpected blow of fear. He had felt a familiar smell—one he had thought forgotten—coming with the wind. A sweet, faint smell of a perfume that brought violent and depressing memories. Memories of yells and aggression, of Amanda screaming at night beside him, of his own tears of solitude and fear.

Larry took the stereo's remote and tuned into an oldies radio station trying to block the images from his mind. The whisky glass, the reassuring sound of the summer night and some soft music. That was good, he thought. There was no wrong in that; no danger in that.

The calm notes of music started to drift him away in shallow sleep.

*This is WAVQ news report...*

The sound was fading away in his ears.

*...that was contained by the Fire Department after two hours of...*

He didn't pay attention to the news.

*...hit and run SUV that killed the man in...*

His head was tilted back in the couch, calling for peace and quite; in a few minutes the soft music would resume.

*...escaped this afternoon from Cranton's Psychiatric secure unit...*

The word escape kept echoing in his head: Cynthia.

He had not imagined the smell. He thought of her and a cold shot climbed up his spine, almost making him drop his glass over the thick carpet at his feet. His nostrils widened, searching for the smell, while he felt his ears move backwards in fear and attention. He rose from the couch moving an inch at a time and left the glass over the small living room table. The sound of the sea far below seemed to come louder now, invading the house and blocking any other noise he was trying so hard to hear.

His eyes darted in different directions as if looking for any strange noise in the house while he stood still in the middle of the living room. He felt the speeding beat of his heart pulsing inside his neck and throwing shocks of warmth up his head. Thank god Amanda is not home tonight, he thought.

And then he feared he would never see his daughter again.

He was about to jump for the phone when the shadow of a movement froze him. Like in a nightmare, he turned around and saw Cynthia standing next to the kitchen window.

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Larry almost didn't recognize his wife. She stood with her arms inert on each side of his body and her shoulders stooped forward. The wind from the sea messed her entangled hair and blew her sweet perfume straight into Larry. Her green eyes were sunken in deep wells on her face. Grotesque strokes of bright red lipstick covered a mouth that was surrounded by dry whitish saliva and an uncharacteristic grey dress hung wasted from her once voluptuous body. She was barefoot and thick lumps of dry mud emerged around her toes.

She seemed calmer than the last time Larry had seen her three years ago. He remembered how she had been sitting over six-year-old Amanda, pulling the girl's hair with one hand while raising a knife into their daughter's neck with the other.

"Hi, Larry," she said.

Her voice had not changed a bit. Soft and mellow. Like if she was about to start singing.

"What are you doing here, Cynthia?" he said. They should be looking for her already, he thought, they will be here any

minute. Why in hell didn't they call to warn him?

"Have you missed me, dear?"

He had missed her many years ago, but it was useless to say anything now.

She took half little step towards Larry, her head bending to the side and her wide eyes fixed on him. Her hands remained behind her back.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. His voice trembled. It was not only fear, but maybe a touch of melancholy for what Cynthia had once been for him.

"You have moved on," she said looking around the living room without moving his head. She didn't seem to listen to him. "You shouldn't have done it. It was difficult to find you."

He didn't understand, but at the same time he knew she would never make sense to him. Her eyes seemed to be drilling into Larry's head. He tried to wet his mouth, but his tongue felt like a piece of leather running over his lips. A tiny flash shone around Cynthia's right hand as she took it from behind her back. The kitchen knife was more than ten inches long and the blade was pristine clean. Larry didn't move back. It was not the first time he was in front of Cynthia while she held a long knife. It was just that it had been too long since the last time.

Cynthia's changes had started not long after Amanda's fourth birthday. Her sweet and caring character started to show cracks of jealousy and anger in short, separate bursts. The episodes got closer together to the point that every week they had at least a fight. It took Larry almost a year to recognize that Cynthia was delusional. Then the anger turned into hostility, and then into violence.

"Put that down, Cynthia," he said. There was no point in being soft or use tender words. She wouldn't understand it in any case.

