

Refuse

The piles just kept getting bigger, and Rudy did nothing to stop them.

He sat on the couch in his living room, its fine leather now old and tattered, and the space felt too small. He was stoned, and he was drunk. Around him were piles of *things*, clothing, newspapers, notebooks, towels, hardware supplies, food containers. The mounds loomed, engulfing the couch. Only one cushion remained free. He sat there now, absentmindedly dragging stained fingers through his matted, silver beard, attempting to forget the life he once knew. But like every night, no matter how hard he tried to drown his thoughts, they resisted, and danced before his eyes.

Rudy looked at the doorway to his bedroom. He could remember with agonizing clarity his last moment with Charlotte, and how inconsequential it had seemed. He had been sitting in the same spot, drinking a cappuccino, reading the stock market pages in the morning paper. Running late for work, she had emerged from their room, and shouted a hasty goodbye as she rushed out the door. He had merely waved and said good luck, then returned to the columns.

The next time she came home was in a pale blue urn. Rudy had hidden it away, and attempted to forget.

But he could never forget, and could only watch his life spiral. His children left home. His friends no longer called. The piles began to build. And he just subsisted, waiting for each day to end.

By 4 AM Rudy felt tired enough to sleep. He dragged himself to his room. Blankets and clothing utterly buried the bed, so no part of the mattress could be seen. Even the closet was enveloped, and had been for years. One pile was entirely dedicated to eyewear; glasses, sunglasses, and their cases, all tangled together and disused. Despite his aching knees, Rudy climbed the uneven pile on the bed and wrapped himself in whatever was around him. Today it was an old grey sheet and a towel, neither which he could remember buying. Sighing, Rudy closed his eyes, and longed for things he could never have.

Sunlight through the window urged Rudy awake.

Rising slowly, he slid off his engorged mattress, and navigated between the piles. Branching paths led to the bathroom and unused bedrooms, all filled with his ever-growing collections. He moved a stack of newspapers aside to open the front door. On the landing was a small, soft plastic delivery package, which he eagerly ripped apart, revealing a bundle of assorted purple socks. Tossing the garbage aside, Rudy put on the darkest pair. Dimly satisfied, the other socks were added to a pile in the hall, and he went into the kitchen to prepare a meal.

No counter space could be seen. Every square inch was covered in old envelopes, boxes, plates, bowls, and empty cans. The sink and stove top he managed to keep clear, though the fridge was in danger of being consumed, and clouds of fruit flies wafted off the unclean dishes. Locating a pan amid the chaos, Rudy cooked eggs and bacon, and toasted bread. Then he sat on the open seat of the couch to eat. A memory began to creep in, and before it could consume him, Rudy fetched his laptop.

The hoarding began almost seven years ago. Most nights were a haze of alcohol and smoke, but with this computer, he had discovered something unexpected within himself, an addictive vice, a rush that rivalled any drug.

Online shopping.

Rudy was a retired optometrist with an investment income, so money was never an issue. The first thing he bought online were groceries. A thrill had coursed through him when he clicked the payment button. The thrill grew stronger when the food arrived, and he kept every piece of packaging as a reminder of the feeling, and for their imagined future utility. He went back online, this time buying light bulbs, a sewing kit, and facecloths. Practical things, he told himself. Things he needed. Again all the packaging was kept, and the piles grew. He bought blankets, plant pots, clothing, kitchen supplies, DVDs, CDs (rarely enjoyed, for the television and sound system were long buried), garden tools, stationary, and books. His hordes were complemented by whatever came in the mail, be it a bill, bank statement, or coupon booklet. He kept it all. Everything had a practical purpose. That much would always be argued.

The one thing he didn't buy online, however, was his weed. That came to him once a week through Ray, his good friend and neighbour, who he had known for decades. Ray was set to arrive that day, and this knowledge eased Rudy's lonely heart as he browsed his favourite websites. He found a page of bathroom supplies, and saw an electric toothbrush. With a start he realized he didn't own an electric toothbrush. He had dozens of regular ones, all waiting in their packages, but his teeth could get so much cleaner with an electric one. And at only seventy dollars, he had no reason to say no. So he put in it the online cart, and rang the purchase through. The familiar rush hummed through him, and the memories were feebly kept at bay.

