



NARRATIVE

STORY OF THE WEEK



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Intervals

A STORY

BY GREGORY BROWN

JACE STOOD ON the sidewalk, his grip slung over his shoulder, staring at the house. At his back the street was empty, and it took him a moment to remember it was Sunday and that here, out of either obligation or belief, people still followed certain routines. The harbor carried on—fishermen mending gill nets, skeleton crews running the cannery, boat builders steaming wood planks to be bent into hulls—but most of Grafton was at church.

The air smelled of the chum the cannery spewed out into the ocean and the ocean threw back against the shore on the tide. The salt from the bay coated the back of his throat, and he swallowed hard, trying to clear the taste. He'd been gone three years, stationed on an aircraft carrier drifting through the Pacific Ocean, and not much seemed to have changed here.

The house was still standing, the same yellow color. When he pushed open the gate it creaked as before. The walkway carried the familiar hard, raspy echo of rubber scuffing against slate. He'd helped his father haul the flat stones from the quarry. Together they had waited for the sun to drop behind the hills, then spent the early evening digging small holes into the weedy lawn and fixing the stones into the earth, while his mother and sister watched from the porch.

Jace found a sheet of yellow notebook paper taped to the front door. Nestled inside the fold, the neat, dark strokes of his mother's handwriting: *Welcome home, Jace. I thought it best not to miss*

work.

That would be about right. Jace stepped off the porch and went back down the walkway. Tall elms had once grown out of the sidewalk, shielding the street from the sun in summer and the ice and snow in winter, but those trees had been ripped out while he was away, leaving jagged craters in the pavement and the wind free to come blasting up the street. He slid the duffel from his shoulder and set it on the pavement, and leaned against the fence. In the yard the ash leaves were starting to die and drift away from their branches. Soon the fishermen would begin hauling their lobster boats in for the season, and then the snow would follow. When a car approached, slowing momentarily before continuing on, Jace realized how long he'd been standing there. The note was still clipped to the door, and the porch was still empty. He'd hoped to find his sister, Alice, waiting for him. It was a foolish thing to think. But still he'd thought it the whole time the train bent up the coast from Boston, imagining Alice standing impossibly straight with her thin arms crossed and her dress twisting about her hips in the wind.

HIS MOTHER HAD HUNG thick curtains in his room—because you deserve your rest, she said—and some days he didn't rise until noon. She never woke him in the mornings when she left for work, but started leaving notes: *65 and sunny. 42 and rainy. A day for a walk? A day for staying in? There's meat loaf in the fridge. Beer too if you want it. Please be safe.*

After that Jace bought a used alarm clock in town and used it until his body adjusted. Then he was up at six each morning on his own, coffee percolating and eggs sliding off the burners by six-thirty, half an hour before his mother left for work at the cannery. Most mornings he sat in the kitchen studying the light as it fell through the windows and layered the walls. On clear days he walked down to the harbor and watched the fishermen bringing in their boats. Sloops, ketches, trawlers—fine, coveted boats, boats not unlike the ones his father had built at his shop down in the

marina. His father's boats had somehow seemed more beautiful than the boats built here now, but Jace had been younger then, and he understood how with age most things lost their wonder.

When his mother was home, she was constantly shifting things around in the refrigerator and rewashing the dishes. Sometimes she looked up and seemed surprised to find she wasn't alone. But her routine never changed. She came home from the cannery at four, spent an hour out in her gardens, pressing her hands into the soft earth under the fading light, and then showered. Jace closed his eyes and listened to the water running through the pipes. Sometimes he wondered if she would ever come out. When he was growing up, his mother had been beautiful, and was beautiful still when he left though she was always tired, always working too many hours in the years after his father died. Now she stopped to lean on tables and chairs when she thought no one was watching, and he wanted to know when she had started getting old.

DURING HIS DISCHARGE examination, a navy doctor named Everett told him that certain things took a while to refocus. He'd told Jace to picture himself as a rubber band.

"Imagine being overstretched," he'd said, extending the foolish metaphor. "Like you've lost your elasticity. Don't be afraid if it takes a while to snap back. Don't be surprised if it takes a very long time."

Everett had leaned back in his office chair, lit a cigarette, and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and Jace had known then that while the man had said "long time" he had really meant "if ever."

