

# Basement Stories



a collection of shorts  
by Bryan Sutherland



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## Thum-Thump

Diego was in that border zone, halfway between awake and asleep, rolling around on his bed unable to get comfortable or even stay still; his body restless, sweat lining his forehead because he was too hot, his arms pulling the blankets up tighter around his neck because he was too cold; his heart beating furiously in his chest.

It was a Thursday, the one night of the week Diego got to spend with his mum since she got a second job. It had become their ritual to get pizza for dinner, and they would drive across town to the good pizza place. She had one rule though, there had to be at least one vegetable on it, and he wasn't allowed to pick it off. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make for good pizza. Then they would go to the video store where they would each pick out a movie to watch. Another one of their little rules, she would watch just about anything he picked, but then he had to do the same. Then they would go home with a couple of movies and a bag of snacks and stay up late. That night as he finished a bag of Skittles and started in on a bag of M&M's she had warned him that he was eating too much sugar, that he should slow down on the sweets before he made himself sick. He didn't listen and was paying the price.

Morning came and his alarm went off. He reached over to the side table and switched it off. His whole body ached from the fitful sleep; his back was stiff and sore, his arms felt like they each weighed a hundred pounds, his legs were cramped. He wondered if his mum would let him stay home sick from school today, but not likely as this was his own fault. That and

the rule was if you were too sick to go to school then you were too sick to play after school, and on a Friday that carried through the whole weekend. He didn't want to sacrifice his weekend like that.

The covers were pulled up right around him and he could feel how damp his body was with sweat. With great effort he threw the comforter off of himself and noticed it, a heart lying on top of his chest steadily beating away. The sight should have frightened him, should have sent him screaming for help. Instead a calm wave enveloped him, he was not scared. He poked around it, felt his chest to see if his own heart was still beating inside him. He felt nothing and noticed the arteries and valves disappearing into his chest. The heart, his heart, beat at a steady pace as he poked around; there was no pain, no discomfort. He was going to yell for his mum, surely this was reason enough to stay home, but she had already left for work.

He held it gingerly as he sat up in bed, cupping the red muscle close to his chest. Was there a way to just stick it back in? He didn't see any way without the help of a doctor. He sat there on the edge of his bed, feet planted on the carpeted floor, wondering what he was going to do now. He resolved to take this one step at a time. He certainly couldn't walk around holding his heart in his hand so he needed to find something to put it in. He went to the kitchen and began rummaging around in the cupboards. He found the brown paper lunch bags his mum would pack sandwiches in. He opened one and dropped the heart inside. It held it fine, but the beating caused the bag to crinkle which was louder than the heart itself and would draw more attention. He poked around some more and found

the cupboard with all the different reusable take-out containers they had saved; round black ones from Chinese food, wide deep ones for soup, he'd be able to find something here. He pulled out different sized containers he thought might work but had trouble finding the corresponding lids. He found one that sort of matched, enough that he could force the lid closed to protect his heart.

He heard the school bus outside and had to grab his lunch and run to make it in time. He got on and the doors closed behind him. "What've you got there?" Mr. Santorini, the bus driver, asked him. "Your mum pack you something special for lunch today?"

"No, it's my heart."

Mr. Santorini was speechless, unsure if he was joking or not. Diego smiled and walked through the bus to find an empty seat. He found one near the back and sat next to the window to stare at the passing world. He could feel the plastic container vibrating quickly as his heart pounded from the quick sprint. He took deep breaths to calm himself down. He thought the container was quieter than the paper bag but he was sure everyone could still hear him.

The bus stopped to let more people on. "Hey Diego, did you see the game last night? Ronaldo was on fire." His friend Alex had gotten on. He'd been too busy watching movies with his mum last night he hadn't watched the game. He actually hadn't watched a football game in weeks and had been keeping up by looking up stats or watching quick highlight reels online. Just enough to get him by. Somehow early on sports had become

their thing, marking and dominating their conversations, dictating their lingo. He didn't follow along much anymore but had still wanted to keep up appearances.

"Actually no, I haven't watched a game in weeks." He decided to tell him the truth today.

"Two goals in the first half, on fire right out of the gates. Just amazing." Alex didn't notice and didn't miss a beat. He continued on like this for the rest of the ride to school, not once noticing or asking about the plastic container in Diego's hand. He carried on about football, excited about the World Cup, and making plans for the two of them to play that weekend.

"Actually I've already got plans to hang out with my mum, going to see a play." She had another evening off and she was going to take him to a play that he had wanted to go to. Another thing he wouldn't have told Alex.

"Did you get in trouble or something, and this is your punishment?"

"No, it was my idea. I love the theatre man."

Alex was speechless at first and had no response. He switched back to a safe topic and started going on about football some more.

He walked through the school hall to his locker. People looked at him as he walked by, looked at the awkward way he held this

plastic container to his chest. To anyone who slowed down, he'd tell them simply; "It's my heart," and walk on.

Alex was right behind him. "Do you think coming in was a mistake? Shouldn't you have stayed home, called your mum, got this sorted out?"

"No, I feel fine. This is fine. Have you seen Sandy today? I didn't notice her on the bus." Sandy was the prettiest girl at school. He'd barely had the courage to say two words to her, but today he was feeling different. He went to his locker and dropped off his bag. He placed the container down inside, his arms getting tired from holding it. The pounding vibration echoed in the metal locker creating a tinny reverberation.

"I think she's been coming in early for theatre practice."

"Theatre, that's right. I think I'll go say hi." He picked up the container and closed his locker.

"Wait, you're going to go talk to Sandy? With that thing?" Alex was pointing at the take-out container.

"Why not?"

"Because, well, because-"

He didn't wait around to hear what excuse he had to say.

