

The Big Sleep

"It's OK to be nervous," Sarah said. "Meeting the parents would make everyone nervous."

"I know, but it feels like a big deal," Mike said. "I worry that they're expecting more."

"You have a stable job, your own place, and a decent car," Sarah said, patting the dashboard to affirm her point. "What more could you ask for of a soon-to-be son-in-law?"

"Your dad isn't mad that I didn't like...ask for his blessing?" Mike said. "I know your family is kind of traditional."

"Not year-round," Sarah said. "Besides, you were asking me to marry you, not my dad."

"Yeah, but this trip feels like it proves my point. Your family has this ancient farm that's been there for generations and you all still go there at the start and end of the winter for...you still haven't told me."

"There are no ritual sacrifices, don't worry," Sarah laughed. "I told you it was a bad idea to watch that horror movie last night."

"Axe Farmer is a classic. It calms my nerves."

"They're going to love you, Mike. Honestly, I hope this doesn't scare you away."

"Well, for better or worse, we'll find out together."

Mike pulled the car onto a long driveway, snow crunching under the weight of the tires as his sedan struggled through the ruts left in the ice. The farmhouse was well-maintained, if a little isolated from the 'civilized world.' The white house blended into the snow with accents of bright blue shutters and dark shingles on the roof to give it shape in the wintry landscape. Mike pulled his car up to the house and joined a row of cars and trucks and saw a group of people chatting on the porch. As Mike stepped out, Sarah waved to the group and almost a dozen people rushed over to greet them. She had joked about giving Mike flashcards to remember all the names and relations of her family, but now he wished that he'd at least studied the family tree before the drive up. He did his best to remember names, but focused his efforts on the cousins that Sarah had mentioned before, Sarah's sister and her parents. He'd have all winter to learn the other names.

The introductions continued up to the house, Mike carrying the bags so that Sarah could properly show off her engagement ring. Between the exclamations of "Congratulation" and "Welcome to the family," Mike noticed a group of seniors sitting in the living room together. Sarah brought him in with a smile and led him to the old

people: Sarah's grandparents in particular.

"This is my Grandpa Jack and Grandma Ellen," Sarah said, setting a hand on the man's shoulder while she introduced them. Mike's grandparents had all lived well into old age, but this couple was ancient by comparison. There was still a light in their eyes and they talked as lucidly as anyone else in the room. Grandpa Jack was quick with a joke and Grandma Ellen's eyes were sharp enough to see the details of Sarah's ring without glasses. Before long, Mike went to help with dinner, cutting up vegetables with Sarah's sister, Beth.

"Your grandparents are pretty healthy," Mike said.

"Yeah, for a pair of old people, they're in great shape!" Beth laughed. "They seem pretty good for a hundred and twenty-six and a hundred and fourteen."

"A hundred and twenty-six?"

"Great Uncle Marcus got to a hundred and forty before we buried him."

"That can't be...are you sure?"

"Well, I hope so, otherwise the funeral was a big mistake!"

"No, I mean...how can they get that--?"

"Old?" Beth asked, cutting to the root of the question. "Family secret, but Sarah wouldn't have brought you if you weren't allowed to know. Good thing you proposed, right?"

"But how does--"

Beth turned away to deliver the cut vegetables, leaving Mike with more questions as he sliced through carrots and potatoes. Dinner was too chaotic and boisterous for Mike to feel like he was able to get any of his questions answered. The group designated "The Olds" kept most of the conversation light and jovial, sharing stories that some of the younger people seemed to have heard, but didn't mind hearing again. Stories from wars, stories from farming life, and stories from before the youngest of the Olds was born. As a history teacher, Mike tried organizing the stories with context clues, finding the tales went as far back as the late eighteen hundreds. There didn't seem to be any secret lifestyle tricks that Mike could see: no secret yoga regiment, no food they all had different from the plates of everyone else, and no mention of any strange rituals with human blood and black robes. They all seemed perfectly average, but that made the least sense of all.

As the last of the apple pie was finished and everyone rubbed their stomachs, it was Grandpa Jack who stood up first. "Well," he said, letting out a satisfied breath. "I don't know about everyone else, but I'd say it's time for bed."

