

The Weight

At first it appeared to be nothing more than a bad fall.

“You know how clumsy she is,” Peg said, sounding bored by the whole business, “always tripping over things. The woman is a total klutz.”

“We used to blame the drinking. *And* the Valium...”

“At least that gave her an excuse.” He heard her yawn. “Anyway, they’re keeping her overnight. Running some tests. She’s pretty disoriented. Probably just a concussion but I guess they have to make sure.” So casual about it even though this was their *mother* they were talking about. Conrad told her to keep him updated and they left it at that.

But when Peg called early the next morning the situation had changed dramatically. Now they were saying Sheila’s tumble had been precipitated by a *stroke*, possibly the result of a blood clot that had lodged in her brain. Overnight her condition had worsened. She was paralyzed on her left side and had lost the ability to speak. They were doing more tests but it was likely she had suffered another stroke, one that had inflicted far more damage than the first.

“So--so what’s the prognosis?” Conrad’s voice sounded wrong, pitched too high.

“It’s bad, Con.”

“As in *super*-bad?”

“As in get your butt home as fast as you can.”

Doing his best Don Adams: “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Jake and I can put you up here if you want.” Jake...Tony...Rafe...the latest in a line of weak-willed, good-looking guys who were drawn to Peg like bears to honey.

“I figured I’d stay at Sheila’s. Feed her plants, take care of shit.”

“I’ve been over there already,” she responded sharply.

“Sizing up the silverware?”

The bad moment passed and she was laughing. “You prick.”

Conrad had to grin. It was like that with Peg and him. Same warped sense of humour. Often it was the only thing that kept them from killing each other.

So he had to drop everything, tell his faculty advisor he needed some time off to deal with an urgent family matter. “It’s...my mom”--hardly able to get it out. So used to calling her “Sheila” (or something worse).

He drove back from Regina to be with his ailing mother and a sister he sort of liked, all the while hoping that whatever happened, it would be over *soon* so he could get back to his classes. Mid-terms were coming up and he really needed to bear down.

About halfway there, his piece of shit Chevette started over-heating and he had to slow down, drive well under the speed limit for the remainder of the trip. By the time he got into town he was tired, grouchy and stiff. Not in the best frame of mind.

Once inside the front door, he dropped his bags and went around opening windows, letting the stale air out. That old lady smell. He’d brought along a couple of joss sticks of strong sandalwood incense and left them burning in various parts of the house.

Peggy hadn't put up much of an argument when he said he'd stay here. She knew it was better when they weren't at close quarters for any length of time. They'd had their differences over the years and some wounds festered, refusing to heal. Sometimes all it took was a chance remark or off the cuff comment to set them off. Well, mainly *her*.

A horn bleated from outside; that was Peg, had to be. Disturbing a quiet neighbourhood so she wouldn't have to come to the door.

She hadn't brought Jake with her, thank God. And from the crooked smile on her face, those half-lidded eyes, she'd been into the strong, homegrown pot she favored. Jake (surprise, surprise) provided the know-how.

"Hey, little bro." No hug and certainly no kiss. She never took her hands off the steering wheel.

"Hope you brought some wacky-tobacccy for me."

Peg shook her head. "Not for the first time. You'll thank me later. You need to be straight, trust me." Taking a breath. "This morning when I saw her, it was a total shock. They've got her all wired up and..." She shivered. "The tests show lots of bleeding and...she probably shouldn't even be alive. They'd like to take her in to Saskatoon but they don't think she'd survive the trip. And that's...that's all we know right now."

"Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*." It was the worst possible news. Now there was no question of being able to extricate himself quickly. He was stuck and who knew for how long?

She prepared to pull out of the parking space, paused. "It's weird. Sometimes she opens her eyes. Looks around, looks *right at you*. But there's no way of telling how much she--Christ, Con!" Peg turned to him, confused and furious, out of her depth. "She just *lays* there. She's not

dead, not alive...what is she? Is it Sheila any more. Is that our--” Almost saying it. Holding off at the last second. “Well...we’d better get going. Hope you’re ready for this.” She checked behind her and nosed the Corolla into the street, getting them underway.