Diego opened the large double doors near the cafeteria that lead into the auditorium. The theatre kids were on the stage belting out lines and sword fighting. It was a full dress

rehearsal and he couldn't tell through the costumes where Sandy was. He sat down next to the director and asked how long until they took a break.

"Maybe another ten minutes, then they have to break for class." He looked over at Diego and noticed the container. "You can't have food in here."

"It's not food, it's my heart."

"What is your heart doing in a take-out food container?"

"Well I'm not just going to hold it in my hand all day."

When the break was called Diego jumped up on the stage and found Sandy dressed in a suit of armor and sheathing her sword.

"Excuse me, Sandy, my name's Diego."

"Oh hey Diego, of course; we take the same bus in the morning." Her voice echoed out of the helmet. "Did you see the rehearsal, what did you think?"

"Sorry I only just got here and missed it. I'm sure it was great though. That's a really amazing costume."

"Thanks, I made it myself," she rapped her hand on the breastplate. "I had a lot of scrap lying around."

"Anyway, I'll get right to the point. I was wondering if you wanted to go out with me tonight. Maybe dinner and a nice

dessert?" He could feel his heart almost vibrating in the plastic container in his hand. Maybe if he packed some cloth in inside that would dull the thudding echo.

"Yeah that sounds great, we can meet up after school." She turned to head into the change rooms but came back around to him. "There's one thing I wanted to ask you. There's a rumour going around the school about that plastic container in your hand." He looked down at it and knew what was coming. "I know it probably sounds crazy but I just need to ask. People are saying it has your heart inside it."

"It does," there was no use hiding it. "Would you like to see?" He peeled off the lid and she peered inside.

"You know a plastic container like that isn't very protective," she said. "But metal, I can make some interesting stuff out of metal."

He could hear her smile inside the helmet, and the plastic take-out container rattled in his hand. Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump Thump Thump Thumpthumpthumpthumpthumthumthump.

## Office Politik

I can hear them out there in the office plotting. They come in in the mornings and immediately set about planning my demise, I'm sure of it. I wonder how they think they're going to do it and be successful. If they're going to just kick down my door, barge in with homemade weapons fashioned out of office supplies; or if they're planning a more subtle approach like hacking into my email, planting evidence, and having Top Brass stumble on it and eject me. It doesn't matter because I'm protected on both fronts; a general always plans for the impossible. I've got traps set all over my office should they decide a front attack, and my own growing arsenal; and I haven't turned on my computer in weeks. See how well they frame me when all the evidence points to my freedom. Then they'll be the ones packing their desks into boxes and having security escort them out. It'll be hard to plan a coup when you can't even step foot in the building.

"Morning John."

Hamish was standing in the doorway. I think he might be the ringleader. Newest member of the team he's still got that spunk, that drive. He's ambitious and gunning for my chair. Sorry to say he doesn't know what kind of a fight he's in for. It takes a special breed to get to management. I hold up my finger to tell him to wait a second as I grab the phone receiver. "Sylvie, yes good morning...it is supposed to be a beautiful day...a meeting? Well, I'd love any opportunity to talk about my future with the company...yes, I've got some big ideas...looking forward to it...ciao." I turned back to Hamish,

"Sorry about that. Sylvie, the general manager, always coming to me for ideas."

"Isn't she on vacation this week?"

"Tells you how much she values my input. What can I do for you?"

"I'm having trouble putting in my time for yesterday. It's giving me some sort of error. Would I send that to IT?" He's still standing in the doorway. So close, just two more steps in and he'd hit the first trap. I wait hoping he'll venture in just a little further. "John?"

"Sorry. Um, sounds like it might be something wrong in the program. Take a screenshot and send it to HelpDesk; CC me on the email."

"Excellent, thanks for your help."

"It's what I'm here for," you filthy backstabber. Don't think I don't know you're up to something. Probably purposefully trying to mess up your pay so you can blame it on me. I've been around for a while though, you're going to have to work a lot harder than that if you're going to try and pull one over on me. This is why I'm up here, in this lush corner office, and you're out there in the pod. They're using conventional thinking and rehashing old ideas. I'm a top-tier level performer coming with originality. Like changing the box measurements so we could fit the same amount of product inside but more boxes on the skid. Arnold stole that from me and took all the credit. But I got him back. No one's going to notice a few drops of peanut oil

on their sandwich. That's what sets me apart, and what will keep me one step ahead of my team as they plan their futile takeover.

I can hear them out there, the three of them, tapping away at their desks, the occasional polite request for a stapler or some tape. Too wise to my open door to discuss their plans openly. To ease the tension and lull them into a false sense of security I put on my headset and pretend I'm on an important call. I walk over to the door, cautiously stepping around the trigger of one of my traps, and close my door.

"I don't care if we have to stay on this phone call all day Heidleburg, we're going to come up with a solution," I yell into the phone, giving the impression that I'm really busy. The door is closed, but not latched, still open just a crack. It's all about appearances. Then I switch headsets to the one connected to the tiny microphone I planted in their pod. Determination, perseverance, ingenuity; doing what it takes no matter the cost. This is what puts me ahead. A click of a button and it's like I'm right there in the room sitting next to them.

"Is everything ready?" Hamish whispers.

"I think so," Susan says. "We just need him out of the office for a bit. Long enough to set up."

Planning something for today? I have to admit I was a little surprised. I didn't think they would be that prepared, but I was always one step ahead.

"Should we do it at lunch?" Maureen asks.

"Only if he decides to come. If not we'll figure it out when we get back. We don't want to make him suspicious by trying to force him out." Hamish says.

"Perfect. If not, maybe I'll get Maxine to have a quick meeting with him in her office. Just long enough so we can set up." Susan says.

I click the headset off, that's plenty. I'll be ready. If they are planning a full attack today I should prepare, plant some more traps.

