

MUM COMES HOME TWICE A WEEK

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*"No live organism can continue for long
to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality."*

Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting Of Hill House*

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"Mum comes home twice a week", said the girl, looking out the window, where a frozen little orchard could be seen, "and, when she does, she expects from me to be 'ere." She was elegantly seated on a wooden stool, her back turned on him. Beside her, a huge hearth was spreading warmth all across the drawing room, darkened enough because of the dusk. He stood on his feet, staring at her silently, trying to make out those uttered words, mystified. "Thus, I have to be 'ere twice a week, accordingly. You see?", added the girl, turning her head delicately in order to look deeply inside his eyes.

Oh, sweet creature! He nodded, smiling. That part of the house was odd, but somehow cosy. It was a small room, and being so he wondered for such a long time about what sort of suitors had been waiting as he had, or even what amount of them had been keeping that same chat concerning her mother visits whilst looking at those frozen dead trees, in that decrepit orchard where no fruits seemed to be produced any more. How many? One? Two? Oh, he thought, surely a huge quantity. She was a pretty dark horse, the kind of girl whom one could sickly fall in love with; the one having all the enigmas and the minimal oddities so as to become, let's say, almost perfect and seldom found. Quite so, he wanted to be engaged to her.

She smiled back at him. Her eyes glowed of pure intensity. "Then, if you want to date me during those visits, you have to come over before or after my mum comes, obviously.", she got up and walked to and fro, trying not to touch him, "Oh, I guess mum's not going to care about that." Outside, it started to snow slightly. The frozen orchard was whitened, so it was not noticeable if it had not been for the footpath leading to the front door, covered with pebbles, almost as if it was a shingle beach, was getting as white as the orchard. "I love the snow.", said she. "Why's that?", it was his first question after entering the house. "Oh, it is depressing. It makes me think about long journeys ending in lovers meeting.". He stared at her and said: "Quite so, indeed."

So, the night fell down and he could see the orchard no more. She moved quickly to the other side of the drawing room, where a small pile of logs waited, patiently, to be chosen. She picked two or three up, and hurled them to the hearth. A few sparks announced the fire was not going to cease. "There, ", she said smoothly, " I think it is warm enough in 'ere. Mum is going to be comfortable when she arrives." She waited in front of the hearth, her face illuminated by the dim light of the drawing room, concealing her hands inside her dressing gown pockets. "I love the fire, as well, ", she muttered. He reached her and put his right hand over her left shoulder, standing his ground behind her. He felt the pleasant smoothness of her delicate dressing gown's material. She did not move at all, so he dared to say: "I'm going to wait for your mother, if you want." To that, she moved away, provoking his right hand to float in the air, as if missing something which had never been there before. "I don't think it's a good idea, my dear.", she noted, "Mum is terribly shy, and she does not want strangers in her house." He pondered for the best part of a minute. Eventually, he said: "I can understand that, of course. But surely I am not a stranger, or am I?". She came to him, again, and caressed his face with her fingertips: "Yes, you *are*, indeed.", she approached him a little more, her perfume drowsing his senses, "My beloved sweet stranger." He closed his eyes for a bit, trying to focus. That odour was penetrating his nostrils quite violently. "Sure, maybe you are my own stranger, ready to satisfy me whenever I am in need.", she said, brutally, whilst looking at him intently. "Mum is jealous, as well.", she added, evilly. He opened his eyes, pulling himself together in order to resist that fragrance weakening him completely, and came to say: "Is she

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jealous because of me?”. She laughed: “I guess not,” she separated herself from him, turning around and went by the stool, where she was seated some minutes ago: “She loves me desperately”, she looked through the window, letting her gaze be mixed with the darkness outside: “I don't want you here when she gets home.”, then, sitting on the stool, she ended: “It wouldn't be safe.” He was startled, looking at her silhouetted figure seated on that stool, placed opposite the window, and said: “I'm not scared of your mother. I could not be.”

She smiled widely. The darkness outside was complete, and the silence was only altered by some logs crackling by the fire in the hearth. “Oh, you are not the first one talking nonsense, my dear.”, she said sadly. “All the same, I don't want you 'ere and that's all.”

He came closer, placing himself between the window and the stool. Then, looking down at her pretty and sad face, he tried to find out what sort of enigmatic dilemmas she had in mind, if so, and how to decipher them. “You know I love you, don't you?”, he inquired hastily. “Yes, indeed.”, was her quick response. “Then, why should I be afraid of your mother?” She looked up, a single tear rolling down her left cheek: “It's the way it has to be”, she answered. “I cannot understand that,”, he admitted, tiredly, “now, who's talking nonsense?”, he concluded.

