



Angel of the House

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It was me living alone in the house around the corner from where my mom lived and died, and where my brother was now staying. This was a Saturday, I was in the kitchen, at the table, enjoying one of these special beers I bought now and again called The Chutney. It came in this pinkish-orangish can that was taller than most. I was enjoying it, the beer had a fruity flavor, the sweetness was tart. Then a pang and something went

wrong in me. I was thinking, Jesus, it's my heart.

I got real nervous, started grabbing my chest. I remember seeing out the window over the sink, looking into the backyard, where there were some children playing, all in a circle, doing one of these *ring-around-the-rosie* games. What kind of children were these? I don't know. They weren't from my neighborhood, half-dressed with what looked like white cloths wrapped around their waists. Like little savages, is what I think in retrospect. But I didn't question, I was worried about my heart.

I was having all kinds of pains, grabbing my right arm, I can see myself, grabbing my arm, hunched over the table, looking out the window, seeing without really seeing, and this sharp pain runs down that side of my body. I thought I was dying. Never had a heart attack before, so I didn't know what was going on. Couldn't go for help, couldn't muster the strength to reach the yellow phone in the nook beside the refrigerator. I was hanging in air. Things weren't the same.

I sensed this glow. I don't know if it was a light. It wasn't the normal kind, at any rate. This is it, I said to myself, this is how I'm dying. When this thought occurs to you it's time to lay on the floor.

That's what I did. Curled up into a ball, one of those moments you don't remember. I wasn't waiting for anything, but I wasn't doing anything either. It was the next best thing to being dead. That's when I knew Deborah was coming. I don't want to say I had a vision, because it was nothing like that. What I had were these shivers, then this feeling I was holding a little girl in my arms, a little girl that belonged to me. But the feeling wasn't right. Not anything I thought having a daughter might be, that is, even though she belonged to me it was all perverted, you know, maybe I was breaking some natural law, holding her this way.

Monday came. I never thought about seeing a doctor because I felt just right after the heart attack was over. I was one of these types, and it's not good of me, where I'd rather not know something is wrong. My older brother

Jenko, he's responsible for this. When our mother passed away I had a sense she was going, but I didn't really know; you see, my brothers, Jenko and the oldest, who was hardly in the picture, they kept certain facts from me, certain medical truths. They just said: Mom's not feeling well. They didn't tell me that the whole inside of her body was rotting up. That she was like a piece of old fruit. One day I went over to the house, right around the corner from my own, and my mommy was there, but she really wasn't there. No one had to explain anything. I knew. You don't need to explain to someone: dead body. You look at it, it's there. Point being, not knowing was my habit, it was forced on me.

I worked at the Hornace Print Shop because Jenko got me a job there, and I showed up and went about my duties. I operated one of the stamping machines, and all you have to know is that I pulled on the lever, a big heavy one, the platform came down, heated a piece of sheet metal, then I released the lever and the platform went back up. I thought I was doing alright. Jenko and

his guys, they thought differently.

It was during the first fifteen minute break, and I was outside breathing in some air. I had quit smoking some time before, so I stood off to the side, away from the fellows with their cigarettes. A few of them came over to me, though. Asked me if I was feeling alright. If I really felt like working. My brother was the one, he was the instigator.

Well, I don't know if I feel like working, I told them. But I feel like getting paid. I thought this was funny. I thought it was friendly enough. But the other guys, not so much. There were three of them. Jenko was always the leader, and he wore the same lousy pair of overalls everyday. Some of the guys had what they called their 'outfits.' You got used to seeing the same holes in their clothes, the same stains. Jenko, for instance, he had a big tear in the left knee and some brown on his right shoulder strap. He was the guy who did most of the talking, and the other two, it seemed, were pretty much there to agree with him.

Well, we're not the only ones who noticed you haven't been pulling the stamper, he said. You've been doing something, sure, but nothing like you did Friday, Thursday, Wednesday, etcetera.

I'm pulling the stamper, I said. Same thing I do every day. Exactly what they pay me for.

The three guys were silent, then it was Jenko who had to speak. He asked me if that's really what I thought I was doing.