I spend the rest of the morning prepping my office with two more triggers; one in my computer for when they try to turn it on and steal information, the other in my filing cabinet for when they search for sensitive documents or plant more incriminating evidence.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in." Hamish pushed the door open and stood in the doorway. Crafty, two steps away from the trigger again. I may have to move it. "What can I do for you Hamish; get that time-issue sorted?"

"Yeah they're working on it. We were going to head out for lunch, go to Jesus Burger up the street, did you want to join us?"

"Thanks, but I'll pass today." A mighty ruse, but I was already privy to their plan. "Pretty swamped and I've got a conference call to prep for."

"Did you want us to bring you back something?"

"No, it's all right. I've got some leftovers from last night."

He lingered in the doorway a moment before nodding his head and leaving. Once all three of them had left the pod I opened my drawer and pulled out the weapon I'd been crafting; an open stapler duct taped to the end of a meter stick. One of an arsenal I had been crafting. They weren't going to take me down. Not today.

Hamish was definitely the ringleader, but that didn't mean I could lower my guard around Susan or Maureen. I'd seen Maureen's CV on file and she had ample experience in many other offices; some doing shipping and receiving, some manufacturing, some IT work. That was her greatest asset, her greatest advantage against me. She had diverse experience and if she was smart she would have picked up a few tricks in other industries that I hadn't even considered yet. Too bad for her, lucky for me, she didn't have the drive; until Hamish came along.

Susan, on the other hand, was a veteran in this office who had been here for years. I'm fairly certain she was responsible for my predecessor leaving, though I hadn't been able to find direct evidence. If I were being truthful she was the one that I was most worried about. Hamish was young, eager, and brash. You could read his intentions on his face and he was apt to make mistakes because he was moving too quickly and not thinking things through. Susan was in the long game. She was practiced and patient, just waiting for her window of opportunity. And when she saw it, she'd take it.



My door was open when they all came back from lunch and they all mumbled Hi as they walked by. I could see the disappointment on their faces as they passed. It felt good. If they were angry or upset then they may slip up, make mistakes. Then I win.

I could hear Susan on the phone just outside my office talking in whispered, hushed tones. A minute after she hung up I saw my phone light up. I was Maxine. They were pulling the trigger.

"Hello?" I answered.

"John, it's Maxine. Do you mind coming up to my office for a minute, I want to go over a report with you real quick."

"I'm kind of swamped here, can we do it remotely? Send me an email." I had every intention of leaving and giving them the time and space to set off my traps, but I wasn't going to make it easy for them.

"I sent you an email about it this morning but you never got back to me." I looked at my blank computer screen. "It'll only take a couple of minutes, I just have a few questions."

"All right," I sighed audibly and hung up the phone.

I walked out of my office, and out of the pod, and made my way towards Maxine's office. I thought about making a big show of leaving and telling everyone where I was going but they already knew. I wanted to keep it simple and not let on that I was ready.

In Maxine's office I played along and answered her questions about the report she had pulled. "Yes, those numbers are right...I pulled them from the DBD report...this is compared to our results this time last year..." all the while keeping one ear to the door waiting to hear the result of Susan, Maureen, and Hamish breaking into my office. I expected to hear an explosion, the fire alarm going off, and people running and screaming for their lives. After ten minutes of silence, Maxine said she got the gist of the report and I headed back to my office.

I stepped into the pod, careful and still expecting, hoping, to see chaos even though I hadn't heard anything. All the lights were off, it was dark with the blinds closed. I pushed the door to my office open, darkness, reached in and flicked the light switch.

"Surprise!" everyone yelled as they jumped up from hiding spots behind my desk. They were wearing party hats, streamers had been strung from the ceiling, and a banner in front of my desk read Happy Birthday. Susan was holding a rectangle chocolate cake with Happy Birthday written on it in blue icing. I stood there, my mouth agape. Was this it; was this the real surprise they had been planning today? All those whispered secrets to get me out of the office to do this? Had I been wrong about them? Still, why did none of my traps activate when they came in? I made a quick glance and nothing looked as if they'd been tampered with, had I not set them properly?

"Let's go out into the pod where there's more room," Hamish said. He brushed past me as he led the procession out. They

brought out plates and plastic cutlery, Susan had a large knife that she used to cut the cake and dole it out to everyone.

"You're a hard person to trick, I didn't think we'd ever get you out of the office for this."

A party, that's what they had been planning. Okay, maybe today was going to be fine. I took a piece of cake and bit into it. The middle layer was fudge, my favourite. Today there was a truce. After the party I'd go into my office and dismantle the traps.

But tomorrow, tomorrow was another day.

## Jungle Supply Op

Jessie pushed through the thick foliage of the jungle, a pistol in her hand cocked and ready. She held up her fist to signal Coby and Brion behind her that they were stopping. She pulled out the map and carefully unfolded it. The air in the jungle was so thick and humid everything they had on them became damp and never seemed to dry. She consulted the map and checked her compass to make sure they were heading in the right direction. They should be approaching the supply cache in about thirty minutes.

"How much farther?" Coby asked. Brion maintained his position in the back but kept one ear trained on the conversation.

"About two kilometers and we should be on top of it," Jessie said.

"That's presuming that your sources are right," he continued. "I mean, they could be wrong."

"This is our own drop box. The sources tell me there's been a drop for us to pick up. This wasn't a renegade rumour that I picked up off the street. We got the message and others confirmed it. People risked their lives to get these supplies." He was new to the cause, she reminded herself. He was still suspicious and always on guard but he was dedicated. It took time to build up trust.

After double-checking their position she moved on.

She trusted her sources not to give her bogus information. They believed in the cause just as much as she did, some of them more so. Every day people were facing mounting hardships; forced out of their homes so the building could be demolished and the land commandeered, struggling to earn money and given ration cards to exchange for food from stores with empty shelves, health deteriorating and no care to help them. She had seen people in dire need and had determined to do something about it.

