

THE PLACE OF EXCREMENT

Thomas Cutler sat motionless by the bed, holding Mother's dry and motionless hand. The omnipresent machines did not beep so much as emit a hapless, chirping sound like a group of sightless baby birds left to starve in the nest. An overworked nurse came and went, dour in her rustling whites. The phone mocked him, refusing to ring. Outside, the afternoon sun laid siege to the tinted back window. The air was too warm and the small room fetid with sweat and the stinging scents of alcohol and floor cleanser.

Cutler looked down at her hand again, the tubing, the needle covered with tape. He studied the rosy blue veins and dirty nails. The relentless chirping continued.

I'm not sure what to do Mom, and this time you can't tell me...

He'd been on the road selling when they'd called. Well, on the road drinking was more accurate. Going to barrooms and conventions with the usual group of mostly older men, laughing too loudly, sweating, bending arms at the bar in suits gone shiny at the elbows. Then the call. Cutler had never felt so abandoned. Oh, Mother's ex-husband supposedly knew, Mr. Dick the Prick, but as expected hadn't even bothered to check in. Nothing in it for him, not one red cent, they'd been divorced far too long. That left Cutler flying solo as usual, nursing another hangover and his sick mother, carrying the whole load again.

Mother had been okay lately, at least according to her neighbors, often outside in her housecoat and curlers, a bit too quick with that leer and a dirty joke. Normal, in other words. The Sunday paper hadn't been collected, so on Monday her nemesis, the divorced bitch next door, had checked to see if Mother was dead. Peeked through the window, saw her sprawled on the kitchen floor, called 911 with an element of glee. Mother

wasn't dead, but she'd popped an aneurism the size of a grape, then somehow broken a rib or two while falling. She'd seemed a bit crazier than usual lately. What a mess. Fortunately her insurance was covering the hospital bills. Cutler had known her physician, Dr. Garris, all of his life. So that part was easy. Dr. Garris had admitted her, and a call had gone out. But now what?

That house. God, how could someone live like that? She wasn't that old, more late middle age for Christ's sake. Cutler had been disgusted as well as disturbed by the mess, walking slowly through the rooms, remembering his childhood. How he'd cowered in his room sometimes, listening to the bead squeaking and the men grunting, the whiskey bottles breaking. The slaps and the shouts *get the fuck out of my house you cheap sonofabitch...*

Somehow in her late forties Mother had become the archetypal cat lady. The house she'd inherited and owned since Cutler's birth was now a cluttered place, filthy with animal droppings and piles of unwashed laundry and sticky dishes. At least it wasn't the worst property on a good block. It ought to go for a decent price, even with the local economy in shambles. Somebody would want to buy it, fix it up and flip it. Cash him out.

Mother moaned. Probably the busted ribs. Her eyelids fluttered a bit and she seemed to clench his hand in her own. She was a stranger to him now, not some mythical figure from the mists of time, some creature who had damned him with her negligence. Just a helpless forty-seven year old woman, drugged up, far too deep in fevered dreams.

Cutler frowned. His eyes moistened. Mother was still pretty, and she looked so small. Helpless. After a lifetime of resentment, it was abruptly difficult not only to be angry, but even to remember why he'd been so hurt.

I'm young, but we're all dying. I'll be there too, soon enough, Cutler mused. The thought of being this weak, and so alone, made his heart kick a bit. He shivered. His blood ran as cold as a mountain stream.

Mother...

In his mind she remained a giant, slapping his drunken stepfather before a dinner party, spanking Cutler with a hairbrush, red-faced and outraged to have caught him masturbating frantically in his room, as if her own sexual escapades were an entirely different matter. Down deep, Cutler knew she'd done her best, come to his plays in middle school, supported his activities. But Mother had always managed to drop something into the conversation after, something that would steal a smidgen of the credit, "he's so talented, isn't he? Got that from me, you know..." And so the hand that giveth, taketh away.

I'm thirty-one years old, he thought. Am I ever going to stop whining?

“You okay in there?”

Cutler jumped a bit. His chair gave a squeak. The nurse was a stern woman with blonde hair pulled back into a high pony tail that was so tight it spread her features. She wore thick glasses over salmon eyes—too wide open, too far apart.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

The nurse wore a black name tag on her white breast, J. FLETCHER. She busied herself at his bedside for a moment, put down her small tray, read the chart, injected something into Mother’s IV line. Seemed unaware her ass end was almost in his face. Cutler had a brief erotic fantasy. His face reddened. Nurse Fletcher’s stomach gurgled. He looked down and away. Mother’s hand twitched as the new drugs hit her system.

“There you go,” Nurse Fletcher said, soothingly. Cutler assumed she’d just given something for pain. He couldn’t keep all the drugs straight. There were already so many, all for different reasons, some to preserve the integrity of her organs, some for the side effects created by all the others. The nurse left the room, the door swooshed closed behind her.

Cutler closed his eyes. He could almost envy Mother her blissful, stoned state. Wished he could get faded. At least he could be sure she wasn’t scared now, or even aware of the terrible events about to take place. *When it’s your time, it’s your time*, Mother used to say, puffing on her cigarettes, sipping cheap whiskey. Sanguine about death and dying, back when she’d believed herself to be a comfortable distance from eternal silence. Cutler wondered what she’d say now, if she were conscious. Would she beg him not to hasten the end? Probably. Hell, she’d ask for a smoke and a shot glass.

