

## PLAYGROUND

A leather leash extended from Caroline Clarke's hand to her little boy. Her narrowed eyes rested on her son Donnie, who sat a short distance in front of her, sluggishly swaying on a swing. His smooth, pale face was flat, absent of any discernable emotion.

Caroline cupped her free hand, protecting her cigarette from the raindrops. The warmth rising to her fingers was welcome on the uncharacteristically chilly evening. She snuck a quick but deep drag and did her best to keep the tobacco dry.

Rock Stanley watched them from the entrance of the park. The thick wrinkles stretching over his gigantic head added a puzzled glare to his grizzled appearance. The droplets fell at a rate that would've sent any sensible parent heading for their car. Yet, there, with her tiny boy, Caroline remained.

In a way, Rock felt a measure of relief at the sight. While he was looking for a parent with at least two children, securing another participant would be better than none. He was glad he'd decided to check the playgrounds on such a dreary afternoon. Surprisingly, the improbable gamble had the potential to payoff.



Rock clenched a brochure in his big hand that read: 'HELPING HEARTS.' It displayed various information about the charity that helped underprivileged children gain access to modern playground equipment. It also had an area with cut lines that surrounded a single ticket for family entry embedded on the final page.

Not wanting it to get soaked, he slipped the informational material back into his pocket. He'd always hated approaching people. His towering height and bulky frame always seemed to intimidate them. Additionally, his social ineptitude was a hurdle. Rock had a lack of experience that no amount of practice could make up for. Despite his many faults, the motivation that awaited him back home turned him into a miracle-maker at times. Hopefully, he could come through again as he had before. But there was something else that was still on his mind besides securing a reservation.

*He's not a fucking dog,* Rock thought.

Rock squinted his eyes. The more he focused on the toddler tether attached to the child's back, the more it bothered him. In his mind, it was the physical manifestation of restriction itself. Just the sight of such a domineering tool filled him with ire. As the rain pattered down on Rock's faded flat cap, he clenched his teeth.

The boy looked just old enough to attend school. He didn't require the weight of such an oppressive invention dragging him down, siphoning the urge to explore and roam freely from his soul. Rock expected such a crass contraption might mutate the child's spirit into something more predictive and robotic.

He knew it all too well.

As Rock watched the boy sit on the swing, he already appeared halfway there. Most children in his position would be rocking back and forth, testing the limits and heights they could push themselves to, exploring acceleration with a youthful vigor to borderline dangerous speeds.

Donnie looked dead.

It was as if his mother was pushing a tiny corpse along for a ride in the downpour.

It sickened Rock. He didn't know if he could watch it anymore. But just as he considered taking a step toward them, Donnie's pace changed.

Caroline took one last mighty pull of her Parliament before she gave Donnie a hard push in the spine. The force sent him upward and left him rocking.

"You've gotta do some of the work too!" Caroline scolded. "I can't do everything for you! Kick your feet forward!"

Doing as he was told, the young Donnie picked up speed. Caroline stepped to the side, ensuring he could rock backward and gain momentum. She continued to push him, and with each completed motion, the leash stretched further and further.

Rock watched with discomfort and anger infecting his chest. The scene was difficult to take in.

Then, suddenly, when Donnie reached the pinnacle of his forward motion, Caroline violently tugged the leash backward.

The power of the purposely ill-timed jerk caused the unsuspecting boy to flip backward. The yank was just strong enough to turn his body half a revolution. After the four-foot drop, Donnie landed headfirst in the muddy sand. The sickening thud of his body hitting the gunky beach grains was highly unsettling. Rock could hear it from where he stood. He cringed.

His eyes flared. It was all too familiar.

"Get up!" Caroline screamed. "You have to hold on! Didn't I tell you to fucking hold on?!"

As the dizzied boy rolled off his back and sat up, Rock saw the mass of wet sand that matted his hair and clung to his face. It was beginning to make sense why she took her child to the playground in the pouring rain.

A flurry of vicious imagery invaded Rock's head. He'd never felt such a strong urge to hurt someone. Inflicting violence wasn't a deed that typically crossed his mind, but he had no control over the psychological jolts.

The terrible things he might do under the right set of circumstances seemed unending. But as attractive as the horrible ideas were, Rock understood they weren't possible. That dreary day wasn't about him.

No day was.

Life, and the dynamic between Rock and the pair of strangers he studied, were far more complex than an idea so simple.

"Clean yourself off, *now!*" Caroline yelled.

She slapped the back of Donnie's head. The force behind the strike was so hard that sand flew from the boy's hair. Rock looked away. He couldn't watch it any longer. Instead, he focused on interrupting it.

Walking toward the swings, he extracted the brochure from his pocket.

## ONCE IN A LIFETIME

“So, he just handed it to you?” Tom Grimley asked.

He took his eye off the road to gaze at his wife. Molly was smiling.

“I couldn’t believe it!” Molly replied. “Well, Macomber has gone to total crap over the last few years. I had to fish out broken glass from the sand the last time I took the kids. I didn’t even want to bring them again, but they love that place. The swings are all busted up too. I think there’s a couple of junkies living behind the bleachers back in the woods. Maybe that’s why he was there? Throwing a bone to families that have to use that sad excuse for a playground. That’s what it seemed like, anyway.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Who cares why? I mean, this place looks amazing! And three-thousand dollars just to have our kids test out an ultramodern playground for a few hours? It’d be a treat for the kids too! It’s a no-brainer! I swear, when he explained it, I felt like Charlie finding the golden ticket.”

Pushing her black hair aside, Molly looked down at the ticket embedded in the vibrant brochure, unable to contain her excitement. The play spaces highlighted in the various snaps on the pamphlet were nothing short of exhilarating—tall, twisting slides; sturdy swings; clean sandbox; cushy seesaw; multicolored merry-go-round; balloon house with ball pit; and a massive stretch of monkey bars were just a few of the alluring sights.

The area surrounding the pamphlet’s adolescent toys was filled with what looked like the softest sand and was encircled by the greenest grass. It was a space of pure magnificence, a visual that would cause the heart of any child to thrash.

Molly wasn’t even going to be the one playing, but she could barely contain herself. Her eagerness was mostly unselfish—she wanted the best for her children. But at the same time, the money felt like gravy. Gravy being laid on so thick it could drown them.

The Grimleys would be happy to drown in it.

While their bank balances were less than desirable, the payout wasn’t the only reason Molly wanted to take the trip. Showing her little hell-spawns a good time was always a top priority. Finding ways to have fun despite their fiscal fiasco was a challenge she welcomed.

The Grimleys were never rich but were able to live with relative comfort for the last several years. However, their content mediocrity suddenly vanished several months ago when Tom lost his job at Electric Boat.

The firing was outside of Tom’s control. Company cutbacks came because of an executive-level fixed pricing scandal. The EB stock tanked. Even now, the company’s survival wasn’t guaranteed, especially given the public outrage.

The company quickly cleaned house at a leadership level, but the reverberations of the scandal were felt by the little guys too. Tom still wondered if it was best that he’d been forced to move on. Either way, as a result of his exodus, money was tighter than ever.

“It just...” Tom began.

“What?” Molly asked.

“It just sounds too good to be true.”

“I’d say the same if that thousand-dollar retainer wasn’t sitting in our bank account right now. But you saw the balance. I damn well know you saw it.”

“But isn’t that kind of weird too? I mean, who just gives someone a thousand fucking dollars at a playground? C’mon sweetie, you know as well as I do, we have shit luck.”

“Yeah, but just because you win the lottery doesn’t mean you’ll win every time you play.”

“It’s still hard to believe.”

“Well, hopefully, it sinks in when we’re another two grand towards the black and the kids are having the time of their lives.”

Tom furrowed his brow in deep thought. It wasn’t the first time he’d discussed it with Molly.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess you’re right.”

“Thank God! I was starting to think you didn’t want to go anymore.”

“Don’t worry. Everything you said makes sense. I know I tend to overthink stuff a little sometimes.”

“A little?”

Molly rolled her eyes jokingly and returned to the pamphlet.

Tom found his smile again. He understood he was a pain at times, but he thought it brought balance between them. Molly was far more daring and spontaneous, as opposed to his tightly measured approach.

“Oh, look,” Molly said. “There’s more! I didn’t even see this part before.”

She touched her slender finger to the text at the back page and keyed in on the writing positioned under the header ‘OUR GOAL.’

“Geraldine Borden aims to implement one state-of-the-art playground in 1995 somewhere in the New England area. After a review of potential candidates, a less fortunate region will be selected, and the grand play space will be presented as a surprise to the chosen representee’s city and the lucky children who reside within it.”

Molly shrieked with delight.

“That’s why they didn’t want us to talk about it! This—This is some kind of *super* exclusive thing! Oh my God, imagine if we got selected? If they built it next year, right in Pawtucket?! We’d be set!”

“Relax. You *always* do this,” Tom replied, a melancholic tinge weighing down his vernacular.

“Do what?”

“No matter what the odds are, you always think the best things are gonna happen to you.”

“Well, *you* happened to me, didn’t you?”

Tom remained silent.