Sure. I didn't know what else I could have been. Something was real wrong, it was obvious, because they didn't talk to me any longer. They moved on out. The impression I got was they needed some information from me, like when a social worker makes a decision and doesn't say a word, session is over, time to leave.

I went back to pulling on the stamp machine, just what I was paid for. Just like I did every day. I went on with it. One piece of sheet metal after another, didn't even pay attention to what I was stamping anymore. Different companies paid us to stamp different words

and signs. I'd get an assignment sheet, it would say: Slide 4a, v67. I pulled the correct slide from the filing, set it in the stamper, refiled the one I wasn't using anymore. Then I was half-asleep, doing my job. You began to sense a pattern in the numbers, so the nice part was that you didn't have to be conscious anymore. There'd be v67 then 8b920. Then after an hour or so you might get 8b098, and all of the sudden something clicks. You remember one coincidence after another, and after an hour passes 9b921 comes along. All this time's been passing and you've done so much work, not even aware of yourself, but somehow knowing it all the same. I might say I'd done it in one of these -- how do you say? -- *previous lives*.

So it was good for me. Work allowed me to keep my mind off my heart attack. Things were smooth sailing, until Jenko showed up again, this time he had the foreman. I knew I was in trouble. Staring at the mud on his overall strap I felt justified in hating him.

Then this foreman -- his name was Gormo, and

he looked like his name sounded, a real fat miserable creature -- he adjusted his visor and pointed at me. What the hell is it you think you're doing?

I told him that I was doing my job, sir. Exactly what Hornace paid me for, the same exact thing I explained to Jenko the first time the question came up.

Then he went on shaking his head. Is that what you call it? Doing your job?

I couldn't understand one bit. Keep in mind I still had my hands on the stamper. This was completely ridiculous. That he could ask me what I was doing when the answer was clear. So I took my hands away and I showed him my palms. As calm as I could be, as respectfully, I said: Sir, what would you like me to do? Whatever you ask. I'm here for another four hours, so I'll do what I'm told.

Gormo, he kept on shaking his head. Like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Then I began to get all shaky. It was like I had drank too much caffeine, even though I only had one cup in the morning. Here the

foreman, he reached forward where my unstamped metal was stacked and he pulls out the assignment paper, except these drawings are all over the back of it, and he shakes it in my face.

What? he says. And I agreed with him: What? I didn't get it.

The thing about these drawings is they were the product of a sick mind. They were all pictures of kids, little girls. And they had the bad parts, if you know what I mean. There were a lot of them. I'd say about twenty or so drawings, covering the complete back of the assignment sheet. I got even shakier looking at them. I realized, on account of how scared I was, and that Gormo wouldn't let it drop, he was accusing me of having drawn them.

Then my brother said: I saw him drawing, but I didn't know he was drawing that. What are they supposed to be? Little girls?

No way I was losing my job, however, so I defended myself: You've got the wrong guy.

Gormo wasn't having it. I didn't know if he was in on it too, but it became a whole ordeal. He asked me if he needed to call security, or if I was going to follow him off the floor back into his office. Of course I agreed to follow him. I didn't want to cause any trouble. And you know they weren't going to pay me for today, thinking I was drawing those pervert pictures.

Something I should mention: Everyone in town, especially the men, they were worked up about these two girls who'd picked up and went missing. One turned up, and she turned in a bad way. They found her wrapped in newspaper, and I remember hearing her face was painted like a whore. We don't know anything about thirteen year old whores. A hand from nowhere reached up into us and started squeezing, rearranging our insides. A game was being played. No one could figure out what the hell.

Gormo asked me if I was a pervert. To my face. Once I was seated in his office he let the page with the drawings flutter down to his desk, then he sat there

opposite me. Watching. Waiting for me to provide him with some explanation. Of course I wanted to tell him that everyone involved was full of shit. That if he didn't remember, when he and Jenko came over to talk to me, weren't both of my hands on the stamper? But I kept my mouth shut.

