***Father’s Painting***

***By Matt Jaggi***

An icy wind blew through the night, causing Mark to momentarily lose his balance as he stepped out of the rental car. The wind beat harshly against his trench coat, and he slid precariously down the front walk. Across the street his lifelong neighbor Mr. Treseder was actually out shoveling his driveway- it seemed crazy to Mark that anyone would be out on a night like this. On seeing him, Mr. Treseder waved cheerfully and Mark nodded his head in acknowledgement.

He then gazed up at the long forgotten house before approaching the door. The mullioned windows were darkened, not a trace of warmth exuded from the old house. The residence showed signs of neglect, long forgotten memories and loneliness.

Stamping his feet on the front porch, Mark removed his woolen gloves and fiddled around in his pocket before extracting the old brass key. There was a soft ‘click’ as the key turned, and the door swung open soundlessly, beckoning Mark inward.

The entryway was black as a pit, and snow flurried inside as Mark stood, unsure, in the doorway. It was the first time he’d been back in several years.

Suddenly shivering, Mark stepped across the threshold. The shivering wasn’t due to the cold alone. There had been a feeling of unease all day. Almost like a premonition of dark deeds to come.

Shutting the door behind him, Mark fumbled around until he located the light switch. Lights suddenly flickered on, and a dull yellow glow, the color of pale sunshine filled the room.

The house was deathly still in strange contrast to the world outside where the wind was shrieking wildly, sounding like the souls of the damned.

Mark carefully untied his dress shoes and left them at the doormat and he hung his trench coat on the old coat rack. He then padded across the old shag carpet of the front room to the thermostat on the far wall. A moment later Mark heard the furnace crank to life, and sighing with relief he ventured out of the front room and into the kitchen.

Turning on the lights, Mark took a long look around the old kitchen. The bisque colored appliances were very much outdated, and he marveled at the fact that Father had never replaced them after all these years. A tiny movement caught Mark’s eye, and he watched a moment as a large white spider crawled across the counter before dipping down into the sink and slinking into the shadows of the drain. Feeling a slight revulsion, Mark turned and headed to the old den connecting off of the kitchen. This is where they would all meet tonight.

Stepping inside, Mark walked around the room and turned on all the lamps, giving life to the neglected den. He heard a ticking noise and looked over to see the cat’s tail as in swung in perfect harmony with the eyes of the black, cat clock. He had always loved that clock.

Mark walked resignedly to the old green rocking chair underneath the clock. It was patched and frayed in many spots. Bright red squares next to faded blue, where the holes had been mended.

Mark took a seat and the chair gave an unbalanced wobble and squeak as he settled into its dusty depths. Looking around, Mark looked at the battered knick-knacks lying around. He had completely forgotten about all the old board games, Chinese Checkers and Yahtzi and whatnot, strewn across the shelves. He smiled to himself as he remembered evenings sitting in front of the fireplace, playing Yahtzi with his Father. Those had been happier times.

Nostalgic memories were always a bittersweet experience for Mark. Half of him wanted to forget, and half of him wanted to remember. *His* childhood had been good. But had Nan’s? Sighing, Mark pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, along with his lighter. He needed something to calm his nerves.

Looking out the dirty window and across the street as he lit his cigarette, Mark could vaguely see Mr. Treseder still out dutifully shoveling, as if it were somehow important. Mark suddenly realized that although *his* life had come to a complete halt, the rest of the world would continue on as if nothing had happened. It was a sickening thought.

As the smoke wound its way lazily around his head, Mark moved his gaze across to the opposite wall, where he noticed the giant framed painting hung in the shadows. It was a grand sight. Four children- three girls in fluffy pink dresses the color of bloody cotton candy and pearl white jackets, and a boy in his Sunday best (the shirt slightly untucked due to his romping around) were standing, smiling in a clump in the middle of an orchard. They looked regal among the peach tree blossoms, the children. It was a lovely painting, depicting the sun beaming down through the thick trees onto the children as they played in the long slender grass. The blossoms of the trees were so thick and heavy; it made it seem as if clouds surrounded the children. Such a beautiful painting.

