

MARK JORDAN MANNER

HAUNTED

THERE WERE MICE IN THE CEILING. We'd listened to them scratch around up there for days. Finally the old man decided he couldn't take anymore. He bought a dozen or so traps and spread them all across the living-room floor. Then he took a steel bat to the ceiling and knocked out a hole the size of a pomegranate. The mice must've been drawn to the light because they immediately began dropping like hairy meatballs onto the carpet. Babies, said the old man. He loaded the traps with small cubes of Cheddar cheese. The springs screeched as he pulled the hammers back and placed the bait on top of the metal catches.

I joined him the following morning to see if anything had been caught. But there was nothing. Only traps and cheese. The old man got pissed at the sight of the bait still being there. He punched the doorjamb with the base of his fist and stomped the floor hard in his moccasin sheepskins. Then he kneeled down and cursed God under his coffee breath until there were no more bad words left to say.

Sylvia visited around that time. She wore a baggy sweater even though it was summer because she hated the shape of her new breasts. I could still see the outline of her bum in violet bellbottoms though. She walked with her hips. She asked why the old man had begun wearing a rawhide hammer in the belt loop of his jeans. I told her it was because the mousetraps hadn't worked. She said she wanted to see the mice. I told her they hid during the day, but she insisted. We waited in the kitchen until the old man left for work.

I poured us a couple cups of water and we brought them into the living room. She held the cup under her nose and sniffed the way the old man did with coffee. Her nose crinkled and made sharp lines along the bridge. I sat down at the upright piano. It was mahogany and stood taller than either of us. She told me to play something to attract the mice. I played "Ode to Joy" because that's all I knew. She told me to play the Pied Piper song, but I wasn't sure what that was. I played "Ode to Joy" a second time.

She explored the room and examined tight spaces between the walls and cabinets. She fingered the lampshade. She toed the floor vent. She lifted the old man's fishing trophies from the rustic mantel. She put them back. Then she stood and stared at the acrylic painting of the bad lady hung behind the black wooden rocking chair. Sylvia always liked looking at the painting because she knew the bad lady was my mother and she said we shared the same lips and earlobes and eyes. She touched my mother's pupils and ran her fingers across the canvass even though I'd told her not to touch it a million times before. She said the painting felt like her father's face.

I stopped playing piano. She put her cup on the mantel beside the trophies and we looked at each other and neither of us spoke for a long time. We listened to the mice move around inside the walls. I sipped water. Mice and sipping sounds and silence. Carrying a conversation had become more difficult since she'd grown breasts.

I asked Sylvia to marry me in the spring of 1973. We were high school seniors and it was a couple hours after prom. I drove us to the town park where we sat on the aluminum bleachers overlooking a small baseball diamond. She wore a light blue dress and white stockings and silvery shoes and there was a plastic magnolia clipped in her hair. The straps on her dress were patterned with pieces of fabric cut in the shape of rose petals. I put my jacket on top of her legs and my arm around her shoulder and kissed the mole on her neck. She complained about my stubble. I kissed her mouth. The taste of cigarettes and spiked fruit punch. I touched between her legs, but she swatted me away. Too cold, she complained.

The moon was pure white. Not a single blue blemish. Not a single star. Sylvia looked at me and asked what was in the duffel bag. I told her to wait. I carried the bag out to the middle of the baseball diamond and dropped it on top of the pitcher's mound. I looked back at the bleachers, but it was too dark. I unzipped the bag and pulled out a half dozen fireworks and dug each one into the crusher dust. I looked again at the darkness and wondered if she could see. I pulled a matchbook out of my sock. Struck a match and lit the fuses and ran. I was halfway back to the bleachers when things started exploding. The baseball diamond brightened under all kinds of pretty colours.

I ran up the bleachers until I arrived at the row in front of Sylvia. She was wearing my jacket now. She was watching the sky. I said her name. She looked down at me. Her red hair hung coiled over her shoulders. I pulled my mother's ring from the back pocket of my tuxedo pants. It was gold and

engraved with butterflies. The fireworks fizzled and Sylvia's skin turned grey under all the blackness. I didn't have a box so I held my hands like a clam and parted my fingers with the ring rested on my palm.

I'd first met Sylvia in 1962. The old man and I had moved into the house across the street from hers in North York. It was a square bungalow with two square windows and a square driveway that sloped toward the beaten street.