He'd been home for three weeks, when one morning his mother said, "This needs to be addressed."

"What?"

"Your little den of madness," she said, gesturing from the kitchen, where they were sitting at the table drinking coffee, to the living room. For days he'd spent hours lying on the couch thumbing through books he pulled from the living room shelves

and left piled around the floor. The most he'd read of any one book was twenty pages. "I'm just relaxing."

"I see that."

"It's been hard to concentrate."

His mother went to the refrigerator and came back with an orange set on a small white plate. "Here," she said. "I bought them yesterday at Rose's." She took a deep breath. "She's hiring down there, you know, at the grocery."

Jace picked up the fruit and tested its weight in his hand. He couldn't remember the last time he'd held an orange, and he smiled at how snugly the small orb fit his palm.

"I just wonder if it isn't best to get back on with normal things," his mother said.

He pressed a thumb into the orange, slitting the skin with his nail, and a little mist of juice puffed out into the air. "You don't have to do that," he said.

"What do you mean? What exactly don't I have to do, Jace?"

"You don't have to plan things out for me. You don't have to try so hard, is what I'm saying."

"It seems to me that someone has to try."

Jace went on dividing and arranging the orange segments on the clean white plate. Eventually he pushed one slice between his lips. The fruit was so good that he closed his eyes and chewed very slowly. "How is Alice?" he finally asked.

"Alice isn't the issue."

"No," he said. "It's that she blames me for Peter's death. He enlisted because I did. I understand that's the issue."

"Alice will come by when she's ready."

Jace finished the orange and knocked a cigarette from the pack he kept in his shirt pocket. The smoking had started overseas. Not much else to do while you waited on an aircraft carrier for a plane to come screeching above the deck, while you waited to be yanked back into the briefing room, to be folded into your turret and sent up into the clouds. "I admire that you really believe that. I really do. But that's not what I asked."

His mother rose from the table, took a mug from the cabinet, and set it in front of him.

“If you’re going to smoke, at least be civilized about it,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re back among the natives, after all.”

Back among the natives. At night, halfway around the world, her phrases were what he had remembered most. Crammed into his narrow berth with a thousand other men packed around him, one saying or another would come to mind. He always meant to tell her that in his letters, how something she once said had come to him last night, but in the morning, when he stretched out in his bunk to write, he couldn’t manage to start.

When his mother spoke again, her back was turned, and Jace could hardly make out her words. It seemed as if her voice were up in the sky, coming through a great wind. “It’s better than spending all day dirtying up your palm and ruining your lungs,” she said. “It’s better than sitting around being sad.”

“I’m not sad, Mom,” Jace said, and thought: *only home*.

IT WAS NEARLY THREE in the afternoon and the wind was up and already it was very cold. He had meant to go out earlier, but lately days went like this: the sun rising and time crumbling away until the sky was suddenly darkening.

A wooden sign clacked against a house, and wind chimes rippled. November was only a week deep, but Jace wished it would start snowing, snow filling the streets, falling through the gray air. The thing he loved about snow was that it could make a ghost of you: steal your sound, fill in your footprints, erase all traces of your passing. He couldn’t tell anyone this. People here didn’t wish for snow. They tolerated it, they cursed it—it kept their boats in the harbor, took their cars off roads, caved roofs in on poor unsuspecting families far out in the country.

Jace had walked six blocks when he stopped in front of the house. It was a different color now: green, when it had been white when he left. In the backyard, the corner of which he could see from the street, a woman was hanging laundry on a line strung

between two weathered posts, the wet clothing coiling around in the wind, clinging to her arms. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five—short legs and a long upper body, whip-thin, red hair streaked with gray, and her jaw cocked out at a combative edge, as if she led with the bone in everything. A clothespin was clenched between her teeth, while her hands held a white sheet over the line. Each time she reached to retrieve the clothespin the sheet slid away and she swore at the clothing, or possibly the line—he wasn't sure which, exactly—and he hadn't meant to laugh, but then the woman was looking at him, and then she was coming around the house toward him.

"It's not as damn easy as it looks," she said. "We don't have wind like this where I'm from. Strike that, this isn't wind. This is just foolishness."

"I'm sorry," he managed. "I knew someone who lived here. They lived here when I left."

