

“Rondo in White”

A.

Keith shifted his load to free a hand and pulled the door closed hurriedly behind him. The house was sealed up tight and the vacuum effect pulled a burst of hot ash from the fireplace onto the rug. A black ring formed around one softly glowing ember before Keith could tamp it out with the heel of his boot.

“Fuck.”

The rug was positioned to hide the cigarette burns on the floor.

Keith dumped his pile of damp logs next to the fireplace and reached for the can of beer he'd left on the mantle. An oil furnace waited in the basement, but Keith tried to keep it idle whenever possible. This weekend threatened to break his resolve. The forecast promised 22 inches of wet snow; the kind used in weapons-grade snowballs. Keith's saving grace was the notice he'd put in several months ago to take this weekend off.

Keith's average height matched his build. Coarse stubble shaded his face, the brown hairs continually ceding ground to the growing number of grays. A few years ago the stubble made him look younger and he had cultivated it. These days the whiskers rooted from too many obligations and too much fatigue. They aged him unapologetically.

“Sorry Beth, but it's gonna' get a little smoky in here. All the dry wood's gone so I have to use this shit from the bottom of the pile.”

“I just had foot surgery, I don’t need emphysema too.” Beth responded without lifting her head from her book. She was a soft presence in the square room, though hardened and thickened some over the past few years. Despite his many unfulfilled promises, Beth still gave her husband a good-bye kiss every morning. And she still meant them.

The phone rang. Keith lifted the receiver. "Hello? Yes sir. No, I can't."

Beth lifted her eyes from the novel, without moving her head.

Keith switched the phone to his other ear and turned toward Beth, eyeing her uneasily. "Yes sir. I understand sir. I put this weekend on the calendar in September."

Beth finally lifted her head now and focused on Keith's face. She released her book and slid an open hand over the clenched fist of the other, feeling the topography of her veins.

"What about Buck?" Keith shook his head slowly at Beth. "Sir, Beth had surgery yesterday, she can't walk. No, I get it. I do. I just can't. There's no way."

Beth released her fist and looked toward the window. The reflection from the electric candle on the windowsill nearly blackened the whiteness outside.

"Sir. Ok. I hear you."

Beth's hands expanded into the fabric of her worn flannels, kneading her thighs like pizza dough. Keith looked her over with apologetic eyes.

"I need time-and-a-half. Actually, screw that - double time. No, triple."

Beth rose, steadying herself with one hand on the cold radiator beside the chair.

"Fine. Gimme ten minutes." He gestured for Beth to sit back down. She ignored him and reached for the crutches leaning against the side of the armchair. Keith threw the phone onto the couch in disgust.

"I'm so sorry, Beth."

"Is it the club?"

"Yes. Steve says his truck is snowed in and I'm the only other one with a plow. I'll be an hour, tops. I'm already dressed. And the girls are asleep."

"God forbid those pricks can't get drunk at home for one night, Beth muttered, crutching over to meet Keith at the door.

The back half of a plastic Labrador retriever, tail at attention, served as a key hook. Keith unburdened the lab and pocketed his heavy keychain. "Those pricks pay more in club dues than I make in a year. And the club is almost half of Steve's business. One hour tops, babe."

Beth faced her husband and grabbed his jacket collar on both sides, her weight rested on the crutches.

"I'm turning on the heat." She pulled down on Keith's collar and kissed his forehead, the one smooth spot on his face.

“Fine. Back in a bit.” Keith ventured back out into the fresh white snow.

B.

“Not fair Mom!”

“Totally a legal move, check the directions,” Diane said with a laugh.

Cassie and Meg shook their heads at their mother. They were seated around a high top gaming table, in a corner of their family room.

“I need some more wine,” Diane said, dismounting from her chair.

“Me too Mom.”

“Haha. Very funny Cass. You guys want anything?” The girls shook their heads again and Diane turned towards the kitchen.

The family room served as the focal point of the house. When Jeff and Diane had it built, they added a hefty sum to the construction costs to combine the family room, kitchen and dining room into one cavernous space. The financial stretch probably tacked two more years onto the back end of Jeff’s career. This seemed a small concession to ensure their daughters spent some time out of their bedrooms during the last years before they left the nest for good.

“Go Meg. While we’re young.” Cassie was every inch the mercurial teenager, spitting honey or vinegar from the cover of a hooded sweatshirt. She was a lady only when it suited her. “It’s not rocket science, roll the dice.”

Meg smirked at her older sister and picked up the dice. She cupped her hands around the dice and shook them. She continued to shake them as she glared at her sister.