It was late at night. The only way to go back to the city was by car, and certainly he was aware of driving frozen roads in the night. “I cannot go, not now.”, he said. “Indeed, it is dangerous.”, she admitted trying to peer through the window: “You cannot leave now, that's for sure.” Then, he grabbed her by her shoulders and, with a jerk, made her get up all of a sudden. Their eyes met for a second, and he could feel her entire body trembling. “I love you.”, he muttered. Behind her, a crack was heard, another log being consumed by the fire. “I love you,”, he repeated, looking at her intently, craving for a response. “I love you too.”, she finally said, and their lips became one for a quantum, and her body relaxed and the drawing room melt down, like ice, and all was fine. “Let me stay.”, he implored, eagerly, drawing his head back to gaze at her, “I beg you.” She shocked her head hesitantly, and ascertained to say: “There's no way.” So, he put her away and went by the hearth, and observing the logs burning down to ashes, he asked: “Why don't you want me to stay by your side?”, somewhere, he heard a car's engine, so far away, “Why?”. She stood where she was, trembling again. She felt very sorry for him: “My mum.”, she responded, as if that was the real matter of it all, “I don't think it is a good idea, anyway.”. “Nonsense!”, he screamed. He turned around and looked at her; she barely saw him clearly because he was standing right in front of the fire, so to her he was merely a sombre. “As you said, I cannot leave now.”, he pointed out. “Yes, “, she admitted dryly, “you have to stay. It is such a paradox, isn't it?”, she asked out of the blue, somehow amused. “Thus, you have to hide.”, she came to such a realization in no time. “Hide?”. “Yes, my dear,”, she continued, “you have to hide 'ere, maybe below my bed or inside some closet.” He burst into laughs. “You're mocking me”. She looked daggers at him: “I'm dead serious”, she said angrily. “You cannot stay freely whilst my mum is 'ere. It is not safe.” He stopped laughing. “You *are* serious!”, she shrugged, “for God's sake. Who the hell is your mum?”. She smiled at him, and took her hands with hers and drove him by the window. “You don't want to know.”, she answered, dryly. “She is all I have, and I am all she has, as well. It is fair to say we have each other, you see.”, he was astonished. “Let me put you in some place where she cannot find you.”. “What if she does?”, he asked nervously. She did not answer. “I'm getting scared, I think”, he said almost in a whisper. “Hush!, “, said she, “you are going to be okay, trust me.” So, she took him from one room to another: from the dinning room to the bathroom; from the bathroom to the bedroom, from there to a lot of huge and creepy closets; from those not quite comfortable closets to some sort of weird and unnamed rooms full of odd and unknown stuff, and not having find the best and safest place to stay, and knowing her mother was going to be there in no time, she eventually came to a bright idea: “Wait!, “, she shouted suddenly, giving him the chills, “you can go spend the night inside your car!”. He nodded, “that's pretty much what I ascertain as a good idea.”, he admitted. “And besides, my mum could see the car during the morning. So, you'll be better going as soon as the sun is shining.”, he added cleverly. He nodded again: “I know.”

Thus, he got out of the house and hurried to the car. It was freezing out there, and he trudged in order to get to the car without falling down on that slippery ground. He passed across that frozen

orchard, looking at the dead trees and the dead frozen soil. From there, he could see her silhouetted through the drawing room window, the only warm place in all that huge household. He got in the car and, closing the door, adjusted the car windows accordingly, impeding the slightest cold air from getting in. "What now?", he thought, still looking in her direction, "she is staring at me.", he was sure of it. "And she loves me, she has to.", she said to himself, feeling sleepy and, indeed, falling asleep in some moment during that agitated creepy cold winter night. Whilst he was dozing, she went to the dining room and waited there for two hours. At three o'clock, the front door's latch moved slightly.

"Mum, is that you?"

