

SCOTT ARMSTRONG

THE TEST

JOE WATCHED THE GARBAGE TRUCK coming down the street. It was maybe sixty seconds away. He moved away from the window and picked up the old shotgun he'd laid across the bed. He hadn't fired the thing in nearly twenty years. Not since the last time he'd gone small game hunting with Earl. But he'd kept it clean and safely stored and was sure it was still good. Joe sat on the edge of the bed with the gun across his lap, looking at the old woman in the chair. It was better to think of her like that now. Without a name. Not really a person any longer. He studied her twisted up face for any signs of life, any kind of recognition in those empty, half-closed eyes. But there was nothing. There hadn't been anything more than a flicker, a murmur in days. A stalemate with death. Just drool and shit and piss. Every day in that chair. Every night in this bed, he thought, passing his hand over the floral quilt. The garbage truck was almost in front of the house. Joe slowly lifted the gun, bracing it against the crook of his shoulder. He checked her eyes again, studying them hard, whispering to her. Nothing. A husk. He pushed the barrel lightly against her skin to keep its mark and turned away. As it did every week, the garbage truck screeched to a stop at the end of his driveway, and, because of the nature of its route, stalled a moment while the driver activated the compressor. The noise it made was loud. Joe didn't look when it was finished, either. He simply closed the bedroom door and walked away down the hall. He waited for an hour. In case someone came knocking. Then he put the gun back in its case, slipped it under his bed and went out for groceries.

It was still before noon and the parking lot was mostly empty. Joe pulled into a spot near the entrance and stepped out into the warm morning sunshine. A cart boy in his shiny orange vest was pushing at the head of a long line of shopping carts. He was leaning into them hard, tilting his whole body forward with his head down. Joe had to stop suddenly to avoid being hit, as did a white delivery van. The kid was putting everything he had into

the job and got them all up over the curb and in through the sliding doors. He was still untangling them when Joe came in. The kid offered him one and Joe took it. He wouldn't be needing one, but thought it might be nice to have something to hold and push around.

The store was quiet. Mostly old people and moms taking their time. Joe moved through the fruit and vegetable section quickly, finding the piled displays too rich in colour and the smell somewhat grotesque. He stopped at a basket filled with French loaves and pinched at them, dropping one into the bottom of his cart. At the long wall of raw meats, he paused for some time, walking back and forth aimlessly, unable to decide. In the end, he chose two thick pieces of steak ringed with peppercorns and a package of thinly sliced haddock. When he touched the cart again, it was as cold as the meat. He began to shiver violently, rocking on his heels. Sweat dripped down the sides of his chest. One of the butchers ran over and took his arm to steady him.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," Joe found himself saying to a portly man in a white, blood-stained apron. "Just another old man filling in time. It will pass. It will pass."

Unable to convince him to rest a moment, the butcher let him go. And further down another aisle, Joe did start to feel better. So much so that he took the time to walk other aisles, marvelling at the variety of choice with a meticulous wonderment.

"By God," he said, touching the elbow of a grey-haired woman, "I never realised."

By the time he had reached the cashes, the cart was half filled and he could no longer remember which items he had originally meant to purchase. The young cashier seemed perplexed by his explanations. She started punching buttons on a telephone. Joe panicked, talking faster, gesticulating vaguely behind him with short, sweeping jabs. The young girl kept pushing numbers, looking around for someone to help. Joe stopped talking. He slipped around the cart and walked towards the exit as fast as he could manage. The cashier called out to him. He didn't stop. He didn't stop until he was back inside the car, reversing into the trickle of weekday traffic. Then he remembered that he had come to buy supper. That there was nothing left in the fridge at home. Hunger filled his body. Ravenous hunger. A new idea came into his head. Something familiar and pleasant. He kept driving.

The day was growing hotter. Summer was in full swing. And everywhere Joe looked from the car, he saw life and the ease of it and the hunger in him grew to an excruciating level. While stopped at a set of lights, he

watched a young black man smoking a cigarette on a bus stop bench. The man's legs were stretched and crossed at the ankles. His chin up towards the sky. Further on, a young woman was scolding her dog, yanking on its chain so a thin layer of foam sprayed from its lips as its head shook.

