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Approx. 3,625 Words

Sisyphus Descending

The rectangle of dim bedroom light lays distorted on the snow. Under the snow stones of granite and basalt, the bones of these mountains, darken into unimaginable cold. The man's shadow is framed in the patch of light; it looks like the silhouette of someone living in the earth.

A thin fog on the pane: breath, or the vapor from something cooking. Faint at first, it whitens, then thickens, growing thicker until droplets snake down the glass, leaving trails that glisten like the tracks of slugs.

He turns to look down at his wife stretched out on the old quilt, her naked body glowing in the firelight.

No. He's a child . . . and the odor of boiled cabbage fills the air. He breathes deeply, tasting from memory his mother's stew.

The boy walks from the south window, past the rumpled, dirty bed on which an open book lays face down. He enters the living room, passing the high-backed Victorian couch, the antique oil lamp —

from which a sinuous thread of smoke rises — on the polished end table, and on to the kitchen doorway to lean against the varnished pine jamb. Again he inhales, shutting his eyes, savoring the fragrance of the bubbling stew.

It can't be that bad, his father's low voice insists. I'd need a day and half at least to get to Twin Lakes.

You could make it in one, his mother answers. Her voice is weak with her recent illness.

His father sighs. Look, by Saturday —

Five days!

They'll have the road cleared and I can drive you down.

If the weather holds, she murmurs.

The radio said no snow till Sunday at the earliest, his father argues. His voice is calm, reasonable . . . the same voice he uses to speak to the boy. Now you really can't expect old Harrison to hike all the way back from town, can you? At his age?

The boy listens hard for an answer, but the quiet is broken only by the creak of a chair.

It's just a cold, his father says.

A chair slides back, rough feet scraping the kitchen's wood floor. There's a brief shuffling of slippers, then the muted knock of wood against iron, the spoon's rhythmic *kock kock kock* blending with the stew's rich aroma and the sharp, held-in coughing that has hurt his mother inside for a week. Then the stirring stops.

Besides, his father says evenly, I'm working on something for *you*. It's almost finished. I just need a couple of days. Three at the most.

She must be looking out the small, west window, the one above the sink, looking down at her shadow lying in a patch of light on the snow. But no. Peeking around the corner, the boy finds the kitchen window blanked out by steam. His mother stares as if the white fog might suddenly vanish. Maybe she's merely stubborn — his father often says so — but to the boy her silence is dignified. His father, at the table, is tearing back a fingernail with his teeth. His mother might be crying. But all the boy can see is the back of her: a few inches of wrinkled, white nightgown hang below the hem of her blue cotton robe, and the robe is pulled in at the waist by a matching sash. Her hands are gripping the sink edge, white-knuckled. Her head is trembling.

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The dark window is clear. The bedroom light is off, and the only illumination comes from a small table lamp in the living room. This lamp's light is subdued by its spherical glass shade, thickly painted with reddish-brown leaves. Here and there a small, dull yellow flower with a dark green center protrudes from the foliage. The flowers look sickly, as if smothered by the mass of leaves. Rising from the top of the sphere is a transparent chimney that, before his mother died, released smoke from an oil-flame. Now the flame is a light bulb, the chimney merely ornamental. The lamp's reservoir is tinted blue to make it seem full of spice-oil, though the wire's silhouette extending up through the glass torso betrays the illusion.

The lamp stands on a small end table, the right edge of which is flush with the right arm of the couch. Three steps away, to the left of the bedroom doorway, an oak desk stands against the living room's south wall. A battered gray Underwood sits on the desk with a half-typed page rolled into it.

The man steps to the desk. He touches the back of his wife's chair. The early morning sunlight kindles her long hair, and she looks up from her work with a smile. He bends and kisses her, then straightens, gazing down at the sentence she just typed and immediately blotted out with a few dozen blows of the number-sign key.

"How do you manage it all?" he says.

"All what?"

He gestures with his chin. "Words."

A wry smile twists her lips. "They just come."

"Always the same answer," he says, not lightly (as usual), but with a note of genuine frustration.

"Look," she says, touching his hand, "it's something I just can't explain."

"Or don't want to explain."

She shrugs. "Six of one. . . ."

The man nods. "Well, how about a walk? Get out of the house for a bit?"

