

Sins of the Fathers

By Sandy Conrad

Some childhoods end with a whimper. They fade out slowly without a milestone to mark the transition-- a little girl starts wearing mascara and caring about blonde highlights; a little boy can't stop thinking about breasts and whether or not some girl has noticed how great he is at soccer. Easy innocence is replaced by morbid self-awareness and anxiety.

My childhood ended with a bang. Five bangs actually. Our nearest neighbour shot himself after killing his wife and daughters. I was nine, and my brothers were eleven and thirteen. We were aged instantly by horror. When we woke up to our mother screaming we just couldn't be young again. Our family was not the same. We didn't talk about it, or process it with the help of psychologists. We didn't paint pictures for therapy or discuss the concept of post-traumatic stress. We took one day off of school and were expected to get back into routine quickly. We punished ourselves and kept our secrets. We grew up keeping our secrets. We moved away from home keeping our secrets. We became adults and forgot we had secrets.

Then my mother decided to buy the house where they all died.

"You have got to be joking," I said to my brother Kyle skyping me from Dubai. "How do you know this?"

"She posted it on her face book page with an announcement--Local real estate agent buys haunted house."

"Why would she do that?"

"Apparently she was tired of seeing it fall apart. It's a great location, and she figures twenty five years is long enough to punish a house for the sins of its owners."

"Sounds like mom. She actually used those words didn't she?"

"Of course." Kyle's grin was wide on my screen.

"So she's just going to fix it up and sell it?"

"You wish."

"No, Kyle. No!"

"Yes, Christie, yes."

"She's gonna live right beside dad? What is this? A bad sitcom?"

"Just call her. I'm tired of being in the middle."

"I will never visit her there."

"Preaching to the choir sis." Kyle adopted his best version of a Jewish-mother accent and wagged a finger from across the ocean-- "Call your mother and don't obsess over this. Oh, and go to a proper stylist will you? The 90's called and they want your hairstyle back."

"I never get tired of that line. My haircut is classic."

“You mean vintage?”

“You’re the trendsetter, brother. Go forth, make money, and invite mom to come live with you on the other side of the ocean please.”

“I love you sis. Don’t stress over this. It’s just a house.” Kyle blew me a kiss and my screen blanked. He wasn’t much for good byes.

Kyle often made me laugh, despite his pointed insults about my hair and clothing. He was a male fashionista, coiffed, cologned and elegant, a gay man who exuded masculine authority. Often the smartest person in the room, or, at least he thought so, I added to myself. It's what I would have said if he'd been listening.

I shut down my computer. I went to the fridge pulled out cheese, salsa, and half a bowl of only slightly brown guacamole. I dumped a giant bag of tortilla chips onto pizza-sized pan and broke off a large chunk of cheddar to chew on while grating the rest. After popping the pan into the oven, I stood at the counter and ate cold chips. If only I had a sister, I thought. Kyle was a good brother, but he had no patience for wallowing. Paul just had no patience for me at all. "I don't need this now, Christie" was the last response I'd gotten from him when I called to fret over our father's ever-increasing absence from our lives. He'd listened, barely, then recited his response. It was always the same, just variations on the theme of "busy"--"my family is my first priority", "problems of my own", and "get over it". He had filled his life so completely that there was no space for a needy sister. He and Kyle had the strongest relationship but only because Kyle was rich and had no kids.

Odd, I often thought, that Paul seemed the least hurt by what had happened to our neighbours. He was the oldest and must have understood more clearly than me had what had been going on at the time. He and Mary Ellen were friends of a sort. He would let her play soccer with his pals if he needed to balance a team, or Monopoly with us on rainy days, but she was not to speak to him at school.

Sometimes dad gets me up in the middle of the night and brings me to the kitchen.

I threw up in the sink. I threw up till nothing was left in my stomach. Then I turned off the oven and left the nachos inside. I went straight to the bedroom, pushed my work clothes to the bottom of the bed and climbed under the blankets. In the bedside table was a drawer, inside the drawer a plastic bottle of tiny pills. One would do it. I reached out a hand, yanked the drawer open, pulled the container toward me and twisted off the cap. I would have swallowed the pill dry except there was still some water in the glass beside my bed. Nothing would get me back in the kitchen tonight.