Cynthia was blocking Larry's escape through the main door or through the terrace door on the other side of the room. She took another half step towards him. Only the small living room table separated them.

"You are not going to use that knife," he said.

That had been true until the night she had attacked Amanda; the first and only time that Cynthia's explosions had turned into physical violence. It had also been the first time that Larry had harmed his loved wife. Then she had been taken away. Locked and gone. It had only been a few weeks ago that his nine-year-old daughter had smiled again for the first time.

"You sent me away!"

Her tone was two notches louder now. It always started

with shouting.

"Put that knife down now, Cynthia."

She leant forward and looked at him from below, like a sinister bull about to charge. Her eyes were half covered by a web of filthy hair. He was not gaining time. He stared at the books in the living room's library. He just needed to deflect the knife once to be able to restrain her.

"You took Amanda from me!" she yelled.

Her eyes widened showing all white around her pupils and her mouth didn't close again. A strange snore started to come out of her mouth after she yelled. He knew he had no time anymore. He took two steps and grabbed a book from the shelf. It was a big, hard-cover architecture book, thick and massive.

"What are you going to do with that, asshole?" she yelled.

Larry was breathing hard. He felt light-headed and couldn't feel his arms and legs. All his body seemed to have gone numb. He held the book with both hands, ready to defend.

She threw forward her chin, breathing through nose and mouth. Then started taking small steps to the side and around the table, like a mad dog about to launch its fangs on its prey.

"You stupid coward!" she continued yelling. "You thought I wouldn't come back and finish what I started?"

Her screams echoed across the house.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"This I'm talking about, faggot!"

She took her left hand from behind her back and Larry saw Amanda's little sweater waving in the air. His knees wobbled at the sight of it. Amanda had been wearing that sweater when he left her at their friends earlier that night.

"Where did you get that?" he yelled. "Where is Amanda?"

Larry turned his head around looking for his daughter.

"Don't look for her! You can't find her anymore, you motherfucker," she yelled back.

"What the hell have you done, Cynthia?"

Larry felt thick warm tears flowing over his cold face while nausea hit him from the mouth of the stomach.

"I took her out of the way, the same that you did to me!"

"No!" he yelled. It was a long, deep wail from the depth of his chest.

"What are you going to do now, mister perfect?" She kept screaming, but Larry didn't hear anymore. His stare couldn't move away from Amanda's blood-stained sweater lying on the floor. She had killed Amanda, he thought. She had escaped and killed Amanda. He raised his eyes into Cynthia's mad stare. He found a shine of triumph in her eyes.

"I told you I'd take her back from you! Now I win, you



bastard. Now who's crying? Eh, idiot, who's crying now? I win, asshole, I win and you—"

The book banged her in the left ear and made her lose her balance. Larry had held the book with both hands and swung it with all his rage. Cynthia almost tumbled, her face fallen over her chest.

He didn't even consider to disarm her or to stop her. In a single fluent movement, he swung the thick book back and banged her again. The book's edge whacked her over the eyebrow. A long, deep cut started to pump blood that covered her right eye. She stumbled a couple of steps back with the hit's momentum, banging the small living room table and throwing down the whisky glass. The glass shattered in a million pieces of golden liquid.

Larry could not see straight, his eyes filled with tears and his head blowing with rage. His little Amanda was gone.

The book hit again Cynthia in the cheekbone, making a bruise and throwing her back against the wall.

He could only see Amanda's little face in front of him.

Another blow to the forehead, her head bounced against the wall leaving a shallow crater in it. A splatter of blood splashed out of the back of her head, staining the wall like red fireworks in a white night.

The little angel that had slept by his side for months

was gone now.

Cynthia's neck seemed to crack after the next impact. He hit her again with the edge of the book, again with both hands.

His small treasure that had learnt to smile again was dead now.

Cynthia collapsed to the floor. Her legs bent and gave away under her body weight. She just collapsed on herself like a puppet that had got its strings cut. She plummeted on the thick carpet almost without a noise.

