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STAN LIVES IN A TRAILER PARK pushed all the way to the edge of town. It's right up against a field that stretches on for miles and disappears into a blur against the sky. On cold mornings, the fog rolls up to the trailer park, and you can't tell the ground from the sky. It was like that the first time we went, and we felt like we'd just driven to the edge of the world.

"The guy who lives in lot thirty-nine is a convicted rapist. He was also charged with indecent exposure. If he comes out in a bathrobe, don't look at him," Arthur told me in the car.

When we got home, I got on the computer and checked the sex-offenders registry. There were 16 convicted sex offenders in the 65-lot trailer park.

"That's one in four people in that trailer park. Every fourth trailer houses a convicted sex offender," I told Arthur.

"I believe it. Where else are they going to go?"

We later moved. Now we have to leave the house at five a.m. to get to Stan's by eight. "The earlier we get there, the earlier we can leave," Arthur said while we were packing.

I don't feel him get up, but it's still dark

outside when he comes back into the room and touches my ankle. I open my eyes to find him stooped over me. His eyes shine like two holes in a wall through which a light flickers. "Time to go."

I sit up and Arthur leaves the room to get more things while I pull my boots on. It rained last night and the lawn is sure to be thick and soggy with ice. I pull on my sweater while I walk out of the room, and I catch sight of Arthur in the bathroom. He's holding an empty Q-tip box in both hands and staring at the back. He rips the cardboard label off and studies the pictures for a moment, his mouth hard and his eyebrows are ridged like rocks. One of the pictures is of a baby, another is a picture of a woman's eye, and the third is a picture of an ear. He folds it into fourths and stuffs it in the hole in the wall where the medicine cabinet used to be.

After he took the medicine cabinet out to retexturize the bathroom

walls, he started using the empty hole as a trash can, dropping in the empty cardboard toilet-paper rolls and used Kleenexes, like he's done with all the houses before. But it always progresses into something more. He starts dropping in newspaper clippings and magazine cutouts. In our last house, he took out a light-switch panel and stuffed inside a newspaper clipping about a little girl who drowned at a friend's pool-party, with six adults supervising and nine other kids splashing around her. Yesterday he dropped a picture of his old dog, Hank, into the wall. The hole goes all the way down to the floor, so once he drops something in, it disappears.

I trudge out to the car, which Arthur has left unlocked so that he can load it up for the trip. While I buckle my seatbelt and lay my seat down to go back to sleep, Arthur locks up the house.

I sleep through most of the car ride but wake up now and again. The late November cold has frozen all of the windows and ice has latticed the corners. The chill is seeping into the car and Arthur cranks on the heater to full blast.

The darkness lasts into morning, and then the sky begins to turn a breathless blue. By seven, the flat fields, which go on forever, are still gray in

the early morning dimness. We're the only car on the highway. No trees, no signs. With flat fields ahead of us and flat fields behind us, it's almost like we aren't even moving. Just suspended in place, wheels spinning, but never getting anywhere.

I fall back to sleep and wake up when the car rolls to a gravelly stop. The fuzzy morning blue has thinned away and the sun is shining at an 8 a.m. slant. Time to wake up.

Arthur shuts off the engine and almost instantly the cold begins to sink inside. He gets out, and I pull on my boots and follow. Together we trudge through the crunching icy gravel toward the front porch. The field behind the trailer is still hazy with cold, but starting to warm up in the angular sunlight.

The vastness of the field makes me think about when Arthur and I met. I was house-sitting for people I didn't know that well—some executive couple going on vacation. Friends of a friend. They had a six bedroom house in the hills, perched upon the top of a steep cliff—just a straight drop right outside the back door. I watched TV, made myself some pasta that I'd found in the pantry, and then went to sleep in their bed. At nightfall, I couldn't

see anything out the windows. Trying to see outside was like trying to stare through a black wall. When I turned off the lights, the house was sealed up in darkness. There were no lights or houses nearby, and no moon in the sky. I lay in the darkness for a long time with my eyes open, not seeing anything, or hearing anything. No one knew I was there, so if I disappeared, it wouldn't make a ripple in the universe. After a while, I couldn't tell if I was still awake or not. The darkness surrounded me, sank into me, penetrated me. In my mind, I could see myself disappearing. First my feet and legs, and then my trunk, and then my hands and arms, like sinking into quicksand. Finally my head submerged, and the room was empty.