"I just wonder," Coby continued. "What's to stop the government from finding out about the drop box, planting the message that there's a pickup, and staging an attack? What if this is a trap?"

Jessie didn't break stride or bother turning around. "That might be the case. Every scrap of information we get is scrutinized, and any one of those pieces, or all of them, could be planted. False intel to throw us off course, lead us into a trap or pit us against our own. That's the risk, I refuse to sit around and do nothing in fear of doing the wrong thing."

They continued on in silence, the sounds of the jungle the only thing keeping them company. Animals far off, insects buzzing by their heads, their own footsteps echoing back at them before falling dead among the trees. What if this was a trap? Jessie had always tried to put the idea out of her head, but each mission it was a very real possibility. Was she ready to lay it all on the line for them?

They came to a tree line at the edge of a small clearing. Jessie stopped them at the edge and crouched down to survey the scene.

"What's going-" Coby began. Jessie silenced him by putting her hand over his mouth.

"Even if this isn't a trap, the enemy could be nearby," she whispered in his ear.

They sat there in silence for a full ten minutes. Jessie watched the clearing and listened for any signs of approaching or hiding soldiers. She looked over at Brion who nodded his head; the coast was clear.

"All right we're good," Jessie said. They all relaxed a bit and Jessie holstered her gun. She pointed into the clearing. "You see that large boulder there with the two small uprooted trees lying across it? That's our mark, the cache is buried right in front. Coby, you and me are going to dig, and we're going to do it fast. It's not deep, but I don't want to waste time making this pretty. Brion, you assemble the wagon, I want it ready when we hit pay dirt. I don't know exactly what we'll find down there, but once we do I want to load it up and get out of here as fast as possible. We're going to be moving at a good clip and burdened with the extra weight; be ready for that. On my mark, ready?" Coby had his shovel in hand, Brion had thrown down his pack and was already assembling the all-terrain wagon. "Go!"

They ran out into the clearing and began digging right in front of the boulder. They had a steady rhythm for staying out of

each other's way; one shovel in while the other was dumping dirt. Back and forth, back and forth. The dirt was soft which excited Jessie, that meant it had probably been dug recently; the intel was good.

They had only been at it for a couple of minutes when Coby struck something hard. They both threw aside their shovels and began pulling the dirt out by hand, brushing it away from the hard surface. He looked up at her with a smile, he was starting to trust.

"How's that wagon coming along?" Jessie yelled. She looked over as Brion was ratcheting on the last wheel. He gave her a thumbs up to show he was ready. "Great, give us a hand over here."

They lifted out a medium sized chest and laid it on the ground. Too eager to wait Coby popped the lock and swung the lid open. There were stacks of extra ration cards, enough to feed people for a month; there were batteries, a set of walkie-talkies, some sacks of grain, jugs of water, and first aid supplies. It was a good haul that would help people out. Jessie and Brion each grabbed an end and carried it to the wagon.

"Wait, there's more," Coby was on his knees looking into the hole. Jessie came back and they pulled out a second chest. "The intel was good," he said.

"I was only told about the one," Jessie said. She popped the lock and swung the lid open. Inside were a series of rifles, stacks of ammunition, plastic explosives and detonators. "This wasn't in the plan."

"Load it up, we'll take it," Coby said.

"How are plastic explosives going to help-" Jessie began.

"We'll find a use for them. Everything can be used somehow," Coby said.

Jessie didn't feel good about this. Something felt off. She ignored the feeling as they loaded up the second chest, replaced the cover over the hole and topped it off with the dirt. She moved to grab the front of the wagon when Coby stopped her.

"Easy there," he grabbed her wrist and threw her arm back. "I'll take it from here. You two can step back into the clearing there;

"Coby?" Jessie said. "You're a spy?"

"Turn around," he reached down and un-holstered her pistol and threw it into the bush. "This is more of a double-cross. I'm taking these supplies to the Liberation Army for when we stage our coup. Now down on your knees, hands behind your head." He had his gun trained on them so they complied.

"This is our drop. Those supplies, those ration cards," she pointed to the loaded wagon. "Those are for the people."

"Hands behind the head," he reminded her. "And the people?" He laughed. "They would just squander it away until they were right back where they started. They don't know what's good for them, they don't know how to take care of themselves. We do,

and with these supplies the Liberation Army will set them free."

"The Liberation Army is just a front for another group of fascist. Give it a catchy name and fresh coat of paint all you want, you have no interest in people really being free. If you did you'd be helping them, not dictating to them."

"Call it what you want, we'll have the power and you'll be dead." He cocked his rifle and fired.

Nothing happened.

The rounds were duds, too damp from the jungle humidity. He became frantic trying to get the rifle to fire. Jessie seized on the opportunity, leaned forward and kicked her leg back into his shin. He bent over in pain. Jessie spun onto her back and kicked her leg out again, landing her heel in his groin. Coby buckled over in pain, dropping the gun in the process. She stood up and finished him off with a knee to the head. His neck cracked back and his body stood there for a moment, frozen in place, before falling back onto the ground.

Jessie slapped Brion across the face to snap him out of his daze. One way or another word was going to get to the Liberation Army about what they had done, but they had to focus on one problem at a time. Right now they had to get these supplies out of the jungle and to their headquarters. She grabbed the front to steer while Brion pushed from the back. Coby was still lying on the ground as they disappeared into the bush.

## Foray Beyond the Shroud

- Hey man, thanks for giving me a ride. I was kind of surprised when I saw you replied to my Facebook post.

- No problem. Like I said, I'm heading in that direction anyway. I'd love the company and the chance to catch-up.

- What are you heading downtown for?

- I've got to meet a guy down there, pick up some stuff.

- Some stuff? What are you a drug dealer now?

- Ha! No, nothing like that. Just picking up a couple crates of records I bought off some guy online. For money I'm working in a warehouse packing orders for a kitchen supply company. Worldwide shipping.

