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Still Life

by James Calvin Schaap

Webb arrived earlier than he said, and, like most men, he sat down on Grandma's rocker. Whenever he moved I heard her voice in its dry shrieking. Men want the rocker, I think, because they aren't comfortable in a preacher's house; they don't want to fall into something soft and plush or overstuffed. But Grandma's rocker is not a strong chair, and I always wince a little when they choose it. I've stuck it away in the far corner of the living room, no lamps around it, only a fern table.

"I'm going to have to let Barry go," he told me almost right away, sparing the amenities. "I don't want to, but I don't think I can keep him around anymore."

He came early because he didn't want to break the news to Dar all by himself. He guessed my husband would take it more easily if his wife was there, already knowing.

He said he caught our son with his hands in the bowling alley's cash register. He'd noticed the numbers were off, he said, and he marked some bills, assuming already that he'd catch Barry, and he did—"dead to rights," he said.

It's been so many years since I doubted an accusation thrown at my son that I wonder now what kind of crime it might take.

"I don't know what to do," Webb told me, lifting his thumbs from his folded hands. "He's a troubled boy."

He's really no boy either.

Webb's an angel of a guy with an errant eye that confuses me because I'm not always sure which eye I should fix on. "I know it's a problem," he said, "and not just for him. It might hurt you too—with that little girl business."

That little girl is all I think about anymore, but it's always been hard to think of her as Barry's daughter. Even Webb can't bring himself to say it—"that little girl," he says, as if she's alone.

"I can't trust him," he told me. "I wanted to know what you think—you and your husband—before I do anything."

"That's so kind of you," I told him. He's an angel. In every church there's at least one Webb Sneider, someone so loving you'd swear the Lord sent him down just to remind you, in the long, dark nights, that He's still there.

"Maybe you two ought to talk about it and get back to me," he said. "I can wait awhile."

In the years Dar and I have been together, I've learned to anticipate what he will think, especially with regard to our Barry. I knew he'd beg, once again, for mercy, another chance.

“In all other respects,” Webb said, “he’s been just fine. He does a great job with the people, and he’s a whiz with the pin-setter, a regular mechanic. He fixes things I’d call in for—I swear, Bette. The kid’s saved me money—saved the business money.” He sat squarely in the rocker, knees together beneath the saucer and coffee I’d given him when he came in. “In the afternoons he’s great with the kids, but I can’t trust him with money, and the truth is I’ve known it for a long time.”

“I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for him,” I told him.

“I just wish it hadn’t happened.”

There he sat with nothing more to say than that a second cup of coffee would keep him up. But about our Barry, I’ve long ago run out of things to say myself.

We’ve been renters for all these years because most preachers are. You never really own the manse: sometimes it’s an orphanage, sometimes a half-way house, or even a hospital with a lobby ordinary people call a living room. Being so public is wearying, but I knew that when I married my husband. Someone with sense doesn’t marry a pastor without knowing ahead of time that you sign a contract for a way of life that tires you with all the giving. Don’t mind my self-pity. I wouldn’t change.

“I really appreciate how you’re handling this,” I told Webb when I heard our garage door rise. “You’re right, of course. If he loses this job, there’s so much more to it.”

“There always is,” he said.

My husband came in through the kitchen, carrying his Bible like some authentic old preacher in the movies, which there aren’t very many of anymore. His tie hung loose and the sleeves of his gray corduroy jacket were lined with wrinkles, but his hair—he’s taken on silver streaks across the temples, perfect silver streaks, as if they were planned—his hair was perfect, like always. No matter how touseled he can look he always seems distinguished. It’s an amazing thing what hair can do—on a man too. A dozen times, maybe, I’ve seen him come in out of a storm and still look perfectly ready to preach. That beautiful head of hair never quite loses its shape.

He was not shocked to find someone in our living room after ten. Instead of hanging his coat in the vestibule, he laid it over a dining room chair and smiled. Webb is a friend.

“Trouble?” he said.

“You sit here, honey,” I told him, “and let me get you a glass of wine”—which to him meant, I’m sure, that yes, there was some trouble. Webb nodded when I asked if he wanted a glass himself.