They look out the window together. The fresh snow seems to blaze among the pine-shadows.

"Just let me finish this paragraph," she says at last.

He glances back at the page. "What is it this time?"

"Actually," she says, "it's about your mother."

"You're kidding."

She looks him in the eyes and shakes her head.

"What is it — the fourth or fifth attempt?" he says. "Jesus! Why do you insist on writing about someone you never even knew?"

"I feel like I did," she says. "You talk about her constantly."

He shoves his hands in his pockets and looks away.

“Come on,” she says, watching his jaw-muscles pulse. “They say its *all* grist for the mill.”

“Be she live or be she dead, right?”

“You know,” she says, “you’re really obsessed. Your father left here years ago. It cost you a lot of time and trouble to fix the place up. Sometimes it even seems like you established that little hospital in Twin Lakes just so you would have an excuse to live here.”

“That’s bullshit,” he snaps, “and you know it. There are three times as many people in this area as when he lived here. And damn it, they need a hospital closer than Grand Junction!”

She looks back at the page. Wind off the mountain rattles the window. “I know,” she relents. “Sorry.”

His eyes glint like broken glass and he growls, “As for my father . . . the man never knew what he had here.” The man stalks to the east window and stands for several minutes, staring. “It’s so damned peaceful,” he says finally, in a near whisper. “Nothing dies that shouldn’t die. Nothing.”

She doesn’t answer. He stands at the window for a long time. Then the typewriter begins again — clack-ack-ack, clack-ack, clack-ack-ack-ack — monotonous and loud.

#

His mother is coughing again and the boy turns from the dark window, stepping quickly past the desk and on into the bedroom. The hearth in this room is set in the east wall, leftward from the doorway, and across the room from the bed. It holds the remnants of a fire: here and there a small, pale flame wavers, but there are mostly orange embers flaking away into fine, gray ashes. His mother’s face is

barely illuminated by the glow. She coughs again, struggling to hold it in. Her dark head jerks stiffly on the pillow.

His wife is coughing and he hurries toward her. "It'll only be a few minutes, he says. "They're getting everything ready now."

"Oh God," she cries, choking. "God it hurts. . . ."

"Just take it easy now," he whispers forcefully, in his most reasonable doctor's manner.

"Everything will be all right."

"It won't, God damn it!" Her back arches and she hisses through clenched teeth, "Miscarriage! I can feel it. I know it."

"Don't say —"

"It hurts!" she half shouts, then trails off into deep, wracking coughs.

The child stares at his mother, hoping her eyes will open and find him there. But they open only to roll back under their trembling lids. He backs away, helpless, then turns away and rushes into the living room, pulls the chair back from the desk and sits down. He takes paper and a pencil from the drawer, lays them down on the blotter. How often he's tried writing a poem for his mother! But as always he can only stare at the paper. Now and then he picks up the pencil, but the words won't come, and each time he lays the pencil down. He can hear the familiar, sharp, muffled *kunk* of his father's chisel biting wood in the studio off the kitchen. Because the room doubles as his bedroom, he has nowhere to go (for several weeks he's slept on the living room couch). So he gets up and moves to the living room window and peers into the dark toward the gash in the mountain where the rising sun will appear tomorrow. His shadow lies framed in a pale patch of light on the snow.

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The mist is thick and white on the glass. From the kitchen comes the gurgle of boiling water. The doctor turns from the window and crosses the living room, passing first the fireplace on the north wall (it stands directly across from the bedroom door and holds a freshly blazing fire), then to the right of the couch and on into the kitchen where there is no one and no water boiling. The boy glances back at the living room window which now is clear and dry, then quickly walks to the old studio door.

He swings the door back and the room is empty.

He swings the door back and his father is there, sitting before a scene cut into a large piece of wood — oak, perhaps, or pine. The boy could never tell the difference.

His father glances back, smiling over his shoulder. How's your mother? he says.

The boy only stares until the fear flickers in the man's diluted eyes. Then he simply says, Sick.

His father swallows. I know, he says, forcing a smile. But she'll be fine. And look here. I've finished. Nothing left but the sanding . . . smoothing it out.

What is it?

Well, his father begins, adopting the tone he so often uses on the boy, I know you don't know about Camus. He's a French writer. From France.

The boy nods. He's heard of France.