And then he noticed that in the background of the painting was another girl. She had on a blue dress, and she seemed to be moving through the trees seemingly lost, trying to join the children. While the other children were happy and smiling, the girl wore a look of confusion. The painting had been based off of a photograph, and it was sad, the way the girl was left out of the group. Almost like the original photographer had purposefully taken the photo before the girl could be part of it.

Why the painter had chosen to include the girl from the photo in his painting seemed strange to Mark. What had been the compelling reason to include her in his masterpiece? Father had paid a small fortune for the painting; strange it looked almost undone.

Nan had always been a bit of an odd one. Could he really help it that they had treated her the way they had? While he and his sisters had acted and played normally, Nan had kept to herself. While his sisters had all complied and worn the frilly pink dresses and white jackets, Nan had fought Father tooth and nail, and had come in blue. She had always been that way. Mark hated to admit it, but now thirty years later, he was still a little afraid of her.

Once while out playing hide and seek in the fields with his friend Tucker, he had found Nan, crouched down next to the electrical fence. They had been told not to play near the fence, and upon asking her what she was doing, Nan looked up at him with a curious expression on her face. It was then that he noticed the grasshopper she was holding delicately between her fingers.

The insect was jerking and twitching slightly every few seconds. Almost as if it were in pain. Looking closer Mark realized that Nan had burned its legs off, using the fence.

This had disturbed him, and he quickly snatched the suffering creature and trod on it with his foot, ending its misery. When he asked Nan why she had tortured the insect, she simply shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno, just cause...” She had then got up and walked away from him. All throughout her life, that had been Nan’s response to her weird ways, to her violence. “Why do you do these things?” “I dunno, just cause...”

Mark shrugged the uncomfortable memory away. He didn’t like to dwell on Nan. Standing up, he crossed over to the grand painting. Smiling, he traced his fingers across the canvas, feeling the bumps in the oils.

There was Barbara, the oldest, with her wild bushy hair pulled back by a headband. She was laughing and looking down at baby Mary in her lap. Mary had always been the sweet innocent one, with blonde curls splashing across her forehead.

Then there was Katie, the third eldest standing behind the girls and next to the boy. She had always been a bit shy, and she had one hand holding her opposite arm, while she smiled sweetly for the camera, in her dainty pink dress and white jacket.

Mark’s finger moved over the dark haired, little boy. Being the second to youngest in the family, and the only boy, Mark had always been a bit spoiled by their father. He admitted this to himself with a small kind of proud laugh. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to think back several years… The late Indian summer was a favorite time of the year for Mark; it was the time of year when Father was finished with his travels. Mark looked forward to the days when he would spend hours out on the lake with Father. They would take the old boat out, and float slowly around in circles, making halfhearted attempts to catch the Rainbow Trout. Mark would sometimes throw old moldy bread to the ducks, and Father would occasionally play the harmonica. Mostly they just talked. Mark never minded the fact that they usually went home empty handed, without a catch; just the fact that he had been with Father was enough.

Opening his eyes with contentment, Mark smiled before his fingers moved idly back to the small figure of Nan behind the trees. Mark stared a moment at the girl, at the face. Had Nan ever spent time one on one with Father? Mark could remember their Father taking the girls out to the theatre and to restaurants. She had gone then hadn’t she? Thinking back on it though, it seemed as if Nan had always stayed home to baby-sit *him* during these special Father-daughter outings. Mark frowned as he was again reminded of unpleasant memories.

There was the time Barbara had locked Nan down in the cellar. The children used to pretend that an old man with jagged teeth and wicked eyes inhabited the cellar, and if they were to go down, he would surely cook them up for dinner. They all knew it was nonsense of course, but when asked by Father to grab potatoes, the children would still dash down the creaky wooden stairs as quickly as possible, and dart quickly back up; just in case.

