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TRAPPED

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His fingers shook as he pressed the lid of his shaving box closed like a coffin. With eyes shut, he saw only darkness and wondered if it might be his last shave. His heart fluttered in an irregular rhythm. He strained in the steamy air to fill his lungs, unsure if it was the steam or his aging bronchi, or perhaps his heart. George Wilson opened his eyes and sighed and studied his wrinkles in the mirror, pressing his fingers into the sagging skin that now covered who he once was. He only recognized his eyes. Everything else was wrong. With a cloth he wiped the remaining shaving cream from the sides of his face and felt younger as his breathing returned to normal.

He slipped on his wristwatch and walked into the closet and shut the door. It was a large closet that housed evidence of success like a museum of the American dream. A life of business travel, golf, and nights at fancy dinners was on display on the left side, a life of once-worn gowns, beach vacations, and women's shoes in rows like library books on the right side. Standing naked, with skinny legs and a gut like a giant flea, he avoided looking into his wife's three-angled full-length mirror and turned to a bag of golf clubs in the corner instead. He was unable to let them go. They were the last youthful thing about him. They sat there like ancient relics, waiting to be discovered again. They seemed as hopeful about the possibility as he did, but hope quickly sank as he caught the image of his naked body in the mirror from the corner of his eye.

His wife, Margaret, yelled from the next room. "George, I'm heading into town. Be back in an hour," she said.

He twisted a medicine bottle and threw two pills down his throat.

A hat on a shelf caught his eye. He had only worn it once during a fishing trip over twenty years ago. He set it on his head like a crown, then mimicked casting a line and reeling in the big one. He sauntered up to one of his wife's gowns and put his arms around it and danced slowly while humming something that sounded like their favorite song, but he couldn't remember the melody for sure.

The overhead light popped and the closet went dark. George fell to his knees and crawled to the door. He pulled at the doorknob, but the door would not open. His panic-shrunken lungs could not catch a breath. The room quickly became hotter and the air became still and thick. He pulled at the door and tried to yell out, but pain struck through

his chest. He collapsed to the floor, gasping. A sliver of light from the door offered no hope.

George awoke, but he could not tell if his eyes were open or closed. Maybe I'm dead, he thought. No big deal. I've been dead before. He pressed his wristwatch and it glowed. More than an hour had passed.

Thirty seconds later he heard his wife come into the kitchen. He pounded on the door. She stomped in heels towards the closet and opened the door. There was George laying on the floor, naked, wearing only a hat and a wristwatch.

"George?" She dropped to the floor and held him.

"I'm okay."

"What are you doing on the floor naked?"

"It is a long story."

"Lucky for you the Lewis's can't make it to dinner, so we have plenty of time."

"What happened?"

"Jordan threw his back out again. Sue said he is walking around bent over like he lost his marbles."

"What a way to celebrate winning the 2020 Des Moines Restaurateur of The Year Award, hunched over. The poor old fool. I'm just glad to hear he is looking more ridiculous than me."

"Stop it. Get dressed, George," she said as she stood.

"Wait. Don't go. I have something to tell you."

"George, are you okay?" She knelt beside him.

"Yes. I just... I just, I need to tell you something."

"What is it, George? This better not be some kind of kinky business."

He began gasping for air. She held him to calm him.

"It's okay, dear," she continued, "You can tell me."

Out of breath, he struggled to speak.

"When I was a kid, I had an uncle... an uncle who owned a funeral home."

"Yes. Your uncle Marvin."

"That's right. Uncle Marvin. He eventually became his last customer."

"What about it?"

"I never told you how I became..."

"Became what?"

"You know."

"George don't you try to tell me at nearly eighty years old that you are coming out of the closet."

"No. No. Of course not, Margaret. I would never tell you such a thing, especially when in a closet. Especially naked in a closet."

His breath returned and a grin matched the color returning to his face.

"Well, I see your sense of humor is still working."

"But seriously," he said, "I wanted to tell you how I became... what's the word?"

"Claustrophobic?"

"Yes. That's the word. Claustrophobic."

"I have avoided saying that word all these years," she said, "All those times you panicked and couldn't breathe and swore you were dying. Sometimes I thought you were just crazy."

"I'm sorry," he said. He squeezed her hand.

"Remember when we went on that cruise and you insisted on sleeping in the dining hall because the cabin was too small? It was incredibly embarrassing."

"Yes, and you slept there with me."

"I have to admit it was fun, and I hate seeing you have those attacks. I intentionally never uttered the word *claustrophobia* for fear of it getting worse. I never knew there was a cause."

"There was indeed a cause. When I was young, just a boy, I went to the Funeral Parlor, Resting Days Funeral Services, where they display all the caskets. Uncle Marvin gave me a part time job during the summer preparing caskets for sale."

"You never told me that. I always thought your first job was at the Mark Cinema."

"Well, yes, that was my first real job a few years later, but I needed money to buy a box car derby racing kit and Uncle Marvin offered me work polishing caskets. I was obsessed with hot rods at the time. He had a beautiful 1950 Mercury Model M74 Eight Sedan, navy blue with chrome everything. He called it 'The Casket', and it looked like the tomb of a Pharaoh with wheels, white walled tires that looked like the clouds of heaven when they spun down Main Street. When I was little my hands weren't strong enough to open the door from the inside, and he would pretend he forgot me and would walk away leaving me trapped in the car."

"That is how you became claustrophobic?"

