

Mae

Cold winter air, dense with ocean water, made condensation on her living room window. Mae sat, admiring her view, hugging loosely to her evening coffee. The chair across from her was empty; there were no guests tonight; hadn't been one in nearly 4 weeks. Tonight she was left with her memories, most of which contained either fragments, or whole strings of memories of her late husband Ron. Ron had gone home 10 years ago and it seemed, to her anyways, that he had taken more than just himself when he passed. Shortly after his burial her son had moved down to the city. When *he* had left, he had done so quietly, and had taken nothing with him. It was strange, to see Matthew so silent all the time, and only months behind him her daughter followed suit. Together they took with them the only love she had left in the world, and even though they had tried to ease the transition when they went, in the end, she was left behind – regardless of how light their footfalls had been. Most nights she could handle it, the isolation of it all, Mae had thick skin. But tonight, was not like most nights.

“Ron,” she said to the empty room, *“...everything’s changed,”* then she paused, “I think you would have said it was a perfect night for company tonight...,” her eyes lifted to the place where his might have been, she never could bring herself to move his chair, she finished, “I would have said I didn’t think it was...even though you would be right.” Her voice had grown distant, lonely. Nobody ever answered her on nights like this, there was never anyone there *too* answer. All the same, it felt better to talk to no one, than to sit in silence. She reached down to the side of her chair, to where the CB radio was. Her fingers absently groped for the ‘ON’ toggle and with a dry crack, the radio came on. A steady stream of static poured from the speaker. Nobody, as Ron used to say, was on the ears. *If only*, she thought, *somebody would come by to visit*. Of course, the door bell stayed quiet and her hope that it would not, remained unanswered.

When the telephone rang – it was almost surreal in its timing.

“Hello?”

“Mum?”

“Matthew?”

“Hi Mum.”

“How *are* you son...? I was just thinking about you... remember when you and your father used to clear the landing in front of the house...”

“Mum?”

“Yes Matthew?”

“I can’t really talk too long right now... I’m sorry, but I have a last minute conference call in a few minutes.”

“Oh...”

“It’s a meeting about the 2010 games. I have to make sure that the selection committee gets everything they need....”

She paused. He wasn’t finished.

“I wanted to call you and tell you that we won’t be making it up this year...”

“.....”

“I thought I should call and let you know...it’s just way too crazy right now to leave the city... “

“.....”

“But hey...” he said, “I can put another cheque in the mail for you... that should help...right? Maybe you could use it to go visiting...?” Her son sounded nervous. He always talked quicker when he was. It gave him a flat tone that always bothered her, and had always gave him away.

“Matthew?”

“Yes?”

“I am so proud of you...”

“...thanks mum...”

“Son, when *do* you think you can come up? Should we make it for August?”

“You know, I don’t think we can make it this summer, but listen, you know why this meeting is so important?”

“.....”

“Stef is pregnant...”

Mae took a deep breath and re-opened her eyes. “Oh Matthew,” she said, “...that is wonderful,”

“I know...” he said, “Isn’t it? As soon as we stopped trying... it just happened!”

“I am so happy for you both... “

“Thanks mum...”

“You know Matthew,” she said, “it has been almost four years since you have been up. Maybe you two, or three, I should say, could come up for Christmas?”

“.....”

“Matthew?”

“Well...” he paused, “...Stef’s family has paid for us to fly out and see them this year for the holidays. They even bought our tickets...they never do that kind of thing.”

“Oh...” Mae said, “OK.” She made no attempt to hide the anger in her voice, “That should be nice for them...”

“Oh c’mon mum... don’t do that...we’ll make it up there... just not this summer...”

“Or for Christmas...”

“.....”

“...when *do* you think you can make it up Matthew?” she asked, she continued, “You haven’t been to see your father in years...do you remember the promise you made before he went Matthew...?” Her son gripped the phone in his other hand.

“.....Jesus Christ ma.....why do you always have to guilt trip when something goes well for us...?”

“.....”

“I kept my word... mum... I’m taking care of you like I said...” He stopped walking, and stood in front of his study window.

“..I don’t need taking care of Matthew.”

“What about all the cheques we’ve sent? And uncle has been coming by; I know he has, because I asked him to...”

“Your uncle...Matthew...is a drunk. He hasn’t helped anyone but the Legion, in years...” She stopped momentarily, Her composure – mostly made of love for her son returned, she finished, “Son...?”

“...yes...”

“I just miss you...”

“.....”

“Matthew...?”

“Mum...,” he said, sounding tired, “I don’t have time to get into this right now...ok...” he finished, “I have an important meeting in a few minutes; I’m going to call you back later... I just thought you should know about baby...”