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"Honestly, I don't know what to think.", he said. The cold of the last winter night was over and, despite the fact the weather was as hard as ever, he could appreciate the smoothness of some sun rays caressing his skin. One of those best friends of his was looking at him through an intense cloud made of cigar smoke. Surrounding them, a pleasant collection of tall and ancient trees, now dead because of the winter, but still looking pleasant; a pack of benches here and there, some of them empty and some others full of seated people immersed in some sort of gay chats; "No,", he thought, "this is a bright day in spite of the cold and the winter, so *that* did not take place.". That friend of his looked worried, and determined to last his cigar for ages, he observed it largely. Then, he said: "It's odd, it is, indeed.", to that he sighed: "I got out of there at sunrise, as I was told.", his friend put his gaze away from the cigar for a bit and looked at him, puzzled: "So?" "So,", he explained, "I came home pretty early in the morning.". "Didn't you see her?", asked his friend, frowning. "Nope." "As I said, weird, so weird, indeed." That smoke coming out from that splendid cigar seemed to cover them completely, as if trying to make them invisible. "You need to forget all about her, old chap.", pointed out his friend, "It seems to me this is not going to do any good to you." He nodded, almost absently. Some paces afar, a child was playing with a black ball. His mother was comfortably seated on a bench opposite him, reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She was beautiful, as beautiful as almost her beloved, he thought, and her delicate neck was protected from the cold by a woollen red scarf. From time to time, she looked up, put her book aside, upon the bench, marking carefully the last read page using a bookmark, and kept an eye on her son. "Be careful, sweetheart", she said sometime, "Don't! Don't!", she said later on, "Now, that's quite rude to do!", she screamed once, and "Don't make me get up!", said she crossed enough, looking daggers at her almost scared son. He smiled. "Why, it is only a child. Don't be so rough.", he said in a whisper. "What?", asked his friend, looking at him. "Never mind.", he responded. "So,", started his friend again, "what are you going to do?" "bout what?", he asked back. "Why, 'bout her, obviously.", shouted that friend of his, quite astonished. "Oh, I don't know yet. Maybe I'm going to pay her a visit tomorrow evening, her mother is not going to be there, I guess." So, his friend shocked his head violently, and said: "No, you are not." The kid was crying. Something had happened to him whilst he was distracted talking to his friend. His mother got up hastily, and put herself beside her son trying to determine what was, in fact, wrong. "What have you done?", she asked, dusting his pants. "Fool!", she screamed, angrily. "How awful!", she added, putting an exceptional effort in cleaning the poor kid's trousers from dust, mud and some glued snow. "I beg your pardon?", asked his friend. "Don't make a fool of yourself, *goddammit!*", said he. "You cannot go back there, that would be pointless. Go look for another pretty face elsewhere!", his cigar was almost done. "She's more than a pretty face, you know." "It does not matter: she is a dark horse, you said so. I don't like dark horses among me and the friends of mine." He laughed: "No, of course you don't."

He looked back at that mother and her son. The child was done with the crying, but her mother was talking to him down. At least, he thought, she is not screaming, any more. The book she left upon the bench was opened by some undetermined page, and a cold wind coming all of a sudden paged the book to and fro, as if some supernatural entity was trying to read the book

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chaotically, in such an extravagant order. "Let's go home this instant," said the mother, "it's getting windy." And then, they disappeared somewhere behind a pack of frozen white dead bushes. "You see," said he, "I would like to be that kid's father." "How awful!", shouted his friend, looking at him scared. "You surely don't want *that!*", and then continued as if explaining an obvious universal truth to such a slow student in some *a-long-time-ago* forsaken classroom, "to be engaged is to be dead, my friend.", he frowned. "Don't look at me like that, you know I am right." "No, I don't." That wind breezed again, and he decided it was the right time to come back home. "That woman was not mistaken at all: it is getting awfully windy." "So, what?", asked his friend. "So, I'm making a move home. You come?" His friend seemed to ponder for a bit, then responded: "Sure, my cigar's done. There's nothing here for me, any more." They got up and started to walk out the gardens.

He looked back. He thought it was really odd to see that bench empty, not even five seconds right after getting up from there, and now it looked at him absent, simply wooden material, painted brown, put there in order to be useful, alone if it were not for the others, more or less looking the same, accompanying it, absolutely unconcerned. And what about that bench, some paces away, where that mother had been seated reading her book? Empty, as well. "Look," said he to his friend, pointing at some further distance. "What is it?" "There's nothing there. Just emptiness." That friend of his, looking puzzled, said finally: "Why, old chap, I guess you are as odd as that *fiancé* of yours."

But I am right, he thought, because there was no one else in those gardens. The latest human being presence was finally over, and now the dead trees and the frozen white bushes, among the painted brown benches, were the only creatures dwelling there.

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"She says beauty is a stationary state," her words were spoken calmly, clearly. The fireplace was still offering warmth and cosiness, as the logs were crackling and burning down, inside that ancient mammoth house, "so, I *am* a stationary beauty, you see." "Oh, we are all such stationary beings, that's for sure.", said he. "She is fond of me," she added quite suddenly, "because of that." He could not understand that. "Why?", he asked her. "She is getting on a bit, she is tired and somehow exhausted and she thinks she is not worthy any more.", she confessed, sadly, looking at the back of her hands: "Look," she said, lifting them both, "can you see it?" "I don't know what you mean.", he admitted, mystified. She smiled and put her hands down. "I guess you are like the others." She came forth, where she could survey him deeply. "What do you want from me?", asked he. "It's not what I want, but what *mum* wants. She's got *rules*."