And then Arthur let himself in the house. He turned on the kitchen light and found a pot of hardened, half-translucent pasta on the stove. He went through the house, turning on lights as he passed through each room, until he came to the closed French doors of the master bedroom—doors that he had hung the day before. He later told me that he had left his phone in the house, but he never could explain why he opened those doors and went inside. I was asleep in bed, but woke up when he

put his hand on my chest, just over my heart. For a moment, in the house and bed that belonged to people we didn't know, and surrounded by pictures of family and friends we didn't really have, it felt like he'd finally come home to me.

* * *

The porch steps are thin and hollow and covered in wet green felt that is icy in spots. Arthur knocks on the door, which is just as thin and papery as the steps.

The park is orderly. The streets are paved and the trailers are each spaced five to ten feet apart. The trailers are all square and flat, like garages. Storage units. A thin crust of ice clings to the crinkled metal walls.

“Arthur!” A short, round woman in a loose maroon dress with aquamarine trim pushes open the screen and pulls Arthur into a tight hug. She has big bright eyes that search around wildly and a wide smile that seems immune to the cold. Her name is Sylvia and she lives with Stan. She is easily a foot and a half shorter than him, so he has to stoop, making the hug look awkward and uncomfortable. “Geez-Louise, it's cold out here! Come inside and I'll fix you both up some hot

cocoa,” she says as she steps back inside and holds the door open for us.

We step inside and are both surprised at the warmth that greets us. The walls are so thin that one would think that the cold would surely have penetrated the trailer. But it’s warm and the air is thick with the smell of roasting turkey.

“So how was the trip? Was there traffic?” Sylvia asks. “Traffic gets crazy the week before Thanksgiving.”

“No traffic. The drive was pretty easy. Just had to watch for black ice,” says Arthur.

“Good, good. Stan’s in the back. Stan!” Sylvia calls as she leads Arthur and me down the hall. “Stan, Arthur and Lily are here!”

She pushes open the paper-thin door. We step inside and nearly jerk back with the sudden rank stench that hangs in the room. It’s a sulfuric smell. Rotting eggs, or trash. Stan is watching TV in bed and his right leg is heavily bandaged. It’s the smell of rotting flesh.

Stan sits up in bed with some difficulty and smiles widely. “Arthur! How are you, kiddo?” He and Arthur don’t look anything alike. Stan is short and portly with dark hair and a red face, while

Arthur is lean and fairer complexioned.

Neither Stan nor Sylvia seem to notice the smell. Arthur does, but he doesn’t show it. I can see his nostrils twitch, but he doesn’t look away or cough or even scratch his nose.

“I’m good,” he says, his voice sounding a little dry. “How are you, Stan?”

Stan opens his arms as if to display a model physique. “Never better. I feel as strong as a horse. Got the appetite of one, too!” he says, and laughs a deep, throaty laugh as he looks up at Sylvia.

“Yup, we’re having turkey, and cranberry sauce, and mashed potatoes,” says Sylvia, listing the items off on her fingers. “And then for dessert, we’re having pumpkin pie.”

“Now that’s a meal,” says Stan.

“Well it’s nice to have a big family to cook for again. Sometimes it gets so dull when it’s just Stan and me. It’s too easy, you know? I can just whip up a couple of hamburgers or a casserole and there’s just nothing to it. But this time, I’m really putting my back into it. It’s going to be great, and everyone will have big, full stomachs to fall asleep with tonight.” Sylvia laughs and Stan does too.

Stan's laugh is deep and husky while Sylvia's is high pitched and punchy, like boiling water.

"Sylv, help me outta here, will you?" says Stan, struggling to hoist himself towards the edge of the bed.

"Wait, wait, don't move. You're going to snag your bandages," says Sylvia as she bustles around the bed and unfolds Stan's wheelchair. Stan kicks one leg into it and then hauls the bandaged one in as well, prepared to slump down off the edge of the bed and into the chair. "Wait, Stan!" Sylvia yells. Some gauze has gotten caught on the arm of the chair. Sylvia tries to work it free but Stan yanks his leg.

"God—damn—bandages!" he growls with each yank of his leg.

Arthur and I go out to the kitchen and sit down at the table. We wait in silence for a moment. We can hear Sylvia's and Stan's muffled voices and the squeaking legs of the rickety cot. Arthur's face is white as he stares down at the tabletop. The last time we saw Stan, there were a couple of small raw spots on his legs. The beginnings of the sores. At the time there was no telling what they would turn into, but everyone was hopeful that they

would heal.

