

The Flashlight Game

Isaac and I are playing in the darkened garage when it finally happens. He is inventing a new game as we go along, and he is giggling and screaming. The thin beam of my flashlight goes on and off to briefly illuminate the garage at his command.

“On!”

He runs forward into the beam and laughs.

“Off!”

I hear him skitter back and start running forward again. His tiny, three-year-old feet slapping quietly in the dark.

“On!”

He jumps into the beam again and laughs so hard he almost falls over onto the concrete. Before he can fully recover from his laughing fit, he runs up to hug my legs and starts to run backward again.

“Off!”

I hear him shuffle backward, run into a box and start toward me again. I turn the flashlight on just in

time to see the black arms wrap around him and pull him back into the darkness. My beam sweeps across the boxes and the wall behind them, but all I see are shadows and no movement.

Keeping my beam trained on his last spot, I run to the wall and turn on the single overhead bulb in the garage. Light washes over the small room and shadows evaporate, but I see no trace of my son. I should scream and tear the room apart, but I sink down to my knees and try to recover the breath I would need to make any sound at all. I knew this day could come, but I wanted to believe he would be spared a fate he never earned.

I don't know who was the first to be taken, but I know that the curse goes back as far as we have records in my family, save a few lucky generations. My father explained it to me when I was getting married. He said that, just as he had learned from his father, it was time for me to learn the full story before I decided to become a husband and potential father. Technically, he didn't call it a curse. None of the men in my family know what to call it, but it feels like a curse. My brothers call it a rite or a passage, but they are wrong because they don't really remember.

When my father told me the history, he asked me if I remembered being taken. I lied and said no, but that wasn't true. It wasn't true, and it's even less true right now. I remember the darkness and the loneliness. I remember the slick arms that grabbed me and the abandonment I felt while my dad just watched without run-

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ning after me. What actually happened while I was gone, I don't really remember. I just remember the betrayal, and right now I'm praying that's not what Isaac will remember.

My father told me that as long as we know, the men in my family have been taken when they were very young, right on the cusp of forming long-term memories. He said that I was taken when I was almost four, but my father and my brothers had all been taken when they were younger than that. My father told me that they believed that's why nobody really remembered, and I didn't tell him that I did remember being taken. When he looked in my eyes as he was telling me, part of me thought he remembered, too. I wondered if we all remembered a little, but denied it. The look in Isaac's eye when he was grabbed said he would remember.

After my father told me about the taking, he assured me that the boys were almost always returned. He said the timing was never consistent, but after a few days or weeks, the sons would be returned. Normally, they were found outside, but close to the home, like they had wandered off in the backyard for a few minutes and found their way back. He said he was found in his front yard after one week, and my brothers were all found crying in the backyard just a few days after disappearing. I was gone for six weeks, and they found me curled up in the corner of the laundry room wedged between the wall and the dryer. He said I didn't make a sound, and they didn't know when I returned. I didn't tell him at the time that I remembered being found, but

I also remembered waiting. I don't remember what happened in what I called The Nowhere Place, but I did remember being back in the laundry room. It was so dark and quiet, I didn't know that I was truly back, and I curled up in the corner for a day before I was found by my mother.

My father didn't say much about the boys that weren't returned. He told me about one of his uncles that wasn't returned and another boy a few generations back, but he didn't mention Jamie. I wouldn't hear about Jamie until a few years later when one of my uncles got drunk at Thanksgiving and let it slip. We were on the back porch talking about the big family secrets when he got real quiet and told me about my parents' true firstborn son. He was evidently born a couple of years before me. There are no pictures of him around the house, but I still hope to find some in a hidden box after my parents have passed so I can see my brother for the first time.

My uncle said that Jamie was conceived before my father knew everything he knew about our family, but my dad did his best to protect Jamie after he found out. When Jamie was not even two years old, he was running in the snow with my dad when something from deep in the pure, white powder reached up and pulled him down into a snowbank. By the time my dad reached him just a few feet away, he was gone. My dad searched for hours before finally going inside and telling my mom about the curse. She didn't believe him and wanted to call the police and get the neighbors'

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help, but he convinced her that Jamie would come back if they just waited. He told her getting outsiders involved would only provoke more questions when he inevitably turned back up in a few days, so they waited. My parents waited for days, then weeks and months, but he never came back and there was never a trace of him found again. They waited for over a year, and they probably would have given up on having a family completely if my mom hadn't found out she was pregnant with me after eighteen months of waiting for Jamie to come back.

That same uncle had a theory about firstborn sons that I am trying not to think about as I still swing my flashlight beam across the empty garage just to see if I can illuminate the darkened corners even now that I've turned on the overhead light. The fact is that he is obviously not here anymore, and whatever took him didn't leave a trace. It looked dark and sinewy, but I have no reason to believe that matters. The taking isn't as bad as whatever happens afterward.

In reality, I don't believe any of us remember what happens while we are gone. It could be because we are always so young, or it could be some effect of The Nowhere Place. Over the years, the men's theories have evolved from myths of Hades and Gehenna to equally fantastical ideas of parallel dimensions and time-space rifts before coming back to fears of ancient gods and generational curses. Wherever we go remains a mystery because nobody has ever remembered a thing, at least nobody who has been able to communicate it. Some

have come back mute or uncommunicative for years, maybe because they did remember The Nowhere Place and couldn't speak until they had forgotten.