A knock came to the front door quite suddenly. She turned back, startled. "Who could that be?", she asked herself, and left the drawing room smoothly. He stood his ground, almost paralysed. He did not dare to make a move, but he could hear her talking. "To whom?", he thought. "Look, it is not even dark." "It can't be her mum, she said..." The front door was shut. She came back, showing a sad expression of extreme disgust. "Well, is anything wrong?", he asked. "Not sure.", she responded, looking down at the floor, as if seeking for something. "Well, who was it?", he tried again, hopeless. "Oh," she lift her head a bit, "it was a police officer." He shuddered. "What? Why?", he demanded to know. "Oh, that's something I cannot tell." "For God's sake!", he exclaimed, staring at her a bit suspicious. "Does it have anything to do with your mother?" "You dare!", she blasted, "Don't talk about my mum like that!" She went by the wooden stool, in front of the sole drawing room window, and sat down. "She's got rules, as I said. That is all." He came closer, and knelt on the tiled floor, right in front of her. He put his hands upon her knees. "I'm so sorry, darling. I didn't mean..." "Oh, it is okay, you could not know." She smiled at him. "Tell me all about those rules of hers, I want to know." She put her own hands upon his, so the effect was quite dramatic. "I love you.", she said, strangely. "Oh, but I *do* know that." "But still," she whispered, "I had to say it." He got up and taking her hands drove her closer to the hearth. A frugal kiss was intended, but she unfolded her arms and pushed him away. "Don't.", she said. He tried again, this time she revealed to be stronger. "What's wrong?", he asked. "Mum is not going to tolerate such a behaviour in her own house." "What the...!", he shouted, loudly. "She's got rules.

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She said so when she arrived 'ere and she *smelled* you.” He was totally astonished. He let his arms fall down, suspended, supported only by his own shoulders, with his fingers touching the void, his skin feeling the warmth sprat out by the hearth, right behind him. “She said I should take care of myself as long as you were 'ere.”

Rules. How odd! Rules and cosy fireplaces where one could feel that stationary beauty talking nonsense. “Tell me, then, what those rules are all about.”, he implored. “I beg you, I want to know. I need to know. I have to.” She grinned: “I guess you are going to hate them.” He took a deep breath and said: “I’ll avoid speaking mind, I promise.” She put a straight face and kissed him in the forehead. “You’re so sweet, my dear.” Then, she walked some paces away, turning her back on him and looked outside through that sole window, unaware of the darkness. “So be it.”, she added.

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There was an empty cup all by itself upon the round marbled table of the *café*. Seated at it, he was peering inside that cup quite intently. Apart from the yellow-coloured ceramic bottom, he could see no more. Inside, the snugness, the almost childish sensation he was perfectly safe among all those who, like him, were having coffees and chats, and laughs and cries, and hopes and desires. A waiter came, carrying another cup of coffee. He put it upon the table using his left hand, whilst taking the other with his right. “Anything else?”, the waiter asked. “No, I’m fine, thanks.” No; he was not: he brushed away an imaginary strand of hair over his forehead, and sipped some more coffee from that new this time green-coloured ceramic cup. “*Hey*, old chap!” he heard out of the blue, and turning his head around he could see his friend, smiling, taking a seat in front of him. “So, how are you doing?” He left a book upon the table, before him. It was in a bad condition, meaning it was read thousands of times. Its cover had such a lack of colour, depicting an ancient ghastly manor, surrounded by high hills almost fainted because of a pale-yellowish dense mist. Some dark tree branches were embracing the house. “Oh, old chap, you look so pale!”, said his friend. “What happened last night?”, he wanted to know. “She told me *things*.” “Well, what things could these possibly be?” He left the cup upon the table, empty. “You are not going to believe me.”, he added, dryly. “Try me.” Another waiter came, not carrying anything, and asked his friend what it would be. “Oh, I’ll have a black coffee, please.” The waiter bowed, and vanished almost instantly, only to reappear after a few seconds with a hot pink-coloured ceramic cup, this time bigger than the ones containing just coffee, and put it upon the table, right in front of him, beside that second hand book. “There you are, Sir.” “Thank you”, said he, and then, having a sip from it he turned his face directly towards him, and added: “now, it is time for you to tell me all about those creepy things she filled you in. I’m all ears.”

Winter, cold, and loneliness. That could perfectly be such a fair description of that mysterious girl he was in love with. He spent some minutes trying to find the words in order to explain, plainly, what he was told that last night, avoiding explicitly to miss some important and conclusive stuff. Then, he started talking: “There are three rules I have to know, and obey.”, he caressed his empty cup of coffee with his forefinger’s tip, “The first one applies to the house by itself: I am not allowed to be in another room but the drawing room, that restriction not including the obvious fact I have to pass through some others in order to reach it. Her mother calls those rooms as *the inner ones*.” His friend looked at him amused. “Now, what a foolish rule to make up!”, he commented, smiling. “The second one, “, he continued, “ is about sex. It is not I cannot have sex with her daughter, that is not the point. This second rule accepts sex as a whole, but I cannot have sex with her *inside* the house. Not even a hug, not to mention a kiss.” His friend grinned quite diabolically and said: “Chap, you have to put her away of that old chilly house for sure, if you don’t want to be pleasuring yourself till the end of times!.” He nodded slowly. Then, the same waiter as before came back and asked them if they were fine. His friend asked for a new cup of black coffee. The waiter bowed, again, and vanished. They both waited till the black coffee, this time in a pale-white ceramic cup, was left upon the table, to go along with the last and incredible rule: “The third one is even more odd: I am not allowed, by all means, to meet her mother. Ever.” His friend