“Didn’t you?” she persisted.

She tickled his side and gave him a loveable smile. Molly felt Tom twitch and squinted her eyes. She leaned into his stubbly cheek and planted a proper peck on his face.

Tom let out a chuckle. “You always were a charmer.”

“And you’re as sweet as strawberry shortcake.”

The sign for Exit 13 appeared and Tom flicked his turn signal on cue. His hand fell onto Molly’s tan thigh and he squeezed it twice.

“We’re almost at your sister’s,” Molly tittered excitedly, placing her hands over Tom’s. “The kids are gonna be so surprised when we get there.”

Molly stared gleefully out the passenger window, looking at the beautiful sunny sky. Tom glanced at the brochure in her hand, back to racking his brain.

“Geraldine Borden?” he asked. “Where have I heard that name before?”

“Well, she’s obviously a state philanthropist of some sort. I’m not surprised if you’ve heard of her.”

“I thought you said it was a guy that talked to you in the park, though. Didn’t you?”

“Yeah, he was a big fella. Thought he might be trouble at first, but once he started talking, I realized he was just a gentle giant. He said he was a representative for the charity. He was really timid, especially for a man of his size. But I’m glad he finally mustered up the courage to give me this. It might very well change our lives.”

Tom rolled his eyes and huffed as if to say, ‘There you go again.’

Molly acknowledged his comical mannerism with a grin of her own.

“What?” Molly asked. “At least for a day anyway.”

## THE FALSE IDOL

Greg Matthews pulled the Dodge Caravan into the black tar driveway, slowing it to a halt beside a massive maple tree. He looked over to the passenger seat at his son, Kip. Greg reached behind him and lifted a red clay-colored baseball glove forward. He smacked it into Kip's belly.

The mitt looked pristine and shined, like a piece of equipment you might see in the Little League World Series.

"She's already oiled up for you," Greg said, "but it's up to you to break her in. You can start today."

There was a look on Kip's face like if he could've used his mouth to make a motorboat noise, he would've. Instead, he thanked his dad with little enthusiasm.

Greg was reading his body language loud and clear.

"What the hell is it with you?" Greg asked his son. "Not only am I getting you top-of-the-line equipment, but I spend all my free-time training you, and that's all you have to say?"

"What? I said thank you."

"You said it like I took a shit in your cereal."

Kip tried to suppress a giggle. He'd never heard his dad use that one before. Greg smacked his hand against the dashboard. The loud *slam* caught Kip off guard. His arms immediately rattled.

"I'm not fuckin' around, Kip! I'd have figured by now you'd realize this is serious business! Do you wanna go pro, or dilly-dally around here fightin' for peanuts the rest of your life?"

"I wanna go pro."

Kip spoke the words like he was reciting a religious verse that had been beaten into his brain. He was conditioned to conform, to win.

"Well, why don't you fuckin' act like it then?" Greg asked, lifting the brown bottle of Budweiser up from the cup holder.

He took a huge swig, polished the contents off, and threw the empty bottle to the backseat with the others. The hollow container clanged as glass struck glass—he'd blown through several over the course of their drive.

"You know," Greg said, "when I was your age, I'd have given my left nut to have a father that gave a shit about what I was doing. When I finished high school, I had offers available from some of the top farm teams in the country, and scholarship offers for college football *and* basketball. I was a goddamn prodigy! A fuckin' three-sport athlete!"

Kip hated how his father screamed when he had too much to drink. It was uncomfortable and frightening all at the same time.

Greg went on. "You think that cocksucker ever said boo to me? You think he ever gave me any pointers along the way? If you did, you'd be wrong. And if it wasn't for my knee going out at Boston College, it wouldn't have mattered. He wouldn't have had a choice. My face would've been all over the TV."

The passionate speech was one Kip's father had gotten a lot of practice at. He recited it like a normal person might the lyrics of their favorite song. It was an obsession. Kip had never met his grandpa—he'd died before he was born—but the way his dad talked, Kip imagined him to be a real son-of-a-bitch.

"So, you should be grateful I'm on the sidelines for you," Greg said. "I could be out with my buddies, having a beer. I could be doing so many things that I actually enjoy. But instead, I'm



grinding it out with you. Teaching you the traits that are gonna make you a millionaire one day. But you won't leave your dad out in the dark once you make it, will ya, kid?"

Greg slapped Kip on the shoulder, trying to liven the boy up a little.

"Course not, Dad."

"That-a-boy. The proof is in the pudding. Just look at your brother, CJ. You listen to me, and you'll be just like him in no time."

Kip didn't respond but looked into his dad's glazed-over eyes and smiled with a nod. The grin was so theatrical it could've reeled in an Oscar.

"Alright, kid, let's get to it then."

Greg hopped out of the van and slid the back door open, reaching inside, and retrieving the black and green, metal Easton baseball bat. It had its share of scuffs, compliments of the two muddied baseballs he lifted with it.

What sounded like a knife grinding against a stone wheel suddenly invaded Greg's ear. The beer flowing through his system made him slow to react, but just as Kip exited the car, he looked to the street curb.

Greg's oldest son, Bobby, entered his line of vision. A massive, Chinese-style dragon was imprinted atop his yellow skateboard. He was sliding sideways in a 50/50 grind position. The momentum he'd gathered prior to his ollie was enough that it impressively brought him down the remainder of the street curb.

Bobby hopped his heavy frame off his board as he reached the driveway and kicked down hard against the back of the skateboard. The wood jumped up to him and he grabbed hold of the front axle like it was second nature.

Greg didn't seem to find Bobby's feat impressive. The snotty, unimpressed look on his face crinkled into a glare that was more angry than anything.

Bobby had seen the look before. It seemed these days it was the only look he saw from his old man anymore. Bobby wasn't usually so soft and welcoming with others, but for his father, he'd do whatever he could to stay on his good side.

"Good morning, Dad," Bobby said.

He forced himself to smile but nervousness warped his grin.

Greg narrowed his eyes at him. "Is it?"

"It's, uh, pretty nice out, I guess."

"Good day for baseball. I don't know about *that* shit though," Greg said, bobbing his head toward the board in his son's hand.

"Yeah."

Greg stepped beside Kip, who quietly watched on.

"You see, Kip," Greg said, "if you get fixated on something like this X-Games horseshit your brother's always babbling about, you'll end up broke."

"They're making it into a sport next year, Dad. Like, a legit competition—"

"I don't give a damn what you say. Ain't no bicycle, skateboard, or—or roller skates, no matter where you use 'em, that'll ever pay the bills. That's a fact. Ain't no one that's gonna tell me otherwise. If you got something to say about it, just don't. You know how Nike says *just do it*? Well, for you it's *just don't*, 'cause I don't wanna hear it. Understood?"

Bobby's face turned a deeper shade of red, traveling outside of the normal range that, as a bigger kid, manifested when he was skateboarding.

"Are you fat *and* fuckin' stupid?" Greg asked his eldest son. "I said, *understood*?"

Bobby nodded his flaming face. In his eyes laid the personal pain of being a disappointment.

“Well,” his father said, “you’ll have to excuse us. Your brother and I have real stuff to work on now.”

Greg approached the gate leading to the backyard. Kip remained in place, looking at his big brother, and mouthed the words ‘don’t listen to him.’ As the gate came open, Greg pressed his fingers to his bottom lip. His loud, obnoxious whistle ripped the air.

“Let’s go!” Greg ordered.

In the eye contact exchanged between Kip and Bobby, there wasn’t an ounce of bad blood. They were each at the mercy of the same grouchy guardian. Kip didn’t know why his dad was the way he was, and neither did Bobby. They had both just been dealt a shit hand.

But they weren’t the only ones.

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-images/svgimg0003.svg-REPLACE\_ME

Tanya set the paper down on the countertop and pushed it towards her mother, her eyes like those of a puppy dog that had just gotten into the trash. She hadn’t done anything wrong, but she was anxious. Tanya had been dreading the conversation they were on the cusp of having for days.

The document in front of her didn’t just hold ink on the page, it held her heart too.

“Sixty dollars? Are you crazy?” Lacey asked, a snarl of repugnance plastered across her face. “Do you think we’re rich or something?”

“It was the only one I could find,” Tanya begged. “I checked the phonebook and all of the papers. I—I even wrote them and told them about our situation. The price is normally one hundred, but they said for us—”

“A hundred dollars?!”

Lacey’s pretty, blonde head quickly tensed up as if it might launch like a rocket right off her shoulders at any moment.

The agony engraved on Tanya’s face was out of a horror movie. Her mother’s heated reaction was the equivalent of pulling her tiny heart out and stabbing it on the table a thousand times over.

Tanya’s thin bottom lip crumpled inward like a three-leaf clover. Four leaves wouldn’t have been suitable for a child of such an unfortunate ilk.

“But I love swimming, Mom. I know I can make you and even Dad proud. I just need a chance. Please.”

Lacey chewed on the idea. “I know when the pool at the YMCA closed, it broke your heart, but maybe it’ll open back up again, eventually. The membership at the Y was affordable. But this kind of advanced class it’s—it’s just too much. Do you have any idea how much Hamburger Helper that would buy?”