In my dream, I was immobilized by a mob so dense I could feel their weight on my chest forcing the air out of my lungs. A fire alarm was blaring but no one was moving and I couldn't budge. I twisted as much as possible and tried to scream. When I woke up and I realized that my phone and clock radio were both ringing. I extracted my numb arms from the tangle of sheets and pushed the snooze button. I picked up the phone and read the number on the screen. My mother. I dropped the phone on the floor, still ringing, and pulled the blankets back up to my chin.

"Good morning, Christie. I know you're there because it's Sunday morning and you're not on-call this weekend. So you're probably sleeping in. Or maybe you have a hot date. Oops...I hope he's not there hearing this. Anyway, I have news. It's very exciting. I think you'll be pleased. Call me."

So many people adored my mother, my fun, youthful, energetic, positive, life-of-the-party mother. I adored my father. Unfortunately, mother was the one who had not abdicated her parenting role. She called at least once a week, maintained all high holy holidays, and worked like a demon to get her kids together at least three times a

year over turkey. Kyle was elusive since his work often kept him out of the country; Paul was grudging but usually obedient, and I always showed up.

When I finally sat up I had to breathe deeply and try to keep my eyes open till the nausea passed. It's too bad I like my job so much, I thought, because I have to move further away. I wonder if they need social workers in Russia? Or Africa? I pushed my hands through my scalp tugging at my hair and its tangled mess. How dare mother think I'd be "pleased". It was just that kind of stupidity that made me writhe in frustration. Mother constructed self-serving realities and expected everyone else to believe them. I lay in bed and ugly memories of life post neighbourhood tragedy crept into my consciousness.

The Havermyer house soon became "the house" and 47 Johnston Avenue an infamous address. People drove along the road slowly and then stopped at the driveway of #47. Sometimes they'd sneak around to the back yard and peek in the windows. It was ground zero for teenagers enacting midnight rituals in the yard, testing nerves and the will to belong. Testing believers in ghosts and superstitions. Halloweens were the worst.

Occasionally tourists would stop at our place and ask if we'd known the family. When my father answered the door they got an earful of profanity and hurried to their car. If our mother answered they heard a story--the story of a mentally ill man and his sweet tragic family. "Couldn't have asked for better neighbours," she always said.

Well, I could have asked for better neighbours, I thought. In fact, I often wondered what life would have been like if the Havermyers had not lived beside us. I felt tainted by our proximity to the horror in our town. It would have been bad enough to have lived so close, but we actually knew them, had socialized over barbecues on summer evenings or a game of cards. There were pictures of us girls together--me, Mary-ellen, Patricia, and the youngest, Katie Lynn. Once a year, I made myself look at the photo of them on our front porch, all of them smiling except Patricia, who had her arms crossed over her chest. We'd laughed about it once, even teased her. I tried to honour the memory of the girls annually by pulling the photo out of a locked tin box. It was as much as I could do for them.

Even Kyle did not mock me for this. We almost never spoke of the Havermyers, but I needed to tell him about the photo, how Patricia didn't smile, and even more shocking, how Katie and Mary Ellen did. The two of us never had found words for what we felt, or what we knew. When I asked him if he thought of them much, he assured me that he did not. "You're the morbid one in the family, Chris. You and dad."

I wondered if dad would answer the phone today. I suspected he was drinking again. Since he'd retired, it was his new hobby. Probably an old hobby, I realized, but he was a lot less secretive about it now. How I missed his cynical, grudging support. Surely the news of his ex-wife moving into the most talked about house in Kincardine would force him into communicating. I dialed the number and let it ring. There was no answering machine, no pretense that he would return the call. I let it ring quite a long time, long enough to be annoying at least, then gave up.

Sometimes dad gets us up in the middle of the night and brings us to the kitchen.