Wherever the sons go, they are all changed when they come back. Most are not struck dumb or catatonic, but they are all changed by the event. A piece of innocence is always taken, and everybody responds differently. I came back shell-shocked and afraid of every noise or dark room. Some of my brothers came back angry at the world, and others just came back without the spark that made them unique. Isaac is bold and creative and everything I wished I could have been. I think he's what I was supposed to be like before I was taken.

What will he be like when he comes back?

As I stop tearing through the boxes in my garage, I know that I must bring my son back before he is changed or gone forever like Jamie, and I have one last hope on which to attach my resolve. If one of my father's other stories is true, then I have one chance to pull him back while he's still close.

I remember asking my dad, when Mary was pregnant with Isaac, if anybody had ever rescued a son from The Nowhere Place. At first, he looked at me like I had just asked if we had ever tried not obeying gravity or just denying death. I could tell the thought of beating fate had never occurred to him, and I started to lose hope of an answer before he started to tell me one of the other myths in our family.

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He said it happened in the old country, before we fled persecution and superstition to land in America. My family fled our home country a long time ago, so I imagined this had to have been around the 16th century, if any of it was true. He told me that he never believed the story, but it had been passed down through the generations and might explain a bit about our family history and what life was like before we had to flee our home.

According to the story, one of my forefathers was standing there when his only son disappeared, and he refused to let him go. He was a successful man in his day, but he and his wife had not been able to have children until they were older. He thought that the line was going to end with him until he was surprised to find his wife pregnant one day. She was older, though, and the pregnancy was hard on her body. They said that he prayed for mercy every day lest the bloodline end with him, but eventually, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. They were so excited that they doted on him and spoiled him in every way. He was growing into a strong and healthy toddler when his father saw the long, dark arms pull him into the wall and into The Nowhere Place.

He screamed in agony and fury, and he begged to be taken instead. His wife ran in to find him sprawled out on the ground, and he told her about the arms and the wall as he banged his fists on the floor. She said that he pled for mercy on his son and started to curse his own life. He started to cut his palms, saying that the

blood might draw the arms back, and she ran out of the room as scared of her husband as she was of whatever might come back into their house. She ran to get the rabbi, and when they came back and opened the door to the small room, the man was gone. Their son was laying on his bed, catatonic, and they found a pile of stones in the middle of the room with a small amount of blood on it. The father was never seen again, but his son recovered the next day. The men of the village helped raise him, and the story goes that he grew up to be a wise and powerful leader in the small village despite the dark rumors that made the older ones fear him. His mother told him the story of his father's sacrifice when he was older, and he never had to make his choice because they said that the curse was lifted even after they fled for the new world. No sons were taken until my grandfather disappeared around 1920, only to return a few days later.

My father told me at the time that the story was most likely apocryphal, and I always wondered if that was because it was actually untrue or because of what its truth would say about all the generations of fathers who had let their sons be taken. If it was true, I wondered what could have brought the curse back almost three centuries later to take my grandfather. At the time my dad told me, I was judgmental of the fathers in my family and didn't fully understand. Everything was theoretical, and I was still thinking about myself as a son. My understanding changed the moment my son disappeared, though.

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I now understand why my forefather did what he did, and I understand why others did not. I know that they believed that their sons would return, even if they were slightly changed, and they would need a father. That is logical, and I am trying to convince myself of that even as I stack up the bricks in the middle of the garage. I'm still stacking the bricks because, as rational as waiting could be, I cannot bring myself to do it.

My son has been taken, and I will do anything to bring him back unchanged and knowing that I would do anything for him. I saw the look of betrayal on his face as he was swallowed up into the darkness, and he has to know how much I love him.

After I have made a small altar from leftover bricks and stones in my garage, the rest of the ritual comes to me as I am quietly moving around the garage and beginning my pleas just loud enough to not be heard by Isaac's mother in the kitchen. I am writing some instructions and history down on a spare notebook that had previously only held doodles and measurements for projects because I need to make sure that Isaac and Mary know that I didn't leave them. They need to know our history, and they need to know that the curse is broken.

As soon as I am done writing my last letter and praying for mercy for Isaac, I slice the palms of my hands with a box cutter from my old toolbox and start my own sacrifice on the altar I have built. As the blood drips from my clenched fists, it flows between the bricks

and I smell sulfur wrap around me. The bitter taste stings my tongue as I breathe it in, and I hear the scratching of nails on the concrete below me. I feel the arms wrap around me as everything gets darker, they tighten like anacondas around my arms and legs and pull me into the floor, but I see Isaac free in the garage waving at me and crying. I hear his voice call out to me as I disappear. After I have sunken as far below the garage as possible, I see only black and hear only silence, but I know that Isaac is free and the curse has been lifted for as many generations as it takes for them to somehow bring it back. Isaac won't have to make the decision I did, and I feel the tears of relief roll down my face as the darkness envelops me.