applauded noisily, and barked: “Yeah! I love this one!” Some customers looked at them, unapprovingly. “Stop the clapping, would you?,” asked him. He was in two minds about that mysterious girl. When they met, some months ago, she looked as enigmatic as ever, but still he fell in love with her almost immediately. One day, they went out for a walk, during the autumn season. The woodland was gorgeous, leaves falling down their trees, in quite a different colour-tones of brown, yellow, and nuclear red. Their feet step over a smooth layer of dead but still colourful bed of leaves. It was then when she admitted she would like to own a small flat in the city, where she could go to bookshops and cafés, and where she could talk to everyone she wanted to. She started describing what kind of flat she was thinking of, and he smiled because it seemed quite apart from that enormous house she lived in. “It would be a small place, with a huge library where myriads of books telling about a pile of varying subjects would dwell; so I would arrive tired of being all day long working hard, and I would relax myself laying down in the sofa, letting my gaze to be lost amidst all those shelves and books they would contain in...” He hugged her, then it was correct to do so, he thought, and she smiled back and kissed him and started to run and played hide and seek for a while. “You would be always welcomed to my little place, and we could stare at my library together, and fall asleep and wake up in the middle of the night and make love and whisper to one another: *I love you, I love you...*” Then he understood she had been alone, she had always been alone, but the real motive was far from being ascertained, and when they were pretty tired of being outdoors, they bade their goodbyes, and he left her there, getting in his car and driving off.

“She would like to own a small flat,”, said he to his friend, “ a very small flat, indeed.” He could see her sad face through the veil of darkness he was in. “Every morning, I would fix some coffee in my kitchen, listening to the latest news on the radio, and letting my imagination fly away, away, and I would pay no attention to the world I would be in, except when that would suite me, so I would be as happy as ever, and I would call you whenever I needed you, and you would touch my face with your fingertips, and I would suppress a scream of ecstasy, for I would not like to be notorious as a consequence of being in the dirty awful mouths of all those noisy neighbours.” “What’s your life like?”, he asked her some other day, whilst having a coffee in that cosy drawing room, this time it was summer so they kept the window opened. “Pleasant.”, he responded mechanically. “Oh, I see, don’t you want to tell me?” “It is not so, my dear.”, she said, smiling, “But I’d rather tell you all about the book I read now.” He knew she was keen on literature, so it was almost impossible not to fall in love with her: he was as passionate as she was concerning books. “I see, tell me then, what is your book about?” Her eyes glowed. “It’s about an apparently weak girl trying to find her own way to be happy, in an old creepy house like this one.”, she pointed at the hearth, “It has a huge fireplace, and a lot of different rooms and weird stuff, and at least I could count three varying supernatural manifestations occurring in there.” He felt a cold breeze caressing his backbone. Back in the café, he grabbed his friend’s book and looked directly at its cover. *The Haunting Of Hill House*, was its title. “What a curious coincidence!”, he exclaimed, tapping at the book’s cover. “What is it, old chap?”, asked his friend, intrigued. “She read the same book.” “Oh, but I don’t even start the reading, you know. I just carry it with me because I intent to read it *soon*.” He handed the book to his friend, nodding. “It is a second hand book, is it not?, he wanted to know. “Sure. Cheaper, you know.”

“In the book, “, he recalled her elaborating, “ this girl died, but somehow she found that way to an absolute deep happiness she was in search for. It is not always right there, in some exact place you could trace, or locate, in a map, or just think of because you know it is real.”

“Who is her mum, anyway?”, asked his friend, saving the book inside a bag which was barely unfolded to allow the book to fit in. “I don’t know.” His friend moved slightly on that chair. “Well, you’ll better know. Or maybe you have to get her out of that house, if you really think you love her.” He was in doubt. “It is uncommon to find a mother like this one, I guess.”, he admitted. “But still, it is her daughter, and I am not sure she is going to come with me. I fear she is not.”, said he, miserably. “Don’t lose your head, old chap.” “I am not sure what I am to do, it is complicated.” All around them, the café was getting empty for the customers were leaving the place. Her smile was present in his mind, and her fragrance and her pose. It was an impressive pose, indeed, and the

mere thought of her pretty sad face holding his gaze, late that night, whilst explaining those rules, feeling she was somehow devastated doing so, almost perceiving a tear not wanting to roll down her cheek, make him be depressed, hopeless, terrified. He could go, kidnap her, put her away from that old creepy household and her enigmatic mother, and then, what? Was she going to hate him for what he could possibly do, or maybe was she going to love him deeply because of that? “Look there, my sweet stranger,” she said sometime ago, in that manor of hers, pointing at what looked like an old small graveyard, “there all my family lay down.” He thought *that* was scary, and he asked politely why she was revealing that small empty place where surely only the dead would dwell for ages even when they both were purely dust and memories of the past. “Why, because it *is* what is left of my family.” And she gazed at it, as if contemplating the brightest stars in a black cloudless sky at night.

