

The Thirteenth Step

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“Paperwork’s almost done,” declared the man from across the desk. “Just let me find the—” he adds as his voice trails off.

The intermingled smell of old coffee and cheap cologne, wafting heavily on the dry air is overpowering. There is a large file cabinet behind his desk that seems to take up more space in this cramped office than necessary. He manages to spin his chair around to face this behemoth and opens the bottom drawer where he begins to rifle through some folders, humming a tune that I do not recognize. My gaze drifts as though my eyes are no longer under my command and fixate on his cluttered desk. The bulb of a distant urge begins to show its first sprouts; an urge that was cultivated when I received a phone call from the man across the desk. A phone call that notified me that my mother had passed away the night before. A phone call that meant that I would have to return to a home that I had planned on leaving in the hazy recesses of memory.

I start to count the pictures on the cluttered desk. *One, two, three.* I begin to count the number of pens in the coffee cup that he uses as a pen holder but willfully stop myself. *I haven’t done that in years,* I think to myself. Fighting the urge to count everything in this office, I train my focus on the item that he has retrieved from the drawer. Clutched between his sausage-like fingers is a sealed, white envelope.

“Here it is,” he says “the key to your old house.”

I barely hear him. I cannot shake the images of my mother on her death bed. I can almost see the stink of antiseptic and death as they perform their macabre dance, pirouetting in the cold air. Although my mother was strong, toughened from a life of hard work, in the end all it took was a fall down a short flight of stairs, one that she had walked on thousands of time before. I try to shut out the images of her lying in a twisted heap at the bottom of the stairs, slowly suffocating as her cracked ribs puncture further into her lungs with every strained breath. *And this stranger sitting across from me was the last person that she would ever see in this life!* He had come to the hospital shortly after she arrived. Barely conscious, her last request was to make sure that this estate lawyer sold the house and to ensure that ‘all of her affairs were in order’ so that I did not have to return. So much for that plan. *A lawyer!* I think to myself. She deserved better than that. But I couldn’t get back soon enough. Couldn’t get away from work. I had my own patients relying on me.

He spins his chair to face me, holding the envelope in an out-stretched hand. The chair slams the drawer shut with a loud bang. I'm still in the hospital room, watching the silhouette of my mom under a white sheet when the loud noise startles me back to the real world. Eyeing the envelope, I don't show any immediate urgency to take it from his hand.

"You're all set," he reassures me. "I'll have the rest of the paperwork ready tomorrow morning." He pushes the package toward me, giving it a shake. "You're sure you don't want me to get a room for you? It won't be any trouble." He seems almost concerned.

"I'll be fine," I reply, my eyes still fixed on the envelope. "I just want to make sure the house is sold and then I'll be leaving." Though the thought of returning there inexplicably causes my pulse to quicken and the hair on my arms to stand on end.

"Say, is that an Australian accent?" he asks.

Before I can correct him, he adds, in a horrible Crocodile Dundee imitation, "That's not a knife!"

"Yeah, sure," I blankly reply.

"OK, well I put a cot in one of the rooms so...at least you won't have to sleep on the floor!" he proclaims cheerfully though his smile seems rather forced now.

I take the envelope from his hand. "Thank you for everything," I manage, as break from my reverie. His expression, though still smiling, barely masks his concern. Or maybe it's confusion. The leather chair squeaks as I stand and turn to walk out of his office. As I cross the lobby, I can hear him practicing his Australian accent from his office.

"Put another shrimp on the barbie!" he exclaims as he laughs to himself.

Six steps to the—I stop myself before I finish the thought, and turn my attention back to the envelope in my hand, squeezing the white paper to examine its contents. Just a key. Nothing more. *Why does it feel so heavy?* I ask myself as I slide the envelope into my coat pocket and walk out into the brisk air of a Midwestern autumn. The taxi is waiting for me, the driver of which has undoubtedly been running his meter since he picked me up at the airport. I give him my destination's address and he says nothing as he puts the cab into gear and accelerates toward my childhood home.