"It's all so fragile," he spoke, surprising himself. "The smallest rearrangement. Beauty and horror in the same breath."

He pressed the turn signal, switching lanes, coming down into a familiar parking lot at the side of a pub. There were other vehicles, but not many. He got out of the car and crossed the pavement holding his stomach. Food. He had a terrible need to be filled with something.

No one showed him to a table. He simply walked to one and sat down, gripping both sides of the chair until the waiter appeared with a menu. At first, Joe thought that he'd come to the right place, but now he wasn't so sure. Nothing on the menu made sense. Blurs and smudges. He handed the menu back and asked for a sandwich. Any kind of sandwich. And a glass of Scotch.

The man laughed, rubbing both hands over his jeans.

"How about a cheap American whiskey, gramps? About as good as I've got in this place."

"Whatever," Joe said, biting down on his teeth. "Whatever you have."

Joe followed the movements of the man back to the bar and watched him tip a bottle to the glass. No, the design of the place wasn't right. Not at all like he remembered. This couldn't be the place, he thought, looking around at other things. Helen would never have allowed them to eat in a place this dingy. The air smelled of urine and stale beer. All the windows had been glossed over in some kind of black, reflective film. The other patrons were all old men like him, hunched over the bar keeping to themselves, staring up periodically at the television screen, nowhere particular to be. Helen would have made them leave. How, then, had he known to get here?

The man came back and put the drink on the table. Joe sipped at it immediately. It helped a little.

Sure, there were other methods he had considered. Poison. Asphyxiation. Carbon monoxide. An overdose. Starvation. Drowning her in the bathtub. The plastic bag trick while she slept. Most simply weren't practical for a man of his age. Seventy-one and counting. Even on her best days, she was only swallowing water, maybe a spoonful of soup. The other techniques called for extended contact. Too much time to linger and stop. And any small failures would have been caught quickly by the visiting nurse. No, he assured himself, finishing the drink more quickly than he had planned, he had done the

best with what he had. Joe waved the man over and ordered another drink.

By the time his food arrived, Joe was no longer hungry. The mound of things heaped on his plate made him dizzy. He called the waiter back and told him there'd been a change of plans. That he had to go. The man shrugged his shoulders and cleared away the food, bringing it back in a Styrofoam container. The drinks, he said, were on the house.

"You look like you've seen the Devil himself," he smiled, counting out the change. "If I were you, I'd go home and take a nice long nap. Go for a walk."

Joe nodded.

"Good advice. Thank you for the drinks."

He left with the food still warm in his hands. The world felt calmer, smoother, and he might have turned around and gone back in for one more drink had he not found something to fear in what the man had said. Sin was like a flashbulb. And the Devil was still on his trail.

Joe drove around the streets in a gentle, aimless fashion until he found himself merging onto the highway, heading east. There was only one person he knew who lived this way. He began to suspect that was where his body was taking him.

Dale Wright had become a drunk in the eight years following his wife's death. Lung cancer. Stomach cancer. He'd allowed his financial affairs to fall into ruin and his house to fill with garbage. He'd suffered a minor stroke and never told anyone. Eventually, his family had stepped in and moved him into a nursing home. His wits were fine, only his will had been damaged. He saw no reason not to live the remainder of his life as he saw fit. Joe had known him for nearly fifty-two years.

The woman at the front desk always squinted up at Joe when he announced who he had come to visit. Dale was not popular with the people in charge. Nobody wanted the liability of an old man drinking himself to death on their property. She said he was in and Joe rode the elevator to the first floor. The two floors above were lock-down units. He knocked on the door, gazing with some dread down the long hallway at the other doors. Helen had always insisted they live in a house with a respectable-sized yard. Even at the beginning of their marriage, when they hadn't really been able to afford it. A home, she'd say, is not a home without a garden. Somehow they had always managed.

No one answered and Joe knocked again. A dull, blurred voice called out.

"Nobody's home. The old shit died yesterday."

“It’s me, Dale. Come and unlock the door.”