“I guess tomorrow night her mother is going to come over.”, he said. “Yeah, *mum comes home twice a week*, I got it.”, said his friend, amused. “So, I guess I'm going.” “Excuse me?” “I said I guess I *am* going.”, repeated he. “Yes, “, said after a while, more convinced, “I made up my mind, I'm truly determined to go and talk to her mother. That's it.” His friend moved again on that chair, showing him he was starting to get tired of being seated there. “But she said... the third rule...” He cut him off quickly: “Stop that, mate. She is just a mother, and I can even understand her and those odd rules she told me about. See...”, he paused for a bit, trying to find the words which could suite that explanation the best, “She told me once she would like to own a small flat and to be there on her own. She would be happy. At that time I thought she was exaggerating, but now I know I do understand her.” He looked resolute enough to his friend's eyes. “I am going to get her out of that old house, but I am due to do things properly.” “Okay, then, tell me: what are you up to?”

For the best part of a minute, he said nothing. The café was, by now, deserted. They were the only customers. In some place inside that café, they could hear noises coming from crockery, cutlery and chinas being carried. Finally, he said evilly: “Didn't you figure it out yet? I'm going to break those sick rules, all of them, one after another, *systematically*.”

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It was hot in *there*. The logs were still crackling in the hearth, and she was seated on that wooden stool. There was no one accompanying her lonely solitude, otherwise that odd gaze she was holding would have been widely commented for years to come; but she was *alone*, and therefore she could drift her gaze elsewhere: not at the cosy drawing room where she preferred to spend all day long; not at the fireplace, where a beam of light coming out from the hearth was illuminating briefly her pale pretty sad face; not even at the frozen orchard out there, right behind that sole huge window, now almost imperceptible because of the darkness and the mist; not here or there, but *beyond*. “Don't cry, sweetheart,” she could hear her mum saying, back in time, in that weird beyond belonging to that happy past, “here's your mum.” She cuddled her, put some kisses on her forehead, and embraced her tight, and whispered some sweet words and she calmed down, and she opened her eyes and looked at her mum and smiled, and her mum looked down at her and smiled back, and kept hugging her for a while, until she could stop that awful crying and wiped her eyes and stopped shivering. “He is not worthy of you, my dear.” And she was pretty sure of that that instant, just because it was something coming out from *her mum*. Outside, somewhere amidst that dark moor, far from reach, she could discern some sort of a lament, probably human. The old huge and chilly household was located in the outskirts of that not quite big city, standing over its own walls, emerging from the soil like a summoned creature. There they lived in peace, in spite of that sick atmosphere and cold air, where even during the summer nights an additional blanket was truly required in order to avoid some chills. Memories, remembrances of that lovely past even when she got hurt, during that unforgettable and unforgivable episode, when she was excessively young and naïve and did not understand a clue about men. She felt in love, obvious thing to do when one is young and beauty, splendid, an actual blossom during the spring. Thus, her mother observed her from the distance only a mother could cope with; when she got home at night, she was questioned

every now and again about what kind of suitor he was, what things they used to do together, if he was touching her *down there*, and if so, if she was feeling something new and dirty. But she said no all the times, trying to put her mother's thoughts and worries at rest, and so her mum was tranquil for a while, at least during the few hours preceding the next date. It was painful when it came, all of a sudden: she came home crying miserably, all her make-up fucked up, burying her face inside the back of her two hands, making breathless noises and hurrying upstairs, until she reached her bedroom and there she stood, slamming the door behind her, hurling herself upon the bed. Her mum was downstairs, looking up and letting her anger flaring, unstoppable. "He dared!", she shouted, angrily, "He dared!".

It came to happen that that suitor was trying to demonstrate he was not queer. Clever but always alone, all the gossip was involved in his hypothetical homosexuality. Therefore, he got a girlfriend and was sure of showing up himself all the time attached to her, kissing her smooth and red innocent lips in public, holding her tight and smiling enamoured at her. She met his parents, his most important and beloved friends and relatives, and she spent some time dinning at their tables and small flats, having chats and talking about the most diverse subjects. She felt she belonged, at last, *there*. His flat was small, indeed, but full of books. Here, there and everywhere she could find tall shelves containing a huge impressive collection of books talking philosophy and philology. Among others, she found *Plato's The Republic*, the complete works of *Heidegger* in German, obviously, and *A La Reserche du Temps*, written by *Proust*, in such a colourful French. She was impressed, and so she came to love him *deeply*. Thus, she felt betrayed and miserable when the awful truth came forth: it was there, in that same small place, that in killing some time, she said to him she would be proud of introducing him to her marvellous and beloved mother, and maybe they could, from that moment on, begin planning their wedding. That came to happen one dull October morning. He was reading in the sitting room *Henry Jame's The Turn Of The Screw. Dark Sanctuary* was on the cd-player, some huge clock on the wall was ticking desperately. "I said...", she started over. He sighed and put the book aside, upon the settee he was seated on, and stared at her coldly. "I am not interested.", was all he said dryly. "But I thought ...". At that, he extended his left arm and showing the back of his left hand directly to her face, he concluded: "Now, all my relatives and friends know I am not queer; thus, I am not going to need anything from you, any more. You are due to get away. Now, if you'd please...", and, having said that, he picked up the book from the settee and resumed his reading, not paying attention to her. Thus, he did not see her silent cry, her total disappointment and sadness and sorrow, and so, he could not see how she went away, running, and how she got home and her mother looked at her hitting the roof.