I looked face-to face with those drawings, I really let myself have it. And I didn't feel very good. These drawings, as I've said, they weren't the work of a healthy man. There was one in particular that I focused on in that foreman's office. There was this drawing of a girl, like the rest of them, but this one was different. She wasn't quite at the center of the page, but slightly off, say a little bit low and just to the left, and it was a fine drawing. Better than the others. It wasn't a masterpiece or anything like that, but the other drawings were doodles with swirlies to be their little pubes and big shaded ovals for nipples. Whereas this one had some thought put into it. A girl with longish hair, and her head was turned ever so slightly like she had been walked in

on and her arms were covering her breasts, but the drawing made it seem that she really had big woman-like breasts. But something about that face made you know that she was just a little girl. This on account of the eyes being so large, and the size of the head too. And I was thinking, this was Deborah.

These are your pictures, that's what you're showing me right now, he said

Then I looked up real quickly. I knew what he was getting at, that I was staring at them when I was supposed to be more disgusted. Still, I pretended not to understand. I don't follow you, sir. I wouldn't admit to drawing these pictures because I really just didn't do it.

Gormo then, he sat back in his chair, chained his fingers over his gut, his swollen belly, and observed me. I let myself be observed. I wasn't courageous enough to look him in the eyes, and I wasn't dumb enough to look at those drawings again, so I stared at the floor. Felt like I was being scolded.

Then he got to talking down to me, and here I had a

chance to feel real nervous. Not even shocked anymore, just the kind of nervousness you feel when you didn't know you were doing wrong then consequences suddenly present themselves.

Why don't you take the day off, he says to me. No pressure. You just need to relax. Then we get back to you. How's that sound?

Of course I had to agree with him. I tried to offer my defense one more time, just let him know that as far as I was concerned, I had my hands on that stamping machine all day. That I couldn't make heads or tails of what was now going on.

In response he snorted at me and nodded, real lightly, like he understood exactly where I was coming from. I knew better, but what else? I had to pretend that I was in good hands. So I up and left the office. I don't need to tell you that leaving the print shop wasn't the most pleasant experience. Word travels fast and I was getting stares. Some of the fellows even stopped what they were doing so they could watch me leave. And off

to my left somewhere I saw him, the guy responsible for all this. My brother: Jenko. Funny enough and go figure that he was the only guy who didn't have to watch me.

I didn't know what Jenko had planned, why he felt he had to frame me, when it was me who should have been framing him. I was the one who'd been wronged. I thought I'd forgiven him. But I don't know, I wondered if it wasn't fair of me to just think that he was the one who killed her.

So I walked on home (I didn't even own a goddamned car) and at the point where I passed Oakrest Elementary School I started to feel real weird, I walked really quickly. The shakes were coming over me. It was at this time, about three hours before I normally would get off work, that the kiddies were all getting out of school. And you know how they are. They like to linger around, once they're out. Instead of being like adults and wanting to get the hell home as soon as possible, they like to just stand under a walnut tree. And here were three girls. Because they were on my mind, that Deborah was on

my mind, I found myself checking them out. Then I thought twice, which was thinking better. If anyone was going to say I was guilty of liking little girls, this was the kind of action that was going to prove them right. Watching these young girls. I don't need to tell you I kept on walking.

I was making my way home. Everything was alright. But everything was not alright. Not only were the shakes coming to me and strong, so strong I was afraid I was going to have another heart attack, but I was being followed. I was sure of it. This group of girls here. Three of them, they were behind me, they were giggling. I couldn't make out the words and I didn't want to. I wanted to be around no more little girls.

So what's a fellow do? He stops in a bar if he happens to come across one. A place called Steamship, and a lot of the time I don't have to pay for the drink, since my older brother knew the owner and some of the bartenders. The guy on shift this afternoon was someone I'd seen before, couldn't remember his name, so I took a seat at

the bar and sat there with my head lowered. Like I was in the sad part of a movie.

The bartender recognized me. Right away. As soon as my ass was on the stool he came over and asked me if I wasn't Jenko's brother. That's right, I told him. I am. Then he asked me if I was taking the day off from work.

No, I said. I'm not feeling well. This was stupid, he comes back at me with: Not feeling well, so you might as well stop and have a beer, huh?

I nodded. Yes, it was stupid. Then I tried to cover myself: No one ever said a beer doesn't make you feel better.

That's right, he said. Then he asks me what it is I'll be having.

