

The Heywoods

by Vysotina Alice

'Can't the man watch an evening program in his own house?!' cried John with a rage in his voice. 'Shut this crying kid up! When I was his age, I broke my leg, while I was six miles away from home fishing for dinner! I managed to get back home on my own, and I didn't shed a single tear.'

'But he's in pain, uncle John, don't be so selfish,' Jason objected with diffidence.

'Right, John, we don't need your advice. You are only good at two things: watching TV and getting wasted. But, obviously, not in finding a job so as not to live as a leech in our mother's house!' Susan pounced on her brother.

'Well, maybe you should watch your own children instead of scolding me like a schoolboy,' uncle John's face turned red. 'At least I don't have a milksop of a son and a daughter that was dumped by two men!'

'How dare you,' started Susan.

'Mummy, my knee hurts,' complained Ethan, crying.

His mother seated him on the kitchen chair, opened a cupboard and started to look for medical supplies.

'Mister Heywood,' she shouted, 'where do you keep a medical kit?'

'I haven't got a damn idea,' John growled back. 'Let him bear the pain, Michelle, he will be fine by tomorrow. If you are as fussy as a hen with one chick, he will grow into a mummy's boy, like his father.'

'Don't say things like that, it is so rude, uncle John,' Jason answered with an umbrage.

Ethan was still crying.

'Here we go,' said Michelle, taking out a medical kit that she finally found. 'Just be brave for a little more, sweetheart,' she said, trying to comfort her son. 'Now you should learn the lesson: don't ever play with these nasty cousins of yours again, because they always put you in trouble.'

'Excuse me,' Sarah interrupted with indignation. 'You left your son on his own, and you are blaming my girls for his acting-up?'

'Ethan would never get into the mud, unless he was convinced to by someone ill-mannered, who has a role model for learning how to misbehave,' Michelle replied with coldness.

'You know what dearie? You'd rather don't say nothin bad about my family, or I shove your words back down your throat!'

'Ladies, please, stop fighting,' begged Jason.

'Seriously, Sarah, maybe you should be more concerned about your own daughter, who turned out to be a smoker,' Susan interfered. 'I'm terrified that my granddaughters are being brought up like this!'

'She's just a copycat, Mrs. Linwood,' said Michelle. 'Her mother has been puffing smoke in her face since she was still in a baby crib, no wonder, that -'

'Shut the fuck up, Michelle, I'm warning you!' cried out Sarah, pointing her finger at her sister-in-law.

'Oh, I'm sorry that I'm everyone's biggest disappointment,' shouted Ashley angrily. 'I don't like any of you either. That's a pity we can't choose our own family because I wouldn't have chosen you. I'm sick of you and of this horrible stinky house,' she cried, and rushed out from the living room slamming the front door behind her.

Sudden sound of breaking glass made everyone turn their faces to the noise.

Ashley's younger sister was standing with a football ball in her hands beside a bunch of small fragments that used to be an urn, and a pile of ashes.

'Oh, no! What have you done!' Susan howled. She minced hastily to the broken urn. 'How many times have I told you not to play with the ball inside the house, Emily?'

'Well, that's it. Not only I'm not allowed to spend a quiet evening in my own house, but there is no way for our father to rest in peace either,' John grumbled, pouring another portion of whiskey in the glass. 'Crazy family', he said, and swallowed the large portion in one sip.

'Help me, someone,' Susan asked, collecting fragments from the floor. 'Not with the vacuum cleaner, you, idiot!' she snapped out at Jason.

'Crazy family,' muttered John once again, and swallowed another portion of whiskey.

10 HOURS EARLIER

Susan

'Eric, honey,' Susan called her husband from the bedroom, 'are you sure that you don't want to come? Mother always treated you well, and she would be glad if you came,' she asked as a formal politeness, because she knew perfectly, that he was not going to come.

'No, honey,' Eric shouted back from the living room, 'I've spent too many Christmas Eves with your family to be wise enough not to attend these bloody reunions anymore,' he explained, keeping staring at the TV screen.

Susan opened a dresser, took a pink jersey out and packed it in the suitcase on the bed.

'Honey, you're exaggerating,' she objected. 'We got along pretty well the last few times,' she shrugged her shoulders. 'Even John was a bit more friendly, than usual.'

'Honey, I don't think John would like to see me anyway,' Eric switched the channel.

'What a nonsense,' Susan exclaimed. 'Let bygones be bygones. I'm sure my brother John has forgotten your small fight already and would be delighted to see you, honey.'

'You know he hasn't,' Eric replied, switching the channel again.

Susan was thinking it over for a minute. 'Yeah, maybe he hasn't,' she agreed, packing her big pink nightgown.

She opened a wardrobe and took two skirt and jacket costumes. She came up to the mirror and held them to herself one after another.

Susan was a stout blond woman in her sixties, but due to her cheerful and kind temper, she didn't have as much age wrinkles, as her coevals had. She always had a neat polite smile on her face, even when she was alone and nobody was watching her. She was that "hearty lady" type, a woman that was acquainted to all of her neighbours and familiar with some of their business, not much, but just enough to say a word or two to show her sympathy, when they met

on the street. Susan always had a candy or two for their children, and she was always glad to lend some sugar or eggs in the name of the neighbourly friendship. She used to wear varied long skirt and jacket costumes that she believed fit her perfectly.