The hospital was on the east side and traffic almost nonexistent. The town seemed dirty, unkempt. Depressingly familiar and unchanged; it was like he’d never left.

“She can’t talk?”

“She can’t *anything*.”

“Well, then, look on the bright side.” She was held up by a stop sign, looked over at him. “At least we’ll always know where she is.”

She stared at him. Opened her mouth. Shocked? Offended? No, *laughing*. And Conrad along with her. Howling in savage merriment, the two of them. Anyone watching them would’ve thought them completely nuts. Because it went on and *on*...

There was definitely something *wrong* with their family and Conrad knew it from a very early age. He’d visit friends, observe how they interacted with their parents and siblings and he’d be dumbfounded by what he witnessed. *Other* families kissed and hugged and talked and did things together.

Not the Dahls. For people who were supposed to be related, living under the same roof, they didn’t connect or (be honest) even *like* each other. Displays of affection were rare and short-lived and were to be avoided at all costs. Most of the time they managed to get by, fake it, but it was like they were four strangers sharing the same house.

Peg couldn't *wait* to get out of there and left home as soon as she legally could. That *really* messed things up, making an already bad situation even worse. The three of them retreated to their separate corners. No one reached out, no one tried to make contact, no one seemed to *care*. For Alan Dahl, the atmosphere of isolation proved to be unbearable. His solution was uncharacteristically dramatic and immoderate: he offed himself.

Coward.

So...exit Peggie, exit Alan. Which left only Conrad and Sheila and *that* lasted all through his high school years. Christ. Every single day, finishing school and knowing he had to come home and face *her*. Try to quickly divine her state of mind and adapt his demeanor accordingly. Calling her *mercurial* was being kind. After she was weaned from the Valium, the loneliness, depression and bitterness descended. She drank a lot (he found the bottles she stashed). She accused Conrad of scheming to leave her, abandon her just like the others (and, of course, she was exactly right).

He worked hard, maintained his grades and managed to earn some scholarships and bursaries. During weekends and summer months he worked at a local bakery, for Neil's dad, a job he'd held for years. Saving every dime.

Getting away was important: to be free of the past, remake himself, a new, improved version of Conrad Dahl. Going to university in Regina would help. Bigger city, more room to grow. And he *did* grow. Made a few friends, went to some parties. But mostly he stayed in and focussed on his studies. Money was short and textbooks ridiculously expensive. He'd initially enrolled on the drama program at the U of R but recently his thoughts had turned to film. He

was halfway through his second semester, debating a change in direction and instead of focussing on *that*, he had to deal with this crazy fucking situation.

They pushed through a door and entered the ICU ward. Peg knew the way and led him to a room off a short corridor where Sheila--his not so beloved mother, Sheila Embry Dahl--lay in the last of two beds, hooked up to a bank of machines.

“Good God, she looks like a cyborg,” Conrad murmured. He wasn’t sure if Peg heard him. She was staring at the impressive array of life-preserving gadgets; it really was like something out of a sci fi movie.

“They don’t know if she’s aware of anything,” Peg had warned him, shortly before they arrived at the hospital. “Just so you know.”

“*You’re* the one who has to watch her mouth. No cracks about smothering her with a pillow.”

“Shut up, you ass...”

They stood on either side of the bed, looking down at their mother, her features barely discernible through the myriad of tubes and hoses they had going into her (and, presumably, coming out). Both were rendered speechless, momentarily overwhelmed by the scene. But no tears, no displays of sadness or anguish.

Those taps had been turned off a long time ago.

After Alan did his dangling act in the family garage, Sheila went into a tailspin. She got an important promotion and a short time later embarked on a sordid affair with one of the senior partners that lasted for more than a year. A married guy, to make matters worse. Word got around and eventually the sneers and sideways remarks got so bad, she had to quit. Stayed

home, never went out or socialized. Basically sat around, watching TV and drinking all day, ranting about the many injustices she'd suffered, calling down divine retribution on her persecutors.