The man clears his throat. Anyway, this is a portrait of Sisyphus — he's a man in Greek mythology. I call it "Sisyphus Descending."

The boy nods again and studies the carving. He's been told that his father is a wonderful artist. And the scene *is* handsome. A curly-headed young man is taking a step down a steep hill. A huge stone squats at the bottom. The edge of the board cuts off any view of the landscape beyond the stone. At any rate, the young man — whose descending step the boy's father has made to seem a step *up* — gazes at nothing but the stone . . . as if there were nothing beyond it. Nothing at all.

It's nice, the boy admits.

The father's eyebrows arch. Nice! he laughs. Well, I don't know if "nice" is the word I'd use. But I do think it'll make your mother feel better.

The boy frowns. There is something here he doesn't understand.

This sickness, his father adds in a low, confiding voice, is mostly in her head. Trust me.

The man rises then and strides out of the room, laying his hand lightly on the boy's head as he passes.

The boy stays behind. He examines the carving from several angles, trying to make the smile on the face of Sisyphus fit in with the barrenness of the hill — not a tree, not even a weed — and the ominous feeling that radiates from the giant stone. Like all the male figures his father creates, whether in stone or wood or plastic, the young man seems indestructibly strong.

Suddenly he sees that the window is covered with a white fog. Small drops, bright with sunlight, are sliding down the side of the fog. He turns and is shocked to find the little girl lying on his old bed, disconnected now from the life-sustaining machines, her small head sunk into the pillow, her thin lips taking on the first faint bluish flush of death. A wave of nausea bathes him and his stomach starts to churn like a bucket full of slugs. His fingers knot into his palms, the knuckles whitening. There is nothing to be done, and he trembles. . . .

#

He peers back at the window. Gleaming tracks crisscross the cold pane. He wheels and swings open the storage-room door. His wife is there, at the stove, stirring something in a scratched, dented pan. Vapor billows up from the pan, rich with the fragrance of onion soup.

She glances up at him. “You were in there a long time. What were you looking for?”

He can’t think of an answer. The nausea has subsided. The wooden spoon rhythmically strikes the side of the aluminum pan: *keck keck keck*.

“We can go for a walk after lunch if you want,” she says. “Like we used to. Seems we never get out much anymore.”

He feels confused and decides to sit down, make conversation . . . at least until he recovers his bearings.

“Of course,” she turns to him, smiling slyly, “we could find *something* to do inside today.”

He returns her smile emptily as a mirror. “So the story’s done?” he asks.

“The one about the suicide cult?”

“No. . . . I mean the one about mother.” He shoves one shaking finger into his mouth and bites at the nail.

She has turned to face him. “What?”

He doesn’t repeat the question. He is no longer sure what the question was.

“Do you feel all right?” she demands.

“No. I mean . . . I feel as good as ever.”

She turns back to the stove and stirs the soup rapidly. “Maybe we’d better stay in today,” she says. “You must be tired.” She stops stirring, then starts again, slower now. “That story about your mother . . . that was *years* ago. You remember — just after I . . . after we lost the baby.” The spoon knocks like a knuckle on a locked door. “It’s this house,” she sighs. “You’re obsessed with it.”

His glance flashes. He believes in no one’s obsession but hers. “And you,” he says. “You’re not obsessed? If I were dead . . . if I were cold on some operating table or in some hospital bed like little Debbie was today . . . what would you do?” He stares at his finger, which has started to bleed from beneath the nail. “You’d write me into a goddamned story,” he tells her, then sucks at the sore finger.

Suddenly she’s sitting across from him. He didn’t notice her crossing the kitchen or hear the heavy chair slide back.

“I know,” she tells him.

The onion soup is beginning to smell strangely spoiled — like formaldehyde.

“You *don’t* know!” he barks.

She reaches toward his free hand, but he pulls it away. “Look,” she insists, “there was nothing you could do. You’re not some superhero. You’re a *man*.”

“Things are *caused!*” he shouts, eyes shining with sudden tears. “They don’t just *happen*. If I can get at the causes . . . if anybody . . .” He is shaking violently now. “I might have saved our baby.”