“All right honey, you’re making them crazy.” Diane Fields had a habit of wearing clothes two sizes too big, especially in the winter. This was a side effect of the embarrassment that kept her from shopping in the “Misses” section. Her sweatpants were rolled up to avoid dragging the hem across the floor as she returned from the kitchen, wine bottle in hand.

Meg lifted her recently manicured hands to her mouth. She drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes and blew on the dice. When she opened her eyes again the room was dark.

“That’s just perfect. Now I really am going to Sara’s party.” Cassie slid off her chair.

“Sit. No way are you going out in that storm.”

“Dad went out,” Cassie snapped.

“Your father had to do something for a case. He’ll be back soon. It’s too dangerous for you to drive. And I don’t know the Knights.”

Cassie climbed back onto her chair and slumped back, clasping her hands in the front pocket of her sweatshirt.

“So what do we do now?” asked Meg. “Do we have candles or flashlights or something?”

“The generator should kick on. Your dad taught me how to start it manually anyway. We’ll be fine. I think there are candles in the pantry.” Diane headed back to the kitchen, feeling her way along the bookshelves. She paused inside the threshold and strained to hear to her daughters’ conversation.

In a hushed tone, Cassie addressed her little sister. “Do you have any cigs? I’m dying here.”

“No, gross.”

Diane cracked a smile, holding out hope for Meg’s future, and walked all the way into the kitchen. She secured some candles and a grill lighter on a large silver tray and headed back toward the family room. She half-caught the tail end of a too-quiet conversation.

“I’m not going to lie to them if they ask where you went.”

“Fine. Pussy.” Cassie nearly spat at her sister and looked away.

“The generator should have come on by now. I’ll go down and get it fired up. You guys light a couple of these candles. And Cass, I don’t approve of that language.”

“I’m going to bed. Remember what I said, Meg.” Cassie took a couple of votives from the tray. She lit one with the grill lighter and put the candle on a coaster from the table. She put the rest in her pocket, shot Meg a threatening look, and headed upstairs.

“Good niuuuuuuight,” Meg called mockingly after her.

“Can you light a few more of these, Meg? I’m going down to the basement.” Diane opened a door on the far side of the room and stepped down into the white stairway.

A.

“Jesus Keith.”

“I know, Jeff, I’m in deep shit here. That’s why I called you. I need some help.”

“You just left her there? What if she was still alive?”

“I know, I know. It’s fucked up. I fucked up. I fucked up real bad. I need your help, Jeff.”

Jeff scanned the dim, oaken taproom, at once keenly aware that they were not alone. He shivered. The bartender was idly toweling off a brandy snifter as bartenders are wont to do when eavesdropping. Two club members sat a few tables away. They loudly cursed the Lawnbrook Club’s management; nostrils flaring beneath bulbous, red noses. Jeff felt hate toward them and little else. At least the hate brought a little color to his normally pallid, pudgy cheeks.

Keith went on, “I freaked man, I just panicked. I had a few beers. I just kept going.”

Jeff took a few seconds to respond, lowering his voice markedly. “This is messed up Keith. Why did you call me? Now I’m in it too.”

“I didn’t know who else to call. You’re my oldest friend, Jeff. And you are a lawyer for God’s sake.”

Jeff’s elbows rested on his knees as he ran his hands through thinning black hair. He let out a frustrated, guttural “Ugh.”

“I’m sorry, Jeff. I’m fucked. I didn’t know what to do. I need your help.” Keith tapped his heel frenetically, matching the pace of his fractured confession. His eyes darted to his watch and then to Jeff and to the bartender and back to his watch. “I’m fucked Jeff. I’m fucked. I’m fucked, right? What do I do now? I hit that kid and I freaked. I left. That’s a fucking hit and run. Shit! What do I do?”

“Were you drunk?”

“No. God, no. Shit, I had maybe three beers, four, tops.”

“And Beth would testify to that?”

“If she hasn’t left me, yeah, she would. It’s the truth. Shit. Beth.” Keith ran a hand over his abdomen, massaging a phantom stomach cramp.

Jeff lowered his head into his thick hands again, staring down at his loafers and then at Keith’s incessantly tapping work boot. “You want my advice as a lawyer? Or as your oldest friend?”

“Would the advice be any different?”



“Yes, Keith. Very different.” Jeff picked his head up and looked around again, ensuring no prying ears were in range. “If I’m speaking only as your friend I would tell you... to turn yourself in. Get on the phone right now and call the police.”

Keith’s hand covered his eyes, massaging a pulsing temple. “What would I be looking at?”

“Vehicular manslaughter, hit and run. First time offense, probably ten years. Maybe fifteen. It depends on the judge.”

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, fuck.” Keith’s boot tapping accelerated as he closed his eyes.