Susan knitted her brows, not knowing which one to choose. Then she went out of the bedroom and came up to her husband for help.

'Honey, which one do you think is better? Maybe a velvet one?'

Eric turned his head from the TV screen for a moment, and glanced at costumes.

'A velvet one is nice, honey,' he said, looking at the screen again.

'But perhaps this cherry costume would be more suitable,' she asked with doubt.

Eric looked at her again, 'Yeah, honey, the cherry one is much more suitable.'

Susan nodded satisfied, and went back to her bedroom. She changed into the dark cherry costume and fetched her suitcase.

'Don't forget to water the flowers. There is a big pan of soup and a stew in the fridge. And don't eat a lot of bread with butter, mind your cholesterol. If our neighbor Mary calls, tell her I will be back in a couple of days.'

'Sure, honey,' Eric replied, not looking at her.

'I've made a list for you and left it on the kitchen table, just in case,' she added.

'Thank you, honey.'

'I've got to go now, or I may miss the train. Call me if you need anything,' she pecked her husband in the cheek and headed to the door. 'Goodbye honey, love you!', shouted Susan, closing the door after herself.

'I love you too,' he replied, switching the channel.

The railway station was crowded and humming with hundreds of voices as usual. Despite her plump shape, Susan manoeuvred skilfully in the crowd, catching snatches of phrases. "I love you", "I will be back soon", "say hello to mum", "I'll miss you" she heard passengers saying and those who came to see them off. People kissed and hugged, laughed and cried, waved their hands to each other. Susan moved forward, smiling at families and lovers, feeling a little bit envy for they were embracing so sincerely. In a few minutes she was already sitting in a local train that was about to take her to the house where she grew up, and where she had been living until she married Eric and left for the big city. The days of childhood seemed so distant, as if they belonged to another life. When her mother died, Susan felt herself obliged to take the post of the family keeper, to take care of its members, to gather them on holidays and big events, but she didn't seem to succeed in it much. Susan was quite happy with her husband Eric, and she wished she could say that everyone else in her family was as happy. But this time everything would be different. She promised herself to reunite her relatives in one big and loving, family. She smiled at her thoughts and the train started off.

The Linwood Family

Jason Linwood was packing things still wondering how he managed to get two days off at work, while their company had a deadline coming. He was working as an engineer in a famous building company Steel & Concrete Inc., that was about to present a big project to an important

client, so it was all hands on deck. Jason's boss, who had been taking advantage of him all the time, was surprisingly compliant, when he asked him for a few days off on a family occasion. What Jason did not know was the fact that his wife Michelle had given his boss a call the other day, reminding him that Jason was a valuable and qualified employee, hard-working and dedicated to his work and that Jason could easily find another place, if his family wished him to.

People used to make a mistake of underestimating Michelle, because she looked very refined and fragile with her pale aristocratic skin, thin and petite body and dark-brown curly locks. But Michelle was a warrior, who used all means to protect her family and its way of life. Her innocent looks tricked a lot of people, who were crushed afterwards, if they had been fool enough to stand on her way.

Jason was quite opposite to his wife. He was a tall, golden-haired man from a working family, who always was a pride of his parents. It was hard for a village boy to achieve anything extraordinary in his life, but Jason grinned his teeth and went towards his dream. Thanks to his clever mind and a strong will to study, he got a senior engineer position in a well-known company. But deep in his heart he was still a countryside naive boy, who couldn't say no and never rejected an ask for a favour from his friends or colleagues.

'Hurry up, Jason,' Michelle said with a concern in her voice, 'we need to get there before supper time. You know that Ethan shouldn't miss the meal, it is unhealthy for his organism.'

'You know, we could grab some food on our way for once,' suggested Jason. 'There are plenty of small cafes by the road, we can stop and eat whenever we like. We could have road trip food like pizza or burgers.'

'You want to feed our son with burgers from a roadside diner?' her dark-brown eyes flashed fire. 'Are you mad? Do you want him to get killed by food poisoning?' Michelle asked with annoyance.

'No, of course not, Shelly, I just thought -'

Ethan, an eight years old boy, as golden-haired, as his father, had been packing his toys in the next room, and heard his parents' talk.

'Are we going to eat burgers? Awesome!' the boy seemed overjoyed.

'No, Ethan, we are certainly not. Your father is making silly jokes,' Michelle looked at her husband pursing her lips significantly, as if she were saying "look what you've done". 'We are not taking all these toys with us,' she said, looking at Ethan's bag. 'We are going for a couple of days only, you don't need all of them. Choose one.'

'But, mum,' begged Ethan, 'I can't choose, they are all my favourites.'

'I said, you will have one, or you will have none at all. Period,' then she looked at her son's face growing red as if he were about to cry, and added, 'If you cry you won't get even one for sure.'

Jason loved his wife though she had been cutting it too fat sometimes. He knew that she loved him and Ethan, she just showed it in a strange way of total control and absolute care. She was all about healthy food, healthy sleep, healthy way of life, fixed daily routine and obeying the rules. It might seem annoying for someone, but not for Jason. Michelle's dictatorial character somehow made him feel more safe and assured in himself and in the future, because he didn't have to take the responsibility - she did. And Michelle seemed to be enjoying it. She liked holding everything in her thin hands, being responsible for the family's welfare and feeling proud

of its success. She was just used to doing things in a certain way, and she couldn't change herself for other people, it was easier to change people around her instead. And it was not only easier, but even better for themselves, as she was absolutely sure.

