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Van Haecke

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## Pancakes

By Elaine Kelly

Walking and smoking and thinking usually did it for me, but not today. No, not tonight.

*I've always hated cigarettes.*

The air was starting to get colder and the grass was just beginning to expire – changing from that rich green to the faint, dying brown. The days line themselves up like little soldiers, marching on and on and on and never stopping to rest. I pulled my coat closer to my chest, hunching my shoulders into a deeper arch as I walked along the sidewalk. I counted the breaks in the cement for a while; my shoes were clopping along clumsily.

*Stupid.*

I dropped my cigarette and paused, looking up at the gray and white sky just as the sidewalk was ending. There were a few old cars parked along the last of the

asphalt, just beyond them a winding dirt road. There were fields, some hills, a short row of mailboxes. It was starting to get dark but a faint glow, curious, was visible a half mile or so past the mailboxes. I kept walking. strange

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This particular morning was different. There was a rustling downstairs that sounded like a dog or an oversized mouse; only problem was they had neither of these. The two looked across the bed at each other, curious. The mother of the household looked over at her husband and sat up, blindly searching for her slippers before she slid them on and walked out of the bedroom. Her husband mumbled something, opening his eyes and sitting up as well. He picked up the alarm clock sitting beside the bed – the hazy glow of the red numbers cast a shadow across his face for a moment. He lazily ran his thumb and finger along his facial hair. The moustache descended just past his upper lip; long enough he had to spit it out of his mouth every so often.

“4:47,” he said, answering his wife’s question.

“Hum,” she said, puzzled. She shuffled across the tile and towards the table in the dining room, yawning, her slippers delicately brushing the floor with every step. She stopped for a moment, straining to decide if she was just hearing things. But no, no, this time she was certain. There really was something downstairs. It couldn’t be the heater or a pet. Their dog was sleeping. *I’m sure it’s nothing*, she thought, shaking her head softly and yawning again.

The stairs creaked their familiar rhythmic pattern as she stepped down them. She reached the bottom, opened the door and turned on the light, pushing her bed head bangs away from her eye with her right hand, still holding the light switch with her left. She wasn't nearly as shocked as she should have been to find a man standing in the middle of the room. All but her eyelids froze, both opening and shutting stupidly as she stood there in a strange state of confusion.

"Darling, Darli- ...come down here..."

She heard her husband's feet thumping quickly towards her, through the kitchen and down the staircase. He made it down the stairs surprisingly quickly, looking up at the man, as he stepped in front of his wife, stretching out his arm in front of her. The husband stood up straight, slowly pressing his chest out far and hardening his eyebrows. He glared at the man without saying a word, standing there like a calm and collected marble pillar. The shadowy figure was frozen, paralyzed for some pathetic, foreign reason. The husband didn't say anything to the man, too stunned to conjure up any words. He was even a bit humored, without the faintest idea of what someone says to a man just standing there sounding like a quiet scavenging animal in the middle of a basement. The three just looked at each other, puzzled, until the man grabbed his bag on the floor, turned around and ran straight between them. He scuttled up the stairs, through their kitchen and out their front door.

She didn't think to call 911, neither did her husband suggest it. The mysterious visitor was clean and handsome with straight teeth and a colorful complexion. His jeans sat right under his waist and just barely hit the floor. His

shoes were tidy. He was wearing a dark top, a hooded coat or sweater of some sort, but – no, other than that there was nothing all that ragged about him. The event wasn't an emergency necessarily, just an oddity. Something rather out of the normal, a bit of excitement for a Saturday morning.

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The couple went through the autumn Saturday as if nothing had happened. They ate breakfast and shuttled their children to the oldest one's soccer tournament. Then they ate dinner and watched some television together and eventually, each of them had wandered to their rooms to sleep for the night, all right around the same time. All was well and ordinary until very early the next morning.

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The darkness of the night was just beginning to fade as the sun crept through the tall pine trees and into the house. It was still far too early for anyone to be up and about, the dog was still sleeping and the birds were quiet. The husband was settled deep into his pillow before he turned himself over, the bed squeaking as he let out a deep breath and rolled to face the other direction. He turned over and yawned, opening and closing his eyes drowsily before noticing the surreptitious figure. The husband opened his eyes wide, closing them and then opening them again wide in a moment of surprise. There stood the solemn character, right there in

the middle of the couple's bedroom. He was breathing harder than any regular, sane person should breath, there was an obvious anxiety teeming through his veins, haunting his every breath. The figure's eyes were wide as he crept closer and closer to the side of the bed, the room was silent other than the shuffle of his feet as he slowly, carefully made his way out of the corner of the room and into the light by the bed.

"You?" The husband whispered. It came out a soft, but startled groan. His voice was still heavy with sleep. He grabbed his wife's shoulder and shook her gently, still holding eye contact with the figure.

"Sir... Sir, can I help you? What do you – do you need something?"

By this time his wife had woken up, her eyes were wide and alert. Her brain was turning, each piece pondering and problem solving at a thousand miles an hour. The mysterious visitor was still silent and unresponsive.