"Where are you now, mother?", she asked no one in particular. The stress was closing in; she could feel it. It was pitch black out there, so she could see, now that she came back to that reality, her reflection painted faintly on the window. For a bit, she could not recognize her own face, and she got scared of her own reflection within that accidental mirror. Then, she smiled and got up from the stool and approached the hearth. Tomorrow evening my mum will be here, she thought. Oh, good God! That was relief, somehow. After all that misery she had been through, after all the sadness and the angriness and the coldness, now she was free to be with her mum, at least twice a week, and so her heart was at ease, and she could wake up every morning and do things easily, like cleaning up the entire house and taking care of absolutely everything, just in order to avoid letting her mother down. She loved her with all her heart. She was the sole friend she got, the only one understanding her feelings completely, the only not trying to take her away, far away, from all that once had bonged to her, like this old creepy house. That night she went to bed happily, eagerly even, craving for the next day to come. Whilst sleeping, lying down in the bed, covered with two layers of blankets, put them there just upon some white bedlinen, smelling of flowers and sweets, she dreamt pleasantly, a wide smile deforming her yet still red and innocent lips, but just slightly.

Far from that house, he was staring at the ceiling, incapable of resting. Upon his face, a weird mixture of eagerness and regretfulness, as if trying to determine which one was going to win that interior argument, if that could be even feasible. The bedroom was darkened. He could see

what time it was thanks to a red-bright alarm clock digital display, which was resting upon a small bed-table. Its intense mercury-coloured light-beam could be follow, slightly, with the corners of his eyes. It was cold out there, but the central heating he decided to install yesteryear coped with that quite successfully, so he could not feel any cold in there. He knew it was late, but he could barely sleep. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw her in that house. "Wait for me, my darling," he said in a loud voice, "I'm coming."

6

"I told you not to come over," she said, crossed. He shrugged and asked her permission to get in. It started to snow violently that evening, so some snowflakes lied upon his leather coat-shoulders, and his scarf was whitened despite the fact red used to be its colour. "It is freezing, may I come in?" She looked impatient. "Of course, otherwise you will perish out there." She let him in, sparing some room in order to allow him to pass her without touching her. "Do me a favour, and stay in the drawing room, would you?" He was going towards that room, indeed. Whilst doing so, he nodded. She shut the door. The floor by the doorway was a bit wet. She made a move to the drawing room following him, who was taking his leather coat off. He put it upon the stool. Dusting his scarf from snowflakes, he said: "I wanted to see you." She approached him from behind, her cheeks reddened as a consequence of that comfortable fire spreading warmth. She embraced him and let her head rest, for a while, against his back. "I love you so much," she said in a whisper, "but I told you not to come over when my mum..." she paused, sighing. There was only a forced silence, jeopardized from time to time by the crackling of those burning logs in the hearth. He waited for her to continue. Finally, she did: "I'd rather want you to be far away." "Why's that?", he asked politely. "I want to know." She went away from him quite suddenly. "You know the rules, I told you." "Yes, you did, indeed. But still." She smiled slightly; there he was: the first suitor who did love her, probably the only one she would ever meet, and between them those unfair rules. What if she decided to have sex with him that instant? She was excited, indeed; it would be easy to hurl herself upon his powerful arms and cover his face with passionate endless kisses. She felt an intense spark of flames down there, right in the groin, and put her hands over the wall, at one side of the window, as if preventing herself from putting them elsewhere. "You could be with me, you know that, do you not?", he asked her. "Where?" "Somewhere else." "But, what would I do in that *somewhere else* place?" "Not much." "Be happy?" "Perhaps." "With you?" "With me." "For years to come?" "For ever." "And shall we be happy always?" "I promise." "Always?" "Always." She went by his side, looking at his eyes deeply. He took her hands and kissed them both delicately. She closed her eyes and let him caressed her face using his fingertips, and then a sole tear showed up. He wiped it away with one finger, and kissed her in the mouth. Those yet still red innocent lips opened automatically, allowing his tongue to get in and search for hers, deeply buried inside that wet cavity. When they met, she felt an intense spasm and her legs weakened, thus she almost fell down if it had not been for those powerful arms of his, holding her tightly. "I cannot do this.", she complained, mumbling. He looked at her mystified. "Who are you, sweet creature?" "No one.", she responded, still keeping her eyes shut. "Let me save you, please.", he implored, almost crying. "What for?" "I love you." "That's not enough, I fear." "It has to be." "No, it never has to." She opened her eyes: now she was crying silently but he could discern her spasms and trembling, aroused. "Let's go upstairs," she said. "What about your mother?" "We still have some time." "I don't want to hurry." She opened her eyes and smiled oddly. "Come," and grabbed his left hand and led him upstairs, leaving the drawing room behind. That part of the house was surrounded by weird shadows. It was cold, probably because there was no central heating at all, so not wearing his leather coat he was terribly cold despite the sexual arouse he was experiencing, and therefore he committed her to hurry upstairs, until finding quite a shelter down the woollen brown blankets of her bed. The bedroom was a small one. Through those shadows painted oddly on the walls, he could make out a simple lamp upon a wooden small bed-table, and opposite the bed, where they were now lying in, a huge ancient wardrobe seemed to be watching them. In her naked embrace, he felt her