'Alright, I just need to check if we've got everything,' she said and started to murmur indistinctive, 'cups, spoons, wet wipes, Ethan's textbooks...'

Jason watched her with admiration.

'Jason, take the suitcase, and I will take the bag with food,' she commanded, when she finished her examination, 'Ethan, take your backpack and come over, we are going downstairs.'

Ethan picked a shabby soldier - his father's old toy, which he liked the best for some reason. He was happy to go, because every trip was an adventure for him, and he liked adventures very much, though he never mentioned it in his mother's presence, because it made her upset. He was forbidden to go on school sightseeing tours and trips, unless his mother could come to supervise them, and they seldom went somewhere together as a family, because he always had to study on weekends, and his parents had a lot of things to do too. Ethan had been looking forward to this trip for about a week already, and he was very excited that he was going to see his grandmother Susan, whom he loved very much. Granny was always kind to him and used to pamper him, when his mother was not watching.

Finally they had loaded their luggage into the car and seated themselves in. Michelle turned back from the front seat to her son.

'Fasten the safety belt, Ethan. Do you want to pee? You should tell me if you do, because we won't be able to make a stop for some time. No? Good,' he sat straight, and turned back again in a moment, 'Are you comfortable? Do you need a pillow?'

'I'm okay, mum,' he answered. 'Did you take my books?'

'I did.'

'Have you got 'Robinson Crusoe? I want to read.'

'Unfortunately, I don't have it. I grabbed your school textbooks, maths and biology. But you are not reading in the car, it can affect your eyesight.'

Ethan threw his head back on the headrest and stared dully through the car window.

'I hope we won't have to treat Ethan for a chocolate allergy again after visiting your mother,' Michelle said, annoyed by unpleasant prospects of protecting her son from her mother's-in-law care.

'She just wants to act like a loving grandmother, Shelly,' Jason objected with uncertainty, 'don't be so harsh on her.'

'A true loving grandmother would stew some broccoli for her grandchild, instead of stuffing him with unhealthy sweets,' she snorted. 'And what about this sister of yours, Sarah? Is she coming?'

'I hope so. We haven't seen each other for a year, since grandmother's funeral.'

Michelle covered her eyes with her palm, and sighed.

'I feel pity for her daughters, poor girls,' she said in a sad voice, 'they have no chance in this life, not with a mother like that.'

'I think you are exaggerating. They are nice girls. Everything is going to be right this time, I can feel it. You just need to be more positive to help it happen.'

'Oh, Jason, I won't say anything on this topic now, only to say "I told you so" afterwards.'

Sarah and Her Daughters

Sarah was waiting in the car, smoking a cigarette and shaking her head in time with some pop song that uttered from the wheezing radio. She was tapping impatiently on a car wheel with her fingers, glancing at the front door of the apartment house from time to time. Sarah passed her hand over her dull, messy blonde hair to move it away from the face. A cigarette ash fell down on her sloppy t-shirt.

'Damn it,' she swore with irritation, cleaning herself.

Sarah was thirty six, she was only four years older than Jason. And though they grew up together in one house, playing and working side by side, she was nothing like her polite and gentle brother. Quite the opposite: she was a rough and rude woman, who used to be on her own and knew how tough a life could be. She was also not as clever, as her brother, so she couldn't make it to the University and got no education besides school. She didn't mind doing labour work as she was a hard-working and responsible woman. Sarah had married bad guys, twice, and divorced, twice, because the first one beat her, and the second turned out to be a lazy drunkard. Two marriages left her with nothing but two daughters on her arms, whom their fathers never cared about. She loved her girls and did care about them, although Sarah was never able to show it like all other mothers did, neither was she capable of extra sympathy or sentiment. 'Going all soft and sloppy won't teach anyone how to stand against their problems,' she used to say.

Finally, girls showed up on the porch.

'Hurry up, you two! I don't want to drive in the dark!' Sarah shouted to her daughters in a husky voice.

They came up closer, and she saw that the younger one, Emily, was carrying a heavy bag.

'What in the hell do you have there, Em?' asked Sarah.

'I took our DVD Player, so we could watch films all together, you said great uncle John doesn't have any,' explained the girl.

'Are you out of your head?' yelled Sarah and turned to Emily's sister. 'Where have you been?'

'I'm not a nanny of hers,' answered Ashley arrogantly.

'You will be, if I say so,' Sarah started to get angry. She pointed at girls with a cigarette in her hand, 'You, and you, take the player back upstairs. Now.'

Ashley rolled up her eyes and followed her sister, not trying to help her with a heavy bag.

'I hope you ain't broke it,' Sarah shouted in their backs, 'because if you have, my belt would meet your ass, when we get back, Emily!'

She lit another cigarette. Sarah was strict and harsh on them but she was proud of her daughters indeed. Emily, her younger daughter, who was thirteen, was fond of reading, for instance. Pastime, that Sarah never liked herself. But she wanted her daughters to take a higher social position and achieve more than she had, that's why she tried to encourage Emily's thirst for knowledge. 'Emily,' she said once, 'it's good that you are a smarty in our family, because it will help you to get things that I couldn't get meself'. Nevertheless, the girl didn't have a chance to use it as an excuse for not helping about the house or not working along with her sister.