Tanya begged her with her eyes this time, the sadness and frustration creating a dark window.

“Please, Mom,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t think it’s worth it.”

A big tear fell over Tanya’s eyelashes and down her face.

“C’mon,” Lacey said. “Don’t cry, honey. I didn’t get to do everything I wanted at your age either. You know that, right?”

Tanya looked down at the table.

Lacey pushed the paper back to her daughter. “Listen, in a few years, you’ll forget about all this anyway. You’ll be busy thinking about boys and finding yourself a looker like I did with your daddy. Maybe once a couple more years pass, we can afford a cheerleading outfit for you. If not, you can always use my old ones.”

“I hate cheerleading!” Tanya cried.

“But you’ve never tried it.”

“I know what it is. I wanna swim!”

Tanya folded her arms.

“Now don’t get snippy with me,” her mother said.

“I’m sorry. I just—I just really, really, *really*, want to do this. When have I ever asked you or Dad for anything?”

Tanya wanted to ask why Kip and CJ got to do what they wanted while she couldn’t but knew that wouldn’t be fair. The driving force behind the extreme baseball fandom in this house wasn’t her brothers. That was all Dad.

“Cheer is *a lot* more common for girls than swim,” Lacey said.

“Mom.”

Tanya’s growl wasn’t going to be enough to convince her mother. She wiped the tear from her cheek and did what she did best: analyzed the situation.

As a straight-A student, she was sharp enough to realize her approach was off-kilter. Grown beyond her years, Tanya forced herself to turn off the emotional aspects of all she strove to attain. She took a deep breath and reassessed the scenario, then readied her refined tactics.

It was obvious—she was asking the wrong person.

“Okay,” Tanya said. “I respect your opinion, but will you please ask Dad too? I just want him to know how much it means to me, even if we can’t afford it.”

Tanya knew her dad’s personality all too well. She knew he’d see swim as a competitive sport and cheerleading as nothing more than a sideline attraction. While there were cheerleading competitions, it still most definitely was *not* a sport. As far as Tanya was concerned, it was just a way for pretty girls to showboat.

Since winning was practically embedded in her father’s DNA, Tanya figured her last shot at getting to swim lived and died with his opinion.

Lacey looked at her daughter and couldn’t help but smile. While she didn’t enjoy how Tanya continued to push back, she was impressed with how eloquently she phrased her question. Tanya displayed a methodical grace and kind-hearted intelligence that had failed to find either of her parents. It was like all the decent genetics had skipped a generation on both sides.

“Okay, honey,” Lacey said. “I’ll bring it up to your father. Just don’t get your hopes up though.”

“Thank you. Oh, and I was going to surprise you, but I may as well give it to you now.”

Tanya reached under the table and pulled a small box from her pocket and set the square, zebra-pattern box on the table in front of Lacey. The hot-pink lettering on the box read: *Fantasia Accessories*.

“What’s this?” Lacey asked.

“It was supposed to be a thank-you gift for letting me join the swim team.”

Lacey pulled the box toward her and grabbed the top.

“But even if I don’t get to join the team, I still want you to have it,” Tanya explained.

Tanya figured things might not work out in her favor. She got the gift in advance to butter her mom up as best she could.

When the top came off the box, Lacey's eyes widened. "Oh my God, I love it!"

While Lacey was genuinely enthralled, some confusion arrived seconds after her initial declaration.

"What is it exactly?"

The round bracelet with the zebra pattern overlapped inside itself a few times over. Lacey plucked the gift out of the box and raised it in front of her face.

"It's a slap bracelet!" Tanya said. "C'mon, Mom, they're everywhere." She snatched the bracelet out of her mother's hand and straightened it out the bracelet. "You flatten them out like this before you use them."

"Wait a second, slap bracelet? Aren't those the things that got recalled for cutting people?"

Tanya drove the bracelet down over her mother's wrist and watched it wrap around it. The zebra and hot-pink design fit her like a glove.

"You're fine, aren't you?" Tanya asked.

Lacey's eyes widened again. "Are you crazy?!"

"Mom, it's fine. That story is just an urban legend. Don't you think if they *actually* hurt someone they wouldn't be for sale anymore?"

It wasn't the first time Lacey felt out of her league exchanging dialogue with her daughter. What she said made sense. Plus, the sound and feel of the snapping bracelet circling her wrist like a gentle snake were so satisfying she couldn't help but remove the bracelet and straighten it out again.

But as she did so, Lacey also got a look at her watch. "Shoot! We need to get going! Otherwise, we're gonna be late!"

*Slap!*

Lacey swiftly banged the bracelet against her wrist again and let it curl around her. "I need you to go upstairs and get your brothers. Tell them to come down right away."

"Okay, but you promise, right?"

"Promise what now?"

"You promise you'll ask Dad about swim class?"

Lacey grinned and looked back at her fancy, new accessory. "I think that's the least I can do for you."

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-images/svgimg0003.svg-REPLACE\_ME

CJ's excited glare fell upon the colorful, inky pages of his comic book with absolute adoration. The Savage Dragon's chest and face were sliced up pretty good after his fight with the rat man, but CJ saw it as a thing of beauty.

Most of the Marvel and DC comics with their pretty art and childish superheroes didn't do it for him. CJ preferred Image Comics. They never skimped on the blood and broke all the boundaries. Although he was just short of being twelve years old, he'd already acquired a taste for adult content. Thankfully, his parents saw comics as a childish distraction. If they actually took the time to crack one open and saw the bloody chainsaws, boobs, and guts, they might be compelled to change their opinions.

The hefty stack of comics that sat on his bedside included many issues of *The Savage Dragon*, *Spawn*, *The Maxx*, a variety of old EC Comics reprints, and Kevin Eastman's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

The comics were his window to elsewhere. They let him escape from the pressures that confronted him daily and without fail. He saw a future within them, a place and time of peace.

His favorite activity was listening to his Walkman and losing himself in the illustrations and dark stories. The only problem was, CJ wasn't the one who decided how he utilized his time.

The play button popped up, momentarily interrupting The Savage Dragon's carnage. He extracted the cassette—Cypress Hill's *Black Sunday*—and flipped it to the other side. But before he could hit the play button and re-immense himself into the bloodshed and stoner lyrics, his father's voice bled in from the open window.

"If you're gonna reach your potential, then you've gotta practice more than just a couple hours! That's two errors already! Now hustle back out there and don't give me any lip!"

CJ quietly slipped his headphones off and positioned himself at the window. He crept forward and peered around the corner. In the backyard, his little brother, Kip, was huffing and puffing.

"But how come CJ and Bobby don't gotta be out here?" Kip whined to their father. "It's not fair."

"Yeah, well, I got news for you, kid: *life ain't fair*." Greg windmilled the bat, stretching his wrist. "Bobby ain't out here 'cause he's a dud. A shit athlete. No matter what he says, that stupid fuckin' skateboard is pointless. That's a *hobby*. That ain't no sport. And CJ gets three hours to himself on weekends. Maybe you will too someday—if you can learn how to field a simple ground ball, for Christ's sake. If you wanna get what he gets, then you'll play as good as he does. It's that simple."

Kip slapped his new baseball mitt against his leg in frustration and backed toward the fence. His father tapped the ball toward him at a decent pace, and Kip scooped up the one-hopper.

"Or, *I* can just be a dud too, like Bobby, right?" Kip asked.

He tossed the ball back in his father's direction.

CJ smiled momentarily, but his grin quickly faded. His kid brother was smart, but CJ understood the miserable truth behind the question. He knew that whether or not Kip was as good at playing baseball as *he* was, Dad was still going to ride him hard either way. Kip wasn't going to be hanging out with friends, reading comics, or thinking about girls. He would be confined to their modest backyard, fetching balls like a dog. And it wouldn't be because he wanted to, but because he had to, so Dad could feel a little closer to achieving the on-field success he'd never found for himself.

"Nice try, but *I'm* the one who has the eye for talent," Greg told Kip.

He knocked Kip's gentle pitch back with far more power than the last and drilled the ball at his son to make a statement. Constantly asserting his dominance kept the boys under his thumb.

"You're only a dud if I say so," Greg continued.

The line drive went right at Kip's face. He was just able to get his glove up and avoid getting beaned, but when the ball smacked into the palm of his mitt, a sharp, stinging sensation ran up his arm.

"Ouch!" Kip cried.

A sour cringe found Greg. "C'mon, don't be a sissy. Did I tell you to take a break yet? Send it back!"

The visuals unfolding before CJ's eyes were all too familiar.

"The pros don't feel pain," Greg said. "Now shake it off and send it back."

Three short knocks pulled CJ's attention away from the sad display.

"CJ?" Tanya asked from behind the door.

“Yeah?”

“Can I come in for a second?”

CJ walked over to the door and pulled it open.

His sister stood in front of him, smiling excitedly. They usually didn't get much time together because of his full-time focus on baseball, a truth that saddened CJ.

“What's up?” he asked.

“You almost ready? Mom says that we've gotta get going now if we're gonna make it to that playground on time.”