When Barbara had locked Nan in the cellar, their father had not been home. Now, years later, Mark still felt guilty. Barbara and Nan had been fighting, and he had stood by and watched as his eldest sister forced Nan, the second child, down into the dark, damp cellar. The girl had been left for four hours, and Nan had screamed and cried and banged repeatedly on the door. Since the light switch for the cellar was outside the door at the top of the stairs, Barbara had turned off the light as well, leaving their sister alone in the dark. It chilled Mark to the very bone marrow, how he could still remember Nan’s cries going silent somewhere around the third hour.

Mark shook his head quickly and rubbed his arms. Why did he still feel awful about this? It’s not like that one experience had pushed her over the edge. She had always been a bit unbalanced. Even back before the grasshopper, and certainly before the cellar.

The sound of a door being opened in the front room brought Mark back to his senses. Finally they had come.

“I’m in here,” yelled Mark. A moment later Nan walked into the den alone.

“Hello Mark” Nan smiled.

Feeling surprised, Mark got up to hug his sister. “Oh hi, Nan, good to see you.” The two embraced briefly, (they weren’t accustomed to touching one another) and as he quickly pulled away Mark looked with confusion at her. “I didn’t know you were coming alone. I thought Barbara, Mary and Katie were coming with you? Where are they?”

“Oh, they won’t be coming tonight,” Nan stated simply, as she placed her purse down on the ground.

The hairs on the back of Mark’s neck prickled. Why did he hate being alone with Nan? He had to remind himself that she was a respectable person now. She had gone to school and even gotten a degree. And didn’t she work now? Surely she wasn’t so strange these days. Scientific research and medical advances had shed light on mental disorders; he was *sure* she had received help throughout her life.

“But why didn’t they come? Katie flies back to Portland in three days, and I’m headed back to Detroit on Saturday. Plus I thought Barbara and Mary had wanted to get this wrapped up today. Did something come up?” Mark was perplexed.

“They just won’t be here.” There was finality to Nan’s voice. Mark decided to drop the subject. It wasn’t worth running around circles with Nan.

“Well I suppose we can fill them in on details tomorrow. I pulled up Father’s will, and was reading through all the details-”

“Actually before we discuss things, do you mind if I make some coffee quick? I could use a pick me up” Nan interrupted.

“Sure that’s fine, that actually sounds really good. I’m a bit thirsty, and since I’ve been here I feel completely exhausted.”

Nan turned and walked out of the den and into the kitchen. Mark followed her. “Would you like some help at all?”

“Oh that’s sweet of you Mark. Why don’t you run down to the cellar for me and grab some napkins? There should be some on the shelf.” Again he felt the small prickling. He brushed it aside.

“Sure” Mark replied.

As he started to leave the kitchen, he heard Nan- “It’s good to see you little brother. It’s been a while...”

Opening the door to the cellar, Mark shivered slightly as a cool draft hit his face. The smell of mold and decay filled his nostrils as he flipped on the light switch before walking through the door. There were stains on the wall and everything was covered in a thick layer of dust except the stairs, where a wide shiny strip had been made. Almost as if something had recently been dragged down the stairs…

As he descended slowly down the ancient wooden steps, old fears returned to him, unbidden. A slight whispering noise could be heard. It was if the old man was moaning out to him. Haunting him.

It was silly, the way they had imagined the creepy old man living down here. There was nothing here after all, but the large boiler, old bottled peaches, some odds and ends and a few mousetraps. Yet Nan had spent time here…

Mark quickly located the napkins, and as he turned to head back up the stairs he glanced past the boiler into the shadows of the corner where he saw the dark shape of a human lying on the ground.

He gasped in surprise and fear and he clutched wildly at the shelf for support. The figure didn’t move. Neither did Mark. He was frozen, paralyzed in complete horror. Gaining control of his voice Mark croaked out- “Hel…hello? … Who’s there? …”

The figure did nothing. An absence of sound filled the frightful cellar.