There was knock. Ray had arrived.

Jumping up, Rudy put his empty plate on the counter with so many others and made his way to the door. Upon the threshold was a man with bright eyes, a peppered beard, and attire suggesting years of gardening.

"Hey old buddy," Ray said, grinning.

"Howdy Ray," Rudy said, stepping out the door. "Come 'round back."

"Still don't want to invite me in?"

"No, no. You don't want to see that place. But the yard is clear enough."

"For how much longer, I wonder?" he said. Rudy ignored him.

He led Ray along the gravelled path between his house and the neighbours to the backyard. The grass and garden were overgrown. Plant pots, shovels, rakes, and bins full of beer bottles crowded the house's outer wall. A wooden table surrounded by four wicker chairs sat in the middle of the lawn, covered in stacks of ashtrays. Only a few had actually been used. They sat at the table, exchanging one hundred dollars for a half full sandwich bag.

"This one's a new strain. Thought we could sample it together," Ray said, conjuring a joint from behind his ear. Rudy put his week's supply in his pocket, and the two exhaled smoke into the morning air.

"So how have things been?" Ray said after a time.

"Fine," Rudy said plainly. Ray looked over his shoulder at the ever growing pile of garden tools. When Rudy didn't say anything else, Ray pressed on.

“Look man, I know we’ve talked about this a dozen times, but I would help you clean up around here, if you want.”

Rudy sighed, and passed the joint back. “No Ray, I don’t need your help. I’m doing fine. Like I said.”

Ray pulled on the joint, his brow creasing.

“No man, you’re not. All this shit is insane. You weren’t like this before. I’ve watched you change. It happened after she passed, I know it. Look, if you let me, I can help you-”

Rudy swung his arm forward, knocking a stack of ashtrays to the lawn with a clatter.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Rudy said, his jaw set. “I don’t need your help. *I’m fine*. I can take care of myself.”

Ray stubbed the remainder of the joint on the table, looking at Rudy with tired eyes.

“You can’t keep reacting this way. You have to realize the truth. Charlotte isn’t coming back. And your kids are far away. I might be the only one you have left. I can help you, Rudy. But only if you let me.” He sighed, and stood. “I won’t come back unless you call. See you later.”

Rudy’s emotions keeled amidst the THC. He waited until he was sure Ray was gone, then flipped the table forward with a roar, the rest of the ashtrays rolling to the edges of the yard.

Rudy paced, fuming. What did Ray know about his problems? About his wife’s death, about *his* relationships with *his* children? He went back inside, rolled another joint, and sat on the couch with his laptop. A few clicks later, more packages were on their way, and Rudy relaxed into the familiar, sedative rush.

The day dragged on. Until nightfall he sat in his living room, reading one of his countless books, joint hanging from his mouth, the bottle never far from reach. Then he retired to bed, curling up on the mountain of blankets, towels, and clothing.

Rudy was awakened by knocks on the back door. He frowned. No postman ever used that door, and Ray hadn't used it for years either. Only two people would be so intimate. Quietly Rudy slid to the ground, head spinning, and opened the door.

His daughter stood before him. Her resemblance was so striking to Charlotte, with dark curling hair, freckled face, and round glasses, that he nearly broke down. She wore a long yellow dress and denim jacket, and smiled sadly.

"Hi, dad," she said.

"Leah," Rudy said. "It's so good to see you."

Leah hugged him. He was embarrassed. His face was unshaven, his clothes unwashed. He knew he stank. But she hugged him all the same, and he could do nothing but hug her back. When she pulled away, there were tears in her eyes, which she hastily wiped away.

"What are you doing here?" Rudy said. "Is everything okay with Jaime?"