As I gaze out of the cab's window, I fight off images of an empty funeral parlor; empty save for a casket and a corpse; and instead look to the leafless trees and dead grass that cover the landscape this time of year. It seems as though death will be the theme of this homecoming. Within minutes, we are pulling into a driveway, one that I had driven on countless times; long ago in a different life. I glance at the meter and pull a large bill from my wallet.

"Keep it," I mutter and pull the handle on the car's door. The door swings silently open and I step onto the cracked cement that is littered with dead leaves and fallen acorns. Through the bare branches of a giant oak tree, a gray sky is lit by an invisible sun and once more I am welcomed by the chill of fall as the air bites into my skin. The scent of dead leaves fills my lungs as I take a deep draught of the cool air, and I quickly realize how much I missed that smell. *Nothing like this in New Zealand*, I think as I let the scent of decay fill my head with nostalgia. A smell that always marks the coming end of another year and the hope of a better one to follow. I barely take notice that the taxi has pulled away, leaving me alone in my rumination.

My eyes eventually fix on the front door of the house, still gleaming white despite having been exposed to the elements for years, and I reach into my pocket, grabbing the envelope. A gust of wind blows past me carrying a rustling cluster of leaves with it and I immediately shiver, though it is not especially cold. Leaves and acorn shells that the squirrels have dropped crunch loudly under my feet as I walk toward the three steps that lead up the porch, tearing one end of the envelope and sliding the key into my hand as I go. *It's tarnished*. I don't know why that realization surprises me. Did I expect a new key? A shiny one without a past? As I flip the key over in my fingers I can't help but wonder if this was the same key that had hung from my mother's keychain for decades, rattling on the plastic trinket that held the image of a small, blonde child, hair (for once all in place), dressed in a blue suit, displaying a checkered grin. A single mom's source of tremendous pride. I run my hand through my hair absentmindedly as the stench of antiseptic begins to supplant the perfume of autumn, again forcing me to push these horrible images from my mind. The key slides quietly into the lock and the door gives its assent as it swings open and I step inside.

The house is empty; no, it's barren. The air is still, quiet. It is the air of a tomb. The furniture has been either sold or thrown away, leaving indents on the carpet and scratches on

the wooden floors. The walls are scarred from pictures that had hung there like so much hope for many years. Pictures of that little blonde boy swimming at a lake. Snapshots of a young man in a cap and gown, standing next to a prematurely aging woman whose smile would befit a person that had just won the lotto but whose weathered face tells the story of a hard life. A framed diploma from a college that most people in this hemisphere have never heard of, earned by a young man that couldn't wait to "get gone."

Looking around the living room, I see that the same thick carpet still lines the floor and I kick my shoes off so that I can feel the wistful softness on my feet. My eyes search deliberately around a room that I had once spent so much time in. The mantle above the fire place, once filled with keepsakes, now holds only dust. I realize the things that make a house a *home*, are the things in it. The couch that cradled a seven-year-old with a double dose of the flu and chicken pox. The chair which hugged a mother and her only child as they watched his favorite movie over and over again. "Sorry I left you mom," I say out loud. I realize that you can never go home. Not really.

Everything is gone. It's just a husk now. Regretting my decision to sleep here instead of a hotel, I wander toward the hallway that led to my old bedroom. As I pass the doorway to the kitchen, I hesitate. Perplexed, I turn and stand at the threshold. Barely lit from the light coming through a single window above the sink, I see that it is just as empty as the rest of the house. I take a step onto the brown tile and the empty room seems somehow foreboding. *It's just the old kitchen*, I remind myself and reminisce about what it used to be.

