

A Family Call

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He can't open his eyes. The door rips open and they sprint, push, heave through a well-rehearsed routine.

They move him up five floors, turn twice and slip down the bright hallways, passing white-clothed people who hurry along their paths, angling away from their newest patient.

Almost there. He has a blanket over him, hiding the damage.

She slumps into the chair just before tossing the keys on the bed. She peers through the hotel window with a tired eye.

Life should be comfortable. They should all be happy. All the ingredients are there. Fred and Sarah are both doing well in school, and their dad just got a promotion.

But she isn't. They aren't.

That's when her phone rings.

Mom and dad isn't home, Sarah isn't home. Those are the best days. Peace and quiet so Fred can blow the speakers out, sit at the TV with a controller and make a lot of noise. No one to complain he hasn't cleaned the dishes yet, no one to demand control of the TV. No one but friends on a headset.

His phone vibrates. Then again. Then again.

Grimacing, he crawls over to pick it up.

Sarah glares through the cab window. It was beginning to rain. *Not again*, she groans and leans over her screen. Pling. Update. Nope. Once-met friend-of-a-friend sharing something about caterpillars. Sure. Like. Done.

Still more rain. Her hand shudders from a shake of the phone. She glances down. A call? Oh. Fred. She considers hanging up, but hell; it can't be worse than the rain.

They sit. Wait. White walls hang around them like drapes. Their eyes are dry but open, tired but kept alive through adrenaline. Doctors scramble past them like ghosts, focused on saving other lives.

Sarah hides in her phone. Fred stares at his screen too, but he can't focus. Mom waits, thinking she should say something. Thinking about what she'll say tomorrow.

Bad news. Cancelled meetings. Many phone calls. Tears.

Black gowns. A church's welcome. A bell that harbors the dead.
In rows, they listen to a speech from a foreign friend. More tears, wet faces.
They sing. They rise and carry a corpse. It's heavy. He had been eating a lot in his late years.
Outside they are drenched. Rain funeral.

Away and gone. This time it's final. Too much of a good thing, perhaps. Some say. Too much of a stray thing.
The black clothes move away from the numinous care and into a silent, low-ceiling apartment they don't fit inside.
Faces they've not seen in twenty years. A gathering of odd mouths, stuck like an old record in the same track.
New family members. Emilia and Florence. New houses, new jobs. Another cancer.
How did you know him? You still working? Writing a book? He *was* kind. Yes. Thank you.

Respond to goodbyes with mute nods. Condolences, acceptance.
More cancelled meetings. More rescheduling. No soccer practice. Pushed the homework to Tuesday. No, I can't come tonight. Sorry. I wanted to.

He deafens himself with music. Perhaps it helps, he can't tell. Sarah goes away but comes back, meets at work but leaves early. Mom stays home.

Fred gets up in the morning as the first, Mom is second. Sarah takes a long shower.
Buy empty boxes, go through closets. Do you want this?
This is mine. I want that. No, I need it. He said I could have it.
Arguments over nit-picks, emotions in empty rooms. Too close, but necessary.
Apartment rent is too expensive, three is too few. Heavy sighs drag around brown boxes with clothes that aren't their own.

Packed books and movies, souvenirs from a life and foreign places they never went to. A last farewell to the flats around them. Farewells and condolences. Neighbors asking the worst questions.

Fred unpacks his computer first, but he turns it off again; unsure of its purpose. The walls aren't white anymore. Yellow beige. He shrugs. Sarah screams. Mom sighs and argues. Sarah goes away, pulls up her phone and isn't seen again.

When she comes back, Fred is asleep. The fridge holds little that is edible. Mom is still working. How can she? Is work more important than family?
Peanut butter. Toast. Sustenance, at least.
She calms down. Checks her phone again. Fifteen icons prying her away from the quiet walls. She sighs halfway through. Not today. Maybe one more.

The office is eerie. A colleague is over in the far corner, dealing with week-old paperwork their boss assigned last-minute. It's Friday, so most left early. But Mom can't get herself to go home. Work piled up over the last week. She's been busy with... No. Pull in. Breathe. Next mail. 10:34 PM.

Another box. Weekend meant boxes. Silent, shared memories. Old pictures of a mute man.
Slow breaths and wet eyes carries them through, whispers in the kitchen about the future. More boxes, enough for one more person who should be there.
One broke. Pictures and plates and cups crash on the floor, splintering into thousands of pieces.

Help.

Fred spends his Sunday evenings doing nothing. That is the temporary goal. No homework, no late night ideas. Just easy to bed. Maybe read a book. Not as taxing. Frees the mind a bit.
Sarah proposes they watch a movie. One of his favorites. Mom said she can't.
Mom is doing timesheets.

The class bell screams until Fred's ears echo even in silence. He finds a seat next to friends and is taught about the catalytic properties of silver. Fred pays as much attention as he can but people are distracting him. Also some that aren't there.

Mom breaks down. Cries and shouts at them both. She is afraid she'll get fired, even though she has been working until 10 every day for the past week. Says it's not even worth the effort anymore.

Sarah looks up a counselor. Assigns Mom to him, even pays for the first session. He talks with her a while. Sarah joins one time too. Fred says it won't help him, but Sarah doesn't believe that.

Mom gets a little better. She resigns her job. Counselor says it would be better for her to find something less stressful in these times.

Sarah checks back every other day, but needs her time away. She sighs as she's about to take the slow train back out of the city again, back home to see Mom. Fred she barely registers, and he only nods in return.

Fred's grades dropped a level, Mom remarks. They did.
I know it's tough, she says. But don't quit because I did.
It's all hard to believe. He nods and retreats to his room.

Vibration. A friend wants to hang out tonight. Sarah stops, lingers on the platform, train just arriving. It'd take her all night. She wouldn't see her family. But Sarah hasn't seen her friend in two weeks. She bites her lip, shakes and pulls up her phone. And walks away from the train.

Mom wakes up to work. It's not that late. She opens her computer. No new mails. Right. There is nothing to do there. Window. Rain patter. Darkness. Clock. 01:14.
Why is she up again?

Fred doesn't know why he wants the weekend to come sooner. He won't enjoy himself more; won't use the time he is given. He turns on the console and flicker between pages for a while, hovering on one, then moving past. His friends stop messaging him every day.

Mom wakes up. 6:13. Eyes agape, haunting, gasping for breath. Councilor meeting in half an hour. She rushes through the morning motions, body half limp and drugged into clarity. Beeps the car open and flings herself inside. Radio chatters about healthcare reforms. She turns it up.

Sarah's head hurts, throbbing in and out of existence. Straining to move, she checks her phone. Mom wants to know where she is. No. She'll answer that later. First, headphones. 128 BPM flares up and she sighs behind her wall of white cables.

Impact. Metal on metal, airbag, pain. Alarm. Important.
Blood streaming from skin. Thunderous sirens and a mobile phone.
A broken car. A missed meeting.

Fred picks up the phone. Always the damn phone.
It'll be the death of us all.
He listens and stops thinking that's irony.
He calls Sarah. She doesn't answer. He calls again. Prays without belief.
Answering machine. Again. Again.

Finally, she gets there. Glazed, tired. A little drugged and more than hung-over. But she slumps into the seat next to Fred.
Her brother is, after all, there. Waiting.
And now she waits too.

Bright drapes surround hallways full of white-clothed skin. Five floors of waiting and hoping. Plastic chairs and someone important behind a concrete wall.

Fred and Sarah look at each other, and ask how they ended up alone.