

Appliances Included

Mark Souza

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Appliances Included

By Mark Souza

Mary Givens struggled to keep the excitement off her face so she could maintain the air of a skeptical buyer. She and her husband, Lou, followed the realtor room to room nodding and dwelling over every flaw. Whenever Mary made eye contact with Lou, he'd arch an eyebrow and give a shrewd frown as a reminder of their powwow in the car. Outside the brownstone beforehand he'd warned, “The happier we look, the more the price will go up. Keep your game face on.”

The real estate agent looked trim and professional in her red blazer and black slacks. Her smile came easily though it seemed overly rehearsed and never quite reached her eyes. She had a knack for knowing how long to spend in each room and when to back off so Mary and Lou could talk.

The tour ended in the laundry room. It was spacious with high ceilings and ample built-in cabinets. A large washer and dryer sat opposite a window looking out on the alley. The agent turned and extended an arm to draw their attention to the machines like a game show model. "All appliances are included with the house."

"How old are they?" Mary asked.

The realtor's smile faded a bit. "I'm not quite sure. But they are industrial quality and have been impeccably maintained."

She swung open the dryer door for Mary's inspection. Mary bent down and peered inside. The stainless steel drum sparkled. Her face reflected off the mirror-like surface at the back. Mary furrowed her brow. "I do worry about the energy rating of such old machines. In fact, I have concerns about the plumbing and electrical in general. Older buildings have a habit of turning into a homeowner's nightmare. How old is this place and what's its history?"

The agent smiled and seemed eager to answer. "The building was erected in the middle of the nineteenth century and has housed a variety of businesses. About ten years ago, it was converted into a residential dwelling. It was gutted down to the brick and built back up. All the systems, windows and insulation are modern and up to code." Her eyes darted back and forth between Mary and Lou. "Why don't I give you two a little time to discuss? I'll be in the kitchen."

As soon as the door closed and they were alone, Lou broke into a grin. Keeping his voice low he asked, "What do you think?"

Mary tried to restrain her glee. "It's incredible, but it's way more house than we need."

"Yeah, but it's half the price of places half the size. We can grow into it and we'll make a fortune once we sell."

"Grow into it? Are you saying we can have more kids?"

Lou nodded. "Do you want the house?"

"Are you kidding?" she said. "Yes."

Mary loaded plates and dishes from boxes into the kitchen cupboards still in disbelief that this was their new home. Hank, her four-year-old, played with Taffy on the floor. The boy ran in circles dragging a small truck on a string and the orange tabby chased behind. Hank burst into giggles whenever the cat pounced on the truck. The cat would gaze at its prize confused that it was no longer alive. It was Taffy's confusion that tickled Hank.

Laughter came easily to her son, something she was sure he inherited from his father. The resemblance was remarkable, the dark curly hair, the olive complexion, the dimples. He was daddy's little boy. The only parts of herself she saw in him were his blue eyes and quick, German temper.

Hank ran out of the kitchen and the cat darted after him swatting at the truck.

"Stay away from those stairs, little man," she called.

Lou walked into the room proudly twirling a hammer on his finger like a classic movie gunslinger. He caught the hammer head in his hand and pointed the handle at her like a pistol. "Don't you fret pretty lady, he'll be okay. I got yonder kid gate installed." He leaned in and pecked her on the lips.

Mary wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled his body tight to hers. "You can do better, Sheriff."

"How much better do you want?"

"I don't know, something passionate and maybe illegal in Alabama."

Lou gave her a crooked smile. He laced his fingers in her hair and drew her close. She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. Lou's stubble singed her chin as he pressed his mouth to hers. He playfully tugged at her lips with his teeth and delicately probed with his tongue. Her weight settled into his arms and it felt as though she was floating. When he pulled away she gasped for air. "Better?" he asked.

Mary opened her eyes. "Uh-huh. In fact, if you don't follow up on that tonight, I'll be awfully disappointed."

She felt a tug at her jeans. A small voice called, "Mom? Mom?"

She smiled ruefully. "Are you sure you want another one?"

"Mom, Taffy's gone."

"It's okay, she's just hiding. She'll come out when she's ready."

Hank jerked at her pant leg again. His voice rose in pitch and had an edge that usually signaling the onset of a tantrum. "Taffy's gone."

She shot a look at Lou that was almost pleading. "Do you want to take this one? If I don't get all this put away, we don't get dinner."