At that moment there was a creak overhead and Mark suddenly had a wild fear of the door at the top of the stairs shutting; of it being *his* turn to be alone in the dark with the old man… Feeling life moving through his limbs again, Mark let go of the shelf and he stumbled to the stair case and clumsily tripped his way up the stairs, banging his shins in his haste to escape. Without looking over his shoulder, Mark slammed the door solidly, locked it with shaking fingers and leaned his back against it, clutching the napkins tightly… His heart rate had sky scraped, and a small sob escaped his throat. Forcing himself to breath deeply for several seconds, Mark began to slowly calm down. After a minute he reasoned with himself. Surely that had *not* been a human in the basement. It had to have been a lump of coal, maybe a pile of old clothes. The old man didn’t exist…

Closing his eyes, another memory came to Mark. After her chilling cellar experience, Nan began to visit the cellar, her prison. It was almost like an obsession for her. Whenever they asked why she would sit in the dark she would tell them “I am friends with the old man.” It still scared Mark the way Nan would go sit in the dark, alone, in the cellar sometimes for hours on end. She was no longer afraid of the darkness. Rather, she embraced it...

This cellar was full of bad memories, Mark suddenly realized. He turned off the light and walked back to the kitchen.

Nan was pouring coffee into two mugs and she smiled at him as he walked in. “thanks for getting those Mark.”

“You know, that cellar still give me goose bumps,” Mark laughed. “I felt myself getting nervous down there, and for a moment I *swear* I saw the old man lying in the corner.”

“Oh yes, the cellar” Nan smiled. “ I used to love it there. It was kind of my secret room. Me and the old man’s…” Nan winked at him as her voice drifted off. Feeling paranoid Mark cleared his throat, “shall we?”

They walked back into the den and Mark returned to the green rocker. Nan took a seat across from him on the small couch beneath the painting, and took a sip of the hot coffee. “So Mark, how are you handling Father’s death?”

Mark took a moment before responding. “Oh I dunno, it seems kind of odd the way he died. The doctors ruled it as heart failure. But he just seemed so young still…” He took a small drink from his mug.

Nan frowned. “You’re right, it was kind of odd. Dad had always been a healthy eater and he exercised regularly,” she replied.

 Mark took another sip. He noticed the coffee tasted a bit off. Nan was drinking some though, and he didn’t want to offend her. The Heavens knew how her temper could flare. “Thanks for the coffee sis.” He took another drink.

“Oh anytime.” Nan stood up and walked to the old bookshelf with the games and trinkets. “Remember how Father used to always play Tchaikovsky for us at night?” She pulled out an old Tchaikovsky record and blew the dust off.

Mark smiled. “Ya, I can remember how Katie and Mary would twirl and twirl in their dresses to the *Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty*.”

“Yes, they were always gorgeous” Nan smiled. “Let’s listen to it again, for old times sake.” Nan crossed over to the old record player. A moment later, the scratching tunes of *The Sleeping Beauty’s* Overture filled the room, as the record spun round and round. Mark was surprised the record player still worked.

Nan sat down again. “Before we start, why don’t you catch me up on your life Mark? It’s been a while…”

Looking at his sister, he suddenly realized she was wearing a pink dress and white jacket, exactly matching her sisters behind her. For some reason this un-nerved Mark. He very much wanted to go back to his motel now, to deal with this all later when *all* his sisters were here.

It seemed kind of stuffy in the small room as well. Mark was suddenly feeling slightly claustrophobic, and rather warm. He pulled at the collar of his shirt to allow some cool air on his neck. The furnace had heated the room quicker than he had thought it would.

“Well I suppose work is going well. The stocks are good, so business is booming at the moment.” Mark really just wanted to get the details of their Father’s will taken care of. Trying to hurry up their conversation, he turned to his sister. “So how are things going at your job? Are you still working as a care-taker?”

Nan took a small drink, and a drop dribbled down her chin. She wiped it away carefully with her napkin. “Um, yes. I moved out of the nursing home, and I now work in a psychiatric ward with high risk patients.”

“High risk?” Mark wondered if he had a fever coming on. He really just wanted to go lie down, and forget about it all. Maybe they could finish another time. He took another drink.

