

It had been described by the papers as “a baffling tragedy” when the Price child set flame to his mother’s bedroom curtains the eve preceding his thirteenth birthday. Others who lived within and serviced the home saw it as a bit of a small grace-- the sprawling excess of its build made it so that when he and his mother burned, only they did.

Supposedly the Prices had never known what to do with the surplus space the inherited monstrosity held upon moving in. The then-newlyweds, a buttercream teenaged beauty from what she’d only refer to as “the old country” and the strapping Price boy who’d found her there on sabbatical, elected to split it as evenly as possible, continuing this separation of the manor on after the birth of their son. The boy, according to talk amidst housestaff after the incident, having been upset with his mother for demanding his beloved pony be sold as a punishment for something or other, snuck from his isolated section of the home to hers with the intent of enacting some sort of half-baked revenge.

“A wicked shame,” they said amongst themselves. “The most potent loss,” the journalists wrote on the front page. They were, of course, a touch less informed than the housestaff.

The father had squared himself off in his office for the night, tucked off within the lower east section of the household. He hadn’t known of the fire until approximately twelve minutes in when Ana, a beloved housekeep, practically banged down his door, terrified to discover the heady reek of smoke and burn emitting in her missus’ personal wing.

He’d ended his night stood out in the grass beyond the porch, staring out at everything spread around him: the screeching chambermaid in her bedclothes, the firemen scrambling past, the shock of chatter and camera bursts from the growing wave of media, the overfed wisteria

down the lane. He looked at everything but the smoke pluming thickly from the windows of the upper west wing. The staff, before the first gust of their collective exodus - excluding devoted Ana- noted that Colin Price never again acknowledged the west wing of the manor, barring one impassioned dismissal of refurbishment. Thus, he remained present in only his sector of the manor as the rest began to rot and crumble around him.

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Blistering, luminous, a mouthwatering acidity pared down with a pop of sweetness. John found that he was better at selecting heirlooms from the garden, as he had the sort of taste good breeding will give you. He was better at quite a few things, but he didn't dare say this to Ana. She was, after all, the self-elected leader of the household. Not that she'd openly admit this to John.

"They're not quite ripe, but they could do," she'd instead declare at his bounty, and turn back to whatever pot of stock she'd been nursing, always missing his returned scowl.

No, John didn't dare say anything. And neither did Ana. There was an order here, and there were roles-- everyone played their part. His being, of course, as the esteemed young man of the house.

His days started when Colin's did. He'd rise a bit past dawn and have a quick smoke followed by whatever breakfast Ana prepared them all, Colin being kind enough to allow her a place at the table. He'd sit quietly and eat while she went on about how so-and-so off in town had asked after Colin. Once, every so often, John would shake things up and go: "Has no one inquired about me?" Ana's response was always the same-- confusion then a smidge of

something like frustration, quickly quieted into a soft, cool, “No, John, no one has.” And then she’d hush up and eat her goddamned eggs.

Routine.

He liked the weekends when she’d go off to visit with her daughters and leave him and Colin alone. They’d fall, the two men, into a step they couldn’t with the interruption of their third. John bloomed in these moments. He gained a freeness, an affability, that only Colin- and the isolation of he and Colin, Colin and he, together- could grant. The household, usually unyielding, swelled with their conjoined presence as though they were pressed soul-to-soul and folded into the walls. And then Ana would arrive home on Sunday night toting cake and gossip, stretching things back apart.

Routine.

John slept in Colin’s bedroom at night, the significance of this being something Colin made sure he knew over the years.

“I slept here alone from the day we moved in, you realize,” Colin would say. “All through my marriage. She liked her privacy.”

“Privacy is lonely,” John would respond, earning a smile of agreement from the Price man.

They didn’t talk much about his wife, or where she’d slept instead of Colin’s bedroom. John didn’t think to ever ask for more than Colin shared: little tidbits from a decade-dead domesticity, things like the time she, twenty and plucky as any suddenly wealthy new mother could be, demanded all powder-based products be removed from the home because the baby had gotten a talcum rash.

“I do mean all of it. Baking flour, baking soda, confectioners sugar. We couldn’t serve our houseguests proper dessert for a month-- just *mousse*. It had made the town papers. People found her rather funny.”

John could somehow envision it; plume from a rolled cigarette trailing the tiny woman as she corralled maids and cooks alike to the basement's incinerator, dozens of packets of white thrust into the ash. He shook off the image.