“Oh crap! I completely forgot about that!” CJ grinned.

He'd been so lost in the tranquility of his music and comics that it had slipped his mind. Relief fell over him. He wouldn't have to drag himself out back for another one of Dad's famous late afternoon practices. Instead, he might actually have some fun. He imagined the activities at the playground would be *far* more exciting than the endless, repetitious drills he'd otherwise be forced into.

“Dang,” his sister said, “I don't know how you could forget after seeing those pictures, but today's the day. And *remember*, you promised we'd seesaw!”

“Oh, we'll seesaw alright. I'll send you right to the moon and back,” CJ said.

A laugh escaped him. He recalled the last few times they went. He'd vaulted her so high into the air that her butt flew several inches off the seat before smacking back down.

“No! None of the launch me in the air five feet stuff! You're gonna give me a heart attack!”

Tanya punched him in the arm softly, still maintaining her cheesy grin.

CJ knew Tanya liked acting as if she hated it when he messed with her, but that wasn't the case. He wouldn't have done it to her if it truly bothered her. It was just one of those things she screamed and acted upset about but secretly loved.

“Okay, I won't,” he said, winking.

“Seriously though, I'm looking forward to hanging out today. I'm so glad we get to do this!”

“Me too.”

“But I really hope they have a seesaw. I've never heard of an ultramodern playground, have you? What's that even mean?”

“I don't know, but they've gotta have one. What's a playground without—”

Suddenly their mother yelled from the bottom of the stairs. “Tanya! I told you to get CJ and come downstairs! We need to go, *now!* We're not supposed to be late! And tell Bobby to move his ass too!”

Tanya crinkled her face in annoyance and silently mimicked her mother's mini-rant.

A grin came over CJ's face. For the first time in a while, he just knew it was going to be a good day. With all the fun they had lined up in front of them, how could it not be?

## GENTLE GIANT

Rock Stanley stared at Geraldine Borden like she was a black hole, a gaping portal of darkness ready to devour him without a moment's notice. His eyes felt just as heavy as the weight that he carried on his stout shoulders. The terror encapsulated in his pupils wasn't anything new. The fear and uncertainty had been stapled to them long ago.

The old hag's glare burrowed into him with the speed and ease of a laser beam. The discomfort that was transmitted left him fidgety. Rock reached up, removing his weathered flat cap, unsure how to respond.

"It's a simple question," Geraldine said. "How many were we supposed to have?"

Rock held the cap firmly in one hand and used his remaining sausage fingers to scratch the disheveled follicles on the top of his skull. The words still weren't coming.

"Answer me, you idiot! How many?!" Geraldine's aged vocal cords screeched.

"Nine?" Rock finally managed to blurt out.

Rock's uncertain tone didn't ooze intelligence, nor did his timorous nature fit such an intimidating presence. At six-foot-three and just under two-hundred-eighty pounds, he didn't have to take shit from anyone. Yet, he did.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Geraldine said. "It speaks! Then help me understand, why did you approach a single parent with only one child yesterday?! Furthermore, you waited until now—hours before they arrive—to tell me!"

"Y—You said that I shouldn't bother you unless—"

"Not another word! You'll never be worth a damn!" Geraldine placed her hand over her mouth, adjusting her dentures. Anger left them on the verge of sliding out. "This is why you'll never be a Borden! Why you'll never be worthy of my fortune! All I ever wanted was another deserving generation to continue once I'm gone! Is that *really* too much to ask?!"

Rock's depression and angst only boiled harder with each cutting remark. He'd never been good enough. Not good enough for his blood parents, and certainly not good enough for his adopted mother. Geraldine was never shy about letting him know he hadn't earned acceptance. He was an outcast, an idiot, a habitual failure—an uncommon man in the sense that, even while in the presence of others, Rock Stanley was still alone.

"If my ovaries weren't barren, I would've had someone capable!" Geraldine said. "But instead, I had to wait almost two years just to get custody of a useless, sorry excuse like you! They didn't even give me a female! Even when you were just a child, I knew you'd be shit! I didn't get *this* successful," she swirled her finger around at the collection of valuables in the stunning room, "by *not* having an eye for failure. I saw you, boy. I saw you coming unglued a mile away. I should've known better than to expect anything less. I should've known better than to believe I could somehow change you."

She turned her back on Rock and looked up at the oil painting of herself that hung above the fireplace. It was a recent rendition that captured all her wrinkles and the oversized, hazelnut mole on her left cheek sprouting several inky hairs she'd neglected to trim. The vivid illustration outlined the compounded hatred and disgust she'd harbored for decades, a lifetime of disappointment trapped in her eyes. While Geraldine's hair may have been a blend of yin and yang, her soul was the former—black as night. And within that sinister space laid the fuel to propel anything her corrupt mind could conjure.

Outside of the parlor, which was nearly the size of a high school gymnasium, the echo of footsteps approached, pausing at the doorway.

Just beyond the threshold, in his elegant brown slacks, white collared shirt, and brunet vest, stood Adolpho Fuchs. The curled brow above his left eye indicated a bit of concern.

“What’s all zhe fuss?” Fuchs asked, his German roots shining through as he spoke.

Geraldine squawked. “There’s only going to be eight now, thanks to this goddamn putz!”

Rock’s squared face and boxy jaw sank lower as he hung his head and clasped the edges of his flat cap with each of his bulky hands. His attire was a far cry from the aristocratic garments worn by Geraldine and Fuchs. The worn-out long-sleeve had small holes developing over his elbows, and his leather belt was hanging on by a thread.

The lack of respectable clothing wasn’t the result of financial limitations. Rock simply hadn’t *earned* the right to high fashion. The way Geraldine talked, he probably never would. Unless of course, Rock was being unleashed to seek out candidates for the playground. In that case, Geraldine had a special outfit she allowed him to don. No family was going to trust riffraff.

“And? Is eight not enough?” Fuchs inquired.

“Nine is the number of children my mother had,” Geraldine said. “And her mother...and I just...” She paused. There was a quiver in her bottom lip that she struggled to subdue. “I just wanted to know what it was like to be her for a day. Just a day.”

The German couldn’t help but chuckle.

Geraldine glowered. “What’s so funny, Mr. Fuchs?”

“Nothing, my lady,” Fuchs replied, the amusement dissolving off his face.

“When my mother fell ill, out of all my siblings, it was *me* that stayed by her side! When all the others left, I stayed. I deserved this.”

Even Fuchs, who had been around Geraldine for many decades now, wasn’t so much shocked by her outlandish standards, but more by the rare display of emotion she’d offered them a window to.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware,” Fuchs replied.

The emotion saturating her cadence quickly evaporated when she thought about what came next.

“We’ve had several *individual* children come and play here in the past,” she said. “The low number amounted to the safest approach. But, as you both know, today is special. Today we take a risk! Today is about the family!”

The madness in Geraldine’s eyes flared. It wasn’t so much about family as it was about *the* family, the one she’d always wanted but was incapable of creating. It was about molding an extension of her own genetics into what she saw fit, about having an intimate connection with the mind she aspired to groom.

Geraldine still had Rock, but as he’d grown, his company was nothing like she’d envisioned. She would never look down on the rest of the world *with* Rock. She could only look down *on* Rock, along with the rest of the world.

If Geraldine had gotten *the family* she desired, there was a chance none of the day’s events would even be necessary, that her corrupt mind would’ve been occupied elsewhere, and the vindictive philosophy it housed might’ve never come to be.

But that wasn’t the case.

“These lowly peasants wallow in filth and poverty, yet, ironically, they’ve created something even my wealth can’t buy, the thing I wanted most, something even a brilliant mind such as yours couldn’t give me, Mr. Fuchs.” Geraldine turned to Rock. “These heathen parents have potential in their seeds. Generational potential! Their pathetic, utterly pointless legacies can be furthered by simply existing, by being graced with bodies that function properly. It’s not the



result of action! They didn't *earn* anything! They didn't *do* anything! It's dumb luck! But that luck runs out today. That unwarranted opportunity shall come to an end."

"Zhat it will," Fuchs said.

The German brandished a warped smile that conveyed he was every bit as sick and in line with the ideas Geraldine put forth.

Geraldine put her eyes on Fuchs once again. She mirrored his grin until another thought wormed into her brain and stunted it.

"That's if this numbskull can be effective for one day," she said. "It's probably too much to ask, though."

Geraldine fixed her glare back on Rock. He hung his head and his hands began to shake. As his cap bobbed up and down, Rock tried to imagine he wasn't there. As beautiful as The Borden Estate was, to him it was a prison built of gold. None of the castle's luxuries could make it worth his stay.

Rock lived inside an echo chamber. The rage-laced rants Geraldine regurgitated with cunning consistency ensured there would always be resounding reminders of his inferiority. The points were always punctual, so he could never forget.

He was a failure.

He was a lesser human.

He would never be good enough.

It was not just how Geraldine saw Rock, but also how Rock saw himself.

"Zhe boy will never be perfect," Fuchs said, "but he has secured you eight. We must be grateful for those efforts, otherwise, we risk ruining zhe festivities. You mustn't let one bad apple spoil zhe bunch, my lady. You should still have some joy, for today will be far different zhan any other zhat we've ever witnessed."