Larry saw the long knife fall beside her. His hand relaxed and the book also fell down with a loud thump on the floor.

Amanda's innocent laughter ringed in his ears. With closed eyes he could see his daughter's small teeth smiling at him. He would never see that smile again. Never hear that laughter from her mouth.

Cynthia took a shallow breath under him. He grabbed the knife and pushed it hard into her chest until it sank down to the handle. Then she didn't move anymore.

Larry kept holding tight on the kitchen knife's handle with both hands. Pieces of broken glass pierced the skin of his knees, but he did not move for what seemed to him like a long time.

As if waking from a nightmare, he recognized the woman he had loved in the white face frozen in front of him. Cynthia's green eyes, her beautiful cheekbones and nice mouth seemed to appear in front of him for the first time in years. There were no out-of-control features on her face anymore. In their place appeared the face that he had loved so much. The lips he had longed for, the eyes he had kissed so many times were all back. Madness had abandoned Cynthia in a split second and his beloved wife appeared dead in front of him.

His tears did not stop anymore and his mouth kept trembling. A thin string of drool descended from his distraught mouth, mixing with the blood in his hands; the hands that had killed his wife. Larry pulled hard to get the knife out of her body. The only two people he had loved in his life were not there anymore.

His own blood started to flow out of his arms; flowing out of him through the cuts he made on himself. A clear memory came to Larry's mind as the warmth started to abandon him. The three of them were in the beach behind the house. Amanda was four-years-old and Cynthia's rage had not started yet. It had been a regular day like many others. They had laughed a lot that day. It had been the last time they had laughed together. The last time Larry had laughed without a dark shadow destroying the back of his mind.

And that was the last image Larry Foster saw behind his dying eyes.

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According to his report, police officer Patrick Conmore arrived at the house at 7.03pm. He had seen no activity from outside and decided to knock on the door. After getting no answer, he went around the house, through the backyard fence and into the sea-facing terrace that connected to the living room. He found the crime scene at 7.08pm, called for medical support and reported back to police dispatch.

He was still keeping watch at the back door when Detective Shelman arrived.

"Good evening, pal," said Shelman extending his hand to Conmore.

"Hi, Detective."

Detective Shelman looked through the terrace windows into the living room. Conmore didn't.

"So you found all this," said the detective.

Conmore only nodded. Still didn't look inside.

"Quite a messy scene, isn't it?"

Conmore looked down. He was tall and very young. A countryside guy just fresh from police academy. He had never seen this kind of horror.

"I couldn't do anything, detective. The guy was dead when

I arrived," he said. "It took me just ten minutes to be here since dispatch sent the notice..."

The veteran detective raised a hand and smiled in a sad way.

"Don't worry about it. There was nothing you could have done."

Conmore changed his weight from feet to feet while sighing.

"Listen, pal, the guy was coo-coo," said the detective while putting his index finger to his temple and moving it around. "This bastard had killed his wife and daughter three years ago."

Now Conmore dared to look back inside the house while the detective kept talking.

"Doctors at Cranton say he had been inside his cell talking to his dead daughter every day since then." The detective took a pause to make sure that the young policeman was taking it in.

"It was good that he didn't injure anybody else," the detective finished. "That's what you were sent here for... to make sure he was put down if he became dangerous."

Conmore looked into the ocean before turning again to see the dead man's lonely body. It was lying in a pond of blood that extended almost ten feet in every direction over the

carpet. The forearms were ruined with deep brutal cuts. The wall in front of the body was full of dents, with a shattered book and thousands of tiny glass pieces forming a sinister mattress underneath the dead man.

"Then it's a good thing I didn't get here ten minutes before," said Conmore.

Detective Shelman nodded in silence, patted the young officer in the shoulder and left.

Conmore still stayed there until his duty was over. He didn't look back inside the house anymore. He kept staring into the dark ocean, feeling the night breeze that blew from the sea bringing a soft sweet perfume.