Footsteps. Dale opened the door, red-eyed and half asleep. The tip of his nose like the first few breaths into a placid balloon. He was puffy, getting fattish. The folded crevasses in his face cutting deeper every year.

“May I come in?”

“Sure. Sure.” Dale waved him in.

It was a small single room with a bed, a dresser, a recliner, and a bathroom. Both windows looked out over the parking lot and a nest of large homes tucked away in a grouping of pine trees. Sunlight flooded the walls. Dale sat down in the recliner and lit a cigarette.

“You’re not supposed to smoke in here,” he said, smiling on one side of his face, “but I pay off the guards.”

He leaned over and raised a window pane. There was a half-empty bottle of rye on the bedside table next to a single glass.

Joe sat down on the edge of the bed facing his friend. Dale was wearing a wrinkled pair of khaki pants and a stained white shirt, both of which he had probably slept in for a few days. His head was an infestation of uneven white hairs. As was his face and neck. The room smelled of booze and sleep.

“Want a drink?” Dale asked, filling the glass.

“No. I’m good.”

Dale took a hit off the drink and started coughing. Something liquidy shifted in his chest. He didn’t seem to care. He stuffed the cigarette between his lips and started sucking, blowing towards the window.

“So,” Dale said, “we’re both still alive. That ought to be worth something. What do you want?”

Joe wasn’t sure. He’d been tied up at the house for so long, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d visited, what they’d talked about, what condition his friend was in. His mind was a blank.

“I’m not sure. I was just driving around and ended up here.”

“We’re old. Shit like that happens. Hell, the other day I got lost on a street corner. Didn’t no which way was right. Which way was left. Christ, I didn’t even understand the concept. You understand? Didn’t have a clue. Left, right, up, down. Nothing made any sense.”

“What did you do?” Joe asked, fanning at the smoke curling around his face.

“Do? I didn’t do anything. Just stood there trying not to look like an imbecile. Must have been there for an hour. Watching traffic. Then some guy came out and asked for a cigarette and I realised I was in front of the bar.

I'd gone out for a smoke."

Dale made a strange, agonised face and swallowed more from his glass. His eyelids were lowering and he was fighting to keep them up.

"How's the wife?" he asked.

"Better," was all Joe could think of to say. "Better."

"Yeah? Well, my kids are itching to have me moved upstairs again. Lock me in, you know. Keep showing up unexpected, poking around, looking for reasons to do it. But it won't happen," he shouted, banging a fist into the padded chair. "Sure as shit rather be dead. Rather be dead a long time ago."

"Your grandchildren must be in school by now," Joe said, steering the conversation.

"And don't you let none of them take you to a hospital," Dale warned, ignoring or not hearing, leaning over the side of the chair to flick his ashes into a garbage pail. "That's where it starts. Once they diagnose something as wrong, they keep bringing you back, making others bring you back. Trap you. So you can die tucked away in the stink of them rooms. So they can stretch you out for a couple more months. The holidays. Make everyone else feel better. Take my advice. Something hurts, let it hurt. There's nothing they can do anyway."

"Did you ever think it would be like this?" Joe asked when Dale had settled back in his chair. "I mean everything. Beyond this room. The past. Five years ago. Everything we've lived through."

Dale laughed.

"Only fools think they understand," was his reply. "I stopped giving a shit a long time ago."

"Are you going to sit in here and drink all day?" Joe asked.

"Nah. Later I'm going down to the bar."

Dale filled his glass a little higher, squealing when the liquor splashed over the sides. He scratched at the grizzled sag in his neck, the cigarette clenched between his curled fingers.

"Well, I best be going," Joe said rising slowly, taking the time to memorise the room, his friend's face. They'd known each other through such different times. "Leave you to your afternoon."

He proffered his hand, but Dale only nodded, grinned a little.

"Good to see you again, old man," Joe said.

"Yeah, yeah."

Joe opened the door.

"You see my kids, you tell them that they're stealing from me here,"

Dale shouted. "The goddamned nurses are stealing from me when I leave the room. Took my watch the other day. My pictures, too."

"I'll tell them," Joe said, patiently. "I'll let them know."