Wooden cupboards that once held pots, pans, and dishes that my mom and I would use to cook in those few times when she was able to get away from work. A sink where I would help her wash the dishes and splash warm, soapy water on the floor as we both laughed at my clumsiness. The doorway to the... *To the basement steps that killed your mom*, says a voice in the back of my mind. "Jet lag," I say out loud and immediately regret the audible utterance. *Jet lag*, I think silently, *has undoubtedly gotten the best of you*. Four steps and I am standing at the doorway of my old bedroom; two more to the cot the lawyer left for me. I try to shake off the feeling of doom that the thought of the basement stairs has roused in me. *You're a psychiatrist, you know this is likely stemming from feelings of guilt*. The words do little to

comfort me as I collapse onto the old army cot and wrap the blanket around me. Before long, I am asleep.

The sound of the house settling rouses me from my sleep.

Creak. Creak.

It's funny how a house never seems to settle; even after it has been around for seventy years.

Creak.

Was that last one louder than the others?

Creak. Creak. Creak.

They *are* getting louder. I sit up, my back against the cold wall, trying to ascertain the source of the noise as I stare into the thick darkness.

Creak. Creak.

My heart begins to thud, my breath quickens.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

Then, nothing. I lay back on the unforgiving cot and pull the thin blanket over my head. Silence begins to fill the hou—Creak. *Not again.*

Creak. Creak. Creak.

It's the stairs to the basement! This realization disturbs the dust off of an old memory from another life, one that I had buried long ago. A memory that is emerging from the unreachable part of my subconscious, demanding to be acknowledged.

The shadows of He-Man, Optimus Prime, and the rest of my friends outlined the shelves along the far wall of the darkened room. *Why won't you do something?* I silently pleaded to them. *Creak. Creak. Creak.* I had to keep count. That was three. Only nine more. It never gets to the landing. Never made it to the thirteenth step. *Creak. Creak. Creak. Why won't she believe me? No one believes me. Creak. Creak.* The same thing; night after night. *Creak. Creak.* Two more and I can fall asleep in the in-between; the short moment flanked between terror

and unconsciousness. *Creak*. One more. I curled under the protective shield of my blanket, my only safeguard in this house of horrors. Just one more. Just one more. *Creak*. I shut my eyes hard and force sleep to pull me into its safe arms.

Ok, I think to myself, that was a kid's imagination gone wild.

Creak. One.

Then why am I counting them?

Creak. Two. Creak. Three.

There has to be an explanation, I try to assure myself.

Creak. Four. Creak. Five. Creak. Six.

Halfway there. Halfway to the in-between—. Stop. Stop thinking like that! You're not a child anymore. This should not scare you.

Creak. Seven.

Then why do you want to scream? asks that distant voice.

Creak. Eight. Creak. Nine.

I need to calm myself before—Creak. Ten.

Calm down! Relying on my training, I attempt to rationalize the situation. *You've just worked yourself up into a panic because of a ridiculous childhood fear. Get up. Get up and see for yourself.*

Creak. Eleven.

One more. One more and I'll go. My legs feel unsteady, unable (or unwilling) to support me as I swing over the side of the cot. *Four steps to the end of the hall and another four through the kitchen will bring me to—to—to what?* "To the basement stairs," I reprove myself. *They're only stairs. There's nothing on them. There is an explanation to the noise. There always was. Four steps to the end of the hallway, four more through the kitchen. Just wait for the last one. Just wait. Wait.*

Creak. *Twelve.*

I jump off of the cot and purposefully make my way through the hall and to the kitchen doorway. My racing pulse causes my throat to constrict and it feels as though it will choke the air in my throat. The wavy texture of the dark-brown tile reflects shards of the scarce moonlight that have managed to penetrate through the window, resembling a murky, unfathomable sea. My lungs are afire, burning in my chest. I raise my right foot and slowly place it on the cold, unforgiving tile; a chill rushes through my body and I suddenly regret leaving my shoes at the front door. I flick the light switch on. No response. *Three more steps*, I prod myself. Left foot up. Left foot down. *Half-way there*. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Then, taking a deep breath, I hastily make the final two steps and reach the doorway that leads to the basement landing. The walls are still covered with the same wooden paneling from time immemorial.