I had The Chutney, and I sat there, looking at the wall. Just trying to bring my head together, and first figure how in the hell those drawings got there on my assignment sheet. Then what I was going to do if I was reported as a pervert. One girl turned up dressed like a

whore, the other no one knows. She's worse. And the fact no one has been charged, it makes all of us guilty. Me. Jenko. Every other guy who goes about, doing his business, he's a suspect, could be anyone.

I was making my head clear when the bartender came back. He was bored and he wanted to talk. He was a thin guy, good-looking, I imagine he was some kind of college student, I'm sure he was used to having people want to talk to him.

He asked me about Jenko. I don't really want to talk about that son of a bitch, I said.

College boy was put off, and I'll admit I was harsh, but I was in no mood.

Now are you saying that you and he aren't on good terms?

I thought about this. Not wondering what kind of answer would be most honest, you see, but what the hell was he talking about. I had to correct him.

Jenko's not my brother, I said. No way. That guy I work with at the print shop? Never.

This really confused him, you could tell because his eyes started darting around. The good news was that he didn't want to talk anymore. For whatever reason, maybe he was closer to Jenko than I thought, he didn't like me talking like I did. So I finished my beer, and when I asked him if I could get another, seeing as how my nerves were a little shot, he denied me.

I don't think that's a good idea, he told me. I don't know if you need to be drinking right now.

College boy, I thought. Very smart. I wasn't even a heavy drinker, but a time when a man's nerves are just a little bit shot, that's when you need The Chutney, and sure enough that's when Mr. Johnny-Goes-to-College decides to cut you off. It was what I said about Jenko that upset him. That he was a son of a bitch. That's pretty much all I could figure. Either that or because he was mistaken. Jenko was no brother of mine. As far as I could remember I never had one, it had always just been me and my mother. Period.

And wouldn't you know it, once I got outside, across

the street, here was Deborah, waiting for me. Her shoulder was tired, I figured, because her book bag was at her side and she was hunched forward. I wondered how long my little girl had been waiting.

When I went across the street she wrapped her arms around my legs. A problem I have is I never know what to say to her. So I asked if she wanted to walk on home and go to bed. Yes, she said. She was so tired. She had been waiting for me all day. So I wondered if she had gone to school.

A child like you, I said, you have to go learn. You can't spend all your afternoons out here on the corner, waiting for your daddy to meet you. What do you think your daddy did when he was your age?

Don't think I didn't understand. Something out of the ordinary happened and I realized it. This was the appearance of Deborah. I asked her, while we were walking back to my house, how I knew her. I believe I said: Who in the hell are you?

And Deborah, she said: Let's go home, daddy. I have

pains in my stomach.

I have to describe her now. I have to say that she was not exactly the girl I had seen on that drawing. For one, whoever had done those drawings wasn't nearly talented enough to capture a real person, you know, those drawings were just *representations*. But something about those humungous eyes, Deborah had them too, large, wide, too inviting. Though she was a child, for sure. And her hair was real dark, it was black. She had this way of walking, all of her movements actually, like when little girls pretend to be adults. When they act like they're being civilized. For instance, she curtsied, I swear, to this elderly woman we passed. And a few blocks later we passed these construction workers who were finishing up for the evening and rolling up their extension cords, putting their drill bits back in the little boxes. Like a grown woman who is starved for attention, Deborah slowed down and waited to be noticed. Of course these fellows, they just saw a little girl, they paid her no mind. Deborah had trouble realizing this and

she pouted. I felt like I was supposed to comfort her, but I didn't know what to say. So I put my hand on her shoulder. You couldn't even say that I actually held her. That I even touched her. This girl wasn't my daughter, and I wasn't in the habit of touching little girls.

My brother, Jenko, was bound to come around after work. Especially after I had been asked to leave. Just to give me shit. So in the meantime I had to figure out what I was supposed to do with her. I felt like I needed this girl around because she was mine, but for obvious reasons I didn't want her around in a way where he could see her. Now she was sitting at the kitchen table. I figured she must be hungry, and I wanted to give her some food. All I had was a can of kidney beans. So I asked her -- because I had no idea what little girls liked -- if she wanted some. She just started with her pouting.