"Yes, we're fine. He's still in Australia with the kids. I'm taking a trip to visit some friends. And I thought I would see you while I was here."

Rudy smiled at the mention of his two grandchildren. He had never met them, but Leah had sent him photos. A boy and a girl. They were just toddlers, but he was already unconditionally proud of them. Leah looked over his shoulder into the house.

"I guess things have gotten worse, huh?" she said. Rudy shut the door.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. But it's a nice day. We can sit out here and catch up."

Leah watched as Rudy fixed the overturned table and righted the chairs. He left the scattered ashtrays on the ground.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

"Just water, thanks," she said. He returned to the kitchen, getting two tall glasses of water and a beer for himself. She made no comment on this.

"Have you heard from Andy at all?" Leah asked. Rudy sighed.

"No. I have no idea where he is, and I haven't seen him since he left. He hasn't called me, and I have no way to reach him."

"I see," Leah said, lapsing into silence. Rudy wanted desperately to speak, but was frozen. Where could he even begin?

Thankfully, his daughter had an idea.

"I think I'm here for some kind of acknowledgement, dad."

Something within Rudy squirmed and twisted, but he throttled it, as he had for years.

"Acknowledgment?" he said.

"Yes, dad," she said, holding back frustration. "I gave up a long time ago on an apology. But if you could just *acknowledge* the way you were, and what you put us through, it would go a long way. It might even help you, too."

Anger bubbled up within Rudy. Again, here was someone telling him how he should feel, how he should live his life. He longed to lash out, to tell her to leave. But this was his *daughter*. So he held the feeling inside, where it simmered, but did not dissipate.

"We all deal with grief in our own way," he said.

"Yes, but that's still no excuse. We were all messed up when mom died. You should never have treated Andy like that. You should never have treated *me* like that."

Of course, he knew she was right. But that did little to still his indignation.

"It doesn't matter. It's in the past. It happened. There's nothing we can do to change it."

"You're right, we can't change it, but we can try to repair the damage. It has to come from *you*, dad. It has to. It's the only way we can go forward."

Rudy sat in silence. There had been so many drunken hazes after she died, so many shouting matches with the kids, so much anger and sadness. But it wasn't his fault! He was traumatized by what happened to Charlotte. He was dealing with it in the only way he could. Leah was too young. Maybe when she was his age, and her husband passed away, she would know the pain. So he just shook his head.

"Leah, you can't understand how I was feeling. It's too complicated. I couldn't have handled it differently."

Leah rubbed her temples. "Why do you always do this? You talk to me like I'm a child, and have no idea what emotions are. It's insulting."

The anger nearly boiled over. "You'll never understand these emotions."

She stood, fists clenched, eyes shining. "That's because you won't *let me!* I want to help you! I tried so many times, when I was living here, and even after I moved. But you're the same, stubborn, angry drunk you were back then, only now you live in piles of garbage." She pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket, crumpled it up, and threw it on the table. "I was hoping to give this to you, so you could start putting things back together. But I guess you can just add it to your piles and forget about it. I'm returning to Australia in a week. I won't visit again, unless you make some kind of effort. Goodbye, dad. I'm sorry. Goodbye."

Tears streaming down her face, Leah stormed across the yard and down the gravel path. Rudy stood, a cold pit forming in his stomach.

"Leah, wait," he started to say, but she was already gone.

The yard seemed horribly still. He unfolded the ball of paper she had left behind. It was a single name, and a number.

Rudy held the paper in one hand, the beer bottle in the other. He downed the rest of it, red fury clouding his gaze, and hurtled the bottle against the wall of the house, where it shattered into the overgrown garden. Breathing heavily, he jammed the paper into his pocket, and went back into his cluttered home, slamming the door behind him.

That entire day, all Rudy did was drink and smoke and buy. There was so much to be numbed, and he followed a well practiced formula. But the memories were relentless. Leah had brought them all back, and they could not be silenced. Though perhaps they could be suffocated, and drowned. So he rolled joints, and emptied bottles. The effects were middling.