Pathetic.

One time Peg came by and discovered her passed out. So she decided to use the opportunity to snoop through Sheila's drawers and private things and came across the torrid love letters Sheila's boss sent her. Really smoking stuff. And, of course, she felt compelled to share them with her little brother. Just so he could bear witness to how sick and depraved the adult world was. Conrad remembered that he went on and *on* about her feet and what shoes he wanted her to wear. Must have been some kind of fetishist.

And the thing was Conrad *knew* the guy from the annual staff functions he'd been forced to attend. Fat and hairy, with big gaps in his teeth. Looked like Ernest Borgnine.

"She seems so small," Peg observed. She was right, Sheila appeared to have shrunk to half her size, dwarfed by the machinery hissing and clicking around her.

"Do they have any idea--" Not sure how to say it but temporarily stymied by the look Peg gave him. "She's not even awake, for Christ's--"

It was uncanny. As soon as he said it, Sheila's eyes popped open. Almost as if she was waiting for her cue. Nothing else moved *except* her eyes, which wandered all over the place. They never stayed moored for long, even when Conrad waved his hand and spoke her name. He looked over and saw that Peg had a "get me the hell outta here" expression on her face.

"Conrad's here," she said. "So I'm gonna take off for awhile."

And just like *that*, she left him there. Standing next to someone who used to be his mother but who now couldn't tell him apart from the ceiling fixtures. What was he supposed to do? Act like she was still in there somewhere, cognizant of what was going on?

He tried, he really did. He told her about university, the classes he was taking, his professors. He talked about how insanely large the campus seemed, like a city unto itself. He mentioned his basement suite and his crazy neo-Nazi landlord. Made a few jokes. But his was the only voice in the room. Otherwise: machine sounds, metronomic ticks, the suck and hiss of ventilators.

There was an old man in the other bed but no one was sitting vigil with *him*. He was getting the full treatment too and seemed more frail than Sheila. Conrad wondered how long before he kicked off, if the staff ever kept pools or whatever. He'd heard that doctors and nurses had a really black sense of humour. Guess in their line of work you couldn't blame them.

What would happen if Sheila's heart stopped, right now, right this second? Would alarms go off and people come rushing in to try and get her ticker going again--and if so, *why*? What purpose would it serve? Wasn't that just making it harder on the people waiting, the ones who needed to get on with their lives? Better, in certain cases, to let critically ill patients go. Concentrate on the ones where there was hope.

Sheila was looking his way again. He couldn't tell if there was recognition in her eyes and didn't want to lean in too close. The thought gave him heeby-jeebies. Brushing against the tangle of tubes and accidentally dislodging something, fluid spraying everywhere--

Christ, that's fucking macabre. Like a whacked-out SNL skit. Get a grip on yourself, man...

“Sheila? *Sheila?*” *Mom?* No, not able to bring himself to say it, not even here, the waiting room between life and death. Nothing seemed to ignite in her eyes, no flicker of understanding or acknowledgement. She was drooling quite a bit, some of the tape around her mouth coming loose. Have to get someone to look at that.

Jesus, it must be terrifying to wake and find your mind exploded, discover yourself a prisoner in a bizarre world; looming faces, strangers babbling at you, poking you with pins and torturing you for no discernible reason.

A tear welled up in her left eye. Conrad tried to tell himself it was nothing. Nothing *conscious*, anyway. But he couldn't stop watching its progress as it slipped down her cheek. Disappearing into the grey and black frizzy hair by her ear.

He had to get out of there. Leave. Now.

I can't do this.

Do you hear me, Peg? I can't do this...

Last year Sheila finally sold the family home and moved into a block of duplexes the town had thrown up with the help of some federal funding. Her place was small but comfortable, the rent calculated on her income. A pretty sweet arrangement. The rooms were cluttered and the closets stacked eye-high with boxes. Sheila was a real packrat, loathed giving anything away. There was all kinds of stuff he remembered from childhood, fragile do-not-touchables he'd longed to hold in his clumsy, indiscriminate hands. A milk crate full of LP records. Elvis and Perry Como and Charlie Pride. Old clothes and baby toys. *Junk*. Soon to be coming to a yard sale near you, the remainder trucked to the local thrift store.