'Mum,' Ashley called through the opened window and Sarah leaned out of the car to see her, 'she also took your curlers and three heavy books.'

'Who on earth needs to curl their hair in the countryside? Tell her to leave it here.'

'What about the books?'

'She can keep them, as long as she carries her bag by herself.'

Ashley was a bit older than her sister, she was sixteen. A charming age of adolescence, when one is a rebel, who is permanently protesting against something, trying to make a small revolution everywhere. Ashley didn't spend time with her sister, because she considered her to be too little to hang out with. Ashley tried to find her place in this world, and in spite of their domestic battles, Sarah didn't blame her at heart. In Ashley she saw herself at the age of sixteen, and back then Sarah was a nightmare, much more horrible than her elder daughter. Sarah didn't care about the music her daughter was listening to, or how she spent her free time, as long as she had been washing the dishes after dinner and keeping Sarah from being summoned to school by a teacher. She was not a book lover, as her sister, but she was interested in art, drawing particularly. Sarah always thought of drawing as a waste of time, that would never give any benefits in real life, but since her friend explained that there were a lot of modern jobs for artists these days, Sarah softened herself a little, and even bought Ashley a set of watercolours for Christmas.

At last, the luggage was in the car. Ashley came up and opened the front door.

'Not the front seat, get back,' said Sarah.

'But mum -' started Ashley.

'Get back with your sister. Now.'

Sarah threw away the stub and got the car started. Emily was looking through the window at the neighbour's houses passing by. Suddenly, she saw someone she knew, and waved her hand to them. She leaned out of the window and shouted, 'I will be back in two days!'

Ashley put on the earphones and turned away.

'Mum, stop the car please,' asked Emily.

Sarah looked in the side mirror to see if she could move to the left.

'Now what?' she asked with annoyance.

'I forgot to take my books from the trunk,' Emily explained guiltily.

'You should have thought about it earlier. I can't stop right now.'

One thing Emily knew for sure: never argue with mother, when she's driving. In fact, just "never argue with mother" was the best way to put it. Emily sighed and started to tap out a rhythm by clapping on her knees. She felt bored in a minute, and touched her sister's hand gently.

Ashley turned her head and unplugged one earphone.

'What?'

'Can you give me one earphone?' asked Emily.

'No,' said the sister, plugged an earphone back and turned away.

Emily sat still for a while, and then asked, 'Mum, are uncle Jason, aunt Michelle and Ethan coming too?'

'I guess.'

'I don't like Ethan. He is a cry baby.'

'Yeah, sure he is, they're fussing over him as if he was a crystal doll,' Sarah answered with a condescending sneer.

Emily had been silent for a minute.

'Mum, can I go to the pond when we get there?'

'If your sister goes with you.'

'But she won't.'

'Then you can't go.'

The girl frowned and started to poke the front chair with a toe of her boot.

'Can we stop by a roadside diner to have some burgers?' she asked.

'We will definitely stop for burgers if you shut the hell up and stop distracting me from the driving.'

Emily crossed arms on her chest, turned away to the window and sulked.

Sarah looked at her daughter through the rear-view mirror and pitied her.

'I will stop in a couple of miles and you will have one minute to fetch you books,' she said strictly.

John

He woke up, but he didn't have a slightest desire to open his eyes, he could even say that he was terrified of that moment, putting it off as long as it was possible. John slurped saliva, running down his cheek. He felt an odious sugary taste in his mouth, and from the depths of his head a terrible pain was rising. He opened one eye, just to close it again, because bright sunlight penetrated through his eyeball straight into his brain and exploded inside with terrible pain. He lay still for ten minutes, feeling too exhausted to move even a bit. Then he started to move his fingers a little, and then he managed to move his arm. He was not sure about moving his head yet, but all the other parts of his body seemed to be fine enough. He opened his eyes once more, and was punished with pain again. But he knew he needed to get up to get something that would make him feel better. He lay still for a few minutes, adjusting to the sunlight, and then made another effort and opened his second eye. The pain doubled, but it faded away back to normal soon. John made a giant effort and raised himself on his elbows. He felt so dizzy, that he had to lie down again at once. He waited for a little and repeated, with a bit more of success. Finally, he managed to sit down on his bed. After a while he stood up on his bent legs, and slowly, step by step, he moved forward through the dizziness, leaning on tables, cupboards and chairs. At last he got to the opposite corner of the room, flopped down into the armchair and with shaking hands he poured himself a portion of whiskey in a dirty glass and swallowed it in one sip. John leant back in the armchair, closed his eyes and waited for the medicine to have an effect.

'Dear Lord Almighty,' he murmured, when he felt a surge of pleasant warmth all over his body.

John looked in the big dressing mirror at the left, and got scared of his own reflection. From the mirror John looked at an old grey-haired man with a three-day bristle, deep shadows around the eyes and bagged cheeks, that were shaking in time with the rest of his body.

'Well, that was obviously not enough,' he said to his ugly twin in the mirror and drank another glass of whiskey.

Feeling much better, John came up to the mirror to have a closer look. He was not shaking anymore, and his face was gaining colour before his very eyes. He looked at the clock. Susan was about to arrive very soon. John glanced around the room. Not that he was very concerned about her or anyone else's opinion about himself, but he wanted to be spared from anyone's lecturing. So he gathered all the empty bottles and even cleared the duvet he slept on from not very fresh bed linen. The old house was moaning regretfully, responding to his every step.