Geraldine glared at the old man and let the words Fuchs offered simmer in her brain. A smile crept over her haggard face. "Maybe you're right. It's not perfect, but I suppose we'll just have to make the best of it." She turned herself back in Rock's direction. "Go to my room. It's time we dress you properly before our guests arrive."

## FUN AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

“Settle down,” Tom demanded using his best disciplinarian voice. “I know you’re excited, but unless the two of you relax, we’ll turn this car right around. I’m serious, no more screaming. Is that clear?”

“Yeesh, chill out, Dad,” Sadie replied.

“Yeah, we’re just playing,” Samantha said.

Sadie leaned into her and let out a girlish giggle.

Isaac pushed his bulky glasses up his nose and sat staring out the window. He peered over the edge of the cliff, watching the stunning waves hypnotically flow. Even the road leading to their wondrous destination was fancy. Something incredible was approaching, and he wasn’t about to let his sisters fuck that up for him.

He usually preferred to keep to himself, but in this instant, he needed to speak up. At ten-years-old, Isaac still had much to learn and was fully aware of that. But for his age, he was far ahead of the majority of his peers. He wasn’t egotistical about it; quite the contrary. However, as he often did, Isaac used sound reasoning to plead his case to his father.

“How is it fair to punish *all* of us because Sam and Sadie wanna be brats?”

“Hey!” Sadie yipped.

While Tom kept his focus on the road, Molly took the initiative. She craned her neck around to Isaac and let out a sigh.

“I suppose if that happened, we’d just have to do something *extra* special for you in the future,” Molly said bouncing her eyebrows.

“We’ll be good,” Sam begged.

“Yeah,” Sadie chimed in.

“After seeing the pictures that you showed us of this place,” Isaac said, “there’s no way you could one-up it. I’d still be losing out.”

“It sounds like your sisters are going to behave, right?” Tom interjected, glaring at Sadie and Sam in the rearview.

They noticed the stare of chastisement and nodded at him accordingly.

“You shouldn’t have anything to worry about, buddy,” Tom assured him. “Besides, I think it’s just up ahead.”

Tall, ebony gates pointed toward the slow-drifting cluster of clouds floating above. The towering steel spears seemed higher than necessary. The preview of the immaculate patch visible through the gates of the property was breathtaking. The medieval architecture ripped from a children’s fable.

The placement of the estate at the end of the sequestered cliff-walk created another inordinate coating of privacy. Along with the location, the sheer altitude of the massive stone walls layered in front of the steel fencing could’ve kept a colossus at bay.

The girls screeched in unison. “We’re here! We’re here!”

Isaac crinkled his face in annoyance. His sisters knew how to squeak out pitches that always got under his skin. They knew it did. That’s exactly why they did it.

While Sam was a year older than Sadie, most people believed them to be twins. It wasn’t the case, but it spoke to their kinship and bond. Their personalities were in stark contrast to their older brother—Sadie in particular.



She might've only been seven years old, but she didn't let that stop her from squaring off with Isaac. She'd been known to assault him, both verbally and physically. She was a firecracker, and once her fuse was lit, Isaac knew he was in for a battle.

Sam was no angel either but never seemed to initiate the torment. Despite being born first, she followed Sadie's lead. If Sadie was mean, Sam was mean.

The mimic of brazen behavior was most likely the reason people believed them to be twins. Also, they both had a similar dainty stature and were blessed with the same shimmering blonde hair. The easiest way to tell them apart was their hairstyles. Sam's hair was normally held back in a ponytail while Sadie had pigtails.

Most people who encountered the sisters for the first time perceived them as innocent. But looks could be deceiving, and often were.

"How the hell does this work?" Tom asked.

"Good question," Molly replied, scanning the brochure.

"These gates are so huge," Isaac mumbled.

"Your ears are huge," Sadie sniped.

She reached around Sam and flicked the wide, awkward cartilage that leaped off the side of her brother's face. Her harassment was stealthy enough to avoid garnering parental attention.

A slight rush of blush manifested on Isaac's cheeks—his sister knew how to hurt him.

It wasn't enough that he was scrawny and unathletic, or that he was shy as a chipmunk. He already got fucked with in school for having strange ears, but Sadie wanted to turn the screw even further. She wasn't the type to avoid people's sensitivities—she preferred to exploit them, to publicly tar and feather them. It wasn't just Isaac. She'd done it to her peers, strangers, and friends. At just seven years old, Sadie's name rang closer to her personality. She was a psychological sadist.

As the family wagon crept to a stop, Tom rolled down the window of his driver's side door. He gawked at the small speaker with a single white button staring back at him.

"I guess I'll just push the button," Tom shrugged.

Molly nodded at him in approval.

The crackle of the speaker suddenly erupted with an elderly man's German accent.

"Hello, name, please?"

"Ah, it's Tom—Tom Grimley."

"Wonderful. Zhe gates ahead are opening now. Follow zhe path all the way up to zhe main entrance and we shall be with you very shortly."

"Alright, sounds good!"

A loud metallic unlocking sound rang out, followed by the electronic hum of the gate gliding backward. The Grimley family sat wide-eyed as Tom pushed down on the accelerator.

## IMPROMPTU ENCOURAGEMENT

Rock stared into the mirror, the collective pain pooling in his glazed eyes. Geraldine lurked creepily behind him and slipped the raggedy coat off his torso. Her hands lingered longer than necessary on his muscular frame, familiar with his physique. She caressed Rock as she disrobed him.

“Oooof, my word,” Geraldine said. “When’s the last time you bathed? You’re most certainly going to need to take a shower. I can’t have you smelling so foul in front of our guests. Even if you’re not above them, you need to act like it. Get this undershirt off.”

Rock hesitated. An unavoidable, rotten reminder was looming. One he wasn’t ready to confront again. It was the reason his funk had become so swollen that it leaked into his battered garments.

Geraldine scrunched her face.

“Take it off, I said!”

The cutting command caused Rock to jump.

Geraldine’s hands remained resting on the back of his arms. She quivered as the warmth spread through her. Feeling the physical manifestation of his fear contact her phalanges excited Geraldine. It enticed her.

Rock pulled the white undershirt over his muscular frame and dropped it onto the floor.

Geraldine peered around the wall of man in front of her, gazing into the standing mirror, feeding on the agony bouncing back from Rock’s pupils.

The melancholic muscleman eyed the reflective glass, still unable to believe it was real. He was the past, present, and future in a single glimpse.

Suddenly, his senses were overwhelmed, and visceral flashes of the encounter crept back into his head. The scent of cooked flesh found his nasal cavity again. The sound of searing skin crackled its way into his eardrums. He felt the itchy ropes binding his wrists, and the rigidity of the wooden chair he was tied to. The soreness in his throat flared from the desperate screams relentlessly ravaging it.

Rock’s eyes dropped as they took in the reddish-violet skin that bubbled back toward him. The eternally inflamed tissue puffed upward, discolored by the unforgiving heat of the branding iron Geraldine had held all those years ago.

At that time, Rock was just a throwaway, an unwanted and undeveloped teenager. She’d been harsh and wicked to him, but he’d never expected things to escalate in the manner they had. He never imagined such an irreversible event would transpire.

Through that old, adolescent lens, Geraldine looked a bit different in his mind. Her skin was smoother, and her hair had more color, but her tongue was still as sharp as ever. The verbal lashings hadn’t changed with time. They remained her most punishing tool, one that haunted Rock as steadily as Geraldine’s hand the moment she pressed the scalding iron into his chest.

Over.

And over.

And over.

Rock recalled how Geraldine had screamed while his flesh had flared from the blistering heat.

“Why did you look at her?!” she’d said. “I saw you!”

Just a short distance away from where he’d sat, Wanda, the then live-in maid, lay motionless on the floor. A growing outline of garnet gruesomeness had infected the carpet. The

soaked flooring her cracked head lay upon would be the site of Wanda's final thoughts.

The battered brain tissue littered around her malformed head was a ghastly image that had burned itself into Rock. It was the picture of all potential fear. The violent amalgamation of inner cranial tissues, skeletal fragments, and Geraldine's rage. An incident that left an impression of such depth on him that it would last a lifetime.

Rock remembered the nonchalant nature of the only other living adult in the room, the straight face Fuchs wore as he watched the madness unfold, sitting casually on the sofa by the fireplace. The gory murder was far from the most difficult thing Fuchs had seen. It looked like just another evening for him as he puffed away on his pipe, watching the branding irons in the fire grow a lighter shade of ginger.

"You'd better take a damn good look at her now!" Geraldine bellowed. "Because it's the last time you'll ever fucking see her! It's the last time you'll ever see anyone!"

Geraldine's grim words weren't exactly accurate. Rock would see her again, for he would be tasked with turning Wanda's body into fertilizer.

Her carcass was hefty.

The generous portions of garbled-up tissue allowed the insects to eat well that evening. After the deed was done, Rock peered over the land, trying to lose himself in the soothing sound of the ocean waves. In his heart, he hoped the garden's insects would never eat so well again.