My husband is the fine actor a preacher needs to be to show that joy is the lot of the redeemed. It is, of course. He sat behind the coffee table on the couch, almost child-like, not defensive at all. I think he knew the pain of what he was about to hear wouldn’t come from Webb so much as it would from his own

still small voice. My husband has a conscience that often seems to me to be like the heart of an athlete, maybe overexercised.

For a few minutes I left them alone in the living room because I thought it would be easier for Dar to hear the news alone. He wouldn't have to measure his reactions by trying to read mine.

I went to the kitchen. Once the kids are out of the house, there's not much left in a refrigerator—never more than a gallon of milk that you have to check once a week to be sure it isn't sour; maybe a half-dozen margarine tubs stuffed with leftover hotdish or sweet-sour pork. You don't have to use the crisper, so in my refrigerator there's usually two or three apples spilling from a plastic bag, little chunks of onion wrapped in Saran Wrap and stuck in the door—the whole thing is a still life, you might say.

I'm only his wife, but with regards to our son Barry, I've sometimes wished myself to be more of a Joab, King David's bloody general, who once shook the grief out of the king, pulled him to his feet in front of his troops, and forced him to thank them for the victory they'd won just that day over his beloved son Absalom, the traitor, the handsome rebel prince whose death he was mourning inside the palace. David needed Joab.

Absalom, my son, O Absalom.

Sometimes I wish I were Joab, even though if I had my choice I'd probably sit in silence just the way my husband does. Maybe not. Who knows what we'd be like without each other?

We've been in Logan far too long, ten years too long, maybe more. No preacher should ever stay in a church more than six years. The reason we've stayed is Barry. Dar can't let him fall on his own, even though our son is 30 years old.

It's hard to say why I love my husband, although I don't think that's unusual. He's a man of God—I say that honestly. He always tries to do what's right. I envy that. He's a principled man. That sounds harsh, but the principles he stands on are compassion, mercy, and trust. They give him life. But when it comes to our son, I wonder if those same principles haven't been the death of him.

When I came in with the wine, Webb was rocking, just slightly, with the motion of his head, as if he were affirming something over and over. I had the odd feeling that I was in his errant eye, my husband in the other. "I wish I could pay him more," Webb said, "but the place is a nickle-and-dime business."

"Don't blame yourself," my husband said. "Just hiring him was a wonderful thing to do. Who else would have?"

How many times haven't we covered his bad checks? The bank calls, and it's always a man's voice politely reminding me that there's an overdraft. Nothing has changed since grade school. Mrs. Visser, the second grade teacher, said

so long ago, "I think you and I should sit down once and talk about Barry." No one wants to hurt the preacher.

"Just the same," Webb said, "a man really can't live on minimum wage—not when he's trying to get his daughter back."

"You weren't paying him minimum wage," I said.

"Couple bucks here or there."

"Who knows what he did with the money anyway?" Dar said. "Who's to say he did anything worthwhile with it?"

At first, my husband always reacts angrily.

Webb stopped rocking and held the glass on the right arm of the rocker. "You got any suggestions?" he said.

This much I know: if it had been anyone else in the world but Webb who employed Barry, our son would be on the street or in jail and his ex-wife would get Julie because right now, to the judge, the choice is only a case of the lesser of two evils.

But I know my husband, and I knew what he'd say.

"Maybe we could try to give him one more chance," Dar said. "We'll talk to him yet tonight—we'll tell him everything you've said. We'll go over there right now—just the two of us."

"It's not that much money," Webb said.

That's not what Dar needed to hear.

Webb sat back in the rocker and laid both hands on the arms. Then he looked at both of us, that errant eye wandering as if it might have its own little corner on truth. "I don't know how to say it exactly, but I want you to know that sometimes me and Karen wonder—and others do too—we wonder where Barry came from. Maybe you wonder too, I don't know." I could see it wasn't easy for him to say. Truth never is. "Nobody holds it against you—what that boy does—not really. He's not a kid anymore."

I knew where he came from. He was our first child.

* * * * *

I'm not sure what I'd call Barry if he weren't my own flesh and blood. I suppose I'd think of him as worthless, a con, a cheat, a kid given to fits of anger and deep ponderous hate. Irresponsible—we both called him that, of course.