Charlotte. The only love in his life. They met when they were children, in a park, near the river. Together they had played with Rudy's soccer ball. It had rolled into the river, and they jumped in after it. The water was shallow, and despite the panicked shouts of their mothers, they had only laughed.

They began dating in high school, and went to the same university. By third year, they were married. She had a penchant for math and design, and followed a path of engineering, while he pursued medicine. Once their schooling was finished,

they travelled together for several years, before settling in their hometown and beginning to work, she as an architect, he as an optometrist. They bought the house and had kids. First came Andy, then Leah two years later, and the family was complete.

When Andy was in his final year of high school, Charlotte was killed on a construction site by a collapsing structure. Rudy's spark faded. He lost passion for his work, and drowned his sorrows in a newly acquired drinking habit. Andy and Leah were equally traumatized, but instead of using the shared experience to heal, Rudy resented and neglected them. His bottled feelings so often turned to anger.

The true schism occurred one night when Rudy was hopelessly drunk, and Andy had suggested they spread Charlotte's ashes, to help them move on. The blue urn had sat within his bedroom, the first thing Rudy had hoarded, mocking him, tormenting him. After refusing the idea, Andy had accused him of being spineless and self-destructive. Rudy got angry and pushed Andy out the open back door, where he tripped over the doorframe and broke his wrist. Leah drove him to the hospital, and a week later, Andy packed his things and left.

Leah was left to deal with her deteriorating father, and all his inebriated rages. The atmosphere became depressive and aimless. Leah left for university as soon as she could, and fell in love with an Australian exchange student, moving to his country as soon as he proposed.

Rudy was alone. He became reclusive, soon retiring from his job, and discovering his new addiction. The piles grew, and now he lived in mountains of garbage. But no matter how high they got, they couldn't bury the truth.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the crumpled paper. It was Andy's number. He could call it now, and try to reconcile what he had done. The argument that had broken them apart was about Charlotte. More specifically, her ashes.

Rudy was jolted by a shock of panic. The ashes! Where were they? He had no idea, and the realization sent chills through his body. He hadn't seen them for so long. He had to find them, and find them now.

With great difficulty he stood, stumbling towards his bedroom. That was the last place he remembered seeing them. Once the hoarding began in earnest, the stuff

piled up wherever there was space, overwhelming the bed and the closet. The closet! That was where he had buried her. Guilt rose in his heart.

“Charlotte, I’m so sorry, I’m coming,” he mumbled as he stood before the daunting heap. Countless shirts, towels, blankets, shoes, shopping bags, and hats blocked his progress, entombing the closet. He tripped over the pile of glasses.

“Damn this garbage,” Rudy moaned. He gathered as many of the glasses as he could in his arms, carried them to the backyard, and hurled them beside the table.

“As if she ever would have worn those, you idiot,” he muttered to himself. He returned to the room and moved armload after armload, until the bedroom floor could be seen for the first time in years. The bed itself emerged next, then the closet door. He flung it open in triumph.

Within was a tableau of his old life. Collared shirts, tailored jackets, and exercise clothes. And so much that once belonged to her: sweaters, dresses, purses, shoes. Gently, he moved the clothes aside.

He saw it on the shelf. The pale blue urn, holding what remained of his only love. Filled with a torrent of relief, he cradled it, and sat on the bed.

“Oh Charlotte...what have I done. The children are gone, long gone, and it’s all because of me. Things have gotten so bad. This never would have happened if you were here. I miss you so much...”

The urn offered no solace. Rudy rocked back and forth, his head spinning and body buzzing. As his mind drifted, the urn slipped from his arms, landed painfully on his foot, and fell open. He cried out, afraid Charlotte would be scattered on the floor, an offence he could never forgive.

But no ashes spilled out.

Instead, there were small rocks. The urn was full of gravel. The same from the pathway beside the house.

Rudy couldn’t believe his eyes. Questions piled into his mind, and a clear answer appeared. He laughed. It was a mad, long overdue laugh, and he felt love blooming in his chest.