Sheila gone, one more piece of his old life erased...before long, he'd be shed of the rest of it and this town too. Finally free to move unencumbered in the world. No past to betray him. No baggage weighing him down.

He made up a bed on the short couch, knowing she'd hate the thought of his sweaty head on her embroidered cushions. He watched TV until he was drowsy but had trouble settling into a deep slumber. Couldn't get comfortable, constantly starting awake in response to strange noises.

He rose early, fired up some instant coffee. Rummaged through the fridge, took his time preparing a substantial breakfast. He kept waiting for the phone to ring but it didn't. It was 10:30 by the time he was done and had everything cleared away.

He was putting on his coat when someone knocked on the front door. It was Florence Bradshaw, an old gal from down the street. Used to teach at the high school way back when. Hard to tell her actual age; late sixties, probably. Friend of Sheila's, wondering if there was anything she could do, heard about what happened, *blah, blah*.

Once she started going on about the wonders revealed by Christian Science, the miraculous healing powers of faith, he gave her the bum's rush. He started down the sidewalk and, lo and behold, Peg's brown Corolla was waiting at the curb. No apologies for bailing on him at the hospital or the six dollar cab ride home (including the tip). Peg *never* apologized or admitted she was wrong. Not just stubbornness, part of her nature, ingrained and immutable.

The highly efficient Nurse Ratchet type who always seemed to be on duty told them Sheila'd had a good night, although she appeared "agitated" at times.

"Is she in pain?" Peg, sounding more curious than concerned.

They weren't sure but thought it might actually be a *good* sign, since it meant she was reacting to the discomfort she was feeling, aware of it on some level.

They managed to secure an audience with a doctor who showed them more test results and explained the extent of the damage inflicted by the strokes. Dr. Abrams' prognosis was grim.

"There does seem to be some minimal response to external stimuli. That's something, at least. We've now determined that she can breathe on her own so we know her brain injury hasn't destroyed critical functions." He paused, as if gauging how much they were taking in. "I'm afraid that based on the testing we've done--and obviously we don't have the facilities larger centres do...but based on what I've seen, the areas of the brain affected, the outlook isn't good. I don't think she'll ever regain full consciousness and she might linger as she is for a considerable period of time."

Conrad closed his eyes, trying to assimilate everything. *Oh, Christ, oh, Christ, oh, Christ...*

"There are other risks, I'm afraid. Another stroke is a definite possibility. We also have to be concerned with the possibility of pneumonia, due to fluid building up in the lungs. We'll be keeping a close eye on that." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something else I could tell you. We can always pray for a miracle." Smiling wryly. "Sometimes it's all we have left."

After he moved off, Peg snorted in derision. "*Great*. You were saying something about putting a pillow over her face? You wanna draw straws?" They chuckled but their expressions were equally bleak.

"So...this could go on for, what, months, *years*?"

“Years, maybe even decades, who knows?” Peg pretended to bite her knuckle. “Can you *imagine?*”

He couldn't. It was too awful. Literally, the death of his dreams. “I think maybe he was being too negative, y'know? I think part of her is still in there. That makes me believe there's hope for improvement. No matter what *he* says.” He'd told her about the tell-tale tear on the ride over but she wasn't convinced. Or refused to believe it.

She scowled. “Con, for her sake, I hope you're wrong. That would be a living hell, something I wouldn't wish on *anyone.*”

“The way she was looking at me. I think there might be certain strong memories or associations that, I dunno, maybe linger or--”

“I don't want to hear this.” Holding up a hand. “I'd rather believe she's moved on.” A nurse gave them an impertinent look for clogging up *her* hallway so Conrad steered her into the visitors' lounge. A woman in a ridiculous hospital gown was sitting with her husband. Her I.V. rig partially blocked Conrad's view of the TV. *Family Feud* was on.

“So what's next?”