A few people laughed and the group all left the table together, dishes and

leftovers all being left for later. Sarah led Mike with her hand and a gentle smile that made him trust the rest of the family, if only for a moment. As a single unit, the collective all walked out to the barn where they had parked their cars, and two of Sarah's uncles pulling the doors open to usher people inside as if it were some kind of religious service. Mike blanched when he saw a row of eight coffins open on the barn floor: one for each of the Olds. As if on cue, the Olds all stood behind a coffin and waited.

Beth walked to the far side of the barn and picked up an old, leather envelope and untied a loop of cord from around the front. Spreading it open, Beth offered a quarter-sized, bright green leaf to each of the Olds like an herbal communion. Each old person took it in turn and ate their leaf before laying in the coffins. Sarah gripped Mike's hand tighter when he moved forward and shook her head: a comfort rather than a warning. The Olds settled into their boxes and closed their eyes one by one. Members of the family came forward, closed the lids of each coffin, and draped thick blankets over the boxes. There was a heavy silence that followed and Mike waited for the collective breath to release.

"Alright," an aunt said, patting a younger child's shoulder. "Let's get back inside. Dishes ain't gonna do themselves."

"Any pie left?" A cousin asked, starting to move towards the house.

"Wait," Mike asked, pulling Sarah aside. "Don't we have to...let them out?"

Beth laughed and nudged Sarah's shoulder. "I think you gotta give him 'the talk'. Rip it off, like a band-aid."

"Come on," Sarah said, pulling Mike away from the farmhouse. "I should explain some things."

Sarah led Mike out to a greenhouse, the windows fogged over with humid air trapped inside to protect the plants from the elements. The floor beneath them was moist soil with plants poking out in odd clusters. The plants all had the same leaves from the ritual and blue flowers that reached up in rows of three or four at the tip of each bundle.

"When our ancestors built this farmhouse," Sarah said, squatting by one of the plants, "this place was almost barren besides these plants. At first, they thought it was a weed or some kind of wildflower and almost destroyed the whole crop. They kept a handful of plants for their youngest daughter, who thought they were pretty. A family cat ate some and was found lying next to it and not breathing."

"So...we watched everyone in there die?"

"Not exactly," Sarah shrugged. "That winter was harsh and cruel, little to eat and

not enough to go around. So, the grandfather decided to sacrifice himself to save his family: choosing the poisonous leaf over the slow starvation. The family held a small service, but kept his coffin in the barn, waiting for the ground to thaw before trying to bury him. Luckily for him, they noticed the cat again before they dug the hole."

"The cat came back to life?"

"The cat never died," Sarah explained. "Whoever eats the leaves of this plant goes into a kind of...suspended animation. We don't exactly take the olds to be studied, but Aunt Joan is a nurse who took all the tests and measurements once when she joined the family. No discernible pulse, no breathing, and not even the flicker of rapid eye movement to indicate deep sleep. Then, when spring rolls around, they hop up out of the caskets and go on as nothing happened."

"So the Olds aren't dead?"

"I've seen them go to sleep and wake up every year since I was born. When I went to my first real funeral, my parents had to explain a lot on the car ride there and back."

"Is that how they're all as old as they are?"

"It extends your life when you give all your organs a break for three months of the year. Technically, they're only alive for three-quarters of the year, so--you think I'm crazy."

"I--I don't know what to think! This is a lot to take in."

"I know it's a big ask, but you have to believe me. Just...give it until spring? Then you'll see, I promise."

"Alright," Mike sighed. "Until spring...but I'm not gonna be sleeping soundly with a bunch of dead people next door."

"You learn to live with it," Sarah smiled and led Mike back to the house.

The rest of the winter passed in a blur: the family all stayed together through Christmas before driving their separate ways for New Year's Eve. Sarah's unemployed cousin volunteered to watch over the house while the Olds took their "Long Winter's Nap". Mike went back to teaching and lost track of things in a flurry of grading papers and making plans with Sarah. When the family got together to organize things for the wedding, a startling chill ran up Mike's spine when he would remember the eight coffins in the empty barn, waiting for winter to end so they could rise. Occasionally, he'd have nightmares of zombies jumping out of the caskets and had to leave the bedroom to shake the nightmare feelings.

