

VISITATION RIGHTS

(from the collection DEAD OF WINTER)

Kealan Patrick Burke

Did you guys already have dinner?" I ask the two little girls in the rearview mirror. The green dashboard lights lend my face a ghoulish cast.

Isabelle continues to stare out the window at the late Christmas shoppers dashing through the snow. Her arms are folded. She's not done sulking.

Kara, a year younger than her sibling, so perhaps not yet mature enough to completely absorb the full potency of her mother's hatred of their father, joins her sister in watching the snowy streets and stores blazing with multicolored lights, but shakes her head.

"Well then I'm glad I put a turkey in the oven!" I tell them. It's a microwave meal, but they don't need to know that, though I'm sure the taste will give it away.

"Everyone hungry?"

No response. Isabelle has tears in her eyes.

In the mirror, my smile looks desperate, and frail.

I return my gaze to the road. I shouldn't be driving in this. The snow makes the windshield look like a TV screen with bad reception. Half-glimpsed figures rush through the lights, heads bowed, as unaware of me as I am of them. My attention is focused on my daughters, who have brought the cold of this Christmas Eve into the car with them.

"You excited about your presents?"

Again, Isabelle says nothing. Kara only blinks.

Somehow, I manage to guide the car out of the shopping district without incident. The festive lights and their associated—if alien—cheer vanish, replaced by whirling dervishes of snow turned red by the brake lights as I turn into our—into my—neighborhood.

Here the houses are vague, dispirited, dark-eyed shapes hunkered against the cold. The wheels of the car slide a little in the slush, but I keep my small, battered Toyota from hitting the curb and offer the girls a reassuring smile neither of them sees.

Then my home, which looks no less unwelcoming than any of the others, and I kill the engine. Listen for a moment to the ticking of the snow against the windshield as it tries to erase the outside world. Listen for a moment to the hitching breath from

Isabelle's mouth as she struggles not to cry. Listen to the sniffing as Kara bravely fights with a cold.

"All right girls...we're here!"

And I listen to the erratic thumping of my own heartbeat as I swallow and open the door.

* * *

Make yourselves at home. Go on. Take your coats and boots off," I tell the girls as I hang my coat on the rack by the front door.

They look inclined to do no such thing. They just stand there, looking small and miserable, and lost. Isabelle is still pouting, but as frustrating as it is, I know better than to chastise her for it. It's one of the many privileges I lost with custody, and one that would only exacerbate things now. Kara is shivering despite the cloying heat in the apartment. It's always warm in here, but today I set the thermostat higher knowing the kids would be coming back with me. I guess I didn't think getting them here would take as long as it did.

I stamp snow from my shoes and offer them reassuring smiles though it hurts my heart to see them standing close together as if seeking solace from some terrible threat. Nightly I relive the warm cherished memories of their faces lighting up at the sight of me coming home from work, especially on Christmas Eve, my arms laden with gifts I made a show of pretending were not for them. I remember the clean scent of them as they wrapped their arms around me, the softness of their lips against my cheek, the laughter, the joy.

The love.

"Right then," I say, rubbing my hands briskly together and moving past them to the kitchen. "Off with those coats or you'll be more roasted than the turkey. I'll get dinner on the table and we can eat. And after that, we can exchange gifts."

As I tug open the fridge, I wince. Using the word "exchange" was a force of habit. Of *course* they have no presents for me, nor should I have expected any. I promised them gifts last Christmas and, on their birthdays, and forgot on each occasion thanks to self-pity and a bottle with a man's name on the label. So, I expected wariness and doubt. I expected awkwardness. I didn't, however, expect fear, distrust, and coldness.

"What I mean is," I tell them, yanking three microwave dinners from the fridge and nudging the door shut with my knee. "You guys can unwrap the gifts *I* got for *you*." The chill from the boxes feels like Heaven on my calloused fingers. I set the meals down beside the microwave and turn to look at the girls. "Come on in here! Sit down! I won't bite."

They don't move. They just keep staring at me, their eyes moist. I notice they've moved closer together though. Kara's hand has found its way into the crook of her sister's arm. Isabelle has her gloved hands shoved into her pockets. Both of them have their hoods still up.

I turn back to the meals. Maybe the smell of food will entice them to join me.

"Not quite as fancy as the dinners your Mom makes," I explain as I set the timer. "But I think you'll like it. The secret is lots of gravy." I chuckle to myself to keep from sobbing.

It's been over a year since I've seen my children. A year is a long time to be misrepresented by an ex-wife who hates you. And she has every right to hate me. I was a drunk, and a violent one, and yes, I hurt her more than once. Sometimes, physically. Often, emotionally. But I never hurt our children. Never did anything but love them, and it angers me to see what she has done to them.

I turn back again to face my girls. Still standing there, still watching.

"Girls, I want you to come in here. I want you to come in here and sit down."

They don't.