"The man from last night," the wife said.

Her voice was airy and barely audible. The man's wary eyes darted towards the floor. He pulled uneasily at his familiar hood and without looking up, kicked the bed with a hard thump – surprising himself at his nonsensical gesture. The husband sat up slowly, befuddled, his right hand grabbing the corner of the quilt to pull it off of his body.

"Ah, sir... sir," her husband was stammering, yet still calm. The sleep was gone from his voice and the words came out clear and sure, "Put that gun down and tell me what you want."

The gun started to tremble; you could see the light glistening off of it as the man struggled to stabilize it with his shaky hand. He managed to point out the door and down the staircase. The kids were all still sleeping.

“Get up... get up.” He said again. They both put their hands up, slowly, and walked out of their door, into the kitchen towards the table. The stranger’s young hands were white and cold, but the rest of him was strangely presentable. He was clean and handsome with straight teeth and a clear, clean complexion. His jeans sat right under his waist and just barely hit the floor. The dark, hooded coat was the only item that made him ominous. His shoes were tidy and he seemed fit and healthy. No, there was nothing ragged about him. But yes, this was the same man.

“Downstairs,” the boy whispered, more harshly now. He followed them out the door and through the dimly lit kitchen. They made it down the stairs, reaching the basement before the husband turned towards the man and spoke again, “You’re a burglar? Here to steal my things? Is it the guns?” he said, pointing to his collection – they were lined up and polished in perfect formation. The basement was a large open room, fairly disconnected from the rest of the house. The only exit was back up the stairs. There was a TV in the corner and an old pool table pushed up against the back wall. Just behind the pool table was an empty doorframe that led to an office, the husband’s office. The figure didn’t respond. He was shaking violently, hardly able to hold the gun in his hands any longer.

“Is it the art? My wife? My kids?”

Silence.

“Tell me what you want, boy. We can work something out.”

“Yes. Yes definitely. We can work something out,” his wife echoed him quietly, looking back and forth impatiently between her husband and their visitor, “We can work something out.”

“Tie up... tie up your wife,” the man said, beads of sweat rolling off of his eyelashes, he was still trembling. “And be quiet, p-please be quiet. Don’t wake anyone else up.”

His wife was alarmed, but didn’t scream or panic. The man raised the gun, still holding it nervously with both hands, and pointed it at the husband’s forehead.

“Tie up your wife,” he whispered again, more forcefully this time.

“Alright, alright,” her husband said, still calm, “I’ll tie her up but you’ve got to explain...”

“Tie up your wife!” he yelled this time. He was starting to sound like a child. An angry, frustrated child that didn’t know what he wanted. He started to rock back and forth, he scrunched his nose and shook his head and looked like he might even start crying.

“I’m robbing your house!” he said, mustering up the strength to speak. He pointed at the safe just inside the back room.

The command sounded so pathetic, his naive voice shook still harder, and his feet were restless as he paced one step forward, one back. The last bit of color in his cheeks faded as he stopped rocking and took two big steps towards the husband. He touched the tip of the gun to the husband’s forehead, the metal meeting his skin directly between his wide eyes. The burglar pulled a roll of duct tape out of his coat and shoved it into the husband’s stomach.

"I'm not going to tie up my wife."

"I have a gun! Tie up your wi- ..."

"I'm not going to tie..."

The stranger's muscles tightened, every vein swollen and pulsing with frustration. He clenched his teeth and groaned, crumpling to one knee and then another before dropping his chin to his chest and setting the gun on the table in defeat.

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There was something about that kitchen that could make anyone forget the rest of the world. There was a patch of sun displayed on the wall, split by the shadows of the window frame and just glowing there on the surface. The weather was cold; a few small drops of moisture had frozen on the bottom of the pane and were glistening as the late morning light caught them. I looked around suspiciously but sat down at the counter anyways, getting lost in the production of it all. There was a warm and comfortable, old fashioned essence to the atmosphere. The cream colored phone with the cord and the vintage mustard yellow fridge fit in just fine, ringing and clicking, opening and closing to the rhythm of her busy hands and feet as she conducted the whole masterpiece, every moment, with grace and sophistication. She was a dance in herself; a hardworking and diligent chef-d'oeuvre that moved like every minute mattered for some beautifully foreign reason.

Family members were sauntering up the stairs towards the table. I can't believe none of them had woken up. She was flipping pancakes with her right hand; her left held the small of her back as she waited for each flapjack to cook full

through. I sat there at the end of the counter nervously, a chorus of good mornings echoed through the big kitchen. The smell of pancakes and bacon and eggs seeped its way into sweaters and drapes and freshly combed hair. The patter of the coffee maker was background music for small bits of lulling, sleepy conversation as each family member drifted to the kitchen table – some staring at me curiously, some not really noticing my unannounced visit.

“How’d you sleep?”

“Is the dishwasher clean?”

“Bacon. Praise God for bacon.”

The whole thing was mysterious to me - their interactions, their gestures.

“I always insist on breakfast as a family, especially on Sunday.”