We were seven. I was invited to play with Sylvia one day while the old man was at work. Our date began in the back yard. She showed me the croquet wickets and the cilantro garden and the hole in the fence where she sometimes spied on the Taiwanese neighbours. She showed me the red oak tree. Climbed the wooden planks nailed into its trunk and entered a fort built atop the branches. She grabbed a soup can from inside the fort and let it drop. The can landed on the grass in front of my sneakers. It was attached to green yarn. She told me to walk as far as possible. I walked until the yarn tugged and I was standing about ten feet away. She told me to press the can against my ear and I did and she asked if I could hear her and I could hear her fine, but it probably wasn't because of the can. It was because she was yelling.

My dad invented this, she said.

I held the can up to my nose. It smelled like ketchup. Sylvia asked me if my mother was dead, because she'd noticed I didn't live with one. I shook my head at the grass and then looked up at her. Ma's helping end the war, I said.

Sylvia's house was square the same as mine. But the inside looked different. The walls were yellow and the rugs were orange and the lampshades and curtains and picture frames were all red. It was like living inside of autumn.

We took our shoes off and shuffled down the front hall. A picture of an old man's hands hung low on one of the walls. It was a pencil drawing. The hands were grey and covered in veins like worms under the skin. They were pressed flat against one another like someone praying. Sylvia said her father used to be an artist, but now he sold cars.

I told her the old man drove a taxi.

That's supposed to be really dangerous, she said.

In the kitchen her mother kissed our foreheads and poured us each a glass of skim milk. She told Sylvia to give me a tour of the house. Sylvia started by showing me the collection of cuckoo clocks on the wall in the dining room

and then the plastic bags of clothes they kept in the garage. She showed me the mildew on the shower curtain and the dark hairs gathered at the base of the toilet. She showed me the automobile books on the coffee table. She showed me the birdcage. She showed me the cat dish. She showed me the storage bin in the basement where her father kept his cigars and photographs of naked black women. She showed me the cupboard under the stairs. She showed me the step where she'd carved her initials with a nail file. She showed me my milk. She asked if she could drink the rest.

Sylvia's bedroom was painted pale yellow. The carpet was brown and scribbled with vacuum lines. Her bed was pink and low to the ground. She sat down on it. This is the desk to my office, she said. She patted the comforter. I touched it too. Then I circled the room and examined the walls. All were bare but one. There was a photograph hanging at the centre. It was of a boy about our age. He had buzzed blond hair and freckles and big lips smiling with only a bit of teeth showing. His face was held in place by a silver tack.

Who's this? I asked.

Kenny, she said. He's dead. I thought maybe if your mom was dead then we'd both be people who know dead people, but your mom's still here.

Kenny's shirt was white and collared and his head was tilted to the side slightly. He sat with his hands on his lap in front of a bookshelf backdrop.

My mom's a bad lady, I said.

How come?

She's not even my mom, I said. The old man says she's my mom 'cause she had me so that makes her my mom, but she's not my mom.

Sylvia slid off the bed. Her dress looked like a pink rectangular box covering her body. Her socks were tall and striped scarlet. She walked over and stood beside me and her hair was a mess of red springs spiraled in every direction. She touched the photograph of Kenny with her pinky. He was gonna to be my husband, she said, but something inside his head went wrong.

What did?

It exploded.

Like a bomb? I said.

It's called *aneurysm*, she said. It's already inside your brain. It blows up and your head fills with blood and you die. Kenny wasn't sick. It just happened.

I looked back at Kenny and tried picturing him as a ghost or a skeleton or an angel but couldn't. He looked too young to not be living. I felt dizzy. I sat down with my back against the wall. Sylvia ran over to her closet and opened

it and pulled out a tin lunchbox from the top shelf and brought it back over to me and sat down. The box was a quarter full of chewed gum. The pieces were hardened and in a variety of shapes and colours. I collect these, she said, and sometimes when I'm sad I look at the gum and it makes me feel better.

I looked at the gum. There was hair stuck to some of it.

So if you find gum, can I have it? she asked.

Okay.

It's under lots of things. And in drinking fountains.

Okay. I know.

She looked at me with grey-green eyes. Don't worry, she said. Kids almost never die, ever. The inside of Kenny's head exploding was a really strange thing. Don't be scared, Harry.

I'm not, I said.