- Oh, I see. That's pretty good.

- ....

- Well I'm working customer service over at –

- So you're going to the airport. Got a fancy vacation planned?

- .... No, I'm flying back home to see my mom.

- Oh, how is she? I haven't talked to her in years.

- She's not doing great, getting old. She took a nasty spill down the stairs last week and broke her hip. She's getting out of the hospital today and I've got to pick her up. Hence the early flight.

- Aw man, I'm sorry. I went through something similar with my mom last year. She didn't fall or anything, but she kept forgetting where she was putting stuff; you know? Like early onset diabetes or something. She'd put stuff from the fridge into the cupboard and I would walk in to sour milk and rotting food hitting me right in the face; this wall of stench making me gag. And she's just sitting here in her chair reading the paper like it's no big deal.

- What'd you do?

- Took her to the doctor's, ran a bunch of tests, got her on some meds. It's not going to stop what's happening, just slow it down. So now I try and visit a little more often to make sure nothing's spoiling in the cupboards, or that she doesn't accidentally burn the house down trying to toast her keys.

- Did that happen?

- No, at least not yet. She did lose her keys and we found them in the toaster. Thank God it was unplugged.

- I thought I saw on Facebook that your mom moved to Europe last year.

- ....

- ....

- So what are you going to do about your mom?

- I'm not sure really. It's one of those things that you don't really want to think about, your parents getting old. They're the ones who've always had the answers and stuff, right? So to see them in this vulnerable state is just...well...yeah, I've avoided thinking about it. We'll have to get her into a home I guess because with the broken hip there are way too many stairs in her place now. We'll have to start scaling things down then; furniture, knick-knacks...don't know where I'm going to offload a collection of porcelain figurines though.

- Oh, you should check out the internet. You can offload just about anything online. You may have to ship them somewhere, but there are collectors looking for everything. Like these records I'm going to pick up; a bunch of 75's and things. Stuff most people wouldn't care about and they'd just end up in the garbage; put them online though and you'll find people like me.

- Yeah, I'll be sure to check out that internet.

- ....

- So you're really going to pick up some records right now?

- Yeah why?

- I don't know, I just thought maybe you were lying about it.

- Really? Why would I lie about something like that?

- I don't know, who goes to pick up records at five o'clock in the morning? Seemed strange. And lying just seems to be a thing you do sometimes.

- Wait, what do you mean it's a thing I do sometimes?

- ....

- What's that mean?

- Nothing, just forget about it.

- No, tell me.

- It's nothing. It's in the past, let's just leave it there. I don't even know why I brought it up. Tell me more about these records. So are you a collector now?

- Yes, I am, and these are some old 75's. Done. Now let's get back to your thing.

- I didn't know records came in 75's. I thought it was 45's and 78's.

- That's what I said. Now back to your thing.

- Christ, I told you to forget about it. It's in the past.

- Well you dragged it up to the present, so now's your chance to get it all off our chest.

- ....

- ....

- How long has it been since we've seen each other?

- I'd say about five years.

- Right, so it would've been around that time that I started noticing you had this penchant for lying.

- Lying? About what?

- Mostly they would be about these stupid little things that don't really matter but add them all up and it got really fucking annoying. So we just slowly stopped calling you.

- We? So this was a group decision? You all collectively got together and said, 'Hey, let's cut Seamus out.'?

- Not exactly like that, we didn't put it to a vote or anything. It just progressed that way.

- And what had I been lying about exactly?

- Stupid shit. Like I'd ask to bum a smoke off you and you'd say you didn't have any, but then I'd see you pull a pack out later that night. Or someone would suggest we got to a certain bar and you'd say you can't because you were kicked out, but the next week you'd show up there no problem.

- So I made a few drunken blunders, selfishly hoarding my cigarettes and dodging exes at bars, and you collectively cut me out?

- Things turned. When you got drunk, which was often, you'd pull one of us aside and go on these rants about what you saw 'beyond the veil,' and how you were sure the others weren't who they said they were. You did this to each of us over a couple of months. It was getting more frequent for you to talk like that and it freaked us out.

- Okay. And did any of you think to ask me about it? Sit me down and straight to my face ask what my side of the story was?

- No, no we didn't. How could we be sure you were telling the truth?

- You're right, that's absolutely right. A notorious liar like me how could you ever be sure.

- And we were practically kids at the time. We didn't know how to deal with that shit. Someone starts acting a little strange you just cut them out. Slash and burn, you know?

- Yeah, I guess.

- I'm not saying what we did was right, but it's what we did. But I'm glad you gave me a lift today, I wanted to see how you were doing. Looks like you're doing well for yourself.

- ....

- ....

- Well here's your drop off. I hope your mom is all right.

- Thanks again for the ride.

- I see you.

- Did you say something?

- I said I'll see you later.



## Movin' Day

Akiva slid the key into the front door and twisted it to unlock it. He held it there to savor the moment. This was the first time he was unlocking his own place, his very own home that he owned. He had been watching the market for years, and though it was a little farther from the city than he wanted to be, he had gotten a good deal on a modest three-story complete with a front and back yard and a tree with a swing on it. It was going to need some fixing up, but he was proud to be able to call it his own. He pushed the door open and entered into his new life.

The movers had already come and gone. Paid only to bring his stuff passed the threshold and no further the front room was cluttered with his furniture; a bed, a couch, a coffee table, a dining table from his parents, along with smaller items like chairs and side tables. The front hall was lined with boxes which he had only labeled sparsely, confident that he would be able to figure them out as he went along. He looked at it all, it didn't seem like he owned a whole lot. One of the benefits of moving from a one bedroom apartment to a three-story house was that it was easy to organize your stuff. The downside being he now had a lot of empty space to fill.