“You heard the doctor. They'll get her stabilized and then we'll have to find some place to put her. Long term care or whatever. Maybe Valley View--” the local nursing home where their grandmother had spent her last years. “Shit, Con, *I* don't know. Gimme a break here.” Something flitted across her face. “And don't think you're going to saddle me with all this, by the way. Because that's bullshit--”

“I'll help out,” Conrad assured her, a sick feeling washing over him, knowing what this meant. The end of everything. “Financially...whatever it takes. After all, she's our *mother.*”

“Don’t give me that.”

“I’m only saying that I fully understand we have a duty and--”

“Speak for yourself.” She was furious, wrenched away from him. “You wanna be a hypocrite and play the good son, be my guest. But don’t talk to me about *duty*. We don’t owe her anything. They were both rotten parents and they totally messed up our lives. I look at her now and I think *good*. She’s exactly where she deserves to be.”

Conrad could tell the older couple were eavesdropping. “Okay, keep it down.”

She edged further away, her eyes filled with spite. “It was *me* who found her, not you. Laying there in her own piss and I had to check and see if she was alive and call an ambulance. I was alone with her that whole time--*you weren’t there, Conrad*. I even cleaned her up so she’d have some dignity when they got there. And I made sure she was treated properly and--and with respect--” Holy shit, Peggie was actually *crying*, genuinely worked up. The other pair were straining to hear; this was better than TV.

“I came when you called. *I came back, Peg*. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, but for how long?” She glared at him and Conrad had to look away.

...she might linger as she is for a considerable period of time...

“I know you’re afraid of getting stuck with this.”

“No, Con, I’m not.” It was the old, cocky Peg again: assertive and unflappable. Swiping at her eyes, not caring if she smeared her mascara. “Because I know you. And I know how to make you do *anything I want*. And you know it so don’t bother denying it.”

He nodded glumly. No use pretending. Peg was his big sister; she would always be older, smarter, stronger, faster. “Are you coming in to see her?”

“You go,” waving him away like some kind of lackey. “I’ll maybe look in later.”

“Or maybe not.”

She shrugged. Refusing to budge an inch.

Conrad wanted to smack her. But then she’d beat the mortal shit out of him. So he swallowed his pride and walked past her, preferring Sheila’s mute company to his sister’s limitless reservoirs of rage and suspicion.

“Okay. See you...”

Forty-eight hours later and virtually no change.

They’d taken some of the machines away but they were still monitoring her vitals and feeding her fluids and nutrients to keep her alive. What remained of her.

Two nights of trying to sleep on that short couch had taken their toll. He was tired and short-tempered. The worst part of it was that everything in the place *smelled* of her. The pillows, blankets and towels. She was everywhere, all around him, permeating the air. It was *suffocating*.

The old man was still hanging in there but his breathing was raw and drawn out. Almost a death rattle. Still no visitors. Dying like Jesus, alone and forsaken. No, wait, Jesus had women with him, didn’t he, his mother and Mary Magdalene. *They* never abandoned Him.

His sheet had partially slid off and, holy shit, he couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds. Cirrhosis? Cancer? Whatever it was, it wouldn’t be long before the pool had a winner.

Sheila’s eyes were open and her lips were twitching and it *looked* like she was trying to speak; no words emerging, just fluttering, futile movements of her mouth. “Hey, Sheila.” She

looked toward him...and away. Then back again. Conrad noticed that someone had tried to brush or arrange her hair. Make it presentable. A nice gesture.

Her lips kept moving, speaking words he couldn't decipher. Likely just gibberish. Or a spontaneous outburst of relief, not *alone* any more, staring at bare yellow walls and listening to the guy next to you dying in slow motion.

The aura of pain and death surrounding this place was getting to Conrad. He could feel it being absorbed into his system, infecting and poisoning his entire body. Corrosive and toxic, lethal in the tiniest, most incremental doses...