I decided I needed to go to the gym. I'd use every cardio machine they had, then lift weights till my muscles were shaking with fatigue. Then I would go to the Wal-Mart, try on cheap clothes and buy Easter candy for Paul's kids. There's running to things, and there's running away from things. Either way, I was still running.

Mother always gets what she wants. I guess she wanted to divorce my dad and marry someone else, because

that's what she did. Then she divorced husband number two. Then she got a real estate licence and joined the ReMax team. She's really good at what she does. She finally told my dad he could stop paying her support when her commissions allowed her to buy a house on Boiler Beach road and a BMW convertible and my dad was driving a rusting Dodge Caravan and our old house was decaying in patches around him. I try to remember what she was like before the Havermyer tragedy. Was she softer? Kinder? The Havermyer children had liked her very much. She would have tea parties for us and get her fragile teacups out of the china cabinet so we could practice drinking with our pinkies out. She'd find hats and gloves and put lipstick on us. Although the girls were never my best friends (they went to the Catholic school), I would play with them if one of our mothers organized something special.

It's odd how distance and time drag questions out of the brain. Mother must have had a relationship with Mrs. Havermyer to have made the effort to get us together. Mr. Havermyer worked with my dad at Ontario Hydro. But were they friends? Why did we socialize but only occasionally? They weren't in my parents' regular circle of friends. Why socialize at all? My dad was silent on the subject. I had had nightmares for years after the murder, but it was never dad who came to my room with hot chocolate, telling me to read till I fell back to sleep. Once, I think, I saw him standing in the hallway watching mom wipe my sweaty face with a cool cloth. Afterwards, I heard a fight going on their bedroom. As I said earlier, there was no real childhood after Mr. Havermyer pulled the trigger on his family. Just fear and shame and tension and the vague notion that nothing would be right in our world again.

By the time I got home from the gym, mom had left seven messages, every hour on the hour. I could be just as stubborn, but my body was tired. I dumped the Easter gifts and treats, cream-filled eggs, and Hershey's kisses onto my kitchen table, poured myself a giant glass of red wine, and dialed her number while peeling cellophane from chocolate bunny number one.

"Where have you been all day? I've been calling and calling."

"Ya. I know. I was out."

"Doing what."

"Gym. Shopping. I wanted to get stuff for the kids."

"For Easter."

"Yup."

"Well, that's what I've been calling about. I have a surprise. Are you there?"

"I'm waiting."

"You already know don't you? Kyle told you about the house?"

"I'd like to hear your explanation."

"Houses are just buildings, Christie. After twenty-five years I figured that--"

"I know. The house had paid long enough for sins of its owners."

"Well that's right. But I do understand that there's bad karma in the walls. I know that the place is filled with negative energy."

Sometimes our dad brings us to the kitchen after mommy's gone to sleep.

The wine and chocolate so recently melted in my mouth threatened to come back up. I gagged as quietly as possible.

"Are you there?"

" You were mentioning the 'negative energy'."

"Well I was thinking that I shouldn't ignore it. The place has a past and I need to free it."

"Where is this going mom? I am tired." I was. I wanted my tiny pill and my duvet over my head.

"When you come for dinner on Easter Sunday, we're going to the house."

"No."

"Just listen.

"No."

"We're going to the house. I have a friend who is a shaman. She's coming to meet us. She's going to perform a ritual to release the energy that's been trapped. We're going to do it in every room. Then we will do a blessing ceremony. And then we will--"

"Mom. I am never going into that house."

"Don't be ridiculous. I am going to live there."

"Why?"

"I want to live closer to your father. He's not well."

"What do you mean 'not well'? What's wrong?"

"Honey...the same thing that's been wrong for years."

"So he drinks. You don't think that you living beside him will make it worse?"

"As a matter of fact...I don't think it can get much worse."