A few moments later, Sylvia wheels Stan out, and the rancid stench from the bedroom rolls into the kitchen. His leg is more visible now, propped upright with spots where black blood is seeping through.

"So how's life, Arthur? You still working for that construction company?" asks Stan as Sylvia wheels him up to the table. In his wheelchair, he sits five inches lower than Arthur and me so that he's looking up at us. After Sylvia pushes him up to the table, she goes to the pantry and gets out a box of hot cocoa packets.

"No, they didn't have anything for me after the move, so I'm with a new company now. I like it better, though. It's a small, family-owned company."

"That's good. So you're still in that house, then?"

"Yeah, we're still unpacking."

"Think you're going to stick with this one?" asks Stan.

Arthur half-smiles and shrugs. "I guess. I don't know..."

Sylvia sets three mugs of hot cocoa on the

table and sits down with her own.

The sun is sharpening outside. The window glows and the ice shards in the corners sparkle.

Sylvia gets up and opens the oven where the turkey is roasting. She grabs the baster off the counter, sucks up some of the pooling juices, and squirts them on top of the turkey.

“Lily, would you mind peeling the potatoes?” she asks, looking over her shoulder at me.

“Sure,” I say as I get up and go to the sink where the potatoes have been piled.

The afternoon is spent cooking and preparing. Stan turns the TV on and he and Arthur watch football, talking during commercials and moaning over bad calls. When Arthur talks to Stan, he doesn't call him “Dad.” He just calls him “Stan.” Arthur was six when Stan left the family, and it was another nineteen years before he heard from him again. They talk to each other like old acquaintances, friends of a friend. They talk like two people who had once shared a house, but had to part ways.

By eleven, the trailer is filled with the smells of Thanksgiving dinner. Every time Sylvia opens the oven, the smell of the roasting turkey unfurls like a

thick, hot fog.

“My mom would always start cooking first thing in the morning, as soon as she woke up,” I say as I peel the potatoes and Sylvia opens the oven again to baste the turkey.

Sylvia smiles thoughtfully as she closes the oven door and goes back to preparing the mustard sauce for the green beans. “I used to do that, too.” She's hesitant. “Six a.m., I had the turkey in the oven and was cutting up the potatoes and carrots. I'd put cinnamon sticks in the coffee maker so that we'd have the smell of cinnamon coffee in the house all day. When I met Stan four years ago, he didn't even have a coffee maker. Only drank that God awful instant stuff. I said to him, ‘you have gone on long enough without real coffee.’ And that was the first thing I got for him. I got him a coffee maker, but he still didn't use it. Didn't use it until I moved in and started making it every morning. Now if you ask him, he'll tell you that he doesn't know how he went his whole life without fresh coffee. It's those little things— little things that make a difference, you know?” She smiles.

Around noon, Sylvia puts on a fresh pot of coffee. Before she starts it, she goes to her spice

cabinet and rummages around for a moment.

“Dang it. I don’t have anymore cinnamon sticks,” she grumbles. “Oh well.”

She turns on the coffee maker, and when it’s done, she takes some to Stan, who takes the dainty white cup in his knotty work-hands. I pour myself a cup, and when Sylvia comes back, she stops in front of the coffee maker and stares at it for a moment. She blinks a couple times, thinking. Remembering, maybe. Finally, she takes the coffee pot and pours the coffee into the sink. A curtain of steam curls up and fogs the window over the sink. “Lily.” She turns to look at me. Her face is uncertain. “We need cinnamon sticks. Will you run down to the store and get some?”

“Sure,” I say, setting down my coffee cup. I grab the car keys and prepare to head out.

“Take Arthur with you. You shouldn’t be out there by yourself,” she says. “Arthur, honey,” she calls into the living room.

Arthur turns his face toward Sylvia without taking his eyes off the TV. “Yep,” he says.

“Will you please go with Lily to the grocery store? We need cinnamon sticks.”

Arthur looks at me and then back at Sylvia.

“Lily knows where the grocery store is. She doesn’t need me to go with her.”

“Do you want her to get picked up by some ruffian?”

“Ruffian?”

Sylvia marches into the living room and turns off the TV. Stan and Arthur both let out open-mouthed moans of protest.

“You know what kind of scumbags lurk around here!”

Arthur sighs as he stands up. “All right, all right, I’m going.”

