

## Her Brother's Apartment

*Bill Glose*

### Front Door

Darla arrives at her brother's apartment as the dawning sun limns the tops of pines and cottonwoods. The police had said the crime scene tape should be gone, but if it wasn't to just rip it down and go inside. So she isn't surprised to find two yellow Xs crisscrossing Curt's front door. Even so, her gut clenches and a spout of bile fills her mouth.

Coming from hardy German stock, Darla's mother is stoic as a marble bust in most situations. But after the police made their next-of-kin notification and she called Darla to pass the news, she only got out, *It's your brother*, before dropping the phone and howling.

Darla had raced over, the traditional roles reversing, daughter consoling mother, promising everything would be all right. It also fell upon Darla to call the extended family; to inform them of Curt's death; to say, *Gunshot wound*, or, *Maybe accidental*, to avoid the words, *Self-inflicted* and *Suicide*.

The only time Darla had been to Curt's apartment previously was the day he'd moved in, newly discharged from the army. She'd helped him unpack his U-Haul, grabbing one end of furniture and toting armloads of cardboard boxes, their contents scribbled on the side in black Magic Marker. He'd provided pizza and beer, and she'd given him a housewarming gift—a glass ball called a suncatcher that she'd created herself at a nearby glass studio. *I don't get it*, Curt had said. *What's its purpose?* He always needed a reason for everything. *Can't something just be pretty?* she'd said. To which he'd popped his frayed skull-head tee shirt and replied, *Hey, I'm all about the pretty*.

Now she stands outside her brother's door turning his key chain over in her hands. The beaded chain holds a door key, a mailbox key, and his dog tags. She rubs her fingers along the raised letters of the tag's silver surface. BRADSHAW, CURTIS J. 228-73-1286. O POS. CHRISTIAN.

He'd given her this spare set of keys for emergency purposes, meaning, she'd always supposed, in case he got locked out. But not this. Never this.

## Entryway

When Darla enters the front door, a swell of musty air invades her nose. At least it's not the stench of decomposition she'd imagined on the drive over. Stupid to think that, she knows. It's only been two days. The coroner removed the body right away and the cleaning service came in yesterday. But still, the mind goes where it wants to.

Closing the front door, she turns and slides open the closet's accordion door. A row of footwear forms a line with their toes touching the back wall—a scuffed pair of desert army boots, a set of Corcoran's with spit-shined toes, a pair of boat shoes, and two pairs of Nikes with well-worn soles. Also on the floor are two neat stacks of board games.

When they played games as kids, Curt almost always won. Like ESP, the way he knew what she would do before she did it, sitting there stone-faced, watching, waiting for her to step into his trap. He always ribbed her when he won, lifting his arms and shouting, *All hail the undisputed champion of the world*. But it was just a playful show. The only times she remembers him truly gleeful were those rare occasions when she won. *Damn, girl*, he'd say, smiling his lopsided grin, *you got me on that one*.

Hanging on the closet rod are a few coats and jackets, a yellow rain slicker, an umbrella, a reflective vest, and two uniforms—a starched set of desert camouflage and a set of dress greens sheathed in a dry cleaner's poly bag. She lifts the gossamer wrapper and inspects the staff sergeant stripes on the arm, the 82nd Airborne patch and Ranger tab on the left sleeve, the additional 82nd combat patch on the right. Fastened to the left breast are a blue pin of a rifle within a wreath—the Combat Infantryman's Badge—and a silver pin of a winged parachute topped with a star—the Senior Parachutist Badge.

Sandwiched between the two pins is the colorful rack of ribbons that Curt called his “salad bar.” He always deflected questions about his awards, so she'd had to look them up online. The four full rows of ribbons are arranged in descending order of importance. A fifth row on top has a purple ribbon enclosed by two vertical, white bars—the Purple Heart—and a red ribbon with white trim and a vertical, blue bar in the center—the Bronze Star. Pinned to the center of this topmost ribbon is a bronze V for valor.