That's when I did something I have never done in my life. I hung up on my mother. My hands were clenching and unclenching. I needed to pace. I know I was crying too, but it was rage, not sadness. Murderous rage. My mother had brought that horrible house back into our lives. She was shoving our faces into its putrefied death-soaked walls and I could kill her for it. I attempted to drink some wine, but the glass was shaking in my hand. I stared at it for a second, then threw it against the living room wall. Then I threw the bottle. When the phone rang again, I added the handset to the streaks of red wine dripping down the wall.

I went to my therapist twice before Easter and she advised me to listen to my gut, to stop ignoring my instinct, to cut ties with my mother by writing her a letter that I didn't even have to send. I always felt better leaving her office. Her advice made me happy. It put me at the centre of my world again where I was allowed to circle the wagons and shoot anybody who threatened my emotional well-being. I wrote the letter. I phoned my two best friends and read it to them. We went out for drinks and dinner and toasted my progress toward self-actualization. I got my hair cut and lost six pounds.

But, on Easter Sunday, I woke up in my mother's house. She always wins.

Kyle was making waffles when I arrived in the kitchen. Paul was on his laptop and Katelyn, his wife, looked up from The Globe and Mail. Various versions of "morning Christie" greeted me, and the mood was far from cheerful, despite the aroma of vanilla and sweet dough.

"How did you sleep?" Katelyn offered me the front section of the paper, but I shook my head.

"Okay. You?"

"Paul was snoring."

"So were you."

"How would you know? You sleep like the dead."

All three of us froze, maybe for half a second, but the word "dead" landed in our midst like a bad smell. I resumed my coffee-pouring. Kyle lifted the waffle iron. Paul typed. Katelyn, never one to back away from a touchy issue, folded the paper and sat back in her chair.

"Seriously, you guys. I say the word 'dead' and you go catatonic. You act like it's your tragedy. It was a quarter of a century ago. Move on."

I swallowed my anger and poured extra cream into my coffee. I would never openly challenge Katelyn, but I hoped Paul would defend us. It was our tragedy too.

"Katelyn's right guys. We shouldn't make a big deal of this. We're here to humour mom. Let's do that and go home."

Kyle and I risked eye contact for the briefest of seconds, tacitly agreeing to go along to get along.

"Speaking of mom, where is she?" I leaned back against the counter, both hands wrapped around my mug. I wanted to be near my youngest brother.

"Church."

"Church?"

"She's bringing the minister home for a late lunch, and then we're going to the house." Paul didn't even pause in his typing while she answered me.

"I thought she was getting a shaman."

Katelyn rolled her eyes and resumed her reading. "I guess she's decided to go with a more traditional exorcism."

There was something about Katelyn that always made me want to defend my mother. "A lot of people believe in negative energy."

Sometimes our dad brings us to the kitchen after mommy's gone to sleep.

"Ya, some people do." Katelyn also didn't bother to look up when she answered, but her tone was scathing and dismissive.

I kept my hands around my cup, but I could see they were shaking. Would this experience be any better if I were surrounded by loving and supportive friends, instead of critics and judges. I am a great social worker and highly respected in my field, but around Paul and Katelyn I feel like a broken mess of a woman who barely manages to keep body and soul together.

"If any house needed an exorcism, our mother's most recent purchase does. Five people died there. Three of them were innocent of any crime except being born." Kyle pulled a plate of waffles out of the oven as we all stared at him. "These are ready. Let's eat. I'll make more when the kids get up."

Kyle was generally cheerful, and we seldom saw a crack in his smooth demeanor. Paul closed his laptop and Katelyn folded the paper. We followed his Kyle's lead and focussed on breakfast, piling fresh blueberries and whipped cream onto our plates. Paul closed his laptop and Katelyn folded the paper. I struggled to swallow my food and keep myself from crying. Once again in the bosom of my family, I felt desperately alone. Once again, while nodding my head in delight as Katelyn told us about Sinead winning her grade five speech contest, or laughing at another decadent-rich story from what Kyle calls his "Dubai-Dubai-do-files", from the bottom of the darkest place in my heart, I wished Mr. Havermyer had had one more shell in his shotgun for me. I was getting so tired of faking it.

It was Patricia's bedroom that broke me.