“Do you think of her as funny?” he asked.

Colin shrugged noncommittally at this. “I don’t think much of her at all.”

Ana was less forthcoming in her interactions with John. In fact, she seemed to make efforts to ignore him; during the first few years of his occupation in the manor, he had to announce his presence to her, a fact that annoyed him and that Colin dismissed. She was nearly twenty years Colin’s senior, and thus the man waved off John’s complaints with excuses about brain deterioration and womanly whimsy, but still. Her ignorance persisted like a stubborn dog with its teeth dug into something it loathed.

She’d refused to call him by name the first few months-- “he”, she’d say to Colin right in front of him, “shouldn’t smoke tobacco indoors”, the smell could get into the walls and spread. His name is John, Colin would reply, and the place smells alright to me. She’d frown. *Oh*. Colin, she’d say while washing up after breakfast, I’m headed to the cemetery this afternoon with flowers, you should join me. Let’s get you outside, leave “him” alone for a bit. He’s *John*, Colin would retort, and I don’t need to go anywhere, and who decided the dead cared for flowers, anyhow? She’d pucker. *Oh*.

Even when she'd stopped with the "him" nonsense, her belligerence relented. "Ana, Colin asked if you could pick up lamb shoulder to make a roast tonight," John addressed her once before she made her daily market rounds. It had been about three years since he'd began living with Colin.

"Ah, lamb roast was Mrs. Price's favorite dish. Perhaps he misses her. Their nineteenth anniversary would be this weekend-- isn't that sweet, Jacob?" The old thing nerved to beam up at him.

"It's *John*."

"Oh. Hm."

All the while she'd been at the market, John fumed about the overstep to Colin, who admonished his harshness and smoothed over Ana's offense.

"The woman's in her sixties, you must bear with it," he said. "She's been here for ages, she thinks she's a close friend. She was fond of my wife and needs time to adjust to you living here. Don't think we'd get on without her, and she's getting up there in age, so really, John, please entertain her. God, I mean-- you won't have anything to say when she's dead in twenty years, so just hush about it now."

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It had actually only taken Ana about another nine years to die, and Colin was right-- John didn't have much to say. It happened unceremoniously; she'd left for another weekend and never came back. In her place came a stern looking woman who'd introduced herself as Ana's daughter and addressed only Colin, a trait John bitterly quipped in his head as genetic. Her mother had medically died of a stroke, she told him, though she'd been showing signs of ill for quite a while.

Headaches, sobbing fits, a general physical weariness. If you asked her, she'd say Ana had finally collapsed from years of stress, a stockpile of worry that accumulated big enough to beat her down, nothing so simple as a sudden tick in the brain.

"She never slouched until my fifteenth birthday," she shared over her mug of tea. John had always known Ana to slouch. He kept quiet.

Maria made the trip because she knew the Price residence hadn't a phone, plus Ana had handled all the mail, and she figured Colin ought to know he'd be out of a housekeep. She knew he'd have no desire to come out to any funeral, and no, she wasn't asking, but helping cover the burial costs would be fine. Yes, she'd like to take her mothers belongings. She spoke with a sovereign authority, her eyes direct, seizing. Colin knew about her: Ana's youngest, the stony one who refused to marry, who dedicated herself to caring for her mum. The one who'd been left alone. Pity.

"You've a scar above your eyebrow, how'd that come about?" He signed off on the check with his gaze still gripped in hers.

"Ah, that. I got it falling over the banister in the foyer. Frederick pushed me. Feels like eons ago."

Colin's mouth pressed into a firm line at the mention of his son's name. The woman deflated, but not enough to release her gaze. He firmly pushed the check into her palm. She folded it in half without looking at the number and continued speaking. "I'd come here to play on some evenings. We'd get rough- well, *he* did, really. I recall beating him in a playfight, so he shoved me over the railing."

"I don't remember that, I'm sorry."

“No, I’m sorry. It’s an awful story to share, really. I didn’t mind the cut, I was older than him. It was nothing.”

“I do remember your mother bringing you around, just not the nature of the play. The boy was...a bit rough, as you put it. I apologize for that.”

Maria had her mother's smile, an odd one that made her look ashamed. “God, I haven’t been here in ages and I’m making him sound like a little monster. I’m terribly sorry.”