Well, I'll cook you beans, I said. Then it occurred to me again. I felt like a goddamned fool. Get the hell out of my house, I said. I can't have you here. Do you know

what kind of pictures they found drawn all over my assignment sheet?

I explained it all to her. She was just a little girl, she couldn't understand, even though she wanted to act like a grown woman. She made snot noises and rubbed her eyes with her tiny fists. I had no idea what to do. It didn't matter what kind of tricks were played on me, I understood this girl did not belong to me. I had no responsibility here. It was another one of those heart attacks.

I figured I would real gently lift her up and bring her outside and she could run off to wherever she came from. And I was going to lift her, and she was just bawling away. But when I put my arms around her I saw that her wrists were tied up. Apparently she did this to herself, because I didn't, and there was no one else in my house. Except it was this real fine, thin wire and her hands and her wrists were bright red. Yes, there were a few bloodspots running onto her hand. Sickening. And the pain. That pain, I'm telling you, glowed from her like

one of those *auras* they talk about. White and blinding. I didn't know what the hell, but I understood why she was crying now. And I told her to hold tight, I would go get some scissors, good ones, pliers, that could cut the wire. Wire cutters.

She was a girl. It was funny, she could behave like a woman for some construction workers who didn't give a damn, curtsy for an old lady, but when push came to shove and she needed to be an adult, she couldn't take it. There wasn't a goddamned problem though. I told her so. I would get the scissors, these wire cutters, then she was free.

There was a room in my upstairs I called my attic, but it technically wasn't an attic because it was on the same floor as my bedroom. An empty space where I kept my tools and some dusty old furniture that used to belong to my mom. It took me a few minutes to find the right toolbox, but I came across it. When I went back to the kitchen Deborah was on the floor, rolling around. And her wrists were still tied up.

She was throwing a fit, slobbering all over the floor tiles, even though I told her to hold tight, that I would be right back. But when I got on my knees and I put the scissors to the wire she started waving her head back and forth like she was resisting. A little storm, that's what she was, and I didn't know what to make of it, she was my daughter. So I snipped away then stood up and waited. She was as still as a freshwater lake. Even though she was free to go she didn't want to. I was exhausted. I took a seat in the chair. Then I remembered I had The Chutney in the fridge, so I stood up and got myself one.

It's funny how the brain moves. I was thinking: Any minute now Jenko's going to come over. No sooner had the thought habituated up inside my head then flew like a birdie than the doorbell rang. Here was my brother, here was Jenko.

He was dressed in his overalls, and I had trouble not looking at the muddy shoulder strap. I distracted myself. I asked him if he wanted a drink.

No, he said. I just wanted to stop by and see what the

hell's going on. Seeing what the hell you're thinking.

He stood in the doorway, no interest in coming further inside my house. Well, I've got an open Chutney, I told him, so if you don't mind I'm going back in the kitchen here to retrieve it.

I'm not sure how I knew, what kind of intuition guided me, but I wasn't surprised that Deborah was no longer on the floor when I went back into the kitchen. It was probably that she had no reason to be here in the first place. I took a swig of The Chutney then went back into the living room.

Jenko was still in the doorway. He wasn't even trying to feel relaxed. Things aren't okay with you, he said. You seem a little too fine considering the amount of problems you're about to have. You understand how serious things have gotten around this town since the incident, and how people aren't joking around anymore?

I couldn't even understand why this son of a bitch was talking to me. I didn't tell him as much on account

of the fact that he was my older brother, I didn't go out of the way to make him feel welcomed either. I sat in one of my old chairs and went to staring at the wall. Jenko was still in the doorway.

You understand what I'm telling you, he said. They're saying you deny having drawn those pictures, even though we all saw you at it. All day. Doodling away. Those were just girls you were drawing. Do you understand they're going to get the authorities involved?

I had to practically spit. Even when I go home, I said, look what I have to deal with. Can't you understand my innocence? Even in my own house, can't I be good? Can't I be innocent here?

Jenko stared at me like I was threatening him with something sharp. Then he let out this horrific cry, next thing I knew he was just like my girl, his wrists were tied up with that same thin and fine wire. He was crying in the same way too, in no way you want to hear your older brother, standing there and pouting, snorting, less than

a girl, more like an animal.

