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## Out Buying Cigarettes

SONNY HELD THE VASE OF TULIPS tight to his chest as he crossed the lobby to the elevator. The janitor, a tall, thin man in his sixties, was unhurriedly mopping the white tiled floor of snow and sand and muddy water left behind by winter boots. Sonny offered an apology as he passed.

The janitor shrugged. “Can’t be helped,” he said, and mopped away Sonny’s footprints.

Sonny took the elevator to the third floor. It was two weeks into January, but still the walls were spotted with ageing Christmas decorations. Fading reminders of a celebration well past seemed appropriate for the place, Sonny thought. He stopped before the door to room 317. The intense smell of disinfectant in the hall made him nauseous, yet he waited a full minute before entering. The others were already there. Crowded into his mother’s small room—his brother, three sisters, and two of their husbands. Sonny noticed that they had all changed their clothes. Only he still wore the dark colours of a funeral.



It was after midnight when a police car pulled into the driveway, the headlights flooding the darkened living room. A car door slammed and Sonny pushed himself up from the chair in the corner. He let slip a groan as his knees and back protested the sudden shift from a position held so long. He opened the front door and stepped outside. A young burly police officer walked up the snow covered steps.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening.”

“Sorry to bother you so late,” the officer said, his voice deep and earnest. He had stopped on the top step directly beneath the multicoloured Christmas lights hanging from the rain gutter. The lighting lent the uniformed man a surreal aspect. “Are you Sonny Stallworth?”

“I am.”

“May we go inside, sir?”

Sonny shook his head. “My wife and son are sleeping. I don’t want to wake them.”

“Alright. It’s just . . . you’re in your slippers.”

Sonny looked down. “They’re moccasins.”

“Oh,” the officer said, and nodded once. He dropped his gaze, uncertain how to proceed. His jaw tightened and he swallowed hard. “Sir, you have a sister, Kaitlyn?”

“I do.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I have some terrible news.” He paused, allowing the other man a moment to brace for the gravity of what was to come. “Sir, your sister was struck and killed at a crosswalk on Pleasant Street earlier today.”

“I know. I saw it on the news.”

“Really?” the officer said, unable to hide his surprise.

Sonny nodded absently. “The tan sheepskin coat lying in the middle of the road. It was my father’s. Kaitlyn found it when we were cleaning out my mother’s house. Thirty years later it’s back in style.”

“Oh. Well if you knew, why didn’t you try to contact us then?”

“I thought you would have been here sooner. I’ve been waiting for six hours.”

“Yes, sorry. There was a murder-suicide this morning and it kind of backed things up.”

“I saw that on the news, too.”

“Uh-huh. Well, that’s why it took us so long to notify you.” The officer frowned and fixed an intent look on Sonny. “Your sister was twenty-two?”

“Yes,” Sonny answered, and felt the strange need to explain. “She was the youngest of the family by ten years.”

“Oh.”

There followed an awkward silence between the two men on the snow-covered steps. For the first time since stepping outside Sonny was conscious of the cold. He buried his hands deep in his pockets. The young officer cleared his throat and sniffled. The police car’s engine hummed in the driveway.

“Forgive me for saying so,” the officer said at length. “But you seem to be taking this quite well.”

“Believe me, I’m not. I’m just very, very tired. And there are other considerations.” He quickly changed the subject. “What happens to the man that killed her?”

The officer cleared his throat again. “He was issued a \$387.50 ticket for failing to yield to a pedestrian in a crosswalk.”

Sonny nodded. “And?”

“And nothing. I’m sorry, that’s it. Unfortunately, that’s all the law allows us to do.”

“\$387.50. Seems like a rather arbitrary amount, doesn’t it?”



“Hello, Sonny,” his mother called cheerfully from her bed. He squeezed past the others and kissed her on the forehead.

“How are you feeling today?” he asked, placing the vase on her bedside table.

“Quite well, thank you. And how are you?”

“I’m okay. A little tired, though.”

“These flowers are lovely,” she said, fingering the petals. “So full of colour. Not like your clothes.”

“They’re for work, Mom.”

“Oh, yes.” She stared at him, her face twisting in a look of muddled concentration. “I’m sorry, I can’t remember what it is you do.”

“I work for the Bank of Nova Scotia. Investing other people’s money.”

“Of course, how silly of me.” She looked around the room. “It’s been some time since I’ve seen you all together. Where’s Kaitlyn?”

When their mother had first moved into the nursing home, a year earlier, a similar question had shattered any lingering naivety about her illness.