Sylvia held the box of gum under my chin and told me to sniff. It smelled like sugar and salt and fruit and garbage. You can come over and look at it whenever you want, she said, but promise never to put it in your mouth. It's not 'cause I don't like sharing; I just don't want you to choke or get sick.

The second time I asked Sylvia to marry me was in the fall of 1981. She and I were twenty-six and it had been almost a decade since I'd last seen her. I'd recently begun teaching eighth grade in a small town called Port Woodlot, sixty kilometers north of Toronto. I was up late marking quizzes when the call came. It was past midnight.

She'd recently returned from Florida where she'd worked customer service at Magic Kingdom in Disney World for the past seven years. She asked me how I'd been. I told her the old man was dead. She said she was sorry. I said *fuck the old bastard to hell*. She tried laughing, but it was forced. I told her I was sorry for saying fuck. She said it was fine. We arranged to meet that Saturday at a restaurant in Aurora, which was halfway between us.

After I hung up I thought a lot about how I'd said *fuck the old bastard to hell*. Made me want to lift the phone and slam it back down. *Fuck the old bastard to hell. Fuck the old bastard.* I repeated it out loud a dozen times. It was such a stupid thing to say.

The next day she showed up thirty minutes late. I was already on my third beer. She slid inside the booth across from me and blamed her timing on the traffic. She wore a denim jacket over a billowy white dress that went down to her ankles. Her fingers and toes were painted red. Her red hair had turned brown. She had a belly. It bulged like a globe under her dress.

Your hair, I said. And you're expecting.

Her face looked a lot rougher, but it was still pretty. I asked how far along she was. Seven months. I asked who the father was. Not in the picture. She drank half a pint of water in one gulp. The ice cubes clattered against her teeth. I asked if she was scared and she said she was and I told her I was scared, too.

Of what? she said.

Huh?

What do you have to be afraid of?

No. I'm not.

She plucked the lemon off the rim of her glass and dropped it on the ice. I put my foot on top of hers under the table. The waitress came and took our orders. Sylvia stared longingly at the people in the smoking section. I reached my hand across the table and held it there and eventually she touched my fingers. I asked if she was in love with the father of her baby. She shook her head no. I told her I loved her and that I wanted to try again. She pulled her hand away like I'd burned it. I pulled out my wallet and spread it open and my heart was beating so hard I could feel it press against my ribcage. A couple loonies and my mother's ring fell onto the table. The ring twirled to a stop. Sylvia held her belly like a basketball player on the foul line. The waitress returned and refilled Sylvia's water and we both watched the lemon wedge float back to the top. Then the waitress left and we were alone again. A white seed slipped out of the lemon and sank to the bottom of the glass.

Harry, she said. Harry. Are you listening?

It was my mother who'd named me Harry. The old man never liked it. He started calling me Edward after she left.

Harry ain't sturdy, he said. Ain't a proper man's name. A proper man's name gotta be sturdy, like Edward. Now there's a proper, sturdy name for ya.

The old man had always been an old man for real. Fifty-six the year my mother gave birth to me and sixty-two the year she split and seventy-seven the year he split himself. His heart attacked him in the washroom at the Dairy Queen. He'd been sitting on the toilet dipping his fries into an Oreo Blizzard when a blood clot clogged a coronary artery. The cops contacted me at college three days after. They asked to speak to Harry. I didn't know what to say.

Sylvia went through a pregnancy phase around the time we were eight. She wore big baggy shirts so she could fit a balloon underneath. Her mother worked at a party store and would bring home bunches of balloons already filled with helium. Sylvia used to draw faces on the balloons with permanent marker and then give birth to them. We'd sit and watch the newborns float to the ceiling and pop against the stucco.

Once Sylvia and I were playing checkers on her bed. She sat cross-legged with her gut inflated on her lap. There was a bowl of BBQ chips beside the checker board. Sylvia kept rubbing the orange powder from her fingers on the comforter and it made smears that looked like little flames.

She was better at checkers than me. She had three kings on her side of the board. She asked if I wanted to feel the baby kick. I touched the balloon. Her older sister Marsha walked by the door and saw me and laughed and asked when the wedding was going to be. Sylvia hopped a red checker over two of my blacks and asked if I would.

Would what?

Marry me if we were grownups.