But that would come later, for now he set about organizing the boxes of stuff he did have into the various rooms. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He looked at the caller display which said 'Rents. Probably his mother who, along with his father and sister, were planning on coming over the next day to help organize and unpack; have a bit of a house-warming

party. He declined the call telling himself that he would call her back later, once he got a little more settled and cleared away some of the boxes.

He opened one of the boxes and looked inside. A box of stuff for the kitchen, it had a bunch of utensils, flippers, scrapers, and tongs. That would be easy enough to move. He picked it up, walked into the kitchen and placed it down on the counter. He opened a few drawers and cupboards, getting a feel for the space that he was going to have. He had some dishes and pots in another box somewhere. Was it best to keep the food low and the pots high? Or vice versa? He wasn't used to having so many options. He decided to just focus on getting the boxes into the different rooms and unpack later.

A bedroom was a haven, a place that was supposed to be relaxing and inviting. This house had three of them. That was more rooms than he'd ever had in a house. His parents' house had three bedrooms but he had been in the basement which was not exactly a 'bedroom' in the strict sense, lacking certain key features like a door. Carrying a box of clothes for his closet he started moving back and forth between the two bedrooms on the top floor trying to decide which he would make the master. They were both roughly the same size, but he settled on the one at the front of the house because it offered a great view of his new yard and the street beyond. He dropped the box of clothes in the closet, leaving them packed up for now. They were wrinkled from being in a box for the past three days and his mom would probably insist on washing everything tomorrow. Give him a fresh clean start.

He opened up a box and a waft of sweet scents entered his nostrils. This was his box of toiletries, already opened bottles of shampoo and body soap, a loofah, shaving cream and razor. His mom told him to get rid of it and buy new once he moved, more of that fresh-start attitude. That seemed wasteful and he couldn't bring himself to throw out perfectly good stuff. So he sealed it all in oversized plastic bags and threw them into a box. There was only the one bathroom upstairs that had a shower in it, which was where he was going to put this. There was another bathroom on the main floor but it only had the basic necessities of a toilet and sink, which was known as a half bathroom, a term he'd never heard until he started looking for a place. He would have to buy some basics for that room as well. All that would come later.

He came across one box with the word MEMORIES written on it in black marker. He opened it up and began rooting around inside. This was the killer of all moving operations and what he'd been trying to avoid by dropping stuff off and not unpacking yet. Pulling open each box and analyzing each item for the stories it held could get you lost and soon the whole day is gone and nothing was done. In this box he found a baseball glove he got when he was eight, a high school yearbook that his first girlfriend covered in hearts, a photo album of his first family trip to the east coast, among other trinkets. He closed it quickly and brought the box up to the third floor where there was a ladder to the attic. He unfolded the steps and carried it up. The attic was dim and he could taste the dust floating in the air. There was something eerie about attics, they all carried some sort of mystery about them. This one had a peaked ceiling and only a single window at one end to let in light, though it was obscured by branches from the large tree outside

making the light dim with a tinge of green. The darkness and shadows played tricks on the mind and he was sure that he could see figures there waiting for him. His heart skipped as he reached up and pulled the cord on the lightbulb, chasing away the darkness. Of course, it was empty. Nothing to be afraid of. He set the box down and went back downstairs.

He moved a few more boxes to the bathroom, the bedroom, and the kitchen clearing a path through the main hallway. Next, he wanted to move some of the furniture. Most of the big stuff would have to wait until tomorrow when his sister came along; there was no way he was going to move a dresser by himself. Smaller things like chairs and side tables wouldn't be so bad. He also considered that it was going to feel weird sleeping on a bare mattress in the front room that night. Dragging at least that up to the bedroom might not be so difficult. There were also miscellaneous large items that he needed to find a place for, like his snowboard. Winter was still several months away and even then he wasn't sure if he would find the time to use it. The attic was always an option, but there was also the huge basement.

Most basements conjure up images of dank cellars with concrete floors, rickety shelving with old paint cans on it, and tiny windows covered in grime and cobwebs. As Akiva stood at the top of the stairs leading down into his basement and flicked on the light, he realized his was nothing of the sort. There was a brand new washer and dryer along one wall with an extended countertop for any folding needs and cupboards below for storage. It was completely finished with tile flooring and a separate room for more storage that he was considering turning into a darkroom; that or maybe a screening room with

big comfy chairs and a projector for movie nights. Then again maybe the attic would be better suited to that once he cleaned it up.

He set the snowboard in one corner in the second room and was considering bringing the stuff he'd stored in the attic down when he noticed a light coming out from under one of the walls. It was a faint glow just along the edge where the wall met the floor. There was no way there could be a third room down here, surely. Curious, and as this was his house now and he was free to do what he wanted, he felt underneath and pulled out the corner of the wall panel. It unhinged easily and he was able to follow the break all the way up until the whole panel popped out. Hinged on one side he swung it like a door. At best he expected to find a dark crawl space on the other side for extra storage if he ever got the courage to clean out all the bugs that called it home; at worst it was some horror dungeon full of chains and stains that had been covered up and was the reason he had gotten such a good deal. He swung the door open and was struck by a blinding white brightness.

When his eyes adjusted he could see, from the doorway, an impossibly large office. There were white gleaming tiles on the floor stretching out as far as he could see until the room faded into a dull white glow in the distance. The ceiling stretched up at least twelve feet, passed what should have been his kitchen. All around the office men and women dressed in black suits walked with determination between white stacks. There was a lone desk in front of him with a man sitting behind it looking at him quizzically. Along the front of the desk it read: Adjustment Bureau in block letters.

Akiva slowly swung the door and latched it closed. That could wait until tomorrow. He really needed to move that mattress.