I spoke to him the same way I spoke to Deborah. I said: Just hold tight. I'll go and get those scissors. The pliers. Wire cutters. I went back into the kitchen where I left them, they were gone. The girl, the scissors, nothing.

Thing to do was run back upstairs into the attic that was not really an attic and see if I couldn't find another pair. As I was digging behind this old dresser I got from my mom, it occurred to me how things and people were vanishing. Nothing like this had ever happened before. I took a moment to be quiet and listen for my heartbeat and feel if it didn't hurt. Not only didn't my heart hurt, but I couldn't feel anything at all. Yes, my body was numb. And furthermore, I could not find the scissors.

One of those moments where you are lost in thought, considering what has happened and what you're going to do next. Just because I couldn't find those scissors, all I had to do was run around the corner to Kisko's and pick up a pair. And this is what I decided I was going to

do. I had it all figured out.

There was rustling from a corner. I waited, figured I very well could have been hearing things. Then it started up again, this rustling, something was moving around in some papers, it sounded like. There had to be vermin. I understood things were urgent with my brother downstairs, tied himself up with as much sense as a girl. I had to investigate. Real quickly I kicked aside a few boxes of magazines and VHS tapes, moved this old light post, lifted a box fan. Sure enough there was a pile of shit up against the wall. Here I was cursing to myself, covering my nose.

This wasn't mouse shit, rat shit, squirrel or raccoon shit. Any vermin you can imagine, didn't belong to them. There was something much larger here. Even though that brother of mine was downstairs, all tied up, I figured he did it to himself. If he had some large animal, you know, leaving droppings -- huge dumps is what they were -- he would have investigated too. So I went kicking boxes around. Then I heard some rustling

again. And wouldn't you know it.

Wouldn't you know that some goddamned animal had made a nest way deep in the corner. The nest was made out of all these newspapers, I'll be damned if I knew where they came from. I never subscribed to newspapers, but they were all piled up. From looking at them, at the pictures of women with curly hair trying out new hairdo-forming machines, noticing the print and just the quality of the paper, yellowed like it had been there for decades and maybe lived through some rain slanting in through this turnable window. This was some nest. And the shakes were coming for me.

So I went back to that light post that was right behind me. It didn't weigh much. I lifted it up and used it to dig around in the nest. There was something in there alright. Some kind of lump. I kept digging away. I couldn't get through enough newspaper. And all the while I had to keep stopping so I could cover my nose. No, I didn't smell anything, but all the same I was affected by it. And I dug some more. I was getting so

goddamned frustrated.

I let the post just fall over, and I got down on my hands and knees and started digging those papers away with my hands. I kept on until I came to that animal. I didn't know what the hell. I didn't know what the hell I expected. What kind of gargantuan vermin could leave dumps like that. Or what was going on. What I found was this girl who was just like Deborah. Well, it very well could have been Deborah, and I'm not sure that it wasn't. But this was no ordinary child. No. And I felt that I was learning something. Every moment of my life now, since that heart attack, I was learning how every moment was new and how everything changed all by itself and sometimes for the better, other times for the worse, and even both at once.

The girl was lying on her back. She was pale. Something of an angel, really. I say that she glowed and was pale white and had that black hair, just like Deborah, just like her. But she looked so clean to me, clean and untouched. And I looked at her wrists,

because I remembered she had tied them up with that wire. And there weren't any marks, not so much as an indentation in her skin. Seeing her there, looking so clean and beautiful, something happened. It was the exact opposite of what should have. I got real nauseas, so I turned to the side and let some puke out. Then some more. I was real sick, and I wondered if it wasn't because of how much she was glowing. When I turned back to look at her, to see if I would get nauseas again, I couldn't even make Deborah out, the girl, whoever she was, buried beneath the newspapers. She was just this glowing ball of light.

Of course when I got back downstairs I didn't have any scissors, the thought completely escaped me. To tell the truth I was weak. If I tried to recall how much I'd witnessed since my heart attack, how everything was rearranged in a real subtle way, I couldn't put my finger down, yet everything was different. I laid on the couch. I must have been drunk or something, because I didn't

even think about how I had left Jenko there on the floor with his wrists tied up. Instead I let myself fall into this dark sleep.