It wouldn't be the last time Rock heard the hungry hum of the industrial-grade wood chipper. More meat would be tenderized, and more bones would be mangled. The device continued to gain relevance as his twisted relationship with Geraldine unraveled.

Wanda's departure left a void in the housework, but no replacement was hired. Geraldine's jealousy kept new personalities from entering the fold. Instead, she forced Rock to absorb all of Wanda's duties, in addition to the ones he already managed.

Geraldine's delusional belief that there was a sexual interest between Rock and the help would never be corrected. His punishment remained permanently in effect, and those living within the walls of The Borden Estate continued their push to total societal isolation.

Rock trembled with disgust, breaking out of his dream-like state as Geraldine's pruned paws glided upward over the unalterable letters scorched into his skin.

"You're mine, remember?" she whispered seductively.

The discolored letters weren't perfectly aligned, but they were close enough to understand the four-letter word that had been singed into Rock's soul.

As Rock stared into the mirror and read the ghastly font that comprised the word 'MINE,' a single tear fell down his bristly cheek.

"And you'll be mine forever," Geraldine said.

She laid down on the bed behind them and delicately tugged Rock's hand.

The conservative dress Geraldine wore became the opposite when she arched her rickety back, and pulled the onyx-toned sartorial up over her hips.

As Geraldine stared at his solemn expression and the permanent label she'd administered beneath it, she only grew more eager to feel his tongue inside her. She pulled her moist panties down, allowing her fermented beaver to peek out from below. The scent was just as ungodly as the sight. Rock stared at the stretchy skin abound with wrinkles. The slick and sudsy sap leaking out from her floppy hole glistened in the daylight. When Geraldine got juicy, she manufactured a rancid odor all her own, one that made Rock sick to his stomach each time he encountered it.

The fetid aroma floundered about, triggering a flashback to the many awful pastimes Rock had been forced into. The sourish scent stunk of outdated dairy, spoiled seafood, and

asparagus-tainted urine. The monstrous melody that was Geraldine's cave brought Rock to his knees.

As Rock looked at the moldy meat, he heard Geraldine's ravings in his head. *The chemicals in those soaps and shampoos shorten the average lifespan. That's why you'll need to stay clean and why I need to maintain my natural oils.* Rock had watched Geraldine grow conspiratorial in her old age. It was like she sensed death looming, but her bottomless wealth could only extend her life so far.

"What are you waiting for?" Geraldine asked.

She pulled her leg backward, exposing her cunt and asshole. The playful passion in her voice was starting to dry up. Impatience—*anger*—could return at any moment.

As the sickening crack of her hip popping resounded through Rock's skull, he knew it was best to begin. A woman of Geraldine's age shouldn't have been so flexible, but she'd put Rock up to the task with such regularity that the yoga-like stretch had become an amateur task.

He'd heard her bone clear as a church bell. It rang most times just before he was presented with his most appalling chore. With an inner disturbance beating around his bowels, he wished it was over, but wishes weren't for people like him. They were for those who celebrated birthdays, and those who aspired to accomplish great things in their lifetimes. They were for normal people that hadn't disappointed everyone they'd come into contact with.

Rock unhinged his jaw and tried to accumulate saliva. Anxiety had dried his mouth to dust. He stared at the faded meat littered with spiky, gray hair. There were patches of scratchy, old skin infected with flaking, dead cells. Not to mention a mortifying, rash-like irritation that encompassed her entire cunt. There were also other areas afflicted with random discoloration—flesh dominated by something that looked fungal in origin.

Geraldine harbored countless battle scars from the experimentation Fuchs had put her through. The molecules of other men had left her altered. She'd made many sacrifices en route to achieving an impossible dream.

"Do it!" she barked.

As Geraldine waited for Rock to dive in, she glared deeply into her reflection in the standing mirror.

Rock finally consented, sticking his boxy face between her feminine snakebite. As his tongue registered her tart taint, he did his best not to vomit. He couldn't prevent it totally, but the minuscule, acidic wave that crept up his esophagus proved useful.

He swashed it around his palate, allowing his dry mouth a measure of relief before he went full-bore eating her clit. It was a trick he'd learned some time ago, using his own revulsion to his benefit. As Rock nibbled on the rosy micro-penis, he allowed the clear vomit to dribble over her pussy and down her ass crack.

"Oh, yes!" Geraldine roared.

Her cries signified how alive she felt.

She arched her head back and used her free hand to latch onto the hairs growing from her mole. She twisted the elongated follicles with each lap Rock took, then refocused her gaze on her worn reflection. She became lost in herself as she wailed out and tugged the sharp mole-hairs, taking joy in the subtle, stinging pain.

Rock accelerated, using the technique he'd gained from their prior encounters. He tried his damndest to make her cum as quickly as possible. He didn't want to be eating her ass and cunt any longer than the bare minimum.

He kicked into an even higher gear, accelerating his perverse actions, doing his best to remember what made her moist. Rock's jaw began to ache alongside his heart. He used his fattest finger to gather spit and puke, then gently massage the skin between each of her holes.

"Fuck," she cried. "Don't stop! Don't you fucking—"

Geraldine's sentence was cut off by her own lust-laced excitement. Her eyes widened to capacity as ecstasy overwhelmed her, and her ghastly head whipped side to side with such jubilation that it caused her bottom dentures to eject from her mouth.

A hearty wad of drool leaked from her gummy mouth in the heat of the passion. Geraldine didn't let the slip spoil her moment. She cradled Rock's face with her thighs and pulled it deeper into her pussy. Then she dug her pointy nails into the back of his head and came like a hurricane.



## HOUSE OF THE BLIND

Geraldine lay alone on her silky gold sheets, the ecstasy slithering through her wrinkled system a fleeting one. Upon being penetrated with the smarting sting of boredom again, she crawled her way back out of bed.

She hadn't bothered to put her teeth back in or wipe her slimy vaginal leakage dry. She was too focused on the door at the far end of her bedroom. Her cunt dribbled onto the hardwoods as she closed in on the knob.

She'd found her enthusiasm again.

As Geraldine twisted her wet, liver-spotted hand and pulled the door open, a different world presented itself. One that often preoccupied her wicked mind. A place that no one else but her could possibly understand.

The reflective surfaces stretched from the floors to the walls to the ceiling. Not an inch was left uncovered. Light fixtures dangled from the reflective ceiling in the narrow, rat maze of mirrors.

Parts of it felt like a funhouse, the architecture of the room having so many numerous paths that crossed over each other. But the images the room projected didn't stretch Geraldine's physique in childish or exaggerated manners. She'd designed the area so she could gaze upon the most granular, ornate details of the body she was obsessed with. The only vessel that could propel her heart to race and bring back the legendary memories.

Geraldine was the oyster of her own eye.

Having a perpetually unsatisfied sex drive took work, but however unorthodox the measures, she aimed to quench her thirst. Geraldine knew she'd never be able to have herself the way she craved, but she'd done everything to make the experience as close to her unusual fantasies as possible.

The shiny hallways looked like the exterior of a diseased cactus. The countless, multicolored pricks of pleasure extended outward, calling to her.

Some were long.

Some were wide.

Some were soft.

Some were hard.

The dildos were suctioned to the glass mirrors within the hallways. She could slow her haggard frame in front of whichever one struck her fancy and adjust it to the appropriate height and angle.

She turned her back to the wall and looked at her slender, worn reflection.

"Just the girl I was looking for," she said with a smirk.

The orange rubber cock littered with stout veins of nightcrawler-sized dimensions immediately made her lips pucker. A crusted, hormonal residue still hung in gunky flakes on the pumpkin-toned shaft from one of her previous sessions. She was ready to reintroduce the dried remains into her soggy cavern.

The dildo drew closer to her slobbering slit and Geraldine's stretchy parts quivered with hunger. Her pruned gash was ready. Just being inside the room of her ultimate obsession made her heart pump, and the feeling of the rod reconnecting with her hole left her knees weak.

In the room, she was blind to the typical surroundings that saddened her. The dark reality that she was doomed to remain alone. Within the hall of mirrors, she was able to lose herself in her anatomy, and also immerse herself enough to reminisce about the origin of those feelings.

The sound of her moist meat conforming and stretching to accommodate the object filled her eardrums. Geraldine firmed her body and pressed her lined palms against the glass in front of her. She rode the rubber like an eager porn star as saliva seeped from her mouth.

She looked at her own leathery leer, relishing in her reflection. But it still wasn't enough. Geraldine closed her eyes.

She traveled back to a time when there was still hope, when the outlook wasn't so dreary. When she was focused on finding satisfaction, and not robbing others of it.

The intense images played like a secret movie in her skull.

Seven-year-old Geraldine sat in the closet. The slivers of blinds in front of her nose offered an obscure but satisfactory view. She spied her mother's smooth, bare ass on the bed. It was the first time she'd gotten to see it, but far from the first time she'd thought about it. She had no idea where the feelings had come from, but, as far back as she could remember, Mildred Borden's backside was a daily thought.

It had become an obsession.