As the students began to plot out their road trips for Spring Break, Mike began to feel a cold twist in his gut, like an icicle used in the killing blow. The last of the snows

had melted weeks ago and Sarah had already asked him to set aside time to go up and see her family. When they'd driven home after the ceremony (and Mike struggled to think of a better word to describe it), Sarah and Mike had been almost silent. The hostility between them had settled with her assurances, but going back was deciding a lot more than Mike was willing to risk: not just the fate of the Olds, but also the fate of Mike and Sarah. They drove together in near silence, punctuated by the harsh voices of radio ads that jolted them both awake. Sarah broke the silence first.

"What are you thinking?" Sarah asked. "Not judging, just curious."

"I'm thinking about Schrödinger..."

"The cat guy?"

"Well, up until now? It's been possible that we're both right. As long as their in those boxes, your grandparents might be asleep or they might be dead. If we open those coffins...it's gonna shake one of us."

"I've seen it before," Sarah said. "I need you to accept this."

"Accept it? And...reject everything I know about the life and death cycle?"

"I'm not asking you to reject anything. Just...broaden your view a little. It won't be long until my parents start going under and those will be hard times for me. It'll be easier if you accept this aspect of my family traditions. One day it'll be you and me in there."

"Until death do us part, huh?"

"Is that why you're worried?" Sarah asked. "Mike, this doesn't change anything between us."

"You're rewriting my whole belief system here. I'm not especially religious, but Catholics believe you only get the one death."

"You keep saying they're dying, but they're not!" Sarah said, raising her voice for the first time in weeks. "I know how it looks, but it's not the same. You say I'm challenging your beliefs? Why not try believing in me?"

The challenge, as it seemed, hit Mike like a punch to the stomach. "It's not that I don't believe in you. I need proof first."

"Then you'll get it soon," Sarah said. The rest of the car trip was quieter than before.

Pulling up to the old farmhouse everyone was lingering on the porch again. Sarah's sadness and any ill-will that had come up in the car seemed to either have melted away or frosted over with excited jubilation. Wedding talk was the language of the hour and Mike found himself relaxing. By dinner, he decided he had been

overreacting in the car.

Family dinner was a hearty dish of beef and potatoes with some of the freshest greens Mike had ever had. The whole meal, everyone was recounting the stories told last winter, word-for-word and laughing and celebrating.

"I can't wait until Grandpa comes back," a young cousin said. "I can't wait to tell him everything that happened over the winter."

"It'll be like he never skipped a step," Sarah said, glancing at Mike with a smile.

Sarah had asked him to shift his beliefs, not overwrite them. It was the act of simultaneously believing that the Olds were dead and alive. They were only partly dead, but they weren't mourned as a loss or celebrated as a life long-lived. They simply were. Mike wouldn't have cried at the loss of his grandfather if he felt that his grandfather was still there with him. Maybe it's why Sarah had never cried about lost family members. Experiencing the small death so many times might have prepared her for the inevitable finale of any number of family members that she'd seen pass away. Sarah had framed the family story as a sacrifice the Olds made, but it was a life that was kept alive by the family that stayed awake and was excited to see them when they were free of the coffins. It wasn't a story about the Olds, but the Youngs.

After dinner--but pointedly before dessert--the family walked out through the yard toward the barn with the coffins. Mike's hand found Sarah's and they regarded each other fondly. He didn't have to believe her story, evidence be damned. He believed in what she was doing and what the family was trying to do. This wasn't cheating death; it was extending life in more than the physical. Ghosts, angels, or suspended animation: whatever brought people comfort was enough.

Sarah walked up to one of the coffins and led Mike with her. Smiling, she pulled the blanket off and bundled it in her arms. A final test of Mike's faith, he realized. One he would take without hesitation.

Reaching down, Mike found the brass handle of the coffin lid and pulled the door open.