“If you were a paying client I’d tell you to take that plow home and wash it. Take a different route than you took to get here. Clean the plow blade and truck with lye, if you have it. If not, use ammonia and bleach. Do you have a GPS anywhere? In your truck or on your phone?”

“Not in the truck. My phone is five or six years old, so I doubt it.”

“That’s good. I would tell you to call Beth right now from that phone and say that you finished the lot half an hour ago and you ran into me here. We had a talk about our kids. Meg is doing well in school and Cassie is a pain in my ass. We didn’t have a drink because you are working. You go home Keith, and you go to sleep. Then you never talk about this again.”

“You think I could get away with it?” Keith stopped his heel tapping and looked up. Their eyes met for the first time since Keith had finished telling the story.

“It is a gamble. On a night like this, with no visibility, bad sledding on the roads, snow falling fast, it’ll be tough, but yeah, it is possible. If they come to you though, it will be bad. That means they found something to tie you into it. What was that kid doing out this late in a giant snow storm? Might not be a lot of sympathy, even with the death of a child. It is a gamble, I’m not going to lie to you, Keith.”

Keith’s heel started tapping again. He looked over Jeff’s shoulder at an enlarged aerial photo of Lawnbrook’s golf course. The photo took up half of the far wall and was framed in mahogany with ornate gold-leaf inlay. Despite the picture’s vulgarly domineering presence, Keith had never noticed it before. He could count on one hand the number of times he’d sat in this oaken taproom.

“Oh god, Beth and the girls. Jeff, what will they do?”

“You have anything saved?”

“I can barely keep the fucking heat on.”

“Jesus, Keith.” Jeff turned away, embarrassed for his friend.

“What am I going to do?”

Jeff took a very deep, very slow breath. He looked back at Keith, taking measure of him. Keith held his stare over Jeff’s shoulder. He took another deep breath, and started to speak on the exhale. “I’ll look after Beth and the girls.”

“What?”

“I’ll take care of them.”

“Jeff, I’ve never asked you for money before, and I’m not starting now. You have your own family.”

Jeff spoke quietly, almost inaudibly, “I have bricks of cash between the joists in my basement ceiling.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Jesus, Keith, wise up. You think I’ve never bent the rules?”

“I am not one to judge right now.”

“There is plenty of cash. If some good can come of it, maybe I can tilt the balance a bit. What does Diane call it? Karma.”

“I don’t know, Jeff.”

“I’ll help your family either way.”

“Fuck.”

Keith stood and walked toward the window. He looked out at the golf course, covered in fresh snow. It was incredibly stark and white and beautiful.

He took his phone from his pocket and dialed.

C.

Two teenagers kissed violently, the girl pressed against a black luxury sedan. Her body heat and rhythmic movement wiped clear a spot on the snow-covered car. That sedan was third in a line of eight or nine cars filling the circular drive in front of the Knight's house. It was a grand Georgian manse, made of stone and glass. Ivy encircled the heavy leaded picture window in serpentine strands, partially obscuring the ornamental chandelier hanging over the vast foyer.

The chandelier flickered and went dark. A big cheer rose up from inside the house. The couple making out in the driveway pulled their chapped faces apart briefly to consider the darkness. In a moment the power returned with the whirring of generators. The lights elicited a collective groan from the house's inhabitants. The amorous couple went back to their probing and fondling, indifferent to the flecks of snow collecting in their hair.

A wobbly-legged teen opened the heavy front door and exited onto the flagstone apron outside the center entrance. He sauntered off to one side and relieved himself at the base of an ornate topiary.

"Tim, you animal! This house has nine bathrooms!" A girl's voice yelled from within the house.

"Can you come aim for me Sara? I think I got some piss on this jockey statue." Tim bounced a few times and zipped up his jeans. He spun on his heels, steadying himself briefly against a column before making his way back in through the open front door. Sara grabbed his elbow and led him into the formal living room, ribbing him playfully, "Too bad Cassie didn't make it, she'd have loved to hold it for you."

The living room boasted vaulted two story ceilings and was decked out in Victorian parlor fashion, complete with grand piano and dry bar. A dozen teenagers occupied the great room, in various states of

revelry. The unmistakable sounds of sex permeated the space, only partially obscured by thumping electronic music. The grand piano lid was closed flat, populated by scores of blue and red plastic cups. A couch in one corner faced a giant television lewdly projecting a particularly hairy scene from a vintage pornographic movie.

Half of the crowd sat on this couch adjacent to a glass coffee table covered with the trappings of an unsupervised Saturday night. A two-foot tall glass water pipe rested amidst multi-colored plastic bags of marijuana and sticky balls of black opium. Two Pez dispensers were labeled coarsely in magic marker: UP and DOWN.