Lou shrugged. "No problem." He tousled his son's hair. "So what's up, sport?"

"Taffy dist-appeared."

"I got that part. Why don't you show me?" Lou reached out and Hank wrapped his hand around one of Lou's fingers. Mary watched as the boy towed his father out of the room.

Lou returned a few minutes later carrying Hank. The boy clutched onto his father like a starfish, his face buried in Lou's chest while he sobbed.

"I can't find the cat," Lou said.

"It's here someplace," Mary assured. "The place is a mess. It probably found someplace quiet to hole up for a while." She searched through the boxes. "It's been a long stressful day for everyone," she said. She found what she was looking for and handed the can of cat food to Lou in exchange for her son. "She hasn't eaten yet. Open that and see what happens."

Lou searched for the can opener while Mary soothed Hank and stroked his hair.

While doing laundry the next morning, Mary noticed the cat food was untouched and the litter box unmarked. She didn't start to worry until that afternoon. It felt silly to bother Lou at work but she did.

"You don't think Taffy might have found a way outside do you?"

"She's still missing?"

"Yes. Could you do me a favor? Stop by our old place just in case. Sometimes cats return to their old haunts if they get the chance. I don't know how she could have gotten outside, but it's worth a shot. Thanks. I'll see you soon."

When Lou came home, Mary met him with expectant eyes. He subtly wagged his head at her unspoken question hoping Hank wouldn't catch on. He did and began to wail. "I want Taffy."

Mary picked up her son and sat with him on the sofa. She tried to comfort him. She assured they'd find his cat and rocked him until he fell asleep.

After dropping Hank off at preschool the next morning, Mary hit the street with an armful of posters featuring Taffy's picture and an offer of fifty dollars for her return. Paper notices already sheathed neighborhood telephone poles like a calico layer of bark. They advertised local rock band appearances, painting and cleaning services, pleas for information on missing persons, and reward offers for lost pets. Nailing up Taffy's poster meant covering someone else's. The first went up over a carpet cleaning service.

Further up the block, a restaurant and grocery let Mary tape posters to their doors. At the corner she chose to cover a poster for a band named Pins and Needles. Maybe by spreading the pain, no one would get too angry. She didn't need anyone ripping down all of Taffy's posters in retribution.

An old woman on an electric scooter wheeled up and eyed the poster. A cigarette dangled from her livery lips. Red ringed eyes shifted from Taffy's photo to Mary.

"Your cat?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I wouldn't put it there. Kids in the neighborhood really love that band. Cover Binky instead, the schnauzer. They found him on the parkway last week. Not a happy ending if you know what I mean."

Mary ripped down the poster covering Pins and Needles and stapled a new one up over Binky. When she turned, she noticed a clear tube under the woman's nose and the green tank mounted to the back of her scooter. "Is it safe to smoke on oxygen?"

The old woman cackled. "I'm ninety-two. At my age it's not safe to do anything." She extended her hand, "Sadie McFadden."

Mary shook her hand gingerly. "I'm Mary Givens." Sadie's spotted skin looked paper thin with a web of brittle blue veins visible beneath. Sadie's grip was surprisingly strong.

"Are you the new people in the loony bin?" Sadie asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

Sadie pointed across the street. "Do you live there?"

"Yes."

Sadie's forehead wrinkled and her face took on an expression of concern, "What did they tell you about the place?"

"They told us it was built in the 1800s, then gutted and turned into a home about a decade ago."

"Didn't they tell you it used to be a sanitarium?" Sadie studied Mary's face and wagged her head. "I didn't think so. Why would they? Your house has quite a history, not all of it appetizing. Do you want to hear it?"

Mary glanced down to check her watch and then looked at the posters in her hand. When she looked up, Sadie's eyes were focused on the posters too. "I can help you put those up," Sadie offered. "We can talk along the way."

The motor of Sadie's scooter whined as she kept pace with Mary. Sadie didn't actually hang any posters, offering advice instead about which posters could be covered. "I've lived here my whole life," she said pointing to a row of buildings behind her. "Your place became a sanitarium during the depression. I think it was a laundry before that. The laundry went belly up and the building stood vacant for about five years. The Ricci

brothers bought it cheap and opened a sanitarium. At first, people got up in arms about having a crazy house in the neighborhood, but it was quiet and there was never a lick of trouble until the police shut it down in the fifties.