His sister Susan got married and left this house years ago, and John stayed here with his parents, and he never succeeded in finding a woman, or an occupation. His father, honourable Raymond Heywood, passed away first, and had been looking at him disapprovingly from his urn on the mantelpiece ever since. His mother, Judith Heywood, lived to see her ninety sixth birthday, and died a week after that. It happened a year ago. Her last will was lost in the fire that destroyed the notary's office, as everyone thought. But it had shown up in some other office a few days ago, and now John had to be the host for his greedy relatives, who were flocking like crows to his house at the moment.

The Heywood Farm, that passed from heir to heir for about three hundred years already, was not just a regular country cottage, not on its flourishing days at least. It was a big farm with one hundred and thirty acres of land. In the times passed, big Heywood families used to live there, planting the land, and even employing some local workers. The farm supplied the village and partly a nearby town with grain. But farming had been dying generation after generation, and when John was a boy, his father planted only a few small crops, and held a small farmyard of a cow, a dozen chickens, rabbits and a nanny goat, just to feed the family. The rest of the land, overgrown with trees, bushes and different sorts of herbage, turned into wilds. By the time Raymond Heywood became too old to maintain even this small piece of a farm, they stopped planting vegetables and sold all the livestock. John and Susan used to help their dad, but when Susan left with Eric and John grew up, he felt sick of farming and refused to take farm management upon himself. Thus, Heywood Farm became a small country cottage with an impenetrable clump of wild trees and thorny bushes all around it. One thing that Judith Heywood had never given up on, was the small garden, which was planted with flowers and grass every year. When Judith was no longer able to maintain it, Susan started to look after it, coming several times per year during the spring and summer seasons. She seemed to like gardening a lot, and felt so inspired and bright every time after hours of digging in the garden, as if she were not working, but resting from the city daily routine.

The house, that had been watching generations of Heywoods growing up and dying, and its adjoining land, falling into desolation, was not so far from collapsing too. It was an old rickety building with two floors and a small attic, stuffed with old forgotten things. Paint on its walls was covered with cracks and was being peeled off. Nevertheless, anyone who dared to enter the ugly old house was taken by surprise with its inside coziness. The interior consisted of hundreds of small things, and every thing had its own place. That's why there were a lot of surfaces of all kinds: cupboards and shelves, bookcases and tables - every horizontal surface was a place for a vase, a lacy tablecloth, a photograph in a frame, or a small statuette, that was given as gift to some family member. Of course, it was a dusty nightmare for every mistress, but the house had

been living without one for a very long time, and John never bothered himself with such nonsense. He made some small paths through the house for himself, and chose some spots in the kitchen and the living room, where he spent his days, ignoring the rest of the house.

John reached for a remote and turned on the TV. After twenty minutes of dull watching he became drowsy. That's when the doorbell rang and shook all the sleep off him.

The Living Room

The doorbell rang again.

'I'm coming, Goddammit!' he growled.

He opened the door and saw Susan smiling on the threshold.

'John! My dear brother! Long time no see!' she exclaimed and kissed him in his bagged cheeks. Then she sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. 'What is the smell,' she said, disgusted. 'Have you been drinking again?'

'A man, who is a master of his house, can have a few pleasant moments with a glass of good old whiskey, ain't he?'

 he asked, pretending to be offended.

'He certainly can,' she answered, giving him a reproachful look and entered the house. John closed the door and followed his sister.

Susan glanced around the living loom and exclaimed, 'My, my, what a mess! Have you ever cleaned the house since I was here three months ago?'

'It does not befit a man to do a woman's job,' he said, and sat back in his chair.

Susan looked at him with sympathy. 'Eric sent his regards, he wished he could come.'

'I'm sure he did,' he snorted. 'When are the others coming?'

'Late enough, I hope. I need to clean this mess first,' she went to the kitchen and looked inside the refrigerator. 'I suppose, whiskey is a fine substitution for both bread and water for you,' she sarcastically remarked. 'Go to the groceries and buy some food. They will be starving, when they get here.'

'I don't feel good to go anywhere,' he said.

'John Arthur Heywood!' she squeaked so loud, that he jumped up in his armchair, 'I'm warning you, you are taxing my patience!'

He got up, muttering under his breath, fetched his coat and went out.

Susan spent three hours cleaning the kitchen and the rooms, and thanking God, that John didn't use all of them. When her brother came back with groceries, seeming to be a little more drunk than before, she started cooking. A sudden doorbell ring caught her in the middle of the process.

Susan wiped her hands with a towel and minced to the antechamber. 'I'll get it,' she said, even though John didn't seem to make a move towards the door.

'Jason, my dear! Michelle!' she kissed them both and looked at her grandson, 'Ethan, my lovely boy! Here, I have a candy for you,' she said, searching for it in her apron.

Michelle made an anticipatory gesture with her hand. 'No sweets, Mrs. Linwood. We don't want to spoil his appetite, do we?'

'Of course, how silly of me, please, come inside,' she invited and minced back to the kitchen. 'Michelle, my dear,' she called, 'can you give me a hand in the kitchen?'

'Sure, Mrs. Linwood, in a minute.'

She turned to her husband, 'Don't take your eyes off him,' she said, pointing at Ethan and headed to the kitchen. 'Good day, Mr. Heywood, how do you feel?' she asked John politely.