“Where’s your father?” she asked suddenly one day.

Sonny, staring out the room’s only window, felt as though a piano had been dropped on his chest. After several seconds of the most terrible silence, he answered with remarkable calm, “He’s out buying cigarettes.” Kaitlyn, sitting on the edge of their mother’s bed, exhaled loudly and turned her face away.

“Oh, I really wish he’d stop smoking,” their mother said, shaking her head disapprovingly.

The next day she again asked, “Where’s your father?”

“He’s out buying cigarettes.”

“Oh, I really wish he’d stop smoking.”

The exchange took place every day for nearly a month, and then, as suddenly as it began, it stopped. Their mother fell sullen and taciturn and their father was never again mentioned.

“Where’s Kaitlyn?”

Anxious eyes turned to Sonny, and he realized that Cathy had told the others about their conversation the day before at the wake.

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“It’s been six days now,” Cathy said.

Sonny, standing before a large board covered with pictures of Kaitlyn, sighed. “And tomorrow it will be seven.”

“When are we going to tell her?” she asked with customary unpleasantness. Her voice never seemed to stray far from a high-pitched indignant tone.

“And why do you assume we tell her?”

“She has a right to know. And I’m tired of telling her that Kaitlyn’s studying for exams. She looks a damn fool, smiling at the lie.”

“So you’d much sooner her heartbroken?”

“No, I’d much sooner we tell her Kaitlyn’s out buying cigarettes with Dad,” she snapped back bitterly.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Sonny said, and turned away in disgust. “A hundred other people in this fucking room.” He started to leave but was stopped short by a gentle unsure hand on his shoulder.

“Hello, Sonny?” a young woman asked shyly. She managed a smile but her face was lined with days of grief. Behind her were four other young women all with red and swollen eyes, holding hands.

“Yes, hello,” he answered.

“I’m Sarah Martin. We’re friends of Kaitlyn’s from school.”

“It’s very nice to meet you. Thank you for coming.”

Sarah dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “Would you mind if we added some pictures of Kay to the board?”

“Of course not. I’m sure I can even get another if you need it.”

“No, no, it’s okay. We just have a couple we wanted others to see.”

“May I?” he asked, and she handed him the pictures. Sonny had long since thought himself dulled by grief, but the images of Kaitlyn laughing and smiling, surrounded by others doing the same, brought him new waves of sorrow. He spent several minutes with the pictures before handing them back to Sarah.

“I’m happy to know she had such good friends,” he said.

Sarah’s smile failed and her eyes filled with tears. She threw her arms around his neck, squeezing him tight. She cried but without a sound; Sonny could feel her tears on his cheek. She let him go but remained a little

longer holding Sonny's hand. Her friends led her to the board covered with pictures of Kaitlyn.

"Can we continue now?" Cathy grumbled behind him. She had not moved an inch.

Sonny was older than his sister by five years, but any passerby would have guessed the opposite. Her hair was flat, plain, and already quite grey. She had terrible wrinkles near the corner of her eyes and mouth. She wore no makeup and her clothes and glasses were those of an old woman.

"I want us to stop treating her like a child," she said.

"Nobody's treating her like a child."

"That's exactly what you're doing. Keeping the truth from her like worried parents."

"You are aware of her illness, aren't you? You've read the pamphlet?"

"Don't patronize me!" she cried loudly, drawing many angry glances. Sonny politely apologized and pulled his sister out of the viewing room and into the hall.

"And do tell, Cathy, what's your suggestion?" Sonny asked, his temper stirring. "That we tell her some eighty-four-year-old asshole in a pickup truck killed her youngest child and got a four-hundred-dollar ticket for it? And when she forgets a day later, or an hour later, do we tell her again? And again? Or should we just make a big sign and post it by her bed to remind her and save us the trouble?"

"Oh, don't be an asshole!"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me," Cathy answered. "She's my mother, too. And I think she has the right to know."

"What possible good can it do?"

"Did you even talk to the others about this?"

"Nobody wants to tell her."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't."

"That's exactly what it means!" Sonny cried.

"Why should we do everything the way you want? We didn't tell her about Dad because you didn't want to."

"Right, tell a woman the husband she's asking after has been dead for ten years."

"We put her in the home because you wanted to," Cathy went on.

"But not until she burned her hand on the element. An electric kettle melted to the stove wasn't proof enough for you."

"If you don't tell her, I will," she said with cold finality, crossing her arms.

Sonny gnashed his teeth and looked away, shaking his head angrily. “You just had to do this today, didn’t you?”