We're in the car, on the way over to Barry's trailer, and I'm afraid for my husband. Dar has both hands up on the steering wheel, and the radio is playing Vivaldi, I think, something full of nervous violins. When we pass the Backroom, both of us are relieved that we don't see his pick-up out front. Dar's Bible is still on the buffet at home, where he left it when he came in, and I wonder why it is that he never takes it along when we see Barry—only on his preacher

calls. Not more than a couple hours ago, Dar probably sat in the hospital reading scripture to anxious parents waiting for a doctor's report. Maybe what we need is a pastor.

He surprises me and turns left a block before the street where Barry's trailer sits in a lot of a dozen, right beside the tracks.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"He's seeing this girl," he told me.

He'd not said that before. We don't talk about Barry much, except when we must.

"She's young and she's Mexican."

My husband is not a racist.

"What girl?" I said.

"She's sixteen," he said. "They say that makes her legal."

A child. Five years older than Julie. My God. I would have felt no less pain had he opened my chest and cut out my heart. "Doesn't he care at all about Julie?" I said. "He doesn't want her back, does he? He'd just as soon that Sally had her. That's it, isn't it? Dar, he's telling us he doesn't want her. I don't care what he says."

"She lives around here somewhere, I think," he said. Three motorcycles leaned up on the driveway in front of the house we passed, a big black dog on its hind legs scratching at the front door.

"What are you going to say?" I said.

He doesn't take his eyes off the road. "I'm going to tell him we're going to bale him out just this once more—not because of him but because of Julie. I'm going to tell him that his life is one thing we can't seem to change, but we won't let Julie get away. I want her, Bette. We both want her."

"Maybe the Lord has his own plan," I said.

"He needs hands," he said, shaking his. "Tonight I sat with a mom and a dad who were this close to losing their daughter, and I kept seeing Julie on that bed. She's almost the same age. And I kept thinking the worst, just like those parents. What if she'd die?—what if our granddaughter chooses her mother somewhere out in New Mexico? What then?"

Julie has six weeks to make up her mind where she will live—here in Logan with her father, or in New Mexico with her mother. The judge stared at both parents, then at their little girl, and he told her he was going to let her choose—a twelve-year-old.

She's with her mother now. Sally is a free spirit who gave up long ago on our son's failures. He met her at college when he tried his hand at school, and that first night he brought her home, we let them alone downstairs when we went up to bed. That night I watched the hands of the clock slip around until after four, when I finally heard his steps come up, listened to the water run in the bathroom, and heard the sound of his bed's familiar moan as he stretched

himself out, arms above his head in the way he always slept, exhausted and always so seemingly guiltless. I never trusted Sally because she was too much like him. You hope against hope that your child will find someone good for him, I guess, but I never saw that in her. I was down on my knees—literally down on my knees—the night before they were married, praying one of them had something strong hidden inside that would grow when they'd wake up to another world the next morning and realize that life was now before them, life itself. She left him years ago for a man who offered her an escape from Logan, and she lives in New Mexico, the man she got away with already gone and another in his place. She waitresses somewhere, I guess, nights.

We want Julie badly but we're the only ones. Sally doesn't really want her and neither does our son, not really.

A trailer is the cheapest place in town to rent, especially out there in the lot by the tracks where thick weeds a farmer could name, I suppose, grow six feet high through a picket fence no one, for years, has taken the time to paint. It's a sad place. I've never been inside.

"Let's pray," my husband said when we parked up beside Barry's truck.

So we did, each of us quickly.

It was after ten, and the only light burned through a window in the back. As we're walking up to the front door, I'm already seeing my thirty-year-old son come to the front of the trailer wrapped in a blanket, some teenage girl with dark eyes peeking out from behind, a sheet held up to her chest.

"I've never been inside," my husband says.

He points down at a bundle of cigarette butts in the dirt beside the cement steps, then he looks at me, shrugs his shoulders. "I've stood out here often enough, but I've never been inside."

He rings the bell, and I expect footfalls up from the bedroom in the back. What shades are there are drawn, although none of them covers any window squarely. A dog barks next door. Once more Dar tries the bell.