'I feel like all sixty four years old farts do, thank you,' he answered, and roared with laughter, making Michelle shiver. 'Well, kid, come here on your great uncle's knees and tell me everything. Do they still have these school gangs nowadays?'

'Uncle John,' Jason interferred with a reproach.

'It's alright, boy, uncle John is just having fun. Do you like it here, in the countryside?'

'I do,' answered Ethan, smiling widely.

'Wanna watch TV with ole John?' he asked. Boy glanced at the kitchen door. 'Don't worry' John moved closer and whispered, 'We won't tell your mother. Right, Jason?'

'I guess,' he said diffidently.

The doorbell rang again.

'It must be Sarah,' said John and went to the door. He opened it letting them in.

'Hey brother,' Sarah hugged Jason, 'I'm glad you made it here. I know that you are a busy brainy engineer, and you have no time to waste it with us.'

'Dear sister! It's been a while. We need to see each other more often. You know that I love the place so much, that I would definitely stay here forever, but Michelle -'

'I know, I know, don't say a word. Where's mum?'

'In the kitchen, with Michelle.'

'Uncle John!' Sarah entered the living room. 'You look older than the last time I saw you!'

'Well,' John responded, 'perhaps we could rejuvenate ourselves with a little bit of fine whiskey?'

'Sure!'

'John?'

'No, no,' he protested, 'thank you. I'm a non-drinker, you know that.'

John poured two glasses and offered one to Sarah.

'Cheers!'

'Cheers!'

Sarah swallowed her drink and put the glass down on the table with a smashing sound. 'Thank you, uncle John, that would help me to greet our dear Michelle properly', she smiled. 'I'm going to the kitchen. Girls,' she turned to her daughters, 'take your things to the room upstairs and come back here to help your grandmother with cooking.'

'No need, honey, we are all set here,' shouted Susan from the kitchen.

'I'm going for a walk,' said Ashley.

'Alright then. Take your sister to the pond. I don't want her to be in the way here.'

'A pond?' Ethan looked excited. 'Can I go too?'

'Why not,' Sarah shrugged.

'I don't think it's a good idea, Michelle would -' Jason started carefully.

'Jason,' Sarah interrupted, 'they're going to be two hundred meters away from the house. We spent all our childhood summers here, jumping and running through the village. Do you really want your kid to live with the 'hold on to mother's skirt' motto?'

'I guess I don't, but -'

'Perfect. Kids, get the hell outta here.'

The Kitchen

'I haven't seen both of you for ages,' said Susan slicing the carrot. 'Michelle, How's Ethan?'

'Well, thank you. He's doing great at school. He was even awarded with a special diploma for perfect studying not long ago,' Michelle said proudly. Sarah snorted and rolled up her eyes.

'How wonderful!' Susan clasped her hands. 'He is so clever, our Ethan. Little genius, I daresay! But how is his health? When I called you a few weeks ago, you said he was ill.'

'Quite so. Well, you know how they regard hygiene at schools nowadays. Very negligent, I must say. I forbade Ethan to eat in the dining hall after I got there once and saw how dreadfully they run it.'

'How terrible!' Susan exclaimed, knitting her brows.

'Anyway, the illness was his own fault, Ethan forgot hand sanitizer at home that day, and -' Sarah giggled. Michelle put her knife away and turned to her sister-in-law.

'Have I said anything funny?'

'No, of course not,' Sarah was trying to suppress laughter.

'Oh, really,' Michelle screwed up her eyes, 'Because if you have any problems, please, I am all attention.'

'It's not me, who has problems here, Shelly. It's your son, who lives his life under a bell glass. I just feel sorry for the kid, that's it. He doesn't see no fun in his life. What a horrible childhood it is.'

Michelle fixed Sarah with an angry stare, flaring her nostrils.

'Your concern is much appreciated, if only it is aimed at your own daughters, that by the way, use to run around by themselves, uneducated and ill-mannered while their mother is drinking whiskey with their alcoholic great uncle!'

After saying that, she turned away abruptly, seized the knife and started slicing potatoes furiously. Sarah was about to spit out an answer to that, but Susan interfered.

'Girls, don't fight here, not today, not this time,' she begged.

Suddenly, Michelle screamed with pain, pressing her left arm to her chest.

'Oh, my dear, what happened?' Susan ran up to her daughter-in-law.

'It's, nothing, Mrs. Linwood, just a small cut.'

'Oh, Shelly, you better go back to the city now,' Sarah laughed with mockery, 'I think you need to get a tetanus shot. Who knows how many dangerous microbes these countryside barbarians have here!'

'Sarah, stop it, at once! Michelle, dear, go back to the living room to Jason, we will finish it here. I'll try to find some bandages.'

The Living Room

Michelle entered the living room and saw her husband sitting sprawled in the armchair with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

'- I swear, uncle John, I'm telling the truth,' Jason was trying not to laugh, 'he just took his cup, filled it with black coffee, and went back to his workplace, as if nothing had happened!'

They both burst with laughter.

'What's going on here?' Michelle breathed out.

Jason looked at Michelle with terror in his drunken eyes. John turned to her.

'A man has a right to have a glass of good old whiskey in his own house, and it's none of women's business,' he proclaimed slurring his words.

'Oh, dear lovely Shelly, I'm so sorry,' tears started to Jason's eyes.