## The Keep Pile

Iago pulled the latch that released the stairs to the attic. Each step up the stairs was a combination of creaks and squeaks as the hinges and old wood rubbed against each other. There was light shining through the window which showed the dust motes hanging in the air creating a musty smell with the weight of age. He made his way across the bare floorboards to some boxes stacked away in one corner. Veronica had asked him to clean it out; go through the boxes and get rid of any stuff that they weren't going to use anymore. He knew it was a bad idea to send him up here, it was going to take him all day and he might only get through one box. She should be the one up here, and he had told her so, for the simple fact that she was more capable of getting rid of these things. He would spend all day reminiscing about the memories each item had or convincing himself that they'll use an item once they do X, Y, or Z. It was wasteful to get rid of perfectly good stuff like this.

"It's not wasteful," she explained to him as she was getting ready to leave for work. "We're not throwing the stuff in the trash. We're going to donate it so that someone else can get some use out of it."

"But what about-"

She kissed him goodbye. "Remember, we're trying to cultivate a space that works for us, not the other way around."

This is what he gets for buying her that book on Hygge.

Because it was memories that he saw when he looked at these boxes. He pulled out a straw hat with a band around it that said Cuba in stylized lettering. He hadn't worn this hat in years, and had no plan to because hats were never his thing; he had an odd shaped head and they looked funny on him. When he looked at this hat though he didn't just see an object that he'd never use taking up space in a box of more stuff that he didn't use, he saw the memory of him and his wife's first trip together to Cuba. How they had spent their days lounging on the beach sipping cocktails and eating food, occasionally dipping into the ocean to cool off. Then at night when the humidity had broken they would head back to their room and make love in the moonlight while waves crashed on the beach.

He put the hat down to one side, that would go in the Keep pile. He reached into the box to see what else he could find. He came up with a piece of wood; that could be used for an interesting art project. He put it down in the Keep pile. After a couple of hours he had managed to get through two boxes and stepped back to see the two piles he'd made. There was the Keep pile; there was the hat from Cuba and the piece of wood, some toys from his childhood, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures, a clock he had built in his high school shop class that didn't run but he could fix, among some other things. The second pile was the Maybe pile; stuff he wasn't sure about yet. There were some old CD's and a couple of VHS tapes with the no labels on them so he couldn't tell what they were, some textbooks from college which he dropped out of, a pile of old magazines, and a fake plaster skull. His Donation pile was still empty.

There were ten or twelve boxes left, and these were just the ones in the attic. They had a whole separate room in the basement with even more boxes and stuff stacked up. Veronica wasn't going to like this, but at least he had gotten started. She could make the executive decision on the Maybe pile and at least that would be some stuff they'd have gotten rid of.

He could only do his best, he told himself and grabbed a third box. This one was full of old electronics. There was an old Nintendo that was definitely going in the Keep pile. There was an old computer mouse; the one he had now was wireless but it was always good to have a spare- Keep pile. There was an old VCR that was going into the Keep pile, and now he could move those VHS tapes from the Maybe pile as well. In the bottom of the box he found his old cell phone from back when they used to flip open. Now here was an interesting little artifact. He wondered how long it had been since he used this thing, at least ten years, back when he was still in school. So many years, so many changes; he wondered what bits of information he could pull from it. He checked the time, he'd been at it for a little over two hours now, a good time to take a break. He dug around in the box and found a cord that looked like the charger and took it down to the kitchen.

He plugged the phone in and left it on the counter to charge just enough so he could turn it on. He needed a little pick up after working all morning so he poured some water into the kettle and set it to boil for some tea.

He was too excited about the phone and went to turn it on. The whole experience was like muscle memory; flipping the phone open, holding down the power button, watching the animation

on the screen as the phone came to life. It was like being thrown back to college when he worked part-time at a Taco Bell. He had to keep his phone on silent and out of sight, so periodically he would duck into the washroom or the big walk-in freezer and flip his phone open to see if anyone had texted him about plans that night. He flipped through the menu, found Pictures and went into the file. There were three pictures saved there, all of them too small and blurry to distinguish what they were supposed to be. He was going to delete them when he paused, Veronica might be able to tell what they are, so he backed out of the pictures and returned to the menu. He scrolled down and found Text Messages, this is where the treasure would be hidden. He opened up the inbox.

There were only a handful of messages there. Maybe he didn't lead as exciting a life as he'd thought. A few were from Veronica, they had just started dating, and most of the messages were plans to meet up later. Nothing salacious or exciting. A few messages from his sister telling him that she had just gotten a phone of her own, and then there was a string of name-calling. That was still typical of her. The last message was from his dad which read: Just tried 2 call you. Mum wants 2 do dinner this sat. Free? Ill try again.

That was a tough memory to come across. He remembered that dinner because he didn't go. There was a party he wanted to go to instead, so he lied and said he needed to study for an exam or write a paper, some bullshit excuse. Two weeks later an embolism burst in his father's head and he died.

Maybe there were some memories that it was best to let go of.

Iago took the kettle off the burner and poured the hot water into a mug. He was about to drop a tea bag in when the phone rang. The cell phone.

He walked over and picked it up. It vibrated in his hand with each ring. He flipped it open and looked at the screen. The caller display said Dad's Cell. It couldn't be. This had to be some sort of joke, some mix-up. The phone didn't even have a SIM card in it anymore. He pressed the answer button and held the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"There you are, thought maybe you were dodging my calls."

"Dad?"

"Well yeah, at least last time I checked."

"Who is this really?" Iago was fighting back tears.

"It's dad, I thought we established that already. Anyway, did you get my message about Saturday?"

"It's...it's good to hear your voice again." Tears were rolling freely. It couldn't be true, but he wanted to believe. He had to focus so his voice wouldn't crack. "I don't know how this is even possible. How are you calling me right now?"

"Same way I always do. You all right?"

"It's just," did he break the news? Was it even news? His mind was running around in circles with no navigator pointing the direction to go. "I don't understand how you're calling right now, you died almost ten years ago."