* * *

The grocery store is a flat rectangle with a faded blue tile roof and a water-stained front. The asphalt of the parking lot is crumbling in many parts and most of the lines of the parking spaces have been rubbed away. Nonetheless, the store is buzzing with people rushing around to pick up the Thanksgiving extras they’ve forgotten.

“What do we need to get again?” asks Arthur as we walk inside.

“Cinnamon sticks.”

“For what?”

“The coffee.”

Arthur doesn't say anything, but he sighs impatiently as he follows me to the spice aisle, where I grab a container of cinnamon sticks.

"Were the cinnamon sticks something we needed?" He's chosen his words carefully, but I don't respond.

After we pay, we go back out to the car.

"Hey, what do you know about the family Sylvia had before she met your dad?" I ask as we get in and Arthur starts up the car.

"She was married, I think. Had three grown kids, or something like that."

"How'd she meet Stan?"

"She worked for the hospital and made house visits. They hit it off, I guess. Kind of weird. Especially since he's so—different from what he used to be."

He's quiet as he drives the car out of the parking lot.

"It seems weird that she'd have her whole life all set up with a family and a house and everything, and she'd just give it all up. She'd change her whole life around to go live in a trailer park."

"People give up their lives for love." He

shrugs. "Sometimes they give up their lives for something different."

When we get back to the trailer, we walk back into the warm smell of food. The warmth of the turkey, the tangy sweet of the cranberry sauce, and the spice of the sweet potatoes. But underneath it all is the smell of Stan's leg.

"Get everything taken care of and done with? That cinnamon nonsense?" says Stan with a big grin as he leans forward on the sofa.

The coffee pot is still empty, rinsed and sitting in the cold coffeemaker. I give Sylvia the cinnamon sticks and she tucks two into the coffee filter and puts on a fresh pot.

We all sit down to dinner at three. A fog has closed in and the windows look like framed photographs of gray. It started shortly after Arthur and I got home, and by three o'clock, the whole outside appears to be swallowed up in the gauzy mist. We can't see any of the other trailers. We can't even see across the street.

We hold hands and Stan, sitting five inches lower than everyone else, says grace.

"Lord, thank you for this wonderful food and for all the blessings you've bestowed on us. Thank

you for giving us a warm home and each other. Amen,” he says, peaking around with a smile.

We eat in silence. Outside, it looks like the fog has swallowed up the rest of the world, and we’re the last human beings on the planet.

* * *

After dinner and cleanup, we spend the rest of the evening watching movies. At nine, Sylvia pulls out the fold-out sofa for Arthur and me to sleep on. When she bends over, her rear strains against the dress, outlining soft, wide hips. I picture Stan seeing her for the first time. He traveled the world, but always found himself lingering in Spain and Italy. Maybe it was the richness of their blood that always held him there, but he could always expect a torrent of conflicting passions to arise within him from either of the two countries. He fell into a bittersweet, day-long love at the sight of the Italian women with their thick hair and long necks, and shameful joy at the blood and fury of the Spanish bullfights. Outside a Spanish restaurant, he saw a young waitress wiping her hands on her apron before adjusting her ponytail, and her newness made him wonder about the family that he’d left behind.

He made up titles for himself. Stan, the Duke. Count Stan. He could drop the titles as easily as he’d taken them. None of it made any difference. It was all just make-believe. He played while it amused him, seduced women who lived for the opportunity, and fell asleep each night as someone new.

And then one evening, while dining on the veranda of his hotel, he saw her—Sylvia, the name sounding like a twinkling forest—bathing on the roof of a crumbling apartment building. The red-orange glow of twilight on her pale nakedness woke him from his make-believe, and he knew that she was the beginning of his end.

“That damn bar will dig into your back, but it’s better than the floor,” says Sylvia, clapping the dust from her hands.

“Come on, Sylv,” Stan calls down the hall as he wheels himself into the bedroom.

Sylvia rolls her eyes before turning and following him.

After getting into our pajamas, I get into bed and Arthur switches off the light. The room is sealed up in darkness. The fog outside is so thick that we can’t even see the streetlights out the

window. Arthur makes it back to the bed, and I feel him settle beside me. We both lay still, and I strain hard to see in the dark. It's raining now, and I can hear the low thrumming, soft, steady, constant. The thrumming grows louder in my ears until I can't hear anything else. Arthur rolls over, but I don't hear him. I hear only the rhythmic drumming of the rain. Soon I don't hear anything. The noise and the total darkness have made me deaf and blind. But I feel Arthur's hand come to a rest over my heart.