It really was a dark sleep because I didn't have one dream. But I know that I was uneasy. You can tell some things about yourself, even when you're at that point where you're not even conscious anymore, you can tell you're not right in your head. Maybe it's because I knew I wasn't right as I was going to sleep that I figured in my sleep I couldn't have been right either, worse off most likely. Though when I came to, when I found myself on the sofa, lying in my own sweat which just positively stunk, really smelled poisonous, like I didn't know how much of The Chutney I had put into my body, I was having memories like they came from my dreams, but they weren't dreams at all. They were real.

What I was sitting there in my sweat remembering was how when my mom passed away and Jenko told me to come over to the house, he didn't tell me what he meant by "passed away" so I went on up the stairs

like I did every afternoon. And recently, since she got sick, my mother had pretty much taken to her bed. So I knocked on the door real lightly, and since she'd fallen ill I didn't wait for her to answer, so I made my way in, and there she was in her ice blue robe, and her head propped up on three pillows, I sat on the edge of the bed. I said: How are you feeling today, mother?

But here was Jenko behind me, dressed in his overalls with the hole in the knee, standing in the doorway. He says: Mom's passed away. And I said: What? And sure enough, though I couldn't see it, her insides were rotted black. Like bad fruit. And I felt all of a sudden like the air around me caved in. They say it *implodes*, and I just didn't know how to act. I didn't know if I could ever feel right again. Not that I didn't know people could just die like that. But having to see it is a whole other issue.

Now I was getting real mad, recalling this real-life dream, and getting real mad at my brother for having kept this from me. He knew she was sick. It was his fault, it was his badness that he never let me know. She

was not feeling well. Not even a day before it happened. He just let the bad news take its course. I could have punched him.

I had my fist in the air, alone I was getting all worked up and the shakes were coming over me. I very well could have punched myself in the face, I very well may have, except for this sense I got. Let's say it was a voice, and all it told me to do was go upstairs. Go on upstairs now and relax for a bit. Take a night to sleep and see how things turn out in the morning.

I was so tired, so confused. I let my fist drop, and I didn't think about the girl in the attic or that son of a bitch Jenko who had come to my house and was more likely than not still tied up on the floor. I was just like any other man, after he's pushed to his limit and passed it, when he finally is in his own house, when he knows it's there and sees all the places he has set for himself to relax, with one directive in mind he hurries off to bed.

Went up the stairs, dragging along, feeling like I was going to fall over at any moment. Before I knew it I was

there. Lost in sleep. And this sleep was just like the one I had on the sofa. The same exact thing. Where I didn't have any dreams, but still I knew my sleep wasn't right. The sleep, as a matter of fact, was the perfect sequel to the first, because when I finally woke up I saw what was a continuation of the first memory. When it was my brother and I some time shortly after the funeral, we were sitting in the kitchen, each of us having our beers. We were dressed up in suits, his was ironed and pretty fine, I had ironed mine, but not nearly as nice as his. If I remember correctly neither of us were talking. Our other brother, his name was Derek, he was never really in the picture, on account of his being so much older than the both of us. He was around the house somewhere.

Jenko said to me: It wasn't my decision, you know.

I was lost in thought. A little drunk, I was mourning. For me this meant getting lost in the big black space behind my eyes, and there's nothing else to say about it.

So I asked him: What are you referring to when you

say it's not your fault? I was angry, I'm sure he could see it, I had some idea. I wasn't beyond knowing that someone just dies. Yes, they do just die. But they don't simply die.

Keeping you in the dark, he says. Then he says it wasn't his idea. He says it was mom's idea. She wanted to protect me. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not true (I don't think it is), but it's something I couldn't accept. And even more so than that, it was his timing that was really off. Here I was, I was going through the mourning process when he breaks in to remind me that I had been kept out. That I hadn't even had the chance.

Well, it's because he disturbed me, that was the problem. And next thing I knew I had him up against the sink. The Chutney was spilled on the floor. I had his arms -- I had them wrapped behind his back. And I was hurting him pretty hard. I was going for his head and he was grinding his teeth together and making this noise like bugs were in his throat.