“You aren’t. He could be ill-behaved. I know that.”

The tea had gone cold. She subdued her gaze, but John was still weary seeing her there, spine shock straight in a chair in their office, disrupting things. John had never been fond of Ana’s butting in and hand-wringing insistences, but the old woman had stayed in her place. She never agitated Colin the way her daughter was now. She didn’t have Maria’s eyes. Vicelike, binding, on and off like a switch.

The older man stood to collect the abandoned china. “Ana never spoke about my son much, I think she found it might upset me. What she didn’t understand,” Colin noted from the doorway, “was I stopped grieving rather quickly. My wife and son are dead, and I am not.” He leveled her carefully. “Maria, my advice to you would be finding companionship in this time. I know you’re approaching your thirties and a single woman of your age is rather troubling. Who’s to care for you?”

Ana wore a different sort of smile now. “No one speaks to you about Frederick.” She followed Colin to the kitchen, pressing her thumb against the decay in the walls, little seeping squelches following her along. “It’s rather a shame. I spent so much time with him, growing up. Toddlers, then children, then teenagers together.” *Squelch*. “If you’d like, I could share stories.”

*Squelch.* “Exchange them, maybe.” *Squelch.* “You say you aren’t grieving but *I* certainly am, perhaps you could push me towards overcoming it.” She pressed so hard this time that her finger burst open a spot of putrefaction above the sink. A scurry. “I think you’ve got rats.”

Colin cleared his throat, hurriedly stepped past the woman back into the foyer. “Have you everything you need?”

When Colin went to escort Maria out, John made a point to speak up. “Colin and I are terribly sorry to hear about Ana, again. I wish it could have been prevented.”

“*Oh.*” Maria stopped, cocked her head back, set those eyes on him. “I do as well...John. It is John, yes?”

“It is. Come by, but really, try not to make yourself too much at home.”

The woman paused, took a long look at her surroundings. The crumbling wallpaper, cracks in the plaster, water stains spreading down from the ceiling to the torn rug slinking battered down the hall, a stink of old smoke and death permeating from that long-abandoned left wing into the rest of the place.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

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She did, though. The manor needed care, and though Maria insisted she was no housekeep, she spent more time at the Price residence than initially expected. She brought loaves of bread and soft cheese, washed the dishes, shrugged off John’s heirloom selection and dusted the crumbling bookshelves. He couldn’t fathom why she bothered-- why she even cared to supplement her mother’s labor and made such an effort to butt heads. It was like having a



younger, more abrasive Ana around, the Ana from a decade ago who challenged his position until she finally deflated. Her disruptions, like her mothers, came drenched in syrup.

“Colin, my mother told me you’d been made school president in upper sixth form. Mister Colin Price, 1930, gosh. I bet your wife was the envy of the town when you brought her in.”

“Colin, do you remember when Frederick and I were...I think he was ten and I twelve, and we tried to crush an anthill? Our legs! My mother was *livid!*”

“Colin, you must do something about the wallpaper in the hall there. It stinks of tobacco and-- I don’t even want to know what else. It’s just not becoming of a *reborn bachelor.*”

John knew Colin was bothered by it, he was sure, but he didn’t stop it. He wouldn’t tell the woman to leave him be, no, instead he would engage with her. Their interactions were painful– watching the man lose the fight and crawl back up for another flurry of blows, weaker each time. Ana only ever spoke about little things, the infinitesimal, her conversations specks of debris falling unnoticed into the cracks along the walls. Maria’s words took a pipe iron and bashed those walls in-- she never wanted to discuss the weather or the market or who’s just had an affair in town, she aimed big, she aimed high, she aimed uncomfortably close. The holes her conversations left reeked of rot. She agreed that she could see Colin was *really* doing alright, and she wanted to talk as much about the past as she could because, *gosh*, what a thing to have gone through! She’d wander off for long moments, and when John asked Colin where the woman had gone, the older man would say he was unsure with a strange look on his face. It was as though she had crawled into the walls without a trace.

Colin became different with John, now. He sought him out with a desperation he hadn't ever shown before, damn near begging for comfort after time spent with Maria.

"Tell me you aren't going to leave," he once demanded, distant eyes misted over a glass of watery scotch.