Creak. *One.* Creak. *Two.* Creak. *Three.*

Creak. *Four.*

My fear is past the point of rationality as I begin to imagine someone—or something—on the steps. I can feel something begin to build up in my chest. *No!* I plead to my lungs. *Please, God, no.* But it's useless. My body has declared me unfit and has successfully mutinied. "Who's there?" My eyes widened in surprise, I quickly cover my mouth with both of my hands. Nothing.

Creak. Creak. *Five, six.*

Those came faster than the others. It's half way up the stairs. Less than five or six feet away. If I peer around the corner of the wall, I could end this. I would know. *I don't want to know.* My breathing is so loud that the noise reverberates off of the old paneling. *Hold your breath,* I tell myself as I take in a gulp of air and clamp my lungs shut. *I can still hear it. Oh, God! It's not me!*

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

A violent banging in the stairwell causes an empty coat rack to fly off of the landing wall and crash onto the floor. It bounces toward the stairs and disappears into the

impenetrable darkness, thudding on each step as it sinks further and further into the shadowy abyss.

BOOM! BOOM!

My legs waiver and threaten to succumb to the fear that has now fully replaced my resolve. I drop against the wall that was once hidden by a refrigerator. A wall that is the now only thing hiding me from the stairs as it stands between me and the source of my fear.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The wall shakes on my back and I wrap my arms around my legs. I can't move. Can't explain this one away. I can't—*it stopped*. I wait for the last few creaks to mark the beginning of the in-between. *It only got to six; maybe now that I have faced it, it will leave*. I wait. Nothing. *That's it! That's all it took!* I breathe a sigh of relief. All of these years and all I—*All I had do was show it that I wasn't afraid*—Creak. *One*.

GODDAMN IT!! A rush of anger momentarily replaces my fear and I am able to get up off the dusty floor and step over to the basement doorway.

Creak. Creak. Creak. *Two, three, four*.

I'm doing it this time, I reassure myself. My feeling of helplessness has stirred a primal rage and fuels a newfound courage as I stand in defiance at the threshold, staring into the void and awaiting whatever may come.

Creak. *Six*.

Creak. *Seven*.

As I stare down at the landing I can hear the breathing again. Creak. *Eight*. It's close now. Another two steps and it'll be within arm's reach.

Creak. *Nine*.

Creak. *Ten*.

It's just around the corner of the wall; I could touch it. It's breathing is loud, deliberate. I know it senses my fear, revels in it.

“What do you want?” I plead into the darkness. Nothing. Not even a hitch in its breath. Just a—
Creak. *Eleven.*

One more step and this will be over. I can't run from this anymore. Maybe I never could. One more step and it will be done. I wait for what seem an eternity and not a sound emerges from the dark. I hold my breath to make sure that the breathing that I *do* hear is my own. It is! *I knew it! All I had to do was show it that I wasn't afraid, that I wouldn't back down. It was a test or something, that's all.* Leaning into the landing wall, I breathe out a sigh of relief. *I need to look.* Gradually, I creep forward, braced by a trembling hand on the ancient paneling. A portion of the top three stairs emerge from the darkness; one of which was formerly occupied. *Just a little more.* As I lean out enough to see the stairs, my hand slips and I stumble onto the landing, hitting the ground hard. A sound causes me to freeze before I am able to shake off the daze of my fall. I hear it. I hear its breath. Raising my eyes slowly to the stairs sprawled out beneath me, I have but a short a moment to realize that I cannot turn and run from here. My heart sinks as my blood runs cold. I know now that I was wrong. Wrong for coming back to this house. Wrong for coming to these stairs. Wrong for believing that this would end any other way than bad. Wrong for—**CREAK, CREAK.** *Twelve, thirteen—*