Mother had insisted that we drive together and that we enter only when the minister arrived. Even Kyle and Paul were quiet in the car, Katelyn had opted not to come along. Mother talked incessantly, about our old house, which managed to look almost as seedy as 47 Johnston and she regaled us with her vision for the makeover of her new purchase, a fancy front porch, landscaping, cherry kitchen cupboards, walls removed, an open-concept

dining-family room, dinky upstairs rooms made large, all new windows and a steel roof. It felt like a bedtime story.

I found myself liking the minister. We were invited to call her Father Alex in spite of her gender. It suited her. She'd arrived in a Prius without priestly cassock or collar, looking refreshingly normal in jeans and an oversized wool sweater. Her hair was gray, stylishly cut into an angled bob and tucked behind her ears. She rolled a black carry on in front of her. After getting over my surprise that the priest was a female, my second thought was that she must be planning to stay the night. She laughed at my question as she shook my hand.

"No, no. These are a few things I'll need for the cleansing ritual."

As our mother hugged her, I found myself looking at Father Alex with a longing that surprised me. I actually tried to stand close to her as we walked toward the entrance. I looked over at dad's place feeling certain that he must be watching us. I hoped that he could see how furious I was at him, at his constant failure to protect us from mother's insanity. Here we were, piling into this hellish house on one of her crazy whims. And where was he in all this? Why couldn't he just come out and save us?

"Before we enter, I'd like to say a prayer. "Dear Father, we come to this house of grief in your name. May the evil that was done here have no more power. May the blood of the innocent cry out no longer. May light and life walk these floors once more and may all this be done in your name and in your service. Amen."

"Amen," my mother chanted. Kyle, Paul and I just looked at each other and stayed silent.

Father Alex reached into her carry on, pulled out a Bible, and a bouquet of pale green sticks with a bouquet of tea bags and strands of red yarn tied to their tips. "'Before we enter, I'd like each of you to hold a branch. Each of the bags is a mixture of dried herbs and hyssop flowers. The branches are cedar. I'll explain what we're going to do when we're inside."

I accepted the branch and stared at Father Alex this strange middle-aged woman. The facade of ordinariness was wearing off quickly. She was squatting on the porch now, pouring water into a wide, shallow pottery bowl.

"Dip your branches here and make sure each bag of herbs touches the water."

I did not dare look at Kyle or Paul, my brothers. Manic hysteria was always a possibility, even in the most loathsome activities.

We followed all of Father Alex's instructions. I think now that having something to do each step of the way was an effective antidote to our discomfort. We were so focussed on the seemingly ludicrous acts of cleansing that we found ourselves moving from room to room, shaking water into corners, lighting candles, closing our eyes during prayers and chants, saying "Amen", that we barely noticed how deep we were inside the belly of the beast. When Father Alex asked us which room we should do last, I almost shouted at her, "the kitchen." That was the room I couldn't face. She looked at me as though she wanted to ask a question, but had changed her mind. There was pity in her expression.

Knowing the kitchen was still three rooms away, I walked into Patricia's room unprepared. There was no furniture left, no personal items. Two and a half decades of graffiti decorated the walls. Teenagers trying to exorcise they're own fears had left messages for the dead: "RIP, Patricia" and "You're with the angels now". For a moment I had almost smiled at the adolescent energy filling the room, but then I saw the curtains, faded and greasy, and I saw Patricia as she was 25 years ago, in a pink nightie, holding up a sign with something written on it for the nine year old me to read. My bedroom was directly across from hers and she knew I could see into her room. I remember that I couldn't read what she'd written, but I'd called Paul and he could. That was the night we'd all snuck out to see what happened in the Havermyer kitchen.

Sometimes our dad brings us to the kitchen after mommy's gone to sleep.

I woke up from my faint with four pairs of eyes above me and my mother's hand on my forehead. I blinked and started to cry, beyond humiliation. Paul backed away immediately but Kyle kneeled and put his arms around me. Mother was crying too. Father Alex held my hand.

