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BURIED ALIVE

I RING THE BELL and Travis opens the door before the chimes have finished.

“Hey Jeremy,” he says. “I’m glad you made it.”

“Well,” I say. “You asked me. So I made it.”

Me and Travis have never hung out before. He’s eighteen, two years older than me, and works at the 24-hour liquor store. Until now, our only conversations have been when I’ve asked him to buy me booze. He does it for most kids. He knows the brands and sizes that everyone wants and he never gets our orders mixed up. He’s good about money too, doesn’t take more than he should, always gives you your change, and sometimes even lets you buy on credit.

He lives with his two older brothers, Micah and Alex. Micah is the oldest and is the afternoon manager at the bank. Alex is about seven years younger and works as the town’s only physiotherapist. I had met Travis’s parents a couple times before they left, at garage sales and the Legion’s bimonthly meat draw. They were far older than any other parents in town, having waited well into their thirties before having Micah. Danny Turnbolt’s grandfather—the one who is raising him—looks younger than Travis’s parents. Theirs is the only family with large gaps between each of the kids, cautiously planned, like how I imagine an architect designs a prison.

Last year, Travis’s parents decided to go on a tour around the world. They wanted to live on every continent for at least three months. Before they skipped town, they organized a backyard bingo night where half the pot went towards their tickets. Both of them had been project managers for oil companies for twenty-five years, but they still wanted half. Travis’s mother won, so they wound up keeping everything. At the end of the night, while Travis’s mother was holding her winnings and thanking everyone for coming, she mentioned that they had invited their kids to come, but all three chose to stay home.

As Travis welcomes me inside, I see that their house is clean and soft, the white couch in the living room covered in plush pink pillows. There are pictures lining the hallway in parallel rows, each the same distance apart from the next. The carpet has lines left by the vacuum cleaner.

Micah comes from around the corner. “Jeremy,” he says, shaking my hand. “Thank you so much for coming.” I’m about to thank him for having me, but he’s turned to holler over his shoulder. “Alex! He’s here.”

Alex comes out from the kitchen wearing oven mitts and an apron. I only know Micah because everyone knows everyone here (and everything about them), but we’ve never been introduced. But Alex—Alex and I have met. “Hey buddy,” he says to me. “You eat meat, right?” I say I do and he gives me a thumbs-up with his oven mitt.

Travis takes my coat and I follow the three brothers into the kitchen.

“Some chinook we’re having,” Travis says, and I nod. Two days ago it was minus twenty-three. Today’s high was plus nine. It’s supposed to rain tonight, which will be the first December that’s happened since I’ve been alive.

The kitchen has granite counter tops and a long wooden table that ten people could sit around. Alex has gravy bubbling on the stove and a tray of vegetables cooling on the counter, but other than that, everything is stowed against the walls or in the cupboards.

I tell them they have a nice house, but nobody seems to hear.

Micah turns to Travis. “Have you shown him yet?”

Travis looks at me and smiles. “Not yet.”

Alex turns off the stove and shakes his mitts onto the counter. “I want to be there for this,” he says.

Travis leads me to the living-room windows, the ones that slide open onto the back deck and lawn. They are covered in heavy red curtains. Micah pulls on a cord and the curtains open.

At first I think it’s odd that they’ve chained a cat to the patio. But then I realize that it isn’t a cat at all, since it is about twice the size it should be, more the size of a dog. But it isn’t a dog either. “Oh my god,” I say, mesmerized, as the animal locks eyes with me and begins to thrash and struggle against the chain, pulling the metal taut against the wooden railing. It hisses, and its teeth are like a snake’s, long and delicate, and just by looking you can feel them slip into you. “Is that ... is that—” but the name escapes me as I watch the animal snarl and writhe.

“Yeah,” says Travis. “A lynx.”

Alex says he was glad he got to see my reaction, but I’m still staring at the lynx, now pacing back and forth, as far as the chain allows, in one tight loop of infinity.

“Where did you get it?” I ask.

Travis says that when Micah went out for his jog last night he saw it behind the Golden Rooster.

“And when it slipped into the dumpster,” Micah continues, “I slammed the lid shut.”

“He came and got me,” Alex adds, “and we both went back and caught it.”

“I wasn’t home,” Travis says. “I was working.”

Micah and Alex go back and forth, telling the story of how they captured the lynx. It was a complex system of bait, a stepladder and a fishing net. “Once Alex got it in the net,” Micah says, “I wrapped the chain around its neck.” He rolls up his sleeves to show me his arms, which are covered in ribbons of claw marks. “And it was not a fan of that, let me tell you.”