## Kitchen

The kitchen is spartan, the counters bare but for a microwave, a Keurig single cup coffee maker, and a rack of K-Cup pods. In the fridge is a smattering of delivery containers with half-eaten meals. She opens cabinets, finding stacks of plastic cups, rows of mugs, mismatched plates and bowls. Under the sink is the typical collection of cleaning supplies, but there is also an unopened box of dishware with a red box affixed to its top. Darla takes it out and sets it on top of the gas stove, knowing all too well why Curt had bought this present.

In the ten months since getting out of the army, Curt kept his hair short while growing a beard. *My George Clooney look*, he'd said. At first, he came over to Mom's for meals once or twice a week, but those visits tapered off after the first couple of months. He kept getting more fractious, more nervous, eyes ringed and tired, searching every corner. But asking what was wrong would just set him off. The last visit had been a disaster. Mom kept after him until he snapped. *I don't want to fucking talk about it*, he screamed, throwing his plate of spaghetti across the dining room where it shattered against the wall. That was three months ago. Last time Darla saw him alive.

Now Darla removes the bow from the box and looks at the glossy picture underneath. It shows the sixteen-piece Pfaltzgraff Venice dinnerware set in teal with a pattern of starfish and seashells. A set of dishes just like Mom's.

## Dinette

Just off the kitchen is a nook set aside to be a dinette. But the five-foot wooden table and four ladder-back chairs are not set for eating. They are loaded down with the same Magic-Marked boxes from the day Curt moved in. Is that even the right term? Had Curt ever really *moved in*? Had he ever *moved on*?

She lifts the top off a box labeled "Odds and Ends." Inside are football trophies, a Rubik's Cube, a roll of papers, and a piggy bank that looks like a British phone booth. She removes the rubber band holding the papers together, unrolls them, and discovers they are shooting targets. In the center of each one is a cluster of small holes. Until the police

notification, she hadn't even known Curt owned a gun, let alone that he went to a range to practice with it.

She re-bands the papers and picks up the red phone booth. The piggy bank rattles when she shakes it. Popping the top, she finds several coins the size of silver dollars. Curt had told her the tradition behind military coins, how each unit minted specialized coins to proclaim their pedigree or to signify particular accomplishments. One of the coins is stamped with an airborne insignia and etched with Curt's name and rank. The other side bears the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment crest, a leaping panther with wings and a scroll with the words "H-Minus," referring to the regiment's airborne drop into France five hours before the beachhead landing on D-Day.

The other five coins denote his "hardship tour" deployments. Coins for the peacekeeping mission in Albania (Operation Allied Force), the war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom), and three for the war in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom I, "The Surge," and Operation New Dawn). So much war in such a short time.

She remembers her big brother on the football field in high school colliding with running backs at full speed. She'd never doubted Curt would be the one to stand up first and saunter away triumphantly. He was her man of stone, impervious to anything the world could throw at him. But even rock erodes, succumbing to the tiniest drip of water and the ceaseless way it cuts.

## Living Room

The living room contains the usual items: couch, end table, lamp, coffee table, telephone, entertainment center, wide-screen television, DVR, Xbox, a Barcalounger with cigarette burns in the arm, and a dartboard surrounded by a scattering of tiny holes. The room also has something unexpected—two caved-in spots in the walls about shoulder height. What you might expect from a full-force punch.

Hanging on the same wall are two pictures. The first is a framed poster of Muhammed Ali standing over an inert Sonny Liston after knocking him to the canvas. Ali is glaring down at the flattened man as if the knockdown wasn't enough; he wants to kill him.

The second picture is a print of Edvard Munch's "The Scream." She studies its harrowed, otherworldly look of anguish and imagines Curt's face squeezed onto the howling skull atop the wavering, wraithlike figure. She wonders if Curt had seen the same thing too, and if so, how long he'd stood transfixed.