"Well you can't expect me to know how this crazy technology stuff works. I just punch in the numbers and hope for the best. So Saturday, yay or nay?"

He wanted to say yes. He wanted to go back and change his mind and be able to enjoy one final dinner as a whole family. That wouldn't change anything though, would it? He still wouldn't have gone, and his father would still have died. He played it as it lay, but with a little more truth.

"I don't think I can make it, there's a girl at this party."

"Well if there's any reason to miss a dinner, that's it. I hope she's treating you well."

"She is. She's the one."

"Great. Hey, by the way, the other night I watched a program about beavers. It was the best dam program I've ever seen."

"Ha, that's a good one."

"Well your mother is calling me away, wants me to clean out the storage room. God I hate doing that stuff; get so lost in there, going to take me a week at least. Talk to you later."

"Yeah, I hate it too. And dad, I love you."

"Pff, pansy. I love you too."

The phone went silent. Iago looked down at the screen and saw that there was no signal available to make calls. He flipped it closed and slid it into his pocket. This was going in the Keep pile.

## Helping Grandma

It all started in the kitchen, where most of life's important decisions are made. Not in any intellectual sense, but in the stomach and in the heart. Making a ham sandwich for his little brother, Giacomo took down the bread from the pantry, untwisted the opening of the bag and pulled two slices from the middle of the loaf. They were thick and soft, perfect bread for a sandwich. He went to the fridge and pulled out the mayonnaise and spread a little on each slice, just a tiny taste. He put the mayo back before pulling out the mustard. That was one of the little tricks that his grandmother had taught him when he was younger. Small things like cleaning up as you go save a lot of time once the meal was done.

He remembered that day a couple of years ago, cooking a meal with his Grandma on a Sunday. Sunday's were when the big meals took place, all of the family gathered together in the afternoon, celebrating a good week finished and a better week ahead, and blessed be the lord for all that he provided. He was younger then, eight going on nine, and the only one in the kitchen helping Grandma prepare the multi-course meal. He was barely helping at that, too young to do much more than pass spices and clear away dishes, but he tried, and he observed, and he listened as she told him exactly what she was doing each step of the way; committing as much as possible to memory.

He pulled out the ham, thin slices of it, and folded them onto the sandwich. Food was as much about textures and feelings as it was about taste. Layering the ham created a better

presentation and a more interesting experience when biting into the sandwich, another tip he had picked up, as opposed to just laying the meat on flat. There should be care and passion in every meal that you make, no matter if you're cooking for a hundred people, or just yourself. The details mattered.

He was clearing away some pots when his Uncle Leo wandered into the periphery of the kitchen. "Hey Ma, is dinner ready yet or what?" he remembered Uncle Leo yelling into the kitchen that Sunday. He had already finished a bottle of wine to himself. "We're getting hungry here."

Grandma winced and Giacomo saw her face fall just for a second. She took a breath and then smiled at him as she struggled to lift a pan out of the oven. Uncle Leo scoffed and walked back to the dining room to take his seat. Giacomo had looked at his Grandma again and resolved to try and help more. He pulled over a stool so he could stand up to the counter and began cutting bread and placing it in the basket.

"Thank you," she had said to him, then asked him to bring it out to the family along with the oil and vinegar. That should hold them off for a while. Then she promised to share more secrets with him once he got back.

He pulled out a head of lettuce for the ham sandwich. He broke away the outer layers that had begun to wilt. There wasn't much to lettuce on a sandwich in terms of taste so you wanted to get one of the pieces closer to the center. They were thicker, harder, and provided a better crunch for the sandwich. Putting the lettuce back he looked for some cheese but couldn't find any. Unfortunate, but he was going to have to make do with

what was available. He did find a tomato which he put on the counter. He found a large butcher knife to slice it up.

That was when he noticed something wrong during that Sunday dinner. His mother had come into the kitchen asking about the pasta sauce saying she hoped Grandma hadn't put too much onion in it this time. She always put too much onion in it, every week, and every week she complained about it but nothing ever changed. Grandma has pulled out a large butcher knife and held it in the air a second longer than necessary before using it to cut an onion in half. "There," she said to Giacomo's mother. "I'll half it today for you," and proceeded to dice up one half of the onion. His mother smiled but there was a nervous twitter in her eye. He thought she had already put the onion in the sauce when she had started it, but he wasn't about to question her practice. Once mother was gone Grandma began cutting up the other half of the onion. "Tell me how to cook," she muttered.

He cut two slices off the tomato and laid them on the ham, then closed the sandwich. He used the same knife to cut it in half and handed it to his little brother. His eyes were half closed and tired because of the late hour, Giacomo knew that they couldn't rest yet. They had to keep moving.

It was just the two of them in the kitchen that Sunday, it was always just the two of them. They could hear the rest of the family out in the dining room, sitting around the table waiting. Uncle Toby sitting at the head was banging on the table and started a chant. We-Want-Din-Ner We-Want-Din-Ner they all called out. He could see Grandma wince again with every successive chant.



Then she smiled at him. She took two small bowls of pasta and ladled out some sauce onto them. "This is for you and your brother, okay?" He nodded. Then he saw her pull a bottle out from under her apron and poured a few healthy glugs into the sauce. "A little surprise," she stirred it around to mix it in. She bent down to his level and whispered in his ear. "This is adult sauce now okay? Only for the grown-ups. You and your brother have your own, so make sure you don't have any of this." He nodded his head and she kissed his forehead, "Good luck."

They were almost finished their sandwiches when the hall light flicked on. Both boys looked up to see a man in a housecoat staring at them. "What's going on here, what are you doing in my kitchen?" He rubbed his eyes as they adjusted to the light. "Wait, aren't you those two missing boys?"

They knew the drill. Giacomo and his brother grabbed as much food as they could and ran for the door, pushing the man down as they passed. This is what they did to survive.