“Yes. I work with those who are in crisis, usually those who are violent and suicidal.” Nan looked out the window. “How is the coffee?”

“It’s perfect, thank you” he responded.

“Oh good, glad you like it. Father liked my coffee also.”

His hands began to tremble slightly, and Mark realized he was sweating all over. He really wasn’t feeling well. He had been fine not three minutes ago; he must have caught a nasty bug somewhere. Maybe his fright in the cellar had caused him to feel ill?

“Nan I am sorry, I’m really not feeling very well at the moment.” Mark realized his voice was slurred and he seemed to be having difficulty speaking. “Maybe we can” he closed his eyes to concentrate- “tomorrow?”

Nan didn’t seem to hear what he was saying. “Did you know that when they found daddy, he was covered in sweat? His face was flushed and red as a rose.” Nan took a sip from her drink.

Mark didn’t feel like speaking anymore. Why was Nan talking about this? Why was it becoming harder for him to breathe?

His sister began humming to the music; unaware of the heat and constriction Mark was feeling in his chest. He realized he was breathing deeply now.

After a moment, she quit humming and turned to him. “Do you know much about the tobacco leaf dear brother?” Mark looked up at his sister. He tried to open his mouth to ask her for help; he was truly scared now. A faint whimpering escaped his lips. Speech would no longer come.

“If you soak tobacco leaves in the sun for several days, and then allow the concoction to evaporate, it leaves a thick black tar.” Mark noticed that Nan was talking as casually as if discussing the weather. Couldn’t she see that something was clearly wrong with him!

Truly in a panic, Mark gestured wildly for his sister’s attention. With a look of amusement, Nan tilted her head to the side. “What’s the matter Mark, can’t you speak?” Mark made a gagging sound in response. Nan stood up and slowly walked over to him, never breaking eye contact with her brother. Kneeling down in front of him, she smiled, then bent down and whispered gently in his ear. “You know, you look *really* sick... It’s almost as if you’ve been poisoned.” She gave a small chuckle that set the hairs on Mark’s neck on edge. Feeling the blood drain from his face, Mark looked in sublime horror towards his sister.

“It has a *very* strong taste, the tar.” Nan continued on nonchalantly as she stood back up. “You only need a small amount in coffee however… to cover up the taste.”

Just then the clanging sound of the ancient doorbell interrupted his sister. Nan walked over to the window and peered out into the night. “Hmmm, look’s like Mr. Treseder has come to visit.” She glanced at her brother and smiled mischievously. “Maybe I’ll invite him in for coffee…”

The moment Nan was out of the room, Mark tried in vain to rise from the chair. Feeling completely spent, Mark’s knees buckled and he sank back into the chair’s death grip. In the front room Mark heard his sister greet the neighbor at the front door. “Well hello Mr. Treseder, how good to see you!”

Mark tried to call out for help to his neighbor. His lips moved wordlessly as small incoherent utterances left his mouth, completely muffled by the sounds of the music still playing.

“Hello Nan. Look at you, you’re all grown up, it’s probably been fifteen years since I’ve seen you…” Mark’s shaking hands fumbled for his pocket, for his cell phone. He dug his hands into his pocket; he couldn’t seem to grasp the phone.

“Were you able to make it to Father’s funeral yesterday?” Nan asked sweetly.

“Yes, Eileen and I came over. It was a beautiful funeral; your Father had many friends. The lines were so long however, so we weren’t able to come offer our condolences.”

Mark finally managed to pull the phone from his pocket. He clumsily flipped it open, as Nan continued to talk. “Oh you don’t need to worry about that Mr. Treseder, we all understand…”

Struggling to punch in the numbers on his phone, Mark tried in vain to reach help. His fingers tripped over the keypad, and he finally typed in a ‘9.’

“Your Father was so young, it was such a shock to us all to see him go.” Mark managed to type in a ‘1.’

“Yes it’s been very hard on all of us. I think Mark is taking it worst though. I’ve been really worried for him.”

His hands were becoming numb, and Mark could no longer feel the phone between his fingers. The phone slipped out of his grip, and landed with a clatter on the floor.