“*Our little girl.*”

“*Mm?*”

“*Doctor? What about our little girl?*”

It's as if he's seeing Debbie's mother for the first time. She seems to be smaller than yesterday; her coat is shabby, navy blue, her eyes washed out by the hospital hall's fluorescence. He stares at her, aching to speak . . . but the right words escape.

"There doesn't seem to be anything I can do," he says.

The words take hours to fall through the small distance between them. Finally the woman seems to hear, then slowly nods. "She knew. Right from the first, when you . . . when we all thought. . . ."

"None of us knew," he says.

"No!" she snaps. "Debbie knew from the beginning."

Now the anguish starts to shake her and his heart hammers. He has never been able to detach himself from this. And suddenly she's in his arms and he holds her tighter, more intensely than a doctor should. He holds her like a lover, a husband. They have one shadow on the pale green hospital wall.

His finger has stopped bleeding. The chair across the table is empty. He turns his head and finds the stove cold. The boy climbs down from his chair and crosses the kitchen, clambers up onto the draining board beside the sink. Smoke from the small oil-lamp mounted on the wall curls and twists, blackening the ceiling above it in a soft, circular pattern, solid and even as new snow . . . but the negative of snow. In the studio his father is whistling quietly and sanding his carving. Outside on the snowy whiteness the boy's elongated shadow lies in the irregular patch of light. When he turns his head the shadow turns its head, too. The boy waves; the shadow waves back. It strikes him as incredibly strange, and incredibly unfair somehow, that the body should block out light.

The living room window is clear. The boy stands with his back to the couch and the lamp with its soft, russet leaves and buff-colored flowers. Now he turns and crosses back to the desk. But he doesn't sit. Instead, he slides open the shallow center drawer, replaces the unused pencil and the blank sheet of paper, and slides the drawer shut.

No. There is no pencil, no paper. The gray Underwood sits on top of the desk with a half-typed sheet of paper rolled into it.

No. He is sitting on the couch, studying the wire that hangs in the body of the lamp like a snake. He shuts his eyes and inhales the aroma of burning spice-oil. He is straining not to hear his father's voice, but it reaches him anyway from his parents' bedroom.

It's for your bed, the man says. It's a headboard.

A *what?* his mother says, then starts coughing and coughs until she wheezes into silence.

Look, his father says. You've been reading Camus' essay like I suggested. Yes? Well, this headboard . . . it's Sisyphus, see? I call it "Sisyphus Descending."

The boy's gaze climbs the twist of black smoke snaking up from the lamp's chimney.

Yes, his mother says, her voice constricted. Yes it is.

The smoke coils upward, thins and frays. . . .

The road'll be cleared soon, his father begins, but his voice dwindles to an unintelligible whisper.

The boy gets up from the couch, steps to the bedroom doorway and leans against the varnished jamb, listening hard. But his mother's voice is ragged. He can't make out anything but her final words.

Get out!

An instant later his father stalks past him into the kitchen and on into his studio, slamming the door. Then the *whack* of something striking a wall in the dim bedroom and the boy whirls in time to see

a book catch fire in the hearth, a few sparks and large glowing cinders snowing down on the wooden floor before winking out. He cannot bring himself to move for many long minutes. Then he edges into the room, into a darkness the brightening fire fails to diminish.

She lies on the bed. Her naked body glows in the firelight.

“I’m sorry, love,” his wife says. “I know you hated to lose that little girl.” She pats the old quilt and her voice drops to a whisper. “Come here.”

No. The room is dark and he tiptoes to the bed where his mother lies. The air is heavy and a thick vapor covers the window down which the first droplets have already started to run.

No. His wife is beneath him. Shudders run through her body and the words flower on her quickening breath. A child, a child . . . we’ll make another child. . . .

No. Flames spurt from the pages, splashing light over his mother’s jaundiced fists thrown down on the green and russet quilt. Now the boy finds the black hair streaked with gray on the ashen pillow, the pinched eyes, the mouth locked open, the wine-red darkness soaking the front of her nightgown . . . a stain spreading even as he watches. . . .

#

He stands at the east window, naked in the living room light. The fevered typing makes him flinch, and he grips the windowsill as if the house were a storm-blasted boat rocking on waves. His shadow, living among stones in the earth, watches him closely . . . watches him burrow frantically into silence. His lungs convulsively swell and collapse as he weeps. On the glass his breath turns white.