"Why did you say the kitchen should be the last room, Christie? Something must have happened here too?" Her voice was gentle as she set her candles in a circle and took the cedar branches from my hand. "Norma, Paul, Kyle, can anyone tell me? I have a feeling that you know." She lit each candle. "I want each of you to share your story. Here, in this room now." Like Mary Poppins, and her bottomless suitcase, Father Alex pulled a colourful wool blanket out of her bag and draped it over my shoulders. "When you've told your story, I want you to blow out the candle."

That's when I realized that there was one glowing flame for each of us. I looked at the candles and then at our strange priest. She looked at me. "The last room is in here," she said, laying the tips of her fingers on my forehead. I smiled a little, then I realized my mother was crying.

"Did you kids know that your father and Janet Havermyer were having an affair? Did Patricia tell you? Did you see them together?"

Kyle, Paul, and I turned as one to stare at my mother in the corner. Mascara and tears streaked her face. She was clutching her purse to her chest.

"What are you talking about?" Paul walked toward her. "Of course we didn't know that." He looked at Kyle and me. "Did you know?"

We shook our heads.

"That's why he killed them all. She was going to leave the bastard. It was me that told him. I told him! I told him!"

Father Alex lifted the candle toward her. "You need to let this go, Norma. Free yourself."

"No damn it, I will not blow out the candle. There is nothing that can take away the evil that I did."

"Mom, that's not why he did it." Paul was looking at the floor.

"What would you know about it? Your damn father and I might as well have pulled the trigger ourselves."

"I am telling you, that's not why he did it. We saw him, okay. We saw what he did to his own kids. We snuck out of the house and watched him that night and he saw us." Kyle was speaking now.

I looked at Father Alex, almost expecting her to pack up her things and leave us to rot in our shame and guilt. She was good and we were bad people. But she stood in the doorway, her head bowed and her eyes closed, hands on her Bible. I guessed we were all in the last room now. I wanted to die.

Mother stopped dead. She stared at Kyle. "You saw him? You and Paul?"

"And me," I added.

"Why? Why would you do that?"

Paul answered. "The night they died, Patricia held a sign up for Christie to read, right here. He walked to the window. "It said, Please help." I got Kyle and we snuck over here.

"We didn't know that Christie was with us," Kyle tried to explain.

"Mary Ellen had told us before that he brought them to the kitchen when their mom was asleep."

"She wasn't asleep that night," mother added. "She was with your father."

I looked at my mother. "Did you know what he was doing to his little girls? Did you?"

"Not in time. Janet told your father she was married to a pervert."

"So dad knew?"

"He thought he could get the kids away. He was going to protect them."

"By leaving us?"

"Are you saying that the only reason our dad stayed with us was because Mike Havermyer shot his family before another man could steal them?" Paul was pacing now.

"That's right," mother choked. "That's exactly how it went."

"So everyone knew he Havermyer was a pedophile and no one reported him?"

"Times were different, Kyle. You didn't just go to the Children's Aid on your neighbours. The girls weren't neglected or beaten."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"I know. I know. It's insane. I would never have let anyone do that to Christie or my grandchildren. We all just suspected. I didn't know for sure till afterwards. Your dad knew what Janet had told him. That's why he planned to take the kids far away from Mike."

We all stopped speaking for a few moments. Mother and I continued to cry. Paul stared out the window. Kyle broke the silence when he picked up a candle. "Mary Ellen, Patricia, Kati-Lynn, can you forgive us for what we knew? Can you forgive us our silence?"

"He set them on the burners when they were cold and then turned them on high. I've killed him a million times in my dreams." Paul kept his back to us.

"Me too," Kyle added. "But in my dreams, I always see his face looking at us through the sliding glass door. I see him putting lipstick on little Kati-Lynn."

"I forgot about the lipstick," I started to hyperventilate. "I forgot how red it was." I sobbed harder. Kyle held the candle in front of my face.

"Tell them, Christie."

"No, mom's right. We should not be forgiven."

"You kids didn't do anything wrong. You were too young to know what you were seeing." My mother stayed in the corner, but she'd stopped crying.