A couple of fishing poles, in sections, are hidden in the grass he hasn't cut all summer.

"You better knock," I tell him, and he does, with the back of his hand, the way you knock on the door of someone who's expecting you, someone you know well.

Where did Barry come from? We have two perfectly normal children living perfectly normal lives. We pray for them daily, several times. But Barry?—because he's oldest, was he sacrificed so that we could learn to be parents? Did it take one child to teach us how to love our kids?

"Maybe he's not home," Dar said. He knocked again, but he didn't want to go in, even if Barry wasn't there. Neither did I. I didn't want to see inside.

"We can call from home. We can call him every fifteen minutes or something," Dar says. The front door has no windows.

"Maybe we should just wait," I tell him.

"He might not come back tonight," Dar says.

It was wrong for us never to have been in that trailer, never to have visited him there. It makes no difference that we were scared to have to see what was inside. Pride, maybe, kept us out. We didn't want to be hurt.

"Go in, Dar," I told him. "I think we ought to stay."

He looks around at me from the steps. "I don't know," he says. "I don't want to be banging around in his life. It's like you're nosy about—"

"Honey," I said.

"You violate something—" he said.

"Violate?" I said, angrily maybe. "I'm going in."

The screen door opens to the outside, so you've got to be on the second step to get in the trailer. I turned the knob with my right hand, but the door jammed. Dar stepped up beside me, held back the screen with his body, and pushed his shoulder into it to spring it free, pushing back a crumpled hunk of braided rug. We went in.

Neither of the wall switches lit anything, so we stood together, spreading the rug beneath our feet until our eyes adjusted to the faint light from the back and we made out a pole lamp behind the couch. Not until I stood there in the darkness and heard a radio did I imagine that Barry still might be inside, in the back, trying to wait out whoever was at the door. Why should he answer, I thought. Since when has he cared?

I took hold of Dar's arm.

"Barry," I said, not loud. "Barry, it's your parents."

No response.

The television sat on a corner table beside us, a couple of aluminum pie plates fixed to the rabbit ears.

"No one's here," Dar said. "He would have come to the door."

The living room was a half-step down from the kitchen floor where we stood, the two rooms separated by a metal railing hung with Levis, a bundle of dish towels, and t-shirts. Dar took my hand from his arm and walked to the couch, searching up and down the pole for the switch.

"Maybe it's on the cord," I told him.

He reached and felt around the base.

"On the lights," I said. "I bet, on the lights, each separate one."

I remembered the couch once we saw it clearly because years ago we'd picked it out ourselves, used, when the furniture store in town had a sidewalk sale—a second-hand orange couch that folded out into a bed, a piece of furniture so heavy that when it went in their apartment, I worried about my husband, sweat pouring off his face. They marred the walls, and if I hadn't been there myself,

I thought Dar might have cussed like Barry did, under his breath, not only at the heft of the thing but at the fact that I'd insisted they have it, just in case they had company. Its shoulders were rounded now and slumped with age, worn away, as were the covers it had taken me a week to sew.

Newspapers and magazines lay half-opened over the floor and on the coffee table. Old cups and mugs, glasses cloudy from milk they must have held a week ago, crowded the table top. If I would have taken a pencil and drawn out what the trailer might have looked like before seeing it, I believe I would have got it right, mostly.

"I want to check," Dar said, and he went around the coffee table toward the back. "I've got to make sure." He called out Barry's name again as if to warn him, I suppose, then walked down the hallway, sideways, as if reluctant to touch the walls. He got to the back room and shook his head.

I'd never seen the kind of magazines Barry had lying around. I was sickened—not simply that he had them—but at the way the women stood or sat or what they lay on, and where they put their hands. And I'd never seen pictures of men that way either, never seen people doing what they were doing to each other.

The rug in his front room lay in a ball beneath the coffee table, grit all over the floor, like sand. A cat box, already too full, sat beneath the television, but we never saw a cat.

In the kitchen, little slivers of burned food—bacon bits, drips of pancake batter, even chunks of meat—lay at the edges of three frying pans over the grates on the stove. The kitchen floor was littered with Coke cups and fast-food wrappers, and dirty dishes filled the sink. The dishcloth was stiff as a kite when I picked it up, and the smell stuck with my fingers as if I'd let them soak in something sour.