smooth skin and her warmth, and he could contain his own excitement no more. So, amidst that terrible blizzard, they made love, and he could hear some snowflakes hitting the bedroom window, and the hiss of the cold wind pushing them, and he could even hear uncommon noises and what he thought it was an afar lament, probably human, but being in that paradise of young delicate skin he thought about that no more, and thus he fell asleep against her naked and small body, whilst she toyed with some wild strands of dark hair glued to his forehead.

A shaking came about three o'clock: he woke up, a bit drowsy, hearing her panicking: "Wake up!. Wake up!." He sat up, turning his head towards her, now a mere blurred image as a consequence of that drowsiness inherent to his dream; little by little, her face was being painted plainly, so at last he could appreciate her scared expression possessing her flaring eyes. She was moving her head quite violently, focussing on him for a while and on the bedroom door for a bit more. "What is it, my dear? What's wrong?", he asked, grabbing her face by putting his two hands on each cheek, determined to stop her convulsive movement. "Tell me!." She was totally gone. Her eyes could hardly look at him, and he managed to detect some sort of spasm provoking her entire body shivering noticeably. "Stop that!", he blasted at her, slapping her face. "What is it? What's going on!." She attained to say: "It's my mum! She's here, I heard the front door's latch moving!." He got up rapidly, leaving her upon the bed. "It's okay, I can go talk to her.", he said, slowly, ensuring she could hear his words and understand them pretty well. He started to get dress, looking for his trousers and all around the bedroom. "No, you can't!", she shouted. "Stay here!" He got his trousers and was putting them on. "Don't be silly, my dear. I can handle this." She was still naked, so he could see some strands of hair falling delicately upon her generous breasts. He was aroused for a moment, but he put that sensation away quickly. "All is going to be fine, trust me.", said he, heading towards the door. "Stay here! Don't go downstairs!", she spouted. He paid no attention to her, and opened the bedroom's door decidedly. The entire household was covered in shadows, and it was really cold there. He could not hear any sort of noise coming from the landing, downstairs. He made a move that way, his gaze fixed ahead. "Hello?" No answer. He continued going down, until he reached the first floor. To his left, there was the drawing room. The door was shut, and he could feel the warmth through its wooden door. "Hello? Ma'am, are you in there?.", he asked, but no answer was given. He knocked at the door slightly, and waited for some response. Finally, he opened the door and got inside. The drawing room was empty. Mystified, he turned back and got out, closing the door behind him. The kitchen was opposite, so he went towards it. This time, the door was ajar. "Ma'am, are you in here? I want to talk to you about your daughter." Before entering the kitchen, he peered across the gap left by the door. He saw nothing. "Hello?", he repeated. He was about to get in when out of the blue, her beloved's voice, upstairs, in the bedroom, said: "Don't mum, *don't!*" Shocked, he turned on his heels and went upstairs, as fast as he could, towards the bedroom. "I promise, mum, I promise!", he could hear her whining. "I'm going to be a good girl, don't, please, don't, *don't!*" He hurried up, he was almost there. "What's happening? *Hey!*", he screamed, pointlessly. Then, he heard a terrible sound of glasses being broken and an intense and creepy yell, fading away quickly. When he got in the bedroom, she was nowhere to be seen. There were scraps of glasses scattered all around the floor and the bed. "Darling! Darling!.", he shouted, jumping over the bed, cutting himself with some of the glasses, not paying attention to that. "Where are you! My dear!." He bent over in order to see through that broken window. Myriad of snowflakes were getting in, now that there was no protection at all from the blizzard, and the bedroom was getting colder and colder every second. When he looked down, amidst the cold, the snow and the wind, he discerned what appeared to be a body, lying down in the ground, quiet. "No!", he now cried, "Oh, good God! No, no, it can't be!" The snow was whitening the bed by now, and the wind, fiercely, was hitting his face. "No, my God, no!", he exclaimed, all over again, looking down through that broken window, where she lied, dead. He rested there for a while, crying, calling her name aloud, whilst the snowflakes were covering the entire corpse of his beloved determinedly, little by little, until there, in that precise spot, only the snow could be seen.