Moving to the cream-colored couch, she sits and notices a series of deep grooves carved into the edge of the cherrywood coffee table. She's seen Curt's Rambo-style knife and wonders if that is what he'd used to saw the wood.

A blinking red light on the telephone tells her there are seven unanswered messages cued up. The last time she'd spoken with Curt had been the end of last week. He'd said he was sorry for all his outbursts and promised things would be different soon. *I realize*, he'd said, *I've got to make a change before I really hurt someone I love*. He'd seemed so at peace, like his old self.

She presses the play button and hears her own voice on the first message. She sounds bubbly, going on about a half-off sale at Men's Wearhouse and asking if Curt would like to go there with her. *About time you added another suit to your burgeoning collection*, she'd said with a laugh, knowing he only owned one suit, purchased in high school for a formal dance. The next two are robo-calls from telemarketers, and then it's her again. Her second message begins upbeat, but even now she can hear the worry fringing her false front as she asks her brother to *Please call back*.

The next message is from Mom; it starts out as an invitation to dinner but quickly devolves into crying jags before hanging up. Then there are two calls from friends. Darla assumes they are soldiers by their terse manner and the way they refer to Curt by his last name. The first one says, *Tag, Bradshaw, you're it. Call back*. The second one says, *Bradshaw, what the fuck man? You ain't got nothing to apologize for. Shit, man, I can't count the lives you saved. So don't go getting all mopey on me, you hear?*

The silence after the last beep was deafening. How many other "apology" calls had he made? As if getting his affairs in order. How could she have been so blind?

Beside the telephone sits a scrapbook, and next to that the glass ball she'd given him resting on a folded towel. Seeing that he'd never hung the housewarming gift hurts her almost as much as the phone messages. She remembers once making a woven dreamcatcher at summer camp and giving it to Curt when she'd come home. He strung it between his bedposts and never took it down, even when his friends came over and razzed him. She'd loved that whimsical side

to him and hoped he'd do the same with this ball, stringing it up in a place of honor because it was a gift from his little sister.

With a sigh, she turns to the scrapbook and flips it open. Turning its pages, she watches Curt's life progress through a series of still frames. The gurgling baby. The rambunctious toddler. The wild-haired boy always digging forts in the woods. The pre-teen showing off new muscles. The confident teenager in football pads. The shave-headed soldier at Boot Camp graduation.

The next pictures show Curt at Fort Bragg, where he and his buddies were posing with girls, cutting up in the barracks, or drinking in various bars. Then come photos of his first deployment, a peacekeeping mission along the Albania-Kosovo border. It was wintertime in Europe, the landscape harsh and bleak, the trees stripped and the earth hardscrabble. The streets in ancient villages were narrow with cracked shoulders, the buildings old and weather-beaten, many with minor damage, a bullet-pocked wall here and a patched section of roof there. But all the residents were smiling, the straight-backed men in threadbare blazers, the wide-checked women in babushkas, and the wiry kids in oversized clothes and muddy boots. Even the soldiers seemed happy, both the AK-wielding Albanians and the flak-jacketed Americans. Curt had told her afterwards how proud he'd been of this mission, how rewarding it had been to make a positive difference in such a troubled area.

The next page shows a squad of soldiers on a rock-strewn plain in Afghanistan. They all look so young and cocky, smirking as if someone had just told a joke and they're trying not to laugh. Curt is on one end with his arm draped over the shoulder of another sergeant. It's the last picture in the book. As if everything that followed wasn't worth memorializing.