“Are you going to tell her?” Cathy asked.

Sonny didn’t answer.

“Are you going to tell her?” she repeated.

“Can’t very well have you do it.”

After Cathy left, Sonny picked up a vase of flowers, carried it outside, and smashed it against the side of the funeral home.



The priest raised his arms in prayer over the mahogany casket. Sonny, in the front row of pews, had to be nudged to his feet. Even then, he heard nothing the priest offered. Nor did he hear Cathy sobbing loudly, almost uncontrollably. Sonny had retreated to a place so readily available and yet so incredibly, unbearably distant.

He and Kaitlyn were driving along the empty Sunday streets. An hour earlier, their mother had asked for the first time about their father.

“When Dad was in the hospital,” Kaitlyn said, her hand out the open passenger-side window, “I would wheel him from his room to the parking lot so he could have a cigarette. I know he wasn’t supposed to but at that point it really didn’t seem to matter. He was on his way out and what did he have left. I took him for his last cigarette only hours before he died. He was so far gone by that point I actually had to light it for him,” she added.

“My God, you were twelve!”

“Almost thirteen,” she replied matter-of-factly. “Be thankful, it tasted so awful, I vowed never to light up again.”

“You’d think a father dying of lung cancer would be motive enough.”

“You’d think.”

Sonny glanced at his youngest sister. She very much had their father’s strong features. On another woman, the cheekbones, jaw, and brow may have laid out a scowl but on Kaitlyn they set a look of pensive stillness.

“So,” she began, paused, and then continued, “do we tell Mom about Dad?”

“Well, I’ve already started us down the path. What do you think?”

“I say we don’t. Seems cruel and frankly selfish.”

“You know what your sister’s going to think, though.”

“Fuck her,” Kaitlyn said, without ill will. “It’s not about her.”

“Oh, little Grasshopper, everything’s about her.”

“Yes, Master Po.”

“How is it you get that reference?” Sonny asked, the mood suddenly lightened.

“It’s called the Internet, old man,” she teased. “They’ve got it on computers now.”

“You mean like on a Commodore 64?” he joked.

“I don’t even know what that is.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus, I am old.”

Sonny pulled to the curb in front of Kaitlyn’s apartment building and she jumped out. She leaned in through the passenger window. “So when are you going to sell me this piece of junk anyway?”

“Maybe when you graduate,” he answered.

“It’s a deal then,” Kaitlyn said, slapping the roof of the car. “Oh shit! I think I dented it.”



“Where’s Kaitlyn?”

“Kaitlyn couldn’t come today, Mom,” Sonny answered, and the anxious eyes of others dropped to the floor.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

Sonny could not take his eyes off his mother’s face. She would not be able to run from the grief as others could. It would fill her small room, her world, and she would sit with it until her mind mercifully let it fade and finally disappear. And then she would again ask after Kaitlyn. Sonny could not imagine another six hours waiting by the front door.

“Is everything okay?” she repeated, her voice pitched with concern.

Sonny allowed himself a second more and then assumed a casual light-hearted tone. “Of course it is. Kaitlyn’s just out with her friends. She found out she got into the graduate program. She’s celebrating.”

“That’s wonderful!” their mother cried, positively beaming. The other faces in the room, with the expected exception, brightened as well. “She always was an incredibly smart girl, wasn’t she? I should get her a gift, shouldn’t I?”

“That’s a nice idea, Mom. I’m sure she’d appreciate it. I’m just going to go home now and change. I’ll be back later,” he said, and kissed her on the forehead and left her room.

He walked halfway down the hall and stopped and waited, knowing Cathy would soon follow. She came out of the room and rushed towards him, her intent evident in her scowl.

“What the hell was that?” she snarled.

“You can tell her if you want,” Sonny answered. “If you feel the need to spread your misery, I can’t stop you. But she’ll only ever be miserable with you. Every time she asks me about Kaitlyn, she’ll get the same answer.”

“It’ll be a lie.”

“It will. And you know what? It won’t matter one bit.”

“I will tell her,” she threatened.

“Then tell her,” he said, and continued down the hall.

“I told her about Dad,” she called to him.

“I know,” he replied over his shoulder without stopping.

On the main floor, Sonny again met the janitor. He was leaning on his mop staring at the clean white tiles.

“Have a good day,” he said to Sonny.

“You too. But I’ll be back. I’ll try to kick the snow off my boots better next time.”

“Why?” the janitor asked, shrugging as he had before. “That’s what the mop’s for.”

Sonny couldn’t help but smile. “Can I bring you back a coffee?”