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730 words.

SILENT AND STILL

by Miles Rausch

The young man stood a little beyond the door. His back was to me; his head was bowed in thought.

"I just don't know what happened," he said. He shook his head, and I watched the shift of his coat, thin and dark. "You say he took some every day? And always seemed the example of health?"

"'Course, doctor," said Ma. "He invented the stuff. A thousand customers and not a one complained. Must'a done somethin' right by it."

The doctor removed his hat and clutched at it with both hands, spinning it by tiny increments. Then he stopped, and so did my heart.

But he didn't turn.

"I know there's nothing to be done," said Ma. "He was a right sick man of late. You- you don't think-"

"Yes, Mrs. Pearl?"

"You don't think that stuff... did it kill him, doctor?"

"Ma'am, you know by now my medical opinion on the matter. But if I'm honest -- and if I'm not, may God strike me deaf and dumb -- I saw no harm in David's drink."

Doctor Spear put a hand on Ma's shoulder. The gesture conjured something deep and mournful in her, and she burst into tears. I wanted to go to her, give her my comfort, but I stayed

rooted in the darkness. He embraced her, but held his body away, as if she bore the malady he couldn't remedy in her son.

"Mrs. Pearl, I do hope you know how hard I tried to save David. I know he was your favorite."

My ma sobbed into the stiff shoulder of Doctor Spear. The grief cluttered her words as she attempted to speak.

"What, ma'am?"

"Oh, he was! He was my favorite boy! So strong and sweet, not callous like his brothers, not ungrateful like his sister. He was perfect to my heart."

The young man and the old woman hung there, together, a strange shape in the golden sunset before me.

"You were a friend of his, weren't you?"

"For a time, we were. When we wore smaller coats," said the doctor. "This must be difficult for you. He's been spending too much time at the bartender's feet, I've heard."

At this, my mother pushed from the doctor such that he rocked against his heels. I could see his cold, black eyes held none of the condolence of his voice and all the stiffness of his posture. My mother glowered at him.

"'Tis a hardship you'd know well, Doctor Spear. How is your wife?"

"Recently taken up with unsavory kind."

Ma puffed with indignation.

"And recently passed on. So I'm told."

Ma deflated, her face twisting into an expression between grief and sympathy. Her eyes danced with more tears.

"I've some work to do," she muttered and tromped away. My heart reached to her, hoping she would see me and come to my side, but instead I caught the faint percussion of cookery.

The young man remained there, a little beyond the door. He turned, and his eyes met with mine. He stepped through the door with a deliberate gait and stopped at the foot of the bed.

"David Pearl's Tincture of Wisdom: for ailments afar, a little blue jar. Not ailments of character, it seems."

I felt his hand graze my foot. The touch set sparks up my limb as if lightning passed through his finger. He came further, dragging his hand along my shin and knee, passing a violent fire into my body. Level with my chest, he brought his open palm hard against my abdomen. The pain splashed over me in a mess, like a pot of boiling water over-turned onto my torso. Had I been in control of my faculties, I should have leapt up and seized my attacker.

The doctor leant over. The humid vapor of his breath clouded my nostrils. "The weak are predictable, David. They cling to silly rhymes and foul concoctions to master the chaos

of their lives. My mistake was marrying a weak woman. Yours was... well, you'll have some time to ponder your mistake."

Doctor Spear stood. "You'll hear your mother weep at your funeral, as will I. Like the devil's hounds, she'll shriek after you, and never know the quiet calm again."

The young man left then, briefly dividing the the sunset into odd, shifting shadows. Then the door shut, and I remained: silent and still.

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