“Is there anything my wife and I can do for him? For you all?” Feeling unrestrained fear, Mark looked wildly around the room until he spotted the vase sitting on the small table next to his chair.

“You know, actually there is something you can do. I’m flying back home tomorrow, but if you could check in on my brother before he leaves Saturday, I would really appreciate it. He will be here cleaning up Father’s house the rest of the week and what not. I just need to make sure he hasn’t gone off the deep end or anything...”

Praying that his aim would be true, Mark swung his arm out with what little strength he had left. His arm connected, and the vase careened off the edge of the table. A loud crash could be heard, as the expensive vase Father had brought home from China, smashed into a dozen porcelain pieces on the wooden floor.

“My goodness, what was that! Is everything all right?”

“Oh yes, don’t worry, it’s just Mark. He’s cleaning up in Father’s den; there is a lot of junk that we need to get rid of.”

“Well is it okay if I step in a moment to see him? It’s been a while.”

“Do you know, I think it would be best if you come back tomorrow. He really isn’t handling things well, and I think he wants to be alone right now.”

“I understand. Well please give him these cookies, and say hello for me. Again I am so sorry for your loss…”

“Oh I will, thank you so much.” A moment later the front door shut, and Mark looked up as Nan walked back into the room.

“Still alive huh?” Nan set the cookies down on the table where the vase had been sitting. “You know, Father paid a fortune for that silly vase. I don’t expect he’d be too happy about it’s demise. But then again, I guess it won’t matter because… he’s dead.” Nan smiled to herself, and she bent over to pick up the broken shards.

 “I expect you haven’t died yet, because you’re a smoker. You must have more of a constitution for the nicotine,” Nan said as she gathered the pieces.

Mark glanced longingly out the window, watching the figure of Mr. Treseder slipping away into the darkness.

“Anyone who drinks the tar I slipped into your drink would become very hot and stimulated, very quickly. They can pass out and die in as little as one minute. Usually it’s from heart failure.”

Nan set the broken shards down on the edge of the table, and then walked over to look at the painting. “Did you know Mark that Father is the one who took the original photograph?”

She took a seat on the couch below the painting. “He never cared for me like he did for all of you. He regretted it later. I expect that’s why his life went to shambles. It’s why he forgot about all of you as well. He was living with guilt.”

Tears suddenly began to stream down Nan’s face. “I didn’t want it to end this way Mark,” she whispered. “It only seemed fitting to leave her there. I dragged Barbara’s body into the cellar. She never smoked like you did. Daddy didn’t either; they both died quickly. It didn’t take too much coffee...”

Mark’s eyes were blurring over, and Nan was moving in and out of focus. “Why did you let her leave me in the cellar?” A moment later Nan began to suddenly hum loudly to the music. After a moment she gave a short laugh. “You must think I’m crazy Mark, Barbara thought so. Maybe I am; I haven’t taken my medications for several months now…”

Mark turned his head as much as he could to look out the front window. Mr. Treseder was across the street. He was shoveling snow again, illuminated by lamplight. “It’s all right little brother… Soon you’ll be with them, and soon Mary and Katie will join you…”

It suddenly occurred to Mark that it was just a normal Tuesday after all. The rest of the World would keep moving on as always. Unaware. Mark looked desperately towards his life-long neighbor across the street, willing Mr. Treseder to glance over. The shoveling continued on.

“Isn’t this appropriate music Mark? It’s my favorite.” Mark glanced back to his sister out of his peripheral vision. She now had a peaceful look on her face, and she had closed her eyes to rest. She appeared to be sleeping. Almost like the Sleeping Beauty. His unfocused eyes slowly looked up at the painting, at the girl in blue; and then he saw no more.

Several minutes later, Nan stood up and gave a good cat stretch before checking for the non-existent pulse of her brother. Satisfied, she gathered the two coffee mugs. A gentle ‘tink-clink’ sound could soon be heard as she washed the mugs in the kitchen sink. A moment later the record in the den came to a stop as the music faded away into blackness.