Outside it was dark, so when I looked out the kitchen window all I could see was the haze of dried-on cigarette smoke and grease so thick I could wipe a finger through it and see the dirt against my skin. But being a parent makes your kid's dirt somehow sufferable, and I couldn't help myself from wanting to clean it. My first reaction—I swear—was to tell Dar that I wasn't leaving until this place was shaped up. I could get rags from home, and a broom and Lysol, and make it nice. Even if Barry didn't like it, I thought, I needed to do it myself.

I reached above the sink because it looked to me as if he might have something there to clean—sponges, floor wax, something—but all I found was empty bottles. Somehow, some way, only by the grace of God perhaps, Barry'd never really fallen to alcohol. Almost everything else had run his life for a time, but he'd never really been a drunk—not that I knew of.

I threw the dishrag in an empty plastic bag and opened the cupboard beneath the sink to find a wastebasket full of brown paper bags and four or five pear

cores in a cloud of fruit flies. I took a towel off the railing near the door and ran water over it. Maybe if I'd just clean the counters, I thought, put the garbage into bags and set it outside, let the pans soak overnight, wash the glasses and the cups. Maybe if I'd just take a first step here, I thought. You just can't turn your back on that dirt. I couldn't.

"You want to see the rest?" Dar said from the hallway. He pointed at the back of the trailer as if there were more to the tour.

When I left the kitchen I had to stumble through those magazines again, and when I did I thought I'd burn them, all of them, and I didn't care what he'd think. I didn't care about Barry, I cared about myself, and I wouldn't have that garbage in his house, not in the place my son lived and I paid for, no matter how much it might be some kind of invasion of privacy. What about Julie?

"I'm going to clean up here a bit," I told my husband.

I knew the moment I looked at him that I'd lost him. My husband has a face to wear when it's Barry that's hurting him. It's vacant, emotionless, but not beaten. In all these years he's built up something inside of himself, something like a forcefield that rises and thickens when the pain of what he's seen or heard threatens to destroy his faith. Because that's what it does finally—Barry's life destroys my husband's faith. Dar's eyes move quickly, as if refusing to settle any one place. He loses passion. He stops feeling. He quits life to protect his soul.

There he stood at the door as if he had an appointment back at his office.

"What is it?" I said.

He leaned against the wall. "He's not here," he told me, as if it were news, and he started buttoning his coat.

My husband seems emotionless. "It's almost eleven, Dar," I told him. "I can take on this whole mess—I swear. You and me—"

"Not me—"

"Yes, you," I said. "Who cares about him? For Julie."

He puts his hands on the wall, as if it's moving, and the look on his face says he's the one that needs to be held. He turns toward the bedroom, then kicks trash out of the way as he walks past the coffee table. He leans over and fans through a magazine, page after shiny page of bright glossy color. Then he rolls it up and throws it at the wall.

There's a shoe on the floor, a dress shoe, one Barry might have worn to church if he'd ever gone anymore. It's almost patent leather. Dar picks it up and steps over the coffee table and smashes a picture, even the frame, glass falling to the floor like music, then rips it down and lets it clatter.

I go to him, take him in my arms and hold him. His hands are folded in front of him, I feel them in my stomach. I pull away and take his arms and wrap them around me, and I pray, out loud, for both of us, in my own words. I run through all of it—what I've done wrong, where I've hurt him, how I didn't love our son enough, or how I scolded him too hard, or whatever it was that

put this demon in him—and here we are in this mess, this horror. My husband is broken.

I take his face in my hands, and it's still dry. He can't cry. I push my fingers back through his perfect hair, and I tell him to go. He is the shepherd to two hundred souls in this town; someone has to care, sometimes, for the shepherd.

I tell him I'll be out after him, and he leaves.

I stand there in the filth, and I'm looking around desperately for something to show me this is my own son, my baby. I don't know what I want to find, but when I see it, I'll know.

I remember the way Barry's feet dug into my lap, their roundness, the fleshy sense of such clean skin against mine when I'd hold him and he'd work so hard to arch his little back, the way I held both his hands to help him stand the first time on his thin and crooked legs, and how he laughed. Something.