Kyle picked up his candle. "I have always believed that we caused Mike Havermyer to kill his children. Mary Ellen told us that he did things to them, and even at eleven I knew it was bad. He saw us that night. Instead of running home and phoning the police, or telling you and dad, we all went to bed. We just went to bed." Kyle set his candle back on the floor, still lit.

Father Alex knelt beside him and picked it up, holding it in front of Kyle's face. "An eleven year old child does not know what to do in the face of grotesque perversion. Forgive the boy you were, Kyle."

Paul snapped at her. "I thought this was about exorcising the house from evil or something. I didn't come for therapy."

Father Alex didn't flinch. "Forgive that boy, Kyle. He was terrified and shocked and confused." Kyle closed his eyes. I didn't realize he was crying till his chest started to heave. We all remained frozen and silent while he sobbed. When he opened his eyes, he took the candle in his own hands and blew out the flame. Then he nodded his head.

Mother came closer to our half circle and sat down. She pulled Kyle's hand to her lips, and kissed it. "Look at what we did to our children. I have no right to ask for forgiveness."

Father Alex offered mom the candle. "It's not a right. It's a gift. You give it to each other; you give it to yourselves. This family has paid dearly for sins of omission."

"Why did you buy this house, mom? Why did you do this to us? Quite frankly I am way more pissed at you than anyone else right now."

"Christie, that's a shitty thing to say to mom." Paul finally looked at us. I knew he was more comfortable focussing on my failures as a human being than spiritual cleansing and exorcisms. He even joined the circle, looming over us with his arms crossed. "You always find a way to make it about you."

That hurt. And it was so untrue. I had noticed in my many years of social work that the first defence of profoundly selfish people is to accuse others of profound selfishness. Normally, I would have apologized. But, there was nothing normal in our current setting, and maybe that gave me courage. "Stay out of this Paul. I asked mom a question and I want an answer."

Paul opened his mouth to respond, but mom jumped in. "I don't think you'd understand it Christie. I barely understand it myself. This house is my shame. This house ruined my marriage to your father. This house took my children in some way I could never fathom. It's like everything that went wrong started here. So, I got thinking that maybe I could come back here and start over."

"It's just a house," Paul shouted. "Can we just finish the damn ritual and get out of here."

Father Alex stood between my oldest brother and me. "Paul, your anger is not helping. Your sister and brother are hurting deeply; your mother has carried a weight of guilt that would have destroyed many. Your father is probably suffering from the same thing. If you can't see what's happening here, maybe you should leave. But I hope you don't."

We all stared at Paul to see how he would react to Father Alex's reprimand. I was sure he would storm out. But he didn't. He sat down without saying a word.

The circle around the three burning candles was almost complete. I picked one of them up and put the flame close to my lips. "Mary Ellen, Patricia, Kati-Lynn, please forgive me for not telling someone. Please forgive me for not saving you. Please forgive me." I blew out the candle.

Mom picked up hers and held it out to us. "Can my children forgive me for not protecting them from evil, for not protecting those dear little girls. Can you forgive the woman who went to Mike Havermyer and told him his wife was leaving him?" Mom's hands were shaking badly, but she held on. Tears and mascara lined her cheeks. "Can you forgive me for blaming your father all these years and making him hate himself?"

Paul, Kyle, and I just stared at the candle. Without a word, the three of us got onto our knees, leaned in, and blew out the flame. We were all crying now, tears flowing easily, noses running. Paul pulled his candle close but left it on the floor. We watched him put his palm over the flame.

"Honey, please. You're gonna burn yourself."

I wanted to slap him, but his tears scared me. "Paul, don't. You're freaking mom out."

"Why do you want to feel pain Paul? Is it better to feel it on the outside?" Father Alex lifted his hand away from the heat and, surprisingly, he let her.

"I told dad what we saw. I stayed up till he got home and I begged him to call the police."

"Oh Paul." Mother put her hand over her mouth.

Paul looked at her. "He didn't call them. I should have done it myself."