“But then,” Alex says, “once the chain was around its neck, we realized that we had no way of tying it on.”

“So I had the idea,” Micah says, “of using an old combination lock I had from when I used to swim at the rec centre.”

Alex says, “But we realized that—”

And Micah says, “Once we’d locked it on—”

And then the two of them say, “We’d forgotten the combination,” both falling into laughter.

The whole time they were speaking, I’m watching the lynx. Its paws are as wide and flat as handcuffs. Two long picks of hair stand on top of its ears. When it walks, it moves from the shoulder blades, an effortless slink. Once it tires of pacing, the lynx curls into itself again.

“Where’d you get the chain?” I ask. Alex and Micah look at each other. Alex says it was beside the fishing net in the crawl space, but Micah says he thought they found it in the dumpster.

I want to know what they’re going to do with it.

Travis shrugs. “What we are doing.”

Behind their yard is the Slavic cemetery. In the fog, the tombstones look like an audience of thousands, standing still and holding their breath.

At the table, Alex serves us and I wait for Travis to start. The blood and grease pools on my plate. Between forkfuls, Alex begins telling us about his day at the clinic.

“And so I asked this woman,” he says, “the one with the bad shoulders—Micah, you remember me saying? So I asked her why she has this damage and you know what she said? She said she used to sleep in a straight-jacket—like what a crazy person wears—because when she was asleep, she’d try and strangle her husband. With her hands.”

“No way,” Micah says.

Travis defends the story, his mouth full. “It could be, Micah. Could be.”

“So the jacket worked for a while,” Alex says, taking a sip of water. “But eventually—and I’m telling the truth, this is what she said—she was able to wiggle out of it in her sleep and go back to strangling her husband. That’s how she injured herself. She wrecked her shoulders while she was trying to free herself.”

Travis claps and laughs. Micah says he’s glad he works at a bank.

“Who is she?” I ask, and the question dunks the table into silence.

“He can’t say,” Travis tells me.

“Sorry,” Alex says. “Patient confidentiality.”

“It’s Janine Trest, isn’t it?” I say, and Alex’s reaction confirms it. “She’s been walking around with her arms in slings. And have you met her husband? It isn’t rocket science.”

Alex looks down at his plate and pushes around the vegetables.

“Did you have to go to school for that?” I ask.

“For what,” he says.

“For being a physiotherapist?”

“Yeah,” says Alex, pointing his knife at his older brother. “Both Micah and I went to the University of Toronto. Six years apart. It was fun.”

“What did you think of Toronto?”

“Oh, it was great,” Alex says, and Micah nods. “Really great city.”

“Then why would you ever move back here?” The question is sharper than I mean it to be.

Alex smiles politely and we all go back to cutting our meat. A sudden scrape of metal makes me think I hear the lynx and its chain, but it’s just Travis’s knife against the plate.

I clear my throat and ask where their parents are now.

“India,” Micah says, but Alex thinks it’s Kenya.

“When did they leave Hungary?” Travis asks, and Micah says they haven’t been in Europe since January.

I want to ask if they wished they had gone with their parents. But my father once told me if you’re afraid of the answer, don’t ask the question. The conversation limps along for the rest of meal, stumbling between the weather, the tenderness of the meat, and the annual rodeo on the rez. The tap drips like Chinese water torture.

I’m thankful when our plates are finished. But then, as Micah clears the table, Travis asks me, casually, as if it’s just occurring to him, “What do you know about Houdini?”

“The magician?”

Travis shakes his head, not like I’m wrong, but like he’s disappointed. “Magicians do tricks, Jeremy. Houdini was an escape artist.”

I nod. “What did he escape from?”

“Everything,” Travis says. “You name it and he left it. Once he was even chained up and buried alive.”

“He has a great quote,” Alex says, “that the only thing he can’t escape is himself.”

“But he did a lot more than that,” Travis continues. “A lot of people think that he wasn’t normal, that he lived on a different wavelength.”

“Like a ghost?”

“No, not a ghost,” Travis says, “but like a ...”

“Spiritualist,” Micah finishes, returning to the table.

“Tonight is the 140th anniversary of his birth,” Travis says, and then leans in, lowering his voice. “And we were wondering, Jeremy, if you would have a séance with us.”

The question hits me like a punch I didn’t expect. I stare at Travis’s eyes. One of them is lazy, but you’d never be able to tell because of how tightly both are now locked onto mine. “Isn’t that talking with the dead?” I ask.

“With the spirits of the dead,” Micah corrects, and I don’t understand the difference. I notice that both Micah and Alex have quietly moved their chairs in towards me and what used to be a large table now seems too small. I search their expressions, hoping that they will break and give themselves away. “Is this why I’m here?” I ask, and when nobody answers it is answer enough. “Why not just do it by yourselves?”