Seeing her mother's ass sitting atop another man's face stirred a strange, warm, yet welcome feeling inside Geraldine, but along with the elation came anger. Geraldine wasn't upset her mother wasn't riding her father's face. She was upset she wasn't riding hers.

Geraldine rarely got an opportunity to play-wrestle with her mom, but whenever she did, she always let her mother get on top. Each time she tried to worm her way closer to her hips, closer to having that thick, voluptuous backside suffocating her.

Geraldine's mother always realized the awkwardness when it arose. Like any logical parent, Mildred pulled away from the inappropriate positions. She wasn't quite sure if her daughter was aware of the inappropriateness of such horseplay, but as time went on, the sparkle of suspicion in Mildred's eye only widened.

Now, as Geraldine thought about her mother, she feverishly gnashed her purple, slimy gums. Her racing heart told her she'd found the closest thing to love she could manufacture.

Memories.

From that closet in her mind, more important moments in Geraldine's deranged timeline triggered.

As a teenager, she'd happened upon the panties in the trash. They were there for the taking, bonded to the pad by a patch of congealed blood. Mildred's flow had gotten a little too heavy. Geraldine had stared down at them, biting her bottom lip. The red cloth had been so close to her mother's beautiful ass, as close as she wanted to be. Geraldine couldn't just let them go to waste, so she'd plucked the ghastly underwear from the can and lifted them to her face. Burying her nose inside them, the irony, Filet-O-Fish scent made Geraldine quiver with exhilaration. She was so enthralled after her sniff that she forgot to clean the blood away from her face. After that groundbreaking day, Mildred always believed Geraldine got random bloody noses because of the spontaneous excuse she had to give.

While the penetration deep inside Geraldine's pussy continued, she continued to reminisce. She took a slobber of drool and slapped it between her legs. With the saliva on her clit, she rubbed it, attempting to escalate her erotic trip down memory lane.

"I miss you, Momma," she hissed, her tone bordering on demonic.

The obscene imagery in her head transitioned from the trash to the toilet.

In her mind, she stood inside the spacious bathroom connected directly to her mother's bedroom. In a mansion as grand as Geraldine's childhood home, the luxury alone would've been enough to distract most. But bottomless money and elegant accommodations had done little to

entertain her. Snooping through her mother's belongings, however...

On that particularly twisted morning, Mildred had left in a hurry. There'd been some kind of emergency. While Geraldine couldn't remember exactly what the commotion was, it was of little relevance. The floating mass that lay in the mustardy water in front of Geraldine was all she needed to remember.

Her mother had left in such a flash she'd forgotten to flush. The log of excrement wasn't particularly large; it appeared that her mother had been interrupted and unable to finish her business.

Geraldine's eyes had been glued to the modest movement drifting in the tainted liquid. It beckoned her.

Even though it was shit, it had slid out from between the two heavenly hams that made up Mom's posterior.

It couldn't be overlooked.

At the time, it might've been the closest Geraldine would ever get to tasting her infatuation, so she'd plucked the putrid purge from the bowl and laid her body down on the floor. As Geraldine slipped off her pants and underwear, she stared at the lurid lump with an irresistible inner lust.

Geraldine had only nibbled on it in the beginning, cherishing each experimental gnaw along with the pungent stench that clung to it. But her enthusiasm rapidly escalated. Geraldine's hot lady parts shuddered as her perverse inner spirit took a crushing hold over her. Her teeth soon parted, and she inserted the soggy mass into her mouth, all but for half an inch on the tail end.

Imagining her mother perched over her face, Geraldine chewed into the slimy secretion. She visualized that it might taste the same as her mother if only Geraldine had been able to pounce on her unwashed backside that morning.

Geraldine hadn't swallowed it—she'd savored it.

She had taken the remaining wad of waste between her fingers and positioned it upon her pleading clit, smearing the shit in a circular fashion. She'd never cum so hard as the day she'd happened upon that bowel movement—not until the last time, she saw her mother.

The gush of liquid that had left Geraldine that morning on the Spanish-tiled floor of her mother's bathroom, pulled her closer to a current climax. She held her eyes shut, reliving the rancid memory down to the finest details, knowing the best was yet to come.

The twisted slideshow moved forward in Geraldine's mind. A mid-forties version of Geraldine stood over her sick mother's bedside. For such a grim situation, the wide grin frozen on Geraldine's face certainly seemed out of place.

The oxygen mask fixed upon Mildred's mouth spelled doom. She was scrawny and hardly able to move. Speaking was no longer an option. In her bedridden state, it looked like death was looming over her, and in a way, he was. But the vehicle he'd assumed to collect the aristocrat was one Mildred would've never predicted.

When Geraldine's pants and panties had come off, so had Mildred's oxygen mask. She'd struggled to breathe without the assistance of the device, but her fight had become far more extreme when Geraldine plopped down on top of her face with her sagging snatch.

Emulating her mother's actions from years past, Geraldine muscled her malicious meat over Mildred's mouth and nostrils. An oily trail of clear and off-white fluids blanketed Mildred's horrified face. As Geraldine's legs quaked with a pleasure she'd never imagined, the snuffles and gasps her mother emitted vibrated against her lips and hood.

Mildred's perverse struggle continued to tickle Geraldine until a newfound elation

championed her to the pinnacle before finally dying out altogether.

The flashback of her mother sucking at her clit for dear life always brought Geraldine to The Promised Land. As she smashed her ass vigorously against the mirror, her arousal peaked. The scream of pleasure that roared from her throat was accompanied by an expulsion of creamy leakage.

The force of her thrusts rattled the mirror, but she wasn't worried about it breaking. When the hall of mirrors was constructed, she'd used extra thick panes. It would take a *tremendous* amount of force for these to buckle.

She grinned with glee as she ramped up her revolutions, thrashing wildly against the wall like a woman who'd been caged for years. The vision didn't fixate upon any particular detail. Geraldine consumed the scene as a whole. As she slithered closer to climax, she opened her eyes and gawked at the woman in the glass.

She wasn't sure if her mother's murder was the reason she'd become attracted to her own physique, but it seemed like the only logical deduction.

The two of them looked so much alike. During her twenties, Geraldine and Mildred had often been mistaken for sisters. But just as Geraldine slid her cunt off the stiff plastic, another recollection wormed its way into her brain. One she'd rather not ponder, but always seemed to be confronted by.

Geraldine had no one left to chase.

She looked into the mirror, wiping the drool from her mouth, a wrinkle of disgust overtaking her expression.

The shift in her psychosexual philosophy was a difficult one. Geraldine's self-lust was enjoyable at first, but it wasn't the same as the other mountains she'd climbed. The summary of sensations wasn't even a blip on the erotic radar compared to the incestual instances with her mother. It was like going from caviar to catfish.

Her fatal flaw was obvious: she hadn't thought ahead.

Even when the solution came to her, it was too late. She remembered the thought quite vividly, but it was a concept she'd rather have forgotten.

As far back as Geraldine could remember, she'd always hated people. But a short time after Mildred's funeral, when she'd been depressed as ever, she'd decided she couldn't be alone. She hadn't been seeking to communicate with anyone, but just to quell her lonesomeness.

The playground was a random choice—a place her mother had taken her before their wealth had ballooned, a place Geraldine remembered dallying around in with a nostalgic fondness.

That day when Geraldine took her place on the park bench, she saw a mother and daughter playing together. She couldn't help but realize just how similar they looked. It was nearly the same level of replication Geraldine had seen between her and Mildred. Then suddenly, it struck her.

*A child!* She'd thought.

Her playground epiphany had the potential to replace the darkness she yearned for. In theory, it made sense, but an unnoticed truth confronted her.

Geraldine had over-ripened.

During the decades of blindness, where her incestuous craze had all but consumed her, Geraldine's reproductive pieces had grown stagnant. She'd slowly dried away into irreversible infertility. It was as if God knew the infernal escapades that might ensue and had given his stamp of approval.

Geraldine stared at herself in the mirror and reflected on the past. In thinking about what brought her to this moment, her expression held a measure of anger. But beyond the hatred, she was making room for another emotion. Her pupils flared, a twinkle of joy eclipsing the rotten recollections.

“You’re somethin’ else,” she whispered.

Since finding out children weren’t in her future, Geraldine had returned to the playground countless times. Ideas on how to best placate her demons had progressed, as had how she perceived the more fortunate families playing in the space.

Geraldine’s gummy grin now stared back at her in the mirror. What had begun as a simple idea was finally ready to be revealed. The structures the peasants deserved would finally be given to them, structures only an era of vindictiveness could’ve conjured.

The charity she’d built; the millions of dollars that she’d spent; the countless test runs she’d orchestrated; the precious years that had passed her by. It all had been building towards this moment, the impending climax of a wretched lifetime.

The privileged peasants would soon understand what peril truly was. She would bring balance back into the world around her and show them all she’d been robbed of.

Exiting the hall of mirrors, Geraldine looked at the grandfather clock near the fireplace. “I’d better hurry.”