"He thought he had a plan, Paul. He was going to save them."

"Ya. That's not what he told me. He told me to mind my own damn business."

We sat in silence trying to put the pieces together, trying to understand how much was said and how little was done, how not one person in our family did the right thing.

Kyle said it first. "No wonder dad drinks all the time."

I looked at Paul. He looked at me. Maybe it was the unbearable tension in the room, or the culmination of too much weirdness, but, simultaneously, we burst out laughing.

“I didn’t mean for that to be funny.”

“Kyle, we’re a mess. Our family is so screwed up.”

“And that is funny because?”

Paul jumped in. He wasn’t laughing now. “We are all fucked, Kyle. But we’re alive. And dammit, I wanted to save them. I wanted to save them and I wanted to do the right thing.”

“So did your dad, Paul.”

Paul looked at mom for a long time and we sat very still.

"You always have to be different," Kyle said. "You think you're more of a man because you won't forgive anyone."

“Is it really going to make any difference, me putting out a candle? Mary Ellen, Patricia, and Katie Lynn are still dead. If it makes you feel better to play this game, go ahead.”

“I am doing it for mom, asshole. For Christie. They’re here. It’s not so much to ask.”

“Well I think it is...too much. Sorry mom, but this is bullshit. I won’t do it.”

“I feel better, Paul.”

“That’s great Christie. Feelings are totally acceptable evidence in a court of law.”

“Don’t spoil it. Don’t.”

“You said it yourself, brother, we’re alive. We have each other.”

“How is this going to make life good again? Mom’s still crazy; dad still drinks.”

“Hey.” Mom tried to look annoyed.

I turned to our guide and minister. “What was the point of this, Father Alex? Do we get a happy ending?”

“How would I know,” she said, starting to gather cooling candles. “It’s not the end of the story.”

We stayed in the circle, not saying much, oddly comfortable with each other, fully present, and not counting the minutes till we could get back to our real lives. My brothers, my mother, they were my first loves, and I had entirely forgotten that.

Some families might have hugged at this point, and made mushy promises to stay much closer in the future. We did not. Instead, we pulled ourselves off the floor, and tried to pretend that we were not shaken by our own individual naked vulnerability and the magnitude of revelations we’d been given. Paul never did put out the candle. He called Katelyn on his cell while we said good-bye to Father Alex, then told us he wanted to walk back to mom’s.

The three of us stared at the house that was to be our new Kincardine home.

“Do you really want to live here, mom?”

“I can’t get it back can I? The years took you all away.”

“Just fix it up and sell it. I don’t think any of us want to go back in there.”

Paul was already a block away, but I saw him stop. I willed him to come back. He didn’t. “It was a brave thing to do, mom,” I said.

“You think so?”

“You brought us back to the bad place and helped us with the truth. The truth is horrible, but the secrets were worse. Thank you, mom.” I gripped her hand and squeezed. Our smiles went right to our eyes for a change.

Kyle added quickly, “I agree; it was good. Weird, but good. This house seemed so much bigger in my memory. And darker. Oh, and I think I have a crush on Father Alex?”

“Does this mean I might get grandchildren?”

“No promises. By marrying a minister almost my mother’s age? Oh, and being a committed homosexual? .”

Kyle grabbed her in an easy bear hug. “I love the way you never give up.”

I threw my arms over them both. I was pretty sure I needed to be alone for a long weepy session of sorting details and imagining how it might have turned out differently if just one of us had screamed that night. For now, though, we were outside under the iron gray sky that promised rain and we had a family supper to put together.

I think we’d always been afraid that the monsters were us. But we were just a family that lived next door to a very sick man. Father Alex was right. I couldn’t change the ending for Mary Ellen, Patricia, or Katie Lynn, and not even for Paul, but our family story was not over.

“I’ll be praying for you all,” Father Alex shouted from her Prius window as she passed us. “Bless this family, Lord! And remember, it’s Easter Sunday. Biggest miracle of the Bible happened on this day!”

“Amen”, I said.

And we all said, “Amen.”

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