“You devil! You rascal! You genius!” Rudy hollered, then lay down on the empty bed, hugging the urn. The intoxication, exertion, and emotion finally took

their toll. Sleep overwhelmed him suddenly, and he rested in strange, unexpected peace.

Rudy woke with a brutal headache.

Loose stones were strewn across the bed, and the urn was on the floor. Sitting up, Rudy set the urn on the nightstand, and rubbed his temples.

He stiffly moved to the bathroom. The heaps of toilet paper packages, shampoo bottles, unused washcloths, and cleaning supplies made him dizzy. He looked at his bearded face in the mirror and doused it with water. Then he shaved, removing years of grey, tangled hair, until his cheeks and neck were smooth.

Rudy went to the kitchen, drank three glasses of water, and ate a bowl of cereal. Once the food was finished, he got his cell phone and went outside, stepping over the pile of discarded clothes, bedding, and glasses to sit at the table. Taking several deep breaths, Rudy dialed the number that Leah had given him.

The phone rang four times before someone answered. Though it had been years, he recognized the voice immediately, and tears sprung to his eyes.

"Hello?" Andy said.

"Hey Andy," Rudy said, doing all he could to keep his voice steady. "It's dad."

There was long pause on the other end, and Rudy was afraid Andy would hang up. But instead, he was given a chance. "Hey dad."

"I uh...I think it's time we got together, and had a talk. There's a lot I've come to realize. There's a lot I need to apologize for."

Another long pause. Then, "Okay, I would like that."

"Are you still in town? Are you close by?"

"Only a few hours drive away. I can come to town easily though, and I'm free tomorrow. We can meet at that café we used to go to, with mom. Then maybe go for a walk."

"Yes, that would be perfect. I'm free anytime."

"3 PM?"

"Sounds good to me."

“Okay, great.” There was so much to say, so much to mend, and it needed to be done in person. But Rudy was reluctant to hang up after all these years of disconnect.

“It’s good to hear from you, dad,” Andy finally said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Andy, wait,” Rudy said. “Did you...did you take her somewhere she would have liked?”

This silence was heavy, and Rudy wondered if he should have kept his mouth shut. But again, his son surprised him.

“I did. I took her to all the places she loved. To her old walking paths, to the beach and the park. To the river”

The tears flowed silently. “Thank you Andy, for doing what I couldn’t.”

“Oh...it’s okay, dad. Let’s talk more about this tomorrow. It’ll be easier that way.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon. Bye.”

The line cut out, and Rudy let himself cry.

Next he dialled Leah. He just wanted to hold her, and apologize from the depths of his soul. She didn’t pick up, but he left a voicemail, knowing she would return the call. She always did.

Then he made a third call, this time to Ray.

“Rudy,” Ray said when he picked up. “How are you feeling today?”

“Better. Look Ray...I’m sorry for how I was the other day. It wasn’t fair to you.”

“That’s alright. I know things have been tough. So what’s up? Do you need a new half already?”

“No, I’m still good there. But you said you would help me clean up if I asked. Did you mean that?”

“Of course! Are you serious man? Do you want to do this?”

Rudy looked at the junk all around the yard, junk that threatened to bury him alive. This process would be difficult, he knew. But he had to start.

“Yes, I’m serious. Bring garbage bags. Lots of garbage bags.”

“Alright! I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay. See you.”

Rudy put the phone down, and sat in the sunlight. The house had once been a paradise, and was filled with joyful memories. Those memories were still there. They were just buried. He would uncover them, one piece of garbage at a time.

“I’m going to get better, Charlotte,” Rudy said. “I’ve been lost, but I’m going to get better. I’ll make sure of it. For them, and for me.”

He closed his eyes. He could almost feel her arms around him, smell her hair, hear her breathing. Though she was gone, her love was not. It radiated from within, warming his bones and easing his pain. He knew she was at peace.

And with a little work, he would be too.