In the middle room is a closet half full of clothes falling off hangers. There's a white shirt and a sport coat against the wall—Sunday clothes—but that's not what I need to see. I search through drawers, nearly empty drawers beneath the closet, find socks in one, some underwear. He's got Dar's old study desk, and in the darkness I see it's full of junk mail—coupons and dozens of envelopes unopened, catalogues of hunting clothes and guns, decks of cards, jacks and kings and jokers, empty cartons of cigarettes.

Behind the desk lamp, stuck in the wall with a thumbtack, is a picture of Julie when she was six maybe, maybe seven, a snapshot from an instant camera, the bottom edge brown and stained. One old picture of the child Webb called "this little girl."

I'm looking for the Bible maybe.

I kick through the clothes along the side of the hall on my way back out of the room, as if by some chance the scripture might be lying there beside the bedroom light. I open all the drawers and fumble through, thinking my hand will stop somewhere when it appears, the old black Bible we gave him years ago, his name in gold on the cover.

A long chain snaps on the light above the sink in a bathroom so small there's barely room for the toilet. A white haze coats the walls of the shower, and the edges of the curtain are stiff with mildew. Streaks and spots litter the mirror, and the sink is ripe with stains. Inside the vanity sit two rolls of bathroom tissue. I don't think I'd recognize drugs if they were handed to me, but behind the sliding doors of a flat cabinet hung from the wall above the toilet, a dozen prescriptions stand in plastic vials. Empty beer cans all over.

Dar is waiting for me in the car, so I turn out the lights and come back through the middle room where the single picture of Julie is pinned to the wall. I tell myself that the picture is all I need to see, just that one hint of something good in him. I take it carefully from behind the thumbtack, and I pin it up higher where he can see it, a color snapshot already fading.

Put out the lights, I tell myself. Your husband needs you.

But I open the top drawer of Dar's old desk and fumble through pens and pencils, a sheaf of old bills and receipts, a wound bundle of rubber bands, and maybe a dozen packs of matches. The file drawer, the bottom one, is full of tapes, video tapes, unmarked. I pull open the drawer and run my fingers up and down—eight of them—all in cartons with battered corners, Memorex, 3-M.

I don't know what the tapes are of, and I don't have time to play them, not with my husband outside—but I don't even want to know. I take one in my hand, a mystery, unmarked—not a note on it. I slip it out of the jacket, but nothing's written anywhere. I've already seen the worst, I tell myself. I've smelled the filth. So what are these, so carefully hidden? He's got no camera. They're not vacations. Why are they hidden? Who wants them? Who uses them?

He's thirty years old, and I don't know my son. I don't know what he's capable of. I have these tapes in my hand, and for all I know it's something worse than I can even imagine. Maybe it's the sinner in me, the doubter, but I know what I know the way a mother does.

Dirty socks lie in a bundle beneath the closet where his clothes hang. My hands don't tremble at all as I light a match, set it into an ashtray, and watch the smoke rise. I lean some old mail, like campfire logs, over the ashtray, then shove paper up around it. An envelope corner browns slowly in an invisible flame. The socks will burn quickly. Everything here will burn quickly. I take an envelope from the top and start old papers on fire beneath the desk.

"Bette," Dar says, from the door. "Are you coming?"

I ball up a newspaper and unpin the only picture he has of his daughter. Then I walk out slowly. I wish I could have watched it burn.

Dar drives home, and I sit beside him, as if we were young again, my hand up behind his head and in his hair. Neither of us speak.

We wait on our driveway while the garage door lifts and the automatic light shines on the back, where Barry's old bike is hung, upside down, from a brace.

In the house, Dar gets a glass of milk, like he always does, and I wait while he pours out maybe a half a glass, sets it in front of him on the counter.

He won't talk. His eyes still move quickly.

"I want to go to bed," I tell him. "I don't want to stay up any longer. I want to lie in bed, and if there's anything to say, I want to say it there."

The clock's numbers glow like green sticks, and I see it's not quite twelve when I finally hear the siren downtown from the fire station.

Tomorrow Dar will know what happened, but he won't say a word to me. He won't even bring it up.