Have you ever had one of these memories, usually on

waking, that you go so far into it you think, I wonder if I didn't just create that? Then coming to, really being awake, you feel alive. You think, Yes, everything's changed. And then there's something that's thrown you off again. Everything moves. All by itself. There's just no stopping the changing from one minute to the next.

Even living alone, like I was doing, people come into your house. There was laughter that was coming from the attic right across the hall. I knew that it wasn't altogether unforeseen, that somehow or another I had managed to expect something like this would take place, but how? No idea.

I jumped out of my bed, but I didn't go running into the hallway. I sat with my ear pressed against the door. All was silent, except of course for the creaks and what not, you grow so used to you don't even hear until you find yourself listening. Then I heard it again. Slightly muted but loud enough to know it was nearby. And yes, I knew for sure, right across the hall in the attic. The laughter, I knew, belonged to a child, a girl. I remembered what my

problem was. That those lousy drawings, those pervert pictures, had something to do with this. And there was that damned girl, there was Deborah.

I was angry, like any father would be, woken in the middle of the night to nonsensical laughter, and I pounded on the attic door. I said: Who's in there? And I heard more giggling, but it sounded further away. At a time like this is when the worst possible can happen. Those shakes returned. Because I was so scared I said aloud: I'll go and get this checked out tomorrow. Just let things be alright today.

I was praying, I suppose, letting God know that if I went and got my heartbeat checked out tomorrow then there was no need to give me the heart attack right now. But those shakes were getting to be pretty loud. And Deborah's little giggles, they were pretty damned clear to me. I thought I would just lie down for a spell, on the other side of the attic door, in the hallway.

Time passed. There was some more of this glow, which was an effect from inside my head. The attic door

opened and there stood my girl. There was Deborah. I said to her: What is it you're doing in that attic?

She said nothing and looked like she was sad. Like she had no idea what I was talking about. But your own child has an effect on you. Sometimes. You see her in all of her loneliness there and you see yourself in her place. So I propped myself up on my arms, and I said: Come here, Deborah. That's it. Come over here.

She acted like she was real bashful, as kids often do when they're sad, then she ran over to me. She got onto her knees. And I said: Do you know what time it is? Why are you here in the attic laughing. Don't you know your father needs to sleep at night? That he works in the morning?

She knew, she knew. She said as much. But then she told me she was feeling a little bit disturbed. And I asked her what about. Because I didn't want my girl to be bothered by something that I could explain. That she would just go on worrying, keeping me up all night. I begged her to tell me.

I heard some bad things. That's exactly what she

said. Daddy, the kids at school have been saying bad things about you. And uncle came over --

Here I stopped her. Maybe I was a little too forceful. It's easy to do when you get all worked up around your kids. I grabbed her jaw like she were just a skull alone and I held her face there. I held her real tight. I said: What do you mean your uncle?

But that's right, I said. That's right. There's Jenko. He's here now, I said. Is that right? Is he here now?

Oh yes, said Deborah. He's here now. In the attic. And she pointed. Yes, I figured, that would be a place for him to be. I said to her, to my girl, I said: And what kind of stuff has he been telling you?

Oh, she said. You know. That you draw all of the pictures of your mommy because it was you who killed her and you can't get it out of your mind.

I swear. To hear a thing like this come out of your own daughter's mouth. I was furious. I'm saying that I got right off the floor like that heart attack never happened, and I said to the girl, I said: Where is he?

Jenko. Is he in the attic here?

And she just nodded yes. Very upset, I'm sure, to see me so angry. To really have just lost my composure. But the thing about children, even when they're unsettled they can sense that the best is being done for them. And her face was all pale and beautiful and those tears went flowering down her face, but underneath it all she was smiling. My little girl understood I was looking out for her. And as I went into that room, I'll tell you, behind me, and I don't know how right it made me feel, but there she was giggling. And I caught myself wondering: Exactly who in the hell is she? Because when I thought about it, no, I had no little girl, I never had a daughter. I had no brother, no mom, it's always been just me. Going back into the attic, not really an attic, the worst thought possible occurred to me, which was that I had never gotten up off the kitchen floor. Some people aren't allowed more than one heart attack. Sometimes there's just the one, then the angels come down, they wrap you up in newspaper, the sky opens up and they take you on your way.