'Don't abase yourself, fella, don't let her make you one of those henpecked husbands, or I will never respect you, I swear!' John cried out like a roaring bear, protecting its cubs. 'Leave him alone, Michelle!'

'Jason, this is unacceptable. We are leaving. Now.'

Jason fell down on his knees and crawled towards her, folding his hands in a begging gesture. 'Dear Shelly, I'm so sorry, I was... I didn't want to,' he slurred even more badly, than his uncle. Suddenly, a frightening thought came up to his mind, 'It's him,' he pointed at his uncle, 'he made me!'

'Traitor,' John roared, 'milk-sop, coward, sissy! Get out of my sight,' he said with despise, and turned away.

Susan and Sarah looked out of the kitchen.

'What in God's name is going on here? John, what is this all about?'

'Your brother, Mrs. Linwood, has intoxicated your son,' complained Michelle, putting her hands on her hips.

Sarah laughed in hysterics.

'Dear Lord! John! Are you out of your mind? Jason is a teetotaler!' cried Susan.

'Ain't it too many women here?! The only man in this room beside me is no longer a man to me. Your sister is twice the man that you are,' he yelled at his nephew. 'So I can see I am outnumbered. Leave me be,' he finished his pompous rant dramatically.

Michelle looked around the room. 'Jason, where's Ethan?' she asked.

'He's at the pond, with Sarah's girls,' Jason said with a voice of a sentenced to death.

Pond

'Look, it's easy. Just pick a flat stone, and fling it horizontally as far as you can,' was teaching Emily in a patronizing manner.

'Will this one do?' asked Ethan picking a flat oval stone from the ground.

'Yup, perfect. Now, hold it like this,' she gave the stone to Ethan, 'and swish your hand like this, that's right,' she encouraged. 'And... throw it!'

Ethan threw the stone and it flopped into the water with a gurgling sound.

'Look, I will throw,' Emily said and picked up a stone. She swished her hand, let it go, and the stone splashed through the water three times and then sank.

Ashley was sitting on a big stone and watching them with a boredom in her eyes. She looked around and saw a deep forest kilometres away on the left, and a road that ran to the

village on the right. What a horrible weekend she was having: not a one friendly soul around, no entertainment either. A horsefly landed on her knee, and Ashley flapped her hand with disgust to shoo it away, but the beast must have bitten her already, because her knee was now itching and hurting at the same time. In a sullen mood she looked at her sister and her cousin. She would never go anywhere with these kids, but she wanted to have a smoke so terribly, that she considered her mother's request to accompany Emily to be her only chance to get away. She lit a cigarette and took a drag on it. Emily turned back to see the source of unpleasant smell.

'Ashley! You're smoking!' she exclaimed quite shocked.

Ethan was looking at his cousin with his mouth opened. No one smoked in his family, and he had never seen any children smoking, for sure.

'Thank you, Captain Obvious,' teased Ashley.

'Does mother know?'

'How do you think?'

'I'll tell her. You shouldn't smoke' Emily uttered in a wary voice.

Ashley took another drag on a cigarette and exhaled smoke almost in her sister's face.

'Firstly, mum smokes too. Secondly, it's none of your business. And if you sneak on me, she will know that you have lost your school uniform shoes.'

Emily blushed and turned away angrily. Sister looked at her with a triumphant smile.

Ethan didn't want them to quarrel, but he didn't know what to do. 'I want to try once more,' he said to Emily, glancing back at her smoking sister uneasily. Ashley turned away, pretending to ignore them.

'Go on then,' Emily snarled.

Ethan threw the stone and it sank again.

'Come closer to the water, perhaps you just stand too far,' suggested Emily. 'You need a really strong throw to make it jump on the water. Try to fling it with all your strength.'

Ethan liked Emily and he really wanted to learn this stone throwing trick to earn her praise. He wanted to impress her with his dexterity, and it was the chance. He came closer to the water, leaned back and flung the stone putting all his might in that throw. But suddenly his foot slipped on a slithery mud of the pond shore, he slid forward and plunged into the water. It flooded his nose and eyes painfully, and Ethan got very scared. He turned in the water trying to find a support and get up, but all of a sudden he felt a strong pain in his right knee that had run against a sharp rock, and he lost his footing. Just a few seconds passed underwater, but it seemed an eternity to him. When Ethan had finally found the bottom of the pond with his feet and got up at last, he found out that he was only one meter and a half from the shore all this time. He was covered with mud, all wet to the skin, and his knee was bleeding. Emily was standing on the shore, covering her opened mouth with hands and she was looking at him, petrified, with her eyes wide open. Ashley was laughing hysterically, holding on her belly. Suddenly Ethan felt so humiliated and disparaged, that tears started to his eyes, and he burst into crying. He cried and cried, standing in the water, feeling awfully embarrassed and disgraced.

'Ethan!' Michelle and Susan were running down the path to the pond. 'My Goodness! What happened?'

Ashley threw her cigarette away hastily. Now, when Ethan's mother was here to witness his shame and even to multiply it by scolding him, he couldn't force himself to speak at all, and it made him even more miserable and caused even louder sobbings.

'My dear bear, oh, my little boy, hush, hush, everything is gonna be alright,' Michelle was trying to comfort her son.

Sarah showed up on the path, with Jason, leaning on her arm. She came up to the girls and asked, 'What happened?'

'We were playing, throwing stones in the water, and then he accidentally slipped and fell in mud,' explained Emily.