"You think you're going to keep me here, don't you?" His voice caught; cripes, if he wasn't careful, *he'd* be crying too. Something that would be *completely* out of character. "I won't allow that to happen." All day being surrounded by her *things*, the accumulated pettiness of her life, the doo-dads and knick-knacks that defined her; and then coming down here and spending hours with this *thing* she had become. It would destroy him, all he was meant to be. No wonder Peg was so adamant about not having this dumped on her. One person couldn't be expected to bear that kind of responsibility. *Or* two. It wasn't fair.

And who knew how long the old bitch would hold on? This was a woman who discovered her husband hanging in the family garage and cut him down *herself*. Peg could recite, with perfect precision, Sheila's words when she called that horrible day: "Your father has done a foolish thing. You should come home to be with your brother."

No tears, no shock, no emotion. She kept the house, didn't sell it or move out to escape any bad memories it might contain. Parked the car in the garage as soon as the weather turned cold. Conrad asked her once if it ever gave her the creeps going in there (he rarely could) and

her reply was brusque and dismissive. Then he took a chance and inquired about something he heard Aunt Edith say, something about a note...

“You remember, Sheila? I asked about the note and at first you pretended not to understand but then you got super angry and told me to forget about it and never, *ever* ask about it again. You were fucking scary that day, lady.” A nurse came in, one of the cute, young ones. Terrific legs. She checked a machine over by the old guy, adjusted the sheet and waved to Conrad on the way out.

Sheila was looking away so he moved around until he was directly in her line of sight. “I wanna know about the note. I have a *right* to know. Did he leave one? *Did he?*” Her eyes started moving but he reached out and grasped her slick chin, turned her head and leaned down until her gaze was on him again.. “Tell me where the note is. You keep everything, so *tell me.*”

“...hh.....hh...”

The smallest sound, a weak exhalation. Another tear, breaking loose and sliding down. He didn’t care. He felt nothing.

“Don’t you think we deserve to know? Peg and me? Was he angry at you, is that it? Did he finally lay it on the line after all the years of you pretending he didn’t exist?” His face was close to hers and he was looking right into her eyes. “*What did he say?* Did it hurt? Did it rip your guts out?”

“...hh...hhh...hh...”

She was gulping for air, strangled sips that couldn’t sustain her. He abruptly released her, used the blanket to wipe his fingers. At that moment she shuddered, her body stiffening, bones and ligaments grating and cracking from the force of the spasm. Her neck arched and she

groaned, a low, feral sound that came from deep in her throat. Conrad backed away, momentarily transfixed...then ran to get a nurse.

Sheila was pronounced dead an hour later. Nurse Ratchet asked if he wanted one last visit with her but he couldn't face it. Peg was nowhere to be found so he called her house and left a message: *it's over*.

He ransacked the duplex as soon as he got back. Tore it apart, top to bottom. Found Grandpa Jack's medals, some old maps and newspaper clippings, locks of baby hair...and those pornographic love letters from her ex-boss.

But no suicide note. Would she keep something like that? Why not? Another interesting snippet for the family archive. To preserve and pass on to the grandkids...

He and Peg had talked it over, trying to imagine what their father's last words might be. She came up with a zinger. "Something short and sweet. '*Dear, Sheila: Fuck it. Love, Alan*'."

Probably as close to the truth as anything.

No letter, no matter how long-winded, could sum up a lifetime of near misses and blown opportunities, with no second chances allowed. And what about the future? Not a whole lot to look forward to: a stalled career, a home life that was a sham, nothing to lighten the load. That heavy, heavy load...

At the bottom of an unmarked box, Conrad found one thin photo album. Snapshots of family vacations, school pictures, fishing at Diefenbaker Lake. The most recent picture almost a decade old. As if life had just *stopped*. Only three photos of his father; he slid one out of its

plastic sleeve, set it aside. There was nothing else of interest. As far as he was concerned, Peg could have the rest. Sell it, give it away, do what she wanted with it.

Of course he'd offer to hang around for a day or two, help with the arrangements and some of the packing. It was a big job and he supposed he owed her that at least. After all, she was his sister, his only living relative.

That had to count for *something*, didn't it?

End

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