"Yeah."

Back in the car, the pain in his stomach returned. He had not eaten all day. Joe started stuffing clumps of sandwich and fries into his mouth from the container, swallowing mechanically. Halfway through, he leaned out the car door and puked everything onto the pavement. Growing up, his father had always warned him to never grow old. It had taken Joe a long time to understand the concept. But it was a useless concept. The better suggestion would have been do not become afraid. Do not become afraid of getting old. But everyone did. You couldn't help it. Dying was a lengthy process.

Joe crossed himself and said good-bye to his friend. He had stopped feeling bad for Dale many years ago. He was done with sadness. The world had already exhausted its portion of cruelty on him. There was nothing left.

Joe decided it was time to go home.

Coming down the street, the house betrayed nothing of the horror that lay within. It was a good house. And in times past, a beautiful house. Lately, the grass had become a little brown and spotty, the flower beds left unfilled, and the boxwoods had lost their trimmed edges. But for thirty-seven years it had been a good house. Joe greeted it as he always did with a little wave.

He took the container of food and threw it in the garbage. He called out to his wife and was halfway up the stairs before he realised what he was doing. That room was empty, he told himself. That room was empty.

He came down into the living room and collapsed into his armchair, turning on the television for noise. A great wave of tiredness washed over him and he relaxed his head just enough to touch his shoulder. His body went cold again and shivers rippled over his skin. His eyes closed. The shivering made for terrible nightmares.

When he woke, the house was in darkness. It was after eleven and he jumped from the chair rushing towards the stairs, stopping himself for the second time that day. Instead, he continued down the shadowed hallway to his own room and stretched out on the bed. He waited for sleep and it would not come. After an hour, he dragged his reading chair to the window and wrapped himself in a blanket, watching the empty street below. He thought about things. He thought about as many things as he could. The years uncurling like a strand of thick, white string. Eventually, the sky crept up pink, then rose, then orange before exploding blue. It was tomorrow.

His son was coming to visit today. The boy liked to come every few weeks to check up on them. He was a good kid. Always has been, Joe thought, shaking his body awake as he stood from the chair. What he would find today was unfortunate.

Joe stripped naked and walked to the bathroom, humming a tune he had not remembered for many years. Under the shower head, he scorched his skin red with heat. It felt nice. He felt alive.

For breakfast, he made toast and smeared it with marmalade, managing to take down a half glass of juice. He'd put on a pair of nice slacks and a coloured shirt. He'd shaved off his moustache and trimmed the hairs in his ears and nose.

After washing his dishes, Joe went into the den and took two pieces of paper and a black marker. On both he wrote: CALL THE POLICE. He taped one to Helen's door and lay the second on the mat in the front hall.

He walked calmly back to his bedroom and found the manila envelope hidden behind the dresser. He opened it, reading aloud the short letter written by his wife many years ago.

"I, Helen Marsh, of sound mind and body, ask of my devoted and loving husband to end my life when my illness has reached its final stages. I choose not to live as a vegetable or become institutionalised and ask of him this terrible favour with all the love and affection I have to give. Please, do not blame him. And God forgive us both."

Under the letter, she had signed her name and dated it each year to show she was cognisant of what was happening. There were no witnesses, of course. Both he and his wife had refrained from asking anyone to share their secret.

Joe kept the letter open on the dresser next to a sealed plastic bag containing all of her jewelry. Next to it was another sealed bag filled with legal documents. He walked back to the bed and removed the large family portrait from the wall and leaned it under the window on the far side of the room. He riffled through the bedside table, placing any objects he found on the dresser with everything else. He then took a pen and signed his own name at the bottom of his wife's letter, dating it. The letter was then folded and placed in a sealed bag of its own.

Joe reached under the bed and pulled out the gun, unlocking the case. It felt dark and heavy in his hands. He sat at the end of the bed and nestled it between his knees, leaning his neck down, opening his mouth. The steel was bitter, ugly on his tongue. They had never discussed this part. He hadn't

wanted to bother her with that. A crazed half-smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. But that was just between God and him. “Hallelujah,” he found himself mumbling. “Hallelu