“Thank-you son” she said, “... can you send me some pictures when you get them?”

“OK...” he said, “I will...”

“Thank-you...” she said, “...Son?”

“Yes mum...”

“I *am* so proud of you, you know....”

“.....”

“It was nice to hear your voice...”

“I love you mum.”

“I love you too son....good night.”

Then the phone was a dead dial tone and she turned it off. The CB had become noise in her temples. She turned it off too. Her eyes turned back to the phone, and she had a thought. It was the wrong thought, full of affliction. She realized that there wasn't even anyone to call and share the news with... How would she raise a grandbaby when there was no family left to raise it in? Her eyes returned to the spot again, and a terrible truth sat in the empty chair across from her.

The truth was simple math. She was 71. She was alone. And not even her novels held any comfort anymore. It occurred to her that she had become somebody else's chore. It turned out there was some humor in that, at least she thought there was, but she felt too weary to find it.

Instead of trying she looked back to her view, back to the thick ferns and hemlocks and cedars. She took another sip from her mug, and thought; *At least that much was the same.* But as she took in the familiar landscape of her village, she noticed something *was* different about it after all. There was a light just off the ravine, coming in the direction of her house.

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It's not a car, she thought, *there isn't road there.* And it wasn't a flashlight either, it didn't sway like one. In any case, it *was* moving though. It lumbered along, dumbly, like a mosquito. "What *is* that?" She said, and leaned out on the edge of her chair. She wished she had Ron's binoculars and considered finding them. Resolute, she pushed herself to a standing position. *The closet,* she thought. She didn't know where the binoculars were, but she *did* know where to find a light of her own.

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"*Alright...*" she said, and boosted herself onto her toes to reach the shoe box. "Now...where did I put you...?" Mae pushed aside the spare CB radio and her fingers rolled over something smooth and

metallic. "There you are..." she said, and plucked it from the box. Her hip was sore, had been for days, and it twisted with an all too familiar fire deep inside. Even so, she picked up her pace.

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As luck would have it though, it did no good at all. Even from the hall, she could see it was gone. The strange light had disappeared. *No good to leave...* she thought and berated herself for fouling up something so interesting. "*OH well* then..." she said flatly, resentfully. Her thumb hit the red button on her light to 'OFF.' A long empty moment passed.

"Well" she said to her empty home, "...another coffee won't matter now I guess..." And she made for the kitchen. As she did, the door bell rang. Mae stopped dead in her tracks. She had no idea who could be coming at this hour, but when she opened the door and saw, her jaw hung slack in her face. Her hand fell from the door knob. Both of her hands came to cover her mouth. "...Ron...." she whispered through her fingers; her heart was either stopping, exploding, or both; she couldn't tell which.

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It wasn't that he was standing there on the step. Or that he was wearing the same suit she had put on his body when he had died. She had seen him before, after his passing, that was, but this was different. It wasn't *him* that bothered her. It was what he was *holding* that was all wrong. In his hands, the hands of her beloved husband Ron, was a cedar bark basket. Inside the basket was one of her most favorite things - a pile of plump, fresh, salmon berries. But they weren't exactly '*just*' salmon berries, were they? These ones gave off a strange light from inside of them. *Green*, she thought, *like new lichen*; like the light, by the ravine. Her eyes rose up. His face was just as she remembered, handsome. The revenant version of her husband tilted the bowl towards her. *God he's*

beautiful, she thought, *even now*, and he was. Her eyes moved from Ron to the figure standing behind him, just over his shoulder. From the very start she had seen the creature standing there, just within arm's reach. It remained motionless and watching attentively with eyes as black as holes in the earth. The paleness of its scent was almost lost, but she recognized it for what it was. Ron gestured the bowl toward her once again, and again, she focused on him. Creature or no, it was that last look that tilt the scales. She reached her hand into the basket.

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The berry slid past her teeth and she savored it. When she was done she crushed it against the roof of her mouth, releasing its juices over her tongue. There was a sensation of slipping without falling; and she looked down. Her hands had begun to lose appearance. It was, she realized, just like in the stories of her childhood. Very soon all of her soft bronze skin faded away to nothing at all.

In moments Mae was changed a final time, she was transformed, like everything in her long life had been. Could anyone blame her for her choice though? A choice that freed her from the isolation? For sure we know the Bukwis wouldn't. That had been its plan all along.

Nobody would ever say for sure what had happened to Old Lady Mae that night. Only a small cedar basket hinted at an answer, and ultimately, her file would remain unsolved. More disturbing though were the other disappearances. There were 4 other instances in all. None of which could be explained by conventional pathology, but, by the spring the happenings would stop - at least until another generation had run its course, and a lonesome Bukwis might find another who was lost in the wood.