“Your turn, Sara.” Sara’s long black hair flowed past her well-defined cheekbones. She angled her face down onto the painted serving tray thrust in front of her. It depicted a placid winter scene, children skating on a pond with freshly fallen snow. Sara inhaled sharply through her nose and looked up to the ceiling. She bobbed her head and tapped her foot in time with the slapping sounds emanating from the television. She turned back toward her friends on the couch, smiling maniacally.

“Hey, where’s your mom, Sara?”

“Fuck if I know. Upstairs? The club?”

Three boys entered the room, no more than 12 or 13 years old. Their faces were flushed, nearly matching the red stains spattered on their snow clothes.

“Piss off, Charlie,” said Sara, still standing in front of the couch. “Go to bed.”

“We want some weed.” Charlie spoke with all the confidence he could muster. His two friends stood at his side as if for muscle.

“No chance Chuckles. Piss off.”

“I’m going to tell mom what you’re doing in here.” Charlie was defiant, but Sara was unfazed.

“You’d have to find her first.”

Tim pulled a long toke from the water pipe and held it in. He walked around the couch to face Charlie and his friends and then blew the smoke directly in their faces. “There. Now go play in the street.”

Charlie and his friends glanced at each other and started laughing. “We already did that.”

“Piss off, Charlie. I’m not giving you any weed.”

The three boys turned to go. Sara turned her back on them and planted her face back down into the freshly fallen snow.

A.

It had been only a few minutes, but the lights on top of the police cruisers were already muted by new snow.

Keith sat in the backseat of one of the cruisers, face in hands. His knee bounced visibly from his heel tapping. The repetition sent a comforting rhythm through his hands and into his head. He yelled into the

silencer of his palms. He took a deep breath and peered through the window. This was a very expensive neighborhood. That wouldn't help him. These brick and stone palaces housed the same lords and ladies as the Lawnbrook taproom.

The cruiser door next to Keith opened, breaking his wretched reverie.

“Mr. Chance?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We found the body.”

Keith attempted a swallow that his parched throat wouldn't allow. The officer pulled a lifeless body from a white garbage bag, holding her up by her long brown hair. Keith winced and turned away.

“It's a doll. Some kids' prank. Covered in ketchup.”

Keith turned back slowly and saw the doll. His eyes welled with tears.

“Thanks for turning yourself in Mr. Chance, but you're free to go.”

Keith's heels stopped tapping. He spun his legs out of the door. His boots crushed an inch of fresh white powder.

B.

Jeff turned the corner onto his street and immediately saw the lights. There were two full ladder trucks, an engine and a pumper. Even at this distance he knew they were in front of his house. The whole scene seemed to emit a warm glow as he approached. The heat caressed his face through the windshield and it was almost reassuring. The fire and billowing smoke blended with the thick snowfall creating a mottle of oranges and grays. Snow accumulated on the trucks and washed out the red.

Jeff got out of the car and approached his wife. Wrapped in a heavy blanket, Diane had lost an eyebrow and her skin was raw. Meg stood next to her, eyes ablaze, fixated on the house.

“Where’s Cassie?” Jeff asked before he reached Diane.

“Meg says she went to get cigarettes. Did you know she was smoking?”

Jeff squeezed Meg in his arms. After pulling away he fixed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “Did you see her leave?”

“No, but she said she was dying for a smoke and was gonna sneak out. I told her not to. I did Daddy, I told her.”

“I know you did sweetie, I know.”

A police officer with a notepad approached Diane. “Excuse me ma’am, you know the source of the blaze?” Diane turned her back on the house to answer the question.

“Yes. I went to the basement to check on the generator. We just installed it last year so it shouldn’t have been a problem.” Diane rubbed her arms under the blanket and stared blankly at the officer. “I brought a



candle with me since it is really dark down there and I put it on the floor. I must have kicked it over. It really isn't like me to be so careless."

"Mom." Meg tried to interject. Diane didn't hear her.

"I'm not sure how it happened, exactly, but when I turned around from the generator the flames were already up to the shelving where we had paint and cleaning products. I saw that and I ran upstairs."

"Mom!"

"What is it, Meg?"

Meg pointed back toward the burning house. "Look!"

Jeff reached for the big white front door. He pulled his hand back in pain and kicked the door open. He glanced back, hesitated for a heartbeat, and ran inside.

A.

Keith opened the door to his bedroom and stepped inside. He turned to read the thermostat, smiled and switched off the heat. He reached into the closet and pulled out a thick white comforter. Keith gently laid the blanket over Beth, careful not to wake her.

Keith sat on the corner of the mattress to take his boots and socks off. He climbed into bed without removing the rest of his clothes. Beth rolled over and put an arm around him. He leaned in and kissed her warm cheek.

“Goodnight, Beth.”

“Goodnight, love.”