"I won't. I'll always be here." John's words felt strange in his mouth. Non-autonomous. There was a draft in Colin's sitting room, as though the heat had been shut off. John flicked his cigarette case open. "Why are you bothering with her, anyhow?" A shrug instead of an answer. He rolled a cigarette. The walls seeped. The ceiling groaned. John pressed it into his mouth, struck a match, puffed. And that draft, a comfortable cool, as if his skin had become used to it-- had it always been freezing? And had it always-- had it always *stunk*?

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Maria had come over the evening of Ana's seventy-fifth birthday, three months after the woman was buried. She was strange this time, horrendously weepy so long after the funeral. Dressed smartly and lugging bags with leftovers from the birthday celebration, Maria explained that she knew Colin loved Ana, but he had a poor way of showing it.

"But that's you, you know," she said, wetly. She wrung her gloved hands in the insufferable way her mother used to. "Stiff upper lip."

Colin, by this point, would nearly keel over every time he saw her car coming up the drive, but still fought to maintain a precise cool. "Well, we're adaptable creatures. I embrace it." He considered Maria for a moment. "Have you met any gentlemen recently?" She froze, eyes unfocused, set them back on his tired, life-trodden face, and barked out a laugh. Colin didn't catch the joke and excused himself so she could cut the leftover chunk of cake she'd brought.

Maria, now alone in the foyer with her bags along her arms, stepped after him a moment, stopped, dropped her bulk, and swung on her heel to head instead to the east wing. It was a skeleton of a living space-- if Colin's wing was rotting, the east was what the rot would leave. Remnants of a sofa, ashtrays scattered about, incomprehensible piles of letters half penned, dust-veiled portraiture of Olivia Price and her boy, all smiles, and the aroma of soot. She wiped a cake of gray off Frederick Price's pubescent face and tried to recall which section of the manor was designated as his. She wondered how much more space the boy would've been given had he grown up. Would he have killed his mother, put her in an early grave, if he hadn't the inherited entitlement, the father, he did? She thought of Colin's denials, the self-inflicted torture of being confronted, over-and-over again, with his own lonesomeness, a lonesomeness he simply ignored. And that "John" nonsense, good God.

Maria headed up to the deceased woman's bedroom, the staircase whimpering under the solid weight of her climb. The abandoned room, the site of the tragedy, had been scorched to its bare bones. A wasp's nest had been built between the cold pipes. A cat lay behind the iron of the bed frame and a smattering of rats were having their way with its carcass. Careful not to disturb the megacosm at work, Maria stood at the threshold and took in the sight of the dead bedroom. She came here during her visits to remind herself that her mother died because of this, worried herself ill and withered away coddling a bratty, spoiled man's delusions. Over *this*. She rubbed away a tear that threatened to burst at the hem of her eye. Stiff upper lip, indeed.

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"I don't like when she goes off", John exhaled along a puff of smoke. "She doesn't live here." Colin wasn't listening. Colin never bothered listening anymore, not unless he wanted

attention or comfort, otherwise he'd shut himself off and become quiet. John always had to pull him back out, back to his senses. It was exhausting. He continued.

“I hear the burner going. Suppose she's reappeared, hm.”

Colin spoke now. “John, am I going to be alone?”

John didn't hesitate. “You've never *been* alone. I'm here.”

Again, the words felt strange, like they'd been wrangled from his throat by force. He slid, hurriedly, out of the gloom of Colin's office and went instead to the kitchen. Maria stood over the burner, heating a pot of stew, her back to him. Slices of cake were plated on the table.

“Who is it?”, she asked the footsteps.

“John. Where were you?” He was surprised at himself for asking. The woman turned, locked him within her crosshairs. The kitchen was fucking freezing.

“John. Lovely.” She took him in fully, up-and-down. “You know,” she started slowly, “he didn't go to their funeral, either. Whole town went, but not Mister Colin Price. It was in all the papers. Loads of talk about that.”

She smiled that ashamed-looking smile Ana once wore. “Forgive me, I went to visit Mrs. Price's room. Or Mrs. Price, rather. You know they nearly burnt to ash in there, the fire went on so long without him noticing? Just skeletons in the caskets, if I remember my mother's words. This place is like...” She slid her fingers down the counter, mulled over the dust left on her cloth-wrapped pads, “...a funeral pyre. A funeral pyre that you *live* in. Strangest thing.”

John inhaled, tapped his ash. The contents of his skull felt like soup swirling up against the bone. He struggled now. “The wife had a bedroom?” Maria looked at him as though he were pitiful. She shut off the burner and made her way over to him, eyes radiating.