Dark soon. Shit. Have to decide.

He released her hand. It clawed at him as he rose. The chair squealed like a lanced pig, a sound high and shrill and obscenely loud. Cutler swallowed dryly. He backed away from Mother’s bed. Dusk was crawling across the grass outside, approaching the hospital. He did not turn his back until he reached the door to her room, then hurried out into the hall. The sudden brightness hurt his eyes. He shaded them and squinted. There was a soft drink machine.

Cutler walked briskly, worn shoes slapping the linoleum. A young Latino man pushing a food cart nearly collided with Nurse Fletcher. She tapped him with her clipboard. The kid muttered something under his breath and soldiered on. He stepped out of the way to let the employee

pass, Cutler's large belly and cheap tie brushing the cart. He walked over to the soft drink machine and fed it quarters. The machine ate too fast, reluctantly belched a plastic bottle of soda. Cutler opened it and drank greedily. Mother hated soft drinks and seldom allowed them in the house. *They make you fat...* So did all of his favorite foods, from mac and cheese to hamburgers to spaghetti and meatballs to hot dogs. Mother had been obsessed with her own weight, a relentless nag, and the effect had been to raise a boy who'd gone out in the world with several bottomless appetites.

He heard the elevator doors open and turned. A tall, slender man in a white smock appeared, arms out, striding forth like some deity. Despite his advanced age, silver hair shone under the fluorescent lighting. Dr. Garris. Cutler ducked his head and walked briskly to the men's room down the hall. Finished the cold soda on the way, his fleshy throat wiggling. In the lavatory, he splashed cold water on his face. As he raised his head from the sink, Cutler peered into his red eyes, glared at the receding hairline and already desperate expression on his features. Knew he had one chance and one chance only to get this right. Do something with positive meaning. Something that would change things.

He attacked the wall dispenser, hammering until it released a large number of folded paper towels. Cutler patted his forehead dry, wiped under his damp armpits and across his fleshy chest. He straightened up. Centered himself. Forty was a long way off. He was going to start over. Hit the treadmill in the morning, cutting way down on the booze and pot, get his life together at last. Cutler knew this with a certainty he had never before experienced.

Moments later, Cutler walked out of the men's room. He paused in the hall. His knees weakened. He steadied himself, and then went in to see Mother. The machines still sounded like tiny feathered things, hungry and scared.

Dr. Garris was in the room, standing next to Nurse Fletcher, Our Lady of the Omnipresent Clipboard. Dr. Garris had a tall stack of papers under one arm. He cleared his throat politely. Waited. Spoke.

"Have you decided?"

"Yes," Cutler said.

Dr. Garris said, "And?"

Cutler extended his hand. Dr. Garris gave him the papers. There were little yellow stickers to show him where to sign. He began to scrawl his name, again and again, precisely where directed. From a long distance away, Cutler heard Dr. Garris speaking in a low, formal tone.

"Mrs. Nora Cutler's chart, if you please, Nurse Fletcher. Write this

down. 6:32, the patient's respiration is faulty. Pulse rate is dropping. We have a directive to not interfere. 6:44 patient stops breathing. 6:51 Dr. Garris arrives, patient pronounced deceased. You have that?"

"Yes, sir."

"You may go, Nurse."

The door opened and closed. Cutler handed the papers back to Dr. Garris. They shook hands. He looked down at Mother, briefly studied her still ample chest as it rose and fell. The equipment chirped as it continued to monitor her vital signs. Dr. Garris reached into the inside pocket of his Armani suit. Handed Cutler a plain white envelope. Inside was a bearer bond, good as cash.

Cutler put it in his own pocket. He turned to go. Dr. Garris surprised them both by appearing to feel awkward, uncomfortable. Perhaps because they had known each other for so long. He stared at the younger man. Cleared his throat.

"She won't suffer much, you know."

"Much?"

Dr. Garris had the grace to blush. "Well, not really. We'll take the necessary organs one at a time, yes, but she will remain sedated, and eventually, well...you know. It will be over. But our buyer wants them to be as fresh as possible, always insists on that. I don't really know why, packed in ice is generally fine, but this buyer insists on fresh."

Cutler blinked. "I don't want to hear anymore."

"I understand."

"Goodbye, Doc."

Cutler walked out of the room and out of Mother's life. It was done. His new life awaited. He made it down the hall and into the elevator before his stomach contracted. The doors opened, released him out into the crowded lobby. Cutler hurried through the mob of family members eager to see patients, dozens of tense people, mostly scared or horribly sad. He did not register a single face. He burst into the parking lot. Walked beside the building for a while, then abruptly bent over a row of rose bushes to vomit.

Darkness took over. Cutler found his car, slid inside, fired it up. He hit the freeway and drove away, trying not to picture anything but a better tomorrow, but knowing that in his tortured mind he would forever replay the faint chirping of abandoned birds.

*“But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.”*

—William Butler Yeats