“Well,” Travis says, looking at his brothers. “We’ve done this a couple times, usually on Halloween, but nothing ever seems to happen.”

“And then last week,” Alex says, “a client of mine was telling me about a séance she once held for her son. And the medium said it always works better with an even number. Something about balance.”

I know he’s talking about Lucile Munro. Her fourteen-year-old fell through the ice last winter, seat-belted to his snowmobile.

“Yes,” I say. “But why me?”

“I thought you were open-minded,” says Alex.

There’s a place a half-hour drive outside the city, a rest stop on the secondary. On Sunday nights it’s a place for boys to go. To be yourself. Six months ago, the first and only time I went, I saw Alex. And the worst part was that, when it was done, without any hint of shame, he offered me a ride back. I didn’t say anything, just started the three-and-a-half-hour walk home.

I’m about to tell Alex that that I am not open-minded, that my thoughts are the opposite of free, but Travis starts talking. “Sometimes,” he says, “I hear him, Jeremy.” He places his hand on mine. “I hear him. In the liquor store late at night or early in the morning, when nobody’s there. Ever so slightly, there’s the sound of keys, jingling. Hundred of them, but barely audible. And it comes from, it’s kind of tough to explain, but from below. And wherever I search, it follows beneath me.”

“So what do you do?” I ask.

“I lock the doors,” Travis says, “because I don’t want anyone to come in and scare him. I try not to make a sound, but as soon as the lock clicks, he’s gone.”

Micah instructs us to put our keys on the table. I dig mine from my pocket and toss them on the pile. Alex turns off the lights and I expect him to light a candle or something, but he keeps the room dark. There’s only the moon’s thin light creeping in through the window.

Micah tells us to close our eyes and place our hands flat on the table. I squint to see Travis’s hands at my right and Alex’s at my left, his pinky touching mine.

“Hello,” Micah says, his voice heavy and hollow. “You know to whom we speak. I command you, come towards us. You cannot flee. You will not escape.”

There is a long beat of silence.

And then a sharp and painful wail, somebody crying with hunger. My head snaps up and Micah's staring at me. "It's just the lynx," he says and closes his eyes.

And then all is quiet.

We sit at the table for half an hour. Houdini never shows. You can't blame him—I don't want to be here either. At the door, Travis apologizes for wasting my time. "I really thought he'd be here," he says. After I've put on my boots and zip my coat, I ask if I can see the lynx. "Sure," he says, gesturing me to the back patio. "Don't worry about your boots." We walk past Micah and Alex cleaning up in the kitchen, towards the patio window. Travis draws back the curtains and turns on the porch light.

The lynx is curled in a tight ball, about the size of a backpack. "It must be sleeping," Travis says. He goes to the fridge and comes back dangling a strip of bacon. "Here," he says. "I'm sure it needs to be fed anyways."

I take the bacon and slide open the patio door, but the lynx doesn't react. Rain has started to drizzle. I take a couple steps towards it and make a kissing sound. When it still doesn't do anything, I realize what has happened. I toss the bacon, but it hits the side of the animal's face and slides to the ground. I walk over and learn what I already know.

I tell Travis that the lynx is dead. It's not injured or anything. Wasn't tangled up in the chain, didn't try to gnaw its way free. Just dead.

"No matter," Travis says. "We're all going that way, I suppose."

I ask what they're going to do with the body and Travis just shrugs and nods towards the cemetery. "Bury it with the Slavs."

I pick it up. It's as light as snow, its body buried so deep into its fur as if it's not even there. Travis asks if I want to keep it and I say I do. He unwinds the chain from the patio and drapes it around my shoulders. The cold metal bites against my neck. "Can't you unlock it?" I ask. Travis shakes his head. "Not unless you can guess the combination."

Travis walks me to the gate and thanks me for coming. "Maybe," he says, "Houdini'll come for his hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary." I nod, but by that time we'll be almost thirty, Micah will be close to forty, and I doubt any of us will still care.

I don't want anyone to see me with the lynx, so I walk through the graveyard. The rain quickens. I had thought that my arms would get tired carrying the body, but after ten minutes the chain is far heavier.

I weave between the tombstones and the graves surround me on all sides, standing guard over their narrow cells of mud and roots. Rows of houses circle the cemetery, streets that I will have to walk through. And for the first time in my life, this town feels big. So big that it could swallow me whole without even knowing. I think about this and it feels like I am being hit in the stomach. And the rain begins to fall like applause, like a standing ovation.