“John, truly, what is your purpose here? To him?” She gave him no time to respond. “The wife had a bedroom and a powder room and a full bathroom and a sitting room. She had a kitchen that she never used. She had her own foyer. She had a room dedicated to *shoes*. And Colin never goes there, so my mother never went there, so you’ll never go there, and you’ll both go on living in this shithole like it isn’t *steeped* in death.

“My mother was always here for him, you know. She cared about him enough to stay employed, to handle his affairs, the things his family didn’t want to. And, yet. The pipes get clogged up somewhere on Olga’s side, but no one can go there, so you’ve no heat. Breaker box jams up, too bad, it’s in the room that stores Frederick’s toys, it’s barred off, there’s your electricity. This house *died*, and she stayed because she wouldn’t let that stubborn man die with it. And for what? So careful to avoid stepping on his toes because she didn’t want him left alone-- well, he *is* alone, and now so am I.” She crumpled. “So am I.”

The cigarette between John’s lips was nearly finished. Maria gulped hard, blinked away a tear. “I can feel my loneliness like a punch in the throat,” she finished. “You don’t get to keep walking away from yours.” A wipe, a sniff, and that awful smile was back up at him. “There’s cake if you want it.”

“I think you should go, Maria.” His head pounded. She clasped her trembling hands and opened her mouth, shut it again, nodded, left. She’d nothing more to say.

The walk back to the office was excruciating. John plopped onto the sofa and leaned in on himself; he could see a cobweb hanging under the table in front of him. A little fly was caught in it. A pause. Colin spoke first.

“It’s lemon cake.”

“Yes.” He placed the dish he’d brought with him atop the table for inspection.

“Ana always liked chocolate.”

“You don’t know that. You’d just ask her to make chocolate and she would. Because that’s how things work, everyone does what you like.” John’s words bit. He looked out the window. He’d never asked to leave the estate, he realized. He never wanted to go out to town, not with the gossip and the people. Sometimes, the memory of a horse would come to him. His horse? Or just its presence, as if in a dream faded by light. The cigarette was near finished. He plucked it from his mouth, let the stub dangle between his fingers, stared back at the plate of cake, lips parted.

“I didn’t know there were more rooms, and I feel very odd about them. A strong discomfort. Nausea, even. But I don’t *know* those rooms.” Colin ignored his comment in favor of picking at the dish.

“I’ve realized,” John continued slowly, “that I want to do whatever you want me to do. And I say what you need me to say. Our comforts align. Isn’t that peculiar?”

“It’s not,” Colin retorted. “We’re a good pair. You’re always very good to me.”

“But *why*?” John flared up now, his hands outstretched. “Why am I good to you?” He hadn’t noticed the near-burnt stick of tobacco had flown out from between his fingertips and rolled along the shambled carpet. Bits of upturned fluff sparked. “Colin, I’ve lived here for as long as I can remember, and I’ve never wanted to see a show, or go to the shops, or take a drive. No one comes to visit me, asks after me, and I don’t think twice about it. Why is that?”

If anyone were to come to the ramshackled Price manor, as daring teenagers occasionally did, and look through the window, they'd see a man, alone, his fingers caked in lemon icing and his head between his knees. "I don't remember moving in. I look in the mirror, and I don't question why I've got your jaw, your neck, your *lines*."

Colin's head hurt. The confrontation was too much-- he didn't remember John coming to stay, either. He'd just known his days had been full of chatter and laughter and affection from the boy and the woman and then they suddenly weren't. And he could feel how devoid the days had become, trudging along in dull succession, and God-- he'd been afraid, *so* afraid, that his life would trudge along like that forever. He obsessed over it, he fought against it, he refused it. And from that refusal came John, and things were *good*.

He whimpered from between his knees. "I don't want to be alone."

The flame from the carpet licked up at the peeling wallpaper, sank its teeth into the soft neck of the aged plaster beneath it with ease.

"You have to understand, I cannot be alone."

A tufted sofa, ignored for years in the back, was swallowed in the quickly growing blaze. It leaned, encouraging, into the comfort of long-deprived touch.

"Please don't leave me alone, John."

The fire slinked itself along the coffee table, ate the cobweb, a little spider scrambling for salvation as its last meal went up in flames.

"You won't be alone, Colin."

And the room filled with smoke.