"Well, no, but it sure didn't help. He always came right back and let me out and laughed. All my life, to this day today, I have had trouble with not being able to open doors that closed. My grip becomes weak. I can't breathe. Dizziness. Vertigo."

“Sounds like he was a cool uncle.”

“He was the coolest. He had been in the war. Intelligence. An interrogator when they captured German soldiers. He spoke German. Somehow he got into the funeral home business. Used to tell all his customers that their dearly departed loved one was on his paper route when he was a teenager. My father told me he never had a paper route. He was a businessman like that, though. He wasn’t a generous man, but he bought me the shaving kit that I still have today. My father thought I was too young, but Uncle Marvin promised to teach me to shave at the end of the summer, before school started.”

“So how did you become claustrophobic?”

“That summer, it was 1949 I think. No, it had to be ’50 because Uncle Marvin had just bought that Mercury. I showed up to work and went into the back showroom to polish the caskets. One casket stood out to my ten-year-old imagination. It was the most expensive one. It had a robust frame like a classic, and chrome trim like Uncle Marvin’s new Mercury.”

He began to hyperventilate and closed his eyes and held on to his wife’s arm.

“Just breathe, George. You are getting yourself too worked up.”

He took several deep breaths before he continued.

“I decided to hop up into the casket. It was comfortable. I even crossed my arms and stuck my tongue out like I was dead.”

“Oh, George.”

“Margaret, have I given you a good life?”

“Oh, of course, George. We have a wonderful life. What is this all about?”

"I'm feeling so old. Tired."

"We are old, George. You are frightening me with this kind of talk."

"Claustrophobia," George said academically, "What a horrible word. It has crippled me my whole life."

"What happened?"

"Margaret, the worst thing ever happened. When I was laying there in that coffin, pretending to be dead, the lid fell closed on me. It was the darkest dark I ever experienced. I screamed and pressed against the lid, but it wouldn't open. I pressed harder and harder. I pushed and pushed and screamed until I was exhausted."

"You poor thing."

"As I laid there in the dark, too tired to fight, waiting for someone to come free me, I imagined my whole life ahead of me. I imagined everything. My career, this house, you, our children and grandchildren. I imagined you exactly, your face, the way you walk, the sound of your voice, before we ever even met. I imagined my entire life ahead of me exactly as it has turned out... with you. I laid there in that dark coffin and imagined all of it. Every moment. Every memory. I fell in love with you before I knew your name."

Her shoulders sank and her face glowed.

"George that is the most romantic thing you have ever said to me."

"I just need to know that the life I imagined was good enough."

"Yes, it has been, and it is. I love you."

A brand new 1950 navy blue Mercury with chrome trim glided on white-walled wheels and stopped in front of a large brick mount with metal lettering that read RESTING DAYS FUNERAL SERVICES. Marvin Wilson hopped out. He was lanky with greased black hair, wearing marble-rimmed Wayfarer sunglasses, green slacks, a collared white shirt, golf gloves, and a black suit slung over his shoulder. He removed his sunglasses and squinted at the cream blue sky hovering over the funeral parlor and imagined it as an advertisement for heaven. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and cleaned bird shit off of the last S of the sign.

As he strutted into the building a silky female voice sang like poetry.

"Hello Mr. Wilson."

"Hello Ms. Townsend. I like your eye shadow today," he replied with a wink as he passed her desk.

She smiled and shifted in her chair as she pulled her shoulders back and continued filing her dark burgundy fingernails. They were the only unprofessional thing about her, and Marvin Wilson liked it.

"You have messages and mail on your desk," she said, "Your four o'clock appointment called and said they would be thirty minutes late."

"Thank you, dear. Say, have you seen my nephew George today?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilson. He was here this morning, but I haven't seen him since."

"He better have those caskets ready or there'll be hell to pay."

"Is there anything further I can assist you with, Mr. Wilson?"

"Maybe later, Sweetheart."

A half an hour later Marvin Wilson emerged from his office in a black suit. He moved in a slower gentle pace as he transformed himself into a caring guide for loved ones entering the afterlife.

A man and woman entered the lobby. The woman looked around at the flower arrangements along paneling walls and took in a deep breath that failed to relax her tight shoulders. Mr. Wilson approached them with soft steps.

“Hello, I’m Marvin Wilson, the director here at Resting Days Funeral Services. You must be Mr. and Mrs. Howston. My condolences for your loss. I knew your father when I was a teenager. He was on my paper route. He waved to me every day.”

“That doesn’t sound like my father at all,” she said, “He must have really liked you.”

“Yes, well, shall I show you some of our better offers for final arrangements?”

They entered the back room where a dozen beautiful open caskets surrounded the windowless purple and gold walls. Each casket was lined with silk that shined in overhead light that illuminated the curves and folds like beds of angels. Soft organ music played from speakers.

“This flat gray with beveled edges is a lovely model,” Mr. Wilson said with a peaceful expression.

Mrs. Howston squinted and raised a finger towards the back of the room.

“What about that one there,” she said, “the one with the closed lid. I think Father would have loved that one. It looks like a hot rod. He loved cars.”

Mr. Wilson walked over to the casket. Mr. and Mrs. Howston followed. He wiped smudges from the surface, then opened the casket. Mrs. Howston immediately threw her face into her husband's chest and gasped. Her husband's eyes grew wide and shifted towards Mr. Wilson.

Marvin Wilson studied the purple lips and peaceful face of the child laying there.

"George. No. George."

George Wilson laid lifeless and naked in his wife's arms on the closet floor, surrounded by golf clubs, gowns, and memories that might last forever. It had been his last shave, before his first.