One of the few times he'd opened up to her about the Middle Eastern wars, he'd confessed his own puzzlement. They'd gone over to aid the citizens, to assist the building of democracy. But the same people who would smile and call you friend one day might shoot you the next. You couldn't even trust the "friendlies" you were teamed up with. Countless stories told of rogue police officers shooting up their station when Americans were present. Even the charitable work they did sometimes boomeranged. *This one time*, he said, *we pulled security for engineers as they dug a community well for a village. Winning hearts and minds and all that. But the well got filled in. So we go back and the engineers dredge it out again. Then the same thing happens. It's filled in with sand. After a couple more digs we stopped trying to help. Found out later it was the local women doing it. They*

*were the ones always sent to fetch the water, and down at the stream was the only time they had to chat with one another. Rest of the time they were holed up in their huts like caged animals. I mean, how can you understand minds that think like that, let alone win them over?*

Darla flips the scrapbook pages back to a picture of Curt when he was ten, seated on an orange, banana-seat bike and getting ready to jump a homemade ramp in the middle of their street. He was paused and smiling, both fists pumping the air as if celebrating a jump he'd already completed. *This* is how she wanted to remember him. So certain of the future. Ready for anything.

## Bathroom

A short hallway elbows off the living room and leads to doors to the bathroom and bedroom. She'd intended to save the bathroom for last, but now that she was within reach, she couldn't avoid it any longer, the doorknob calling to her like the handle of a pot on a hot stove to a curious child. Darla reaches out, twists, and pushes the door open.

The police had said the few things they'd taken had come from the bathroom. Darla had wondered what that cryptic message meant, but was afraid to ask. Now she sees the shower curtain missing and her mind races. The police might not pry up tiles spattered with blood, but the curtain? Yes; that could be bagged and taken into evidence.

A foot above the tub's rim is a thick hole in the wall with fissures radiating out from it. It looks like someone swung a pickaxe into the tiles. This, she knows, is where the bullet passed through her brother's brain and lodged in the wall. She's so thankful, right now, that the police had suggested the biohazard cleaning service. She can't imagine how she'd react to a wall dripping with blood and brain matter. The thought alone makes her shiver. The gravitational tug she'd felt moments ago is gone. Now she feels repulsed.

Turning to the medicine cabinet, she swings open its mirrored door to reveal toiletries of all sorts on the top and bottom shelves. On the nearly empty middle shelf are bottles of Tylenol and cough syrup. Gone is the medicine she knew Curt had been prescribed, the Klonopin for panic disorder, the Lexapro for depression. The police took them or the cleaning service. Either way, she doesn't care. All she would've done is flushed them down the toilet.

## Bedroom

When Darla swings the bedroom door open, she gasps and her legs nearly buckle. What she sees is as surreal as a Salvador Dali landscape. Eventually she will go through the dresser and the clothes neatly folded and stacked within. She'll open the closet and riffle through everything on hangers, his high school letterman jacket, his one suit, his parade of solid-colored Polos and long-sleeved flannels. She'll open the athletic bag stuffed with racquetball gear. She'll even look under the queen-size bed and root through the half-dozen shoeboxes filled with baseball cards and knick-knacks. But for now, she is too stunned to think about any of that.

Dangling from thin wires, filling the width and breadth of the ceiling, is a profusion of glass suncatchers. Each globe is unique, streaked with different dyes and striated with patterns created when it was a molten ball spinning at the end of a blowpipe. She stretches out her arm and touches the bottom of the nearest one, setting it swaying on its string. It clinks against a couple of the other balls. She wonders how long it had taken Curt to craft all these at the glass studio. And why hadn't he told her? She understands keeping what he did in the war a secret, but not this.

She nudges more of the balls, creating a tinkling like that of wind chimes, then moves to the bed with its tightly tucked sheets and blanket, the corners creased at forty-five degree angles. Lying down, she removes one of the two pillows from the blanket and holds it up to her nose. Her brother's scent fills her head. Hickory and soap and sweat.

The headboard is butted against the window. Reaching behind her, she pulls the string on the shade and it retracts, flapping upward and wrapping around the roller. Morning sun streams through, refracting and reflecting, sparking through what now resembles an ocean of alien worlds. As she sniffs the pillow, she remembers Curt's joking response to her gift—*I'm all about the pretty*—and for a moment she smiles, as light twinkles through the room and the sun creeps higher in the sky.