I try to measure my tone, but it's getting more difficult. They're looking at me like I'm some kind of a monster. Maybe I was, once, but never to them. Never. She has no right to make them think of me that way, and they have no right to believe it.

"Isabelle...Kara...I'm not going to ask again. Please come in and sit down so I can talk to you. You're not being very nice to me right now, treating me like this."

Kara's lower lips trembles.

A tear spills down Isabelle's cheek.

I begin to tremble. "Isabelle...why are you crying? I haven't done anything to you, have I? I thought we were just going to spend a little time together for Christmas. I thought we were going to have a nice Christmas Eve dinner and—"

"I want Mommy," Kara whimpers, and now she is crying too.

"What?" I heard what she said, but I don't want to have heard it. It's a cold finger against my heart, a clenched fist in my throat. I don't want them to want their mother. Just once, just for a little while, I want them to want me.

Snow patters against the windows. The wind moans in the eaves. A symphony of loneliness that will never have a reason to change.

"Ok, ok." I say and throw up my hands. Force a smile. "Gifts first, then dinner, and then I'll take you home, how does that sound?" I head into the living room, resisting the urge to grab my children as I pass them and throttle the sense their mother has contaminated back into them.

"We don't want gifts," Isabelle sobs. "We want to go back to Mommy."

At the wretched looking tree, which I surreptitiously salvaged from the reject pile at the back of Carson's Christmas Tree Lot, I feel my muscles tense and swallow to clear my throat. "You're being silly. Every kid loves gifts. Just wait until you see what I got y—"

"We want Mommy now. Bring us home," Isabelle says. "You weren't supposed to bring us here. You weren't supposed to take us away."

Bathed by the sulfuric glow of the cheap lights I have strung chaotically around the palsied limbs of the tree, I bite my lip and drop to my knees. There are only two presents there, but they represent three weeks' worth of overtime and worse, three months of sobriety.

"Just wait until you see..."

"We don't *want* your stupid presents," Isabelle yells, and stamps her foot on the floor, startling me. "We want to go home to Mommy, *now*."

I can't move. I'm on my knees with my hands poised over her present, and I can't move. I feel as if my insides have turned to solid ice, my brain to fire. The trembling worsens. God help me I want to slap my little girl across the face and tell her to never speak to me like that again. That if she understood what life in this shithole little apartment has been like without her, without Kara, without her mother and the affection with which they used to treat me, that she would forgive me my trespasses and rush into my arms. She would gladly accept the gift I bought her then. She would gladly accept me as part of her life again. She would care.

I weep, silently, as I unwrap the gift. I'm blocking it from her view, so she can't see what it is. But that hardly matters now, does it? It could be a pony, a car, a million dollars, and it wouldn't matter. She only wants her mother.

"It's a cell phone," I whisper, running a finger over the small rectangular box. "An expensive one. I bought it..." My throat closes, trapping a sob. I wait. Try again. "...I bought it and programmed my number into it so that, even if you didn't want to talk...you could send me a text now and then." The sobs come, wave after wave of them rippling through me as I push the gift aside and reach for Kara's. I can barely see it through the ugly orange and dazzling white kaleidoscope the tears have made of my eyes. Blinking furiously, I tear open the wrapping paper and roughly fling it aside.

"For you, Kara, honey." I raise the box to show it to her. I am heartened to hear her give the slightest gasp. "A Sassy Sarah doll. The clerk at the store told me they're the coolest thing out there right now." I continue to hold it up for a moment, waiting, wanting her to take it. When she doesn't, I let it fall to the floor and stand, my knees cracking painfully.

We are a tableau of pain and misery and fear.

I watch them, searching their small faces for the slightest hint of love.

And find none.

"Okay," I tell them. "Let's get you home. You can still take the gifts if you want them."

They don't, of course.

* * *

They say nothing on the ride back to their mother, even when I tell them I'm sorry for scaring them, even when I tell them the words I've rehearsed in my gloomy apartment every night for over a year. Even when I open the car door for them and tell them I hope we can try again some time.

They have nothing to say, and that says enough.

Lit by the car's headlights, our passage up the snowy cross-studded hill is a somber one.

"Happy Christmas," I whisper to Isabelle, as I lay her body back into her grave. The wind freezes my tears.

"Happy Christmas," I whisper to Kara, as I lay her down in the hole, which is not as deep as I dug it thanks to the endless snow.

I return to the car and retrieve the shovel, grimacing as the handle chafes against my calloused hands.

And as I fill my children's graves back in, my eyes stray to the headstone next to theirs, to my wife's grave, and I wonder if she will ever forgive me, if maybe that's where a wiser man would have started. If maybe, just maybe, some day she might give me another chance.

Hope is a dangerous thing, but without it, what else is there?

I allow myself a small smile.

We'll see.

Valentine's Day is not so far away.

*Copyright © 2010 by Kealan Patrick Burke
No unauthorized reproduction permitted*