"What was her name?"

He smiled at that. "The house was white then."

"It looks better like this."

He nodded. She was right. Green fit the outside. He couldn't remember when he'd last seen the inside. The last time he'd seen Mikkala she'd walked out the front door and met him in the yard. They'd borrowed her brother's Pontiac and driven out to the lake at the Grafton County line. It had been late September. The fallen maple leaves had layered the lake's surface in pots of orange and yellow and red. Around the shore most of the vacation cabins had been boarded up already.

"Well there's nothing funny about this." The woman who now lived at the house was suppressing a smile as she spoke. "This is laundry and it's quite serious business, damn it."

"It looks that way," Jace said.

"Don't try to tell me you can help," she said. "Because if that's what you have to say I don't want to hear it."

He held his palms up against the wind. "Wouldn't dare."

Scowling, she marched back into the yard and Jace followed,

and when she bent down to gather the sheet up in her arms for another go at it, Jace noticed that she wasn't wearing any shoes and that her wrists and forearms were bruised. "I'm fine. Fine as fine gets. And even if I wasn't, I'm afraid I'm beyond hope." She threw the sheet on the ground and then picked it up again and turned to the street. "I get frustrated. And then I say foolish things. It's just that I'm not much good for this type of thing."

"For laundry."

"That's the start of it."

"But not the half of it?"

"If you only knew." She hung the sheet back over the line and looked down at the clothespin she'd let fall to the ground. "Are you going to come over here and help me or not?"

INSIDE THE HOUSE he hung back near the door as she went around tidying things up on the counter. Her shoulders were broad and the muscles of her back flexed as she worked. Sometimes she touched her stomach. Jace had never seen someone who talked so brassy and acted so nervous.

She told him her name was Tess and that she taught music.

"Well I did. Now I—" she stopped and looked around the small kitchen. "Now I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be. I mean, I know what to call it. But I'm not sure what it is. I'm married."

"My sister," he said. "She used to sing."

"But she doesn't now?"

"She still might, I'd like to think she does. What I'm trying to say is that she was always musical."

"I got that," Tess said.

Dishes were mounded in the sink and a full ashtray sat on a small red wicker chair pushed up to a window looking out on the backyard—a weed-ruined garden, a stone birdbath carved in the shape of a crescent, a clapboard shed half sunken into the earth. Beyond the yard, a gravel alleyway ran back toward town.

"I came here for a man," Tess said. "I came because of my husband."

Jace nodded, wondered what to make of that. She wasn't wearing a ring.

"I was born here," he said. "Grew up right here."

"And now you're back here," Tess said, and before he could answer she asked Jace if he was in the service, and he said that he was.

"People must thank you all the time."

"Some do."

"My husband, he's the type who'd never stop thanking you. He'd want to shake your hand every time he saw you. He might run into you three times in one day and he'd have to shake your damn hand each time. Well they're nice hands at least," she said. Jace had been rubbing his chin, and he noticed then that her eyes were following his hands as if they were holding something valuable. "Pianist's hands," she said. "The long fingers."

Jace held his hands out into the light falling through the window above the wicker chair and thought about what she meant by telling him that. He wondered if she wanted something else from him and he thought about kissing her. Then he decided that she was just lonely. He remembered being in a bar in the Philippines once. It was near the end of things, a week or so after they'd set the sky on fire above Nagasaki, and he'd been sitting with a woman he'd just met. She'd laughed at his jokes a little too eagerly, let him buy her a drink, touched his elbow on the bar. Luanne, that was the woman's name, and instead of taking her up to his room and sleeping with her like he was supposed to he'd told her every single thing he could think to tell about his life. Later he understood he'd sounded like a fool. But you were alone, and then you felt something with someone and you found yourself telling them every goddamn buried thing, all the horrible truths of all the horrible days.

"You were going somewhere, weren't you?" Tess said. "When you stopped."

The room seemed to be contracting, growing smaller and hotter.

"No," Jace said, looking Tess directly in the eyes. "I haven't had

to be anywhere in a long time.”

PICTURES HUNG ACROSS the living room walls, clustered together in rows, the frames layered in dust. In some there was a tall man with a narrow jaw and eyes too large for his face. Tess often stood beside him, and they were rarely smiling.