She stirred some more flour into the batter, glancing at me to explain.

“You see Sunday is the Sabbath, it’s sacred. We go to church on Sundays.”

I nodded and took a sip of coffee, setting it down quickly as I rubbed my aching head.

“It doesn’t matter if we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” she continued, “Sunday was the Lord’s Day when I was born, and it’s going to stay that way until I die.”

“Damn right it is, darling. Damn right.” Her husband walked into the kitchen, chuckling as he waltzed past. He kissed her good and hard right between her disapproving eyes, watching me carefully, observing my every movement.

Her husband was a tall, handsome man, but I was still kind of afraid of him. And she, she was actually quite lovely, beautiful even. I hadn’t noticed last night, or early this morning, really. Her hair was freshly fixed and her brightly rouged cheeks

shown with a deep, contended pink. She smelled like a good, caring mom should smell. I wished for a moment that she might replace my own mother.

“And we don’t swear on Sundays either, dear,” she said.

“Good morning, sir.” He said, ignoring his wife’s discipline, looking straight at me. His eyes were hard and vigilant despite his boisterous gestures and lighthearted chatter. It was subtle, but he was obviously concerned, just the slightest, by my presence in his kitchen. He had to be.

“Morning,” I said – my voice cracked, still raspy with fatigue. I hadn’t slept in a long time. I swirled the coffee around in my mug – staring at it as it ran down the ceramic walls. I was too wary to hold eye contact – I couldn’t get past the whole situation. Her husband looked like the kind of man who only trimmed his beard for marriages and funerals. He knew how to clean up though; his shiny black shoes and button up shirt accentuated his dark rosy cheeks this morning – barely visible under the blanket of beard hiding most of his face.

The bacon was still steaming on the plain white platter as she waltzed over to the table. She prepared and served it all with impeccable accuracy, the whole procedure a fine tuned chemistry experiment that came together just in time. Somehow she’d managed to keep everything hot and delicious until everyone was up and sitting around the table, there were five of them sitting there staring at me, *five* children. Six if you include the dog – also staring at me. The youngest one’s eyebrows buried themselves deeper into her scowl as he introduced me.

“We had a visitor last night,” he started, “This is Clay. He’ll be eating breakfast with us this morning.”

Their mom pinched the youngest one's lower back, reminding her to sit up straighter I guess. I sat up a little taller myself and lifted my hand, waving a little wave.

"Hey there... morning," I said, clearing my throat a little bit.

They just bowed their heads and waited for the prayer to be said. Her husband said the prayer with his head half bowed, eyes not quite all the way closed. He was quickly scanning the long table for each of his children's faces. He finished with a deep chuckle, a rumbling joy that didn't make any sense. No, none of it made any sense.

One of the girls twirled her hair and nibbled on a pancake, staring down at the syrup as it pooled around the edges of her plate. The youngest one never stopped chewing, taking bite after bite of pancake and bacon – washing it down every now and then with a swig of milk. One of the middle children started to pour herself another glass of milk, but nearly lost control of the jug, sending a waterfall of milk plummeting into the cup at such a great force that it splattered across the table, spraying even the front of my shirt before I had time to jump out of the way. Her dad had gotten up, his chair screeching as it slid along the tile. He walked slowly towards the sink and grabbed a dishcloth to wring it out, looking at me as he did it. He walked back to the table, hesitating for a moment before wiping up the mess.

"You know this is how the famous artist, Jackson Pollock made his artwork," he said, putting a hand on the table and then pausing to look down at the milk covered tile, "he just splattered paint and called it art."

I nodded my head and picked up my spoon.

“That’s what this is,” he decided softly, shaking his head at the splattered milk, “ This is art. Wouldn’t you say, Clay?”

He winked at me, smiling, and wiped up the mess.

“He probably didn’t even know what he was doing first time he tried.”

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I finished chewing and set down my fork, staring at it for a minute before picking it back up to scrape the trace of maple syrup into a little pool. I licked the fork and took a final swig of coffee before I put my hands into my small coat pockets and stood up, fingering the lonely cigarette box and lighter.

“Thanks,” I said, looking at the kind wife. I handed her my empty plate and turned, following her husband to the front door.

“So we’ll see you here next Sunday?” He said.

He opened the door, squinting at the clouded sky and then looking out at the street before stretching his hand out towards me. He turned his head and rocked back on his heels before looking down at his floating right hand, it was dangling their awkwardly, waiting for me to shake it.

“I – I don’t know if I’ll be in town, but...”

I shook his hand and smiled just a little bit, barely nodding my head.

His wife was standing behind him, drying a bowl with a red and white-checked hand towel. She whispered something to her daughter before waving at me and walking out of the hallway, back into the kitchen.

“We’ll see you here next Sunday, boy. Thanks for joining us this morning.”

The husband smiled and looked down at his shoes, putting his hands in his big pockets before he waved and shut the door behind me. I stared at that door for a few seconds before turning towards the street and walking down the frosted cement steps. My coat didn't feel quite so heavy without the gun and the duct tape.