I said I would. She asked what we'd name the baby if the baby were real. I told her Edward. Edward's a good name, I said, a good, sturdy name. She lay back and looked up at the ceiling with her legs bent and her knees pointed in the air. She lifted her shirt and the balloon rose. It was red and attached to purple curling ribbon like an umbilical cord. The ribbon was tied to the zipper of her pants. The face on the balloon had buckteeth and crossed eyes and I snipped the cord with nail clippers and it floated and bounced against the ceiling fan.

Edward sounds too old, she said. That's an old man's name.

No, I said. It's proper. It's a proper, sturdy name.

How about Eddie? she said. That's proper too, but not so old sounding.

Is it actually proper?

It is, she said. Sure is.

I pulled Eddie down and tied him to the bedpost. Sylvia walked over to the picture of Kenny. She took out the tack and Kenny slid down the wall and fell face forward on the carpet. Sylvia brought the tack over and told me it was boring playing checkers with me because I was so bad at it. She pressed the tack against the balloon. Scraps of Eddie exploded everywhere.

I don't like this one, she said. Let's make another. We need to draw Eddie a better face. I wanna make him smiling. I wanna make him the happiest baby in the world.

Sometimes I dream about the day I'll ask again. It won't be for another couple decades. I'll find her living in a retirement home in Florida a ten-minute drive from Walt Disney World. She'll be seventy-eight and so will I and together we'll be old and shrinking. I'll stand on one knee. Hold her hand in mine. It'll be cold and covered in spots and wrinkles and I'll kiss her knuckles and slide the bad lady's ring on top of her frail, tobacco-stained finger and turn the bad into something good.

Sylvia, I'll say.

And I'll touch her face and look at her eyes and see the little girl who lived across the street from me. The girl with red hair that turned brown that turned white and I'll tell her that she and her baby were the two best things that ever happened to me. I'll walk over to the closet. I'll pull out the lunchbox and open it and find the picture of Eddie glued to the backside of the lid because the shoebox is where Sylvia kept her treasures. And I'll spit my gum inside the box. Breathe in and out and shut the lid and hold the box tight against my soft sagging body and keep it safe forever and keep her safe forever and that's how things will end for us.

There was a baby mouse on the floor. It trembled in the shadow between two coffee table legs. I'm not sure how long it'd been there before Sylvia saw it and pointed and hopped on top of the couch with her black socks sunk into the bronze-yellow cushion. I thought she was scared at first, but realized she'd only jumped to avoid hurting it. She told me to jump too. I hopped on top of the piano bench.

The mouse was the size of a gumball. It had a pink wormy tail. I told Sylvia the old man wanted the mice dead, but she said we needed to save it. I stepped down from the piano bench.

I'll catch it so we can bring it outside, I said.

It's so cute, she said.

I told her I'd trap the mouse under a cereal bowl. Then I could slide it across the carpet and kitchen tiles and wooden floor in the hall until I got to the front door and released it. Sylvia told me to hurry. I ran to get a bowl. When I returned I saw she'd unfastened the bun from behind her head and stretched the elastic band over her wrist. Her red hair sprang to life like blood exploding from her scalp. I dropped onto my hands and knees and crawled across the floor toward the mouse. It stayed shivering in its spot. I got close enough so that my shadow merged with the one from the table. The mouse

inched forward. Sylvia told me to be careful. She was on her knees on the couch leaning forward to get a better look. I held my breath and cupped the bottom of the bowl in my right hand and held it back behind my head like I was about to throw a football. The mouse stopped and moved and stopped again. I counted to three in my head and brought down the bowl. Sylvia squeezed her eyes shut. I was looking at her instead of the mouse.

When the old man returned home from work I was waiting for him on the steps outside. It was around dinner. The sun had already set over Sylvia's house across the street and the light in her kitchen was on, but the blinds were pulled shut. The old man asked what I was doing. I told him I'd made a mess inside.

What sorta mess?

I showed him the mouse on the living-room floor. It'd been split almost in two by the rim of the bowl. Its insides blotted the carpet. The old man put his hand on my shoulder. It was big and hairy and calloused and I could smell the crud under his nails. You got one, he said. And there was delight in his voice. He told me to go grab the broom and dustpan from the front closet.

When I returned the old man was standing with his hands on his hips and he was looking at the painting of the bad lady. Then he turned to me. You got one, he said again. His smile was wide and his eyebrows were high up on his head. I swept the mouse onto the dustpan. Now we know it's possible, he said. You got one, Edward.