Tess was sitting at the small upright piano in the corner of the room. She lifted the keyboard lid and played a few notes. The sound, full and haunting, seemed too large for the room. Between notes she talked as if unaware of his presence at all, telling the air about the pentatonic scale, how it had five notes between octaves, and the diatonic scale, running in intervals of seven notes, and how everything about music made sense because it was a type of beauty built from a concrete set of distances. Spaces determined sound. And the sound was what was heard.

“You miss teaching,” Jace said when she stopped.

“Maybe that’s it. I wish that was it.”

Tess slid over on the piano bench, inviting him to sit, and when he did not, she retreated back to the bench’s center. “You don’t make things easy, do you?” After a while, she said, “The thing is, I’m having a baby.”

“You don’t sound excited.”

“It’s not the baby I’m supposed to have.” She was looking at the pictures with the man in them.

Jace nodded. “But he doesn’t know that.”

“No. You could build a whole world out of what people don’t know about the people they love.” Tess closed the keyboard lid and dropped her arms to her sides, the bruises disappearing against her dress. “Some damn days I think I’ll really go. Almost every day I think about it. But you know the thing I can’t figure out? The thing I can’t figure out is how I’d ever get this damn piano out of here with me. It’s the most foolish thing, I know it is.”

Outside the light was graying. “It’s getting dark,” Jace said. “Your laundry will freeze.”

“Let’s not worry about that,” Tess said. “I’m tired of worrying

about that type of stuff.”

Jace turned to leave but stopped. “Sometimes I don’t think my sister will ever speak to me again. Her husband Peter went to the South Pacific after I did. He died, I didn’t.”

“I don’t know,” Tess said. “I bet she’ll come around.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

She rose to follow him across the room, and he could sense her right behind him, her breath practically dusting his neck, but she didn’t reach out to touch him and he didn’t turn around.

OUTSIDE THE HILLSIDES sloping down to the bay held a few late patches of sun, the light falling through the trees low and watery, brittle with the thin, pale quality that announced winter was near.

At the end of the alley Jace could see the grocery and the Help Wanted sign hanging out front. Behind the windows, the lunch counter, the stools empty now, the overhead lights gleaming against the washed countertop. Some days boys slept until noon, rose, combed their hair, put on their dress uniforms, and went down to the lunch counter at Helen’s. They had gone off—to Europe or the South Pacific—and they had come back, and now that was all they did in a day: they put something on for the world and went out into it to eat over-peppered eggs and drink watery coffee.

Jace turned away and started walking the other direction.

It was almost dark now. Soon the alley would end. The streets would broaden. From the sidewalk he would be able to see the lights in his kitchen, his mother with her back to the window, her shoulders curled over a pan on the stove. The wind thickened, pressing against his back, and his thoughts kept returning to Peter, and to his father, and to Alice. He had gone not because he had wanted to serve but because that was what you were supposed to do, and he didn’t miss anyone from the South Pacific or from the strange blurry nights on shore leave. A year from now he would not be able to remember the sound of a single one of their

voices. There were things he wished he hadn't seen, things that recounting to others would never improve—mainly the way that a plane came apart and the men inside with it, or how the ocean, coated in fuel, could burn for hours. But people were always trying to ignore one thing, to replace it with some stray thought of another, to snap back or move on.

Coming back from the lake that afternoon in September before he'd left home, Mikkala, sullen, embarrassed, withdrawn, had driven. She had told him she'd wait for him, and he hadn't said anything back. Jace sat in the passenger seat, watching the woods rip by outside. It was all rushing pines, thickets of deep shadow, momentary explosions of green-tinged sun, until the car turned a corner, and there, beside the road, was a deep clearing in which three men were framing a cabin. They were gone as quickly as they had materialized, but for a moment they were locked in the window and Jace had not forgotten the sight: the three men working with clear purpose, lifting a freshly hewn and planed cedar log, one man on each end, the third man, his arm speckled gold with sawdust and raised to shoulder height, pointing to exactly where, atop the rising wall of logs, they'd set the next one.

Jace drew his coat tighter. He slipped the jacket's buttons through the little vertical cuts in the fabric, all the way up to his chin, sealing himself in, then he turned toward home, leaning into the wind, as though from the start he had set out to do this one thing. 