'Oh, did he?' asked Michelle distrustfully, cuddling her crying son. 'Or was it you, who pushed him?'

'Enough,' said Susan. 'Emily is a good girl, she would never do such a thing.'

Sarah sniffed a cigarette smoke in the air and traced it down to the smoking stub in the bushes nearby.

'Alright, which one of you two had been smoking here?'

Girls kept silent. She came up to Ashley. 'Breath out,' she commanded. Ashley breathed with a strong cigarette reek.

'Go,' Sarah said through her clenched teeth, grabbing her daughter by the arm.

PRESENT TIME

'Crazy family,' muttered John once again, and swallowed another portion of whiskey.

'Can you do anything useful, instead of boozing up?' asked Susan.

'We need to go and look for Ashley,' suggested Jason. 'It's getting dark'.

'Agree,' said Susan.

'She will come back when she calms herself down,' Sarah disregarded. 'No need in chasing her through the village. She's a grown-up girl.'

'You can stay here, if you don't care about your daughter,' Susan looked at her Sarah angrily. 'Let's go, Jason', she said and they went out.

Sarah snorted irritatedly, sat on a chair by the window and lit a cigarette. Michelle gave her smoking sister-in-law a criticizing look and clasped her hands tightly around Ethan's shoulders, trying to succour him. Emily watched her crying cousin guiltily through the doorway from another room. John glanced at Michelle and Sarah uneasily and turned his head back to the TV screen, but he couldn't focus on it.

'Ashley!' called Jason, gazing around. 'Ashley!'

He assumed that the girl wanted to stay alone, and turned left, to the old path, that was vanishing in a clump of trees ahead. He felt strangely calm and peaceful, walking in the dark of the evening by himself. This farm, which was his native land, a place where spent so many days of his childhood, it was his true home. He really liked to spend time here and missed the place, while he was away. He enjoyed the fresh, cool air, and soothing sound of crickets in the grass. His thoughts were interrupted by distant sobs. Jason followed the sound.

Ashley was sitting on the grass, with her back rested against the tree. He came up to her.

'Hey.'

She didn't answer.

'Do you like it here?'

'What?'

'I mean, at the farm. I really like to come here. I wish I could come and stay here forever.'

'Stay then.'

'It's not that simple.'

They were silent for a while.

'Let's go back,' he asked.

'It's not that simple.'

Suddenly, Jason felt responsibility for his niece, that had been growing up without a father.

'Your mum loves you, so does your sister. All of us do. Emily is too little, and I need someone to look after my fidgety sister Sarah,' Jason said. 'I say, it should be you.'

'I can't go back. Mum will kill me.'

'She won't. We all had enough for today. Everyone is too tired to be angry.'

'Here they are!' exclaimed Susan. 'Come in, or mosquitos will eat you alive.'

Jason and Ashley entered the room. Ethan didn't cry anymore and the awkward silence hung in the air. Jason cleared his throat.

'Look, I want to say something. We have never been a united family, that's true, but we gathered here for grandmother Judith. As you all know, she was the most loving and cordial person in this family, and she always wanted us to be together as a real loving family. God knows how much I miss her, even though the year has passed since the day she died. I think that today we should become a united family to honour her memory, because it is what she wanted for us. Or, at least pretend one.'

By the time he ended his speech, the awkward silence was gone.

Judith's Epilogue

They all gathered in a small office with only a couple of chairs to sit on. Notary was late. They waited chattering, and though no one admitted it, they all were anxious about the will and inspired by their sudden last night's reunion.

Susan was smiling at her family members, feeling proud of the change that happened yesterday.

'I'm so happy to see you all friendly chattering here,' she said, addressing everyone.

'Mother always wanted our family to be together. I can't believe it has happened.'

'Better late, than never,' answered Jason.'

John sighed and said, 'I'm sorry mother didn't live to see this moment. She loved us all so much, she would be very pleased.'

'I know that mother is watching us right now and she is happy,' said Susan, taking her brother's hand in hers.

Finally, the notary appeared.

'I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. What a mess... I thought Mrs. Heywood's will had been lost forever after the fire, and we are terribly lucky that it showed up in a wrong box in another office. Now, shall we?' he asked, holding an envelope in his hands.

They all nodded, Susan took out a handkerchief from her pocket. Everyone was smiling delightfully, waiting for Judith's last loving words. The notary opened an envelope, cleared his throat and started reading.

'Dear relatives, I can't imagine how difficult it was for you to gather for this enterprise, and I only hope that there was no carnage of any kind, and everyone made it to the notary office safe and sound. I know how deeply you hate each other, and I highly appreciate that you can bear each other's presence in this room for five minutes more. I hate you all as much, so I will speak briefly.

You can't imagine how tired I am of endless attempts to reconcile you all. I pray to God, asking to take me every minute because I can't bear your ugly mugs any longer. Nothing in this world will ever bring you together. I have been forcing myself to be nice and loving to all of you but I don't feel obliged to do so on my deathbed as well.

The only valuable thing I have is the Heywood Farm. For the years under your management it turned into the clump of woods with a rickety house in the middle. You don't deserve a square meter of my land nor a penny from my pocket. I bequeath the Farm and all the valuables to St. Peter's Orphanage. It seems, John, you have to move your alcoholic ass elsewhere.

I hope you all will go to hell.

Judith.'