## IMPATIENTLY WAITING

The drive had gone by quicker than anticipated. Greg stood beside Lacey, his arms folded at the front doors of the castle. His initial amazement at the majestic architecture had worn off. Greg wasn't the patient type.

Thankfully, their collection of kids was occupied. He'd instructed them to play a game of tag while waiting for the owners. He always wanted his kids active and contending. He knew their futures, and he most certainly depended on the competitive spirit.

"The fuck is taking so long?" Greg asked.

"I wish I knew," Lacey replied.

His wife shook her head, her pink hoop earrings swaying. Her puffy blonde hair glistened in the sunshine as she reached for the zebra slap bracelet on her wrist.

"I'm getting pretty damn tired of waiting," he grumbled. "They said eleven, no?"

"They did," Lacey agreed.

She unrolled her gift into its alternate stiff and flat form.

Greg grimaced. "Well, he's got about five more minutes before—"

*SLAP!*

The sound of the bracelet connecting with Lacey's dainty wrist caught Greg off guard.

"Jesus!" he said. "Do you have to do that? I heard one of those things malfunctioned and poked someone right in the damn vein. Bled out right on the spot, the way I heard it."

Lacey continued anyway. She wanted to do it again but saw Greg was getting annoyed, so she decided to refrain.

"Relax, baby bear," she said. "That story is just an urban legend. Everybody has these things. And who cares if we hang around here a little while? They're paying us to be here, remember?"

"I don't give a shit if they're planning on putting the kids through college. Nobody leaves the Matthews waiting."

Despite the tough talk, Greg wouldn't be budging anytime soon. Doing so went against his philosophy. The boys were supposed to generate income—perhaps Tanya too. They weren't *just* family; they were an investment, one that should be lucrative so long as he instilled them with the proper ethic and nudged them along. The kids reeling in three grand just to test out a stupid playground was too easy, but Greg was confident this was only the beginning.

He watched his oldest son, thirteen-year-old Bobby, get chased down by Greg's pride and joy, CJ. He was certain CJ was going to be special from the moment he got his legs under him. The boy's uncanny speed, muscularity, and intangible prowess were easy for the former athlete to see dollar signs behind.

*Son-of-a-bitch is faster than a Ferrari. Little shit might even be faster than me,* Greg thought.

Greg watched Bobby as he tried to close in on his tag target. He was mere inches away when CJ jukeed him. CJ's natural gifts frustrated his oldest, causing Bobby to give up and focus on the youngest of the litter, Kip.

*It ain't even fair to the rest of them,* Greg chuckled to himself gleefully. *That's money in the bank.*

Greg saw himself in his son. CJ held the same set of attributes he had before tearing both ACLs in his third college football game. While his body had failed him, he knew that CJ wouldn't be hindered by the same gremlin.

As he watched CJ's long slicing strides, Greg knew he'd have made one hell of a wide receiver. The kid had hands like Cris Carter and cut as sharp as Barry Sanders. But all that was too risky. He didn't want his golden ticket to suffer the same injury that sullied Greg's scholarship.

Although the ligament tears that ended Greg's career had the potential to happen in any sport, he wanted CJ to do something with minimal contact. The gridiron was too violent. It wasn't so much that Greg cared for his well-being; he just wanted to see his show horse run in as many races as possible.

When Greg pushed him into baseball, he took to it like a duck to water. With CJ at shortstop, sensational catches and double-plays were always the norm. And when he stepped up to the plate, there was always the chance that he might blast one out of the park. The natural, sporty talent that he harbored left him leaps and bounds ahead of his age group. And just as Greg had told himself, CJ was the king of whatever diamond he graced.

Bobby, on the other hand, was a painfully crushing disappointment. Greg had high expectations for his firstborn. He definitely didn't expect a stinker. But it wasn't like he could just return him or go back in time and have an abortion. Greg still pushed Bobby the same as all the others, but he knew there was no light at the end of his tunnel. He liked that Bobby could still beat the shit out of most kids, but he was still too fat for a pair of gloves and headgear. Toughness alone was useless to Greg in the fiscal scheme of things.

*At least he ain't a faggot*, Greg thought. It was all his warped, bigoted brain could find to be proud of.

Bobby's stride stretched far further than his seven-year-old brother could. In less than a minute, Bobby, red-cheeks and all, was able to close in on him. He slapped his back with a thunderous tag and Kip fell onto the grass.

"You're it, dumbass," Bobby hollered.

He ran away unleashing a hyena-like laugh.

"Hey! Language!" Lacey yelled.

It was a request she'd made to Bobby more times than she could count.

Greg watched Kip like a scout before draft day. His brother had given him a decent shot in the lungs, and he'd taken a tough tumble. Despite being disappointed with his boy getting caught, the blow and fall didn't faze Kip. The jury was still out on his overall potential—he was too young for Greg to figure—but at least he could take some pride in his son's toughness.

*Welp, he ain't no pussy, that's for damn sure.*

Kip lifted himself off the ground and looked to his sister Tanya, pegging her as the easiest catch.

Upon seeing Kip key in on her, Tanya readied herself. The nine-year-old coyly positioned her body beside an extravagant cement birdbath at the center of the lawn.

*Fuckin' birds got a better shower here than I do at home*, Greg thought.

When Kip charged in, Tanya tactfully sidestepped the boy and made her way around the fixture.

"Why is she playing with them again?" Lacey asked.

"I dunno, 'cause they're kids?" Greg reasoned.

"I just... I don't want her thinking she's going to be something she's not."

"Seriously? She's just messing around."

As shallow as Greg could be, even he was a bit shocked that his wife was irked by Tanya mixing it up. His buzz was also wearing off, making him just more argumentative than he

normally was.

“We’ve been letting her mess around with them too much,” Lacey whined “Now she’s talking about swimming lessons.”

Lacey and her daughter locked eyes momentarily. Tanya’s shoulder’s tightened and her eyes drifted as she grew distracted by her mother’s scowl of disapproval. The dirty looks were nothing new. She’d seen them many times before and even grown somewhat accustomed to absorbing her glares of displeasure.

Routine didn’t make them hurt any less though.

Tanya’s mother had a vision for her, but the *last* thing Tanya wanted to do was stand on the sidelines of a sport she didn’t care about. She wasn’t looking for an eventual suitor; she wanted to compete. The idea of cheerleading felt low and idiotic. It disheartened her that it was the only thing her mother believed her to be capable of.

What Lacey surmised was best mattered little to Tanya. She might’ve been young, but she was already old enough to understand that no one, not even the woman she came out of, was going to control her.

Tanya didn’t need her mother’s belief; she had her own.

She envisioned herself swimming with the best of them, or maybe competing in gymnastics which she’d taken an interest in recently. Tanya hoped that her mom might be asking her father about the lessons they’d discussed at the table that morning.

Tanya wasn’t sure what more evidence they needed from her. At the YMCA she was the fastest in the water, but her parents were never there. How could they even know? They used the club more as a babysitter for Tanya than a means to support her passion. It allowed her father to focus more on training her brothers, and left her mother to do whatever it was she did in her free time. It worked like a charm when the investment pricing was low. But now Lacey’s babysitter had become more expensive than it was worth.

She’d show them.

She’d show them *right now*.

Tanya only relinquished a meager amount of her attention toward her mother’s cancerous attitude. She yearned to watch her failures bloom, but today, she would have to wait.

As Kip closed in on her, Tanya let him get close enough to think he had her dead to rights. But as Kip blasted full-speed ahead, Tanya pivoted her body and went tumbling sideways. Planting her palm on the ground, her cartwheel successfully evaded the tag. As she landed on her feet in perfect form, Kip found himself sliding belly-first past the birdbath, over the impeccable front lawn.

“Whoa, did you see that?” Greg asked. “Maybe there’s something to it. It’s only normal for her to have a hobby. All the boys do. Hell, she might even be a little better than you think. Maybe she deserves those lessons after all.”

“You’re going overboard now,” Lacey replied.

“Am I?”

Lacey gritted her teeth.

The move Tanya had shown off was impressive, a trick she might’ve even been able to use in cheer if Lacey could somehow break her daughter’s will. But it didn’t help convince Greg that the costly lessons might not be worth it. If anything, it was an argument in favor of the investment.

Greg and Lacey were alike in how they viewed the children that matched their gender. All Lacey wanted was a daughter that would follow in her footsteps. But she never expected Tanya



to have her own ideas or have a stronger mind than the rest of her siblings. She couldn't be molded to simply worship those within her familial circumference just because they shared the same bloodline.

"She got lucky," Lacey grumbled. "The sooner she realizes that, the easier it'll be. She's not like the boys. She's thinking Olympics, but she *should be* thinking pom-poms."

Greg chewed on the thought for a moment before a jock grin graced his face.

"I remember you in those tight-ass outfits. Fuck, you were something else, baby doll."

A beam of joy crept up on Lacey's face, matching her love.

"Is that right?"

"That's right."

The intimate memory was abruptly disturbed by the sound of tires slowly churning through the gravel.

Greg and Lacey turned their attention to the vehicle heading in their direction.

"Hey! Timeout!" Greg yelled. "Watch out for the car! I can't afford to have any of you getting hurt!"

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