“It seems the Riccis were collecting social security checks for more patients than the place would hold. Whenever someone died, they wouldn’t report the death and just kept collecting checks. And, of course, a death opened up a bed for someone new. But they got greedy. The Inquirer got wind of someone about to reach their 108th birthday and sent a reporter out to do an *Oldest Living Person in Philadelphia* human interest story. That blew the lid off everything.

Sadie stopped at a lamp post and wagged her finger. “You can cover the ‘Classic VW Bug for sale’ poster. It didn’t run and the cops towed it last month.” As they started up the block, Sadie resumed her story. “The strange part was, after the investigation, the cops never found a single body. Where did they all go? The police questioned the Ricci brothers and they claimed the missing patients didn’t die, they just disappeared. The Riccis said they didn’t know what happened to them. Of course no one believed them, including the jury.

“After that, the building sat vacant for forty years. Kids would break in, mostly teenagers doing what teenagers do. Every now and again one or two of them would go missing. Then in ninety-five, or maybe it was ninety-six, a nice gay couple bought the building for a song and started renovations. After they moved in, they began hearing noises during the night - voices. Geoff, one of the boys – listen to me, *boys*, they were in their fifties at the time.

“Anyway, Geoff liked to talk to me because he said I reminded him of his dead mother.” Sadie took a drag from her cigarette and flicked off the ash. “They say gays are supposed to be so damn sensitive, but I didn’t see it. His dead mother for Christ sake, who wants to be compared to that? Oh well. Geoff said the voices came from the laundry room. One night, his roommate - is that the right term, went downstairs to check on it and just disappeared. The police never did find him.

“Geoff was despondent and scared. He moved away, New York I think, and let the bank foreclose. Since then, no one has managed to live there more than a year. New couples come and go. Only not all of them go. Usually someone winds up missing. Sometimes only a pet. The only ones making out on the place are the damned realtors every time it sells. Commish, commish, commish.”

Mary realized she had stopped walking and was frozen in place. She looked down at the posters in her hand. They didn’t seem important anymore. Sadie’s eyes were locked on her and from Sadie’s expression, Mary knew her anxiety must be apparent on her face.

Sadie frowned. “I’ve said too much, haven’t I?”

Mary forced a smile and extended her arm to shake hands. “No, no, it was so nice to meet you, Sadie, but I have errands to get to. Maybe we can talk again, soon.” Mary walked home and resisted the urge to run. Why was she so upset? The old woman was clearly wrong, putting her own spin on every odd little thing that had happened over the years.

Inside the house, Mary dropped the posters on the entry table and peered out the window. Sadie was nowhere to be seen. She considered calling Lou and thought better of it. No need to disturb him at work over an old ladies crazy stories.

Hank saw the posters on the entry table when Mary brought him home from preschool. Her son snuffled and began to wail for his lost cat again.

“See this?” Mary said, holding up a poster. Hank gazed at Taffy’s picture and nodded. “We’re offering people money to help find Taffy. It won’t take long now.” That seemed to satisfy him. He spotted a bucket of Legos Mary had unpacked. He plopped on the floor and started building.

“Any luck,” Lou asked when he returned from work.

Mary wagged her head. “I did meet an interesting lady who seemed to know a lot about our house.” Mary gave a summary of what Sadie said and Lou looked skeptical.

“Who knows how much of what she said is true,” Lou said. “There’s probably a kernel of truth there, but maybe a smidge of elaboration, and a dash of delusion too. I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s just old lady talk.”

The gerbil in Mary’s head hit full stride while she did the dinner dishes, and popped a little crystal meth later as she tried to settle in for sleep. Its wheel squeaked with every revolution pounding out a monotonous mazurka like rhythm as thoughts turned over and over in her mind. She stared at the dark ceiling and tried meditation; however, the racing rodent at the wheel wasn’t a practitioner.

She couldn’t help but dwell on her conversation with Sadie McFadden. Maybe Lou was right and it was all crazy lady talk, but Sadie seemed perfectly lucid and plugged in. The conversation with Sadie replayed inside Mary’s head. It probably meant nothing, but what if Sadie really knew something?

Her husband snored away beside her, at peace. He’d assessed the Taffy situation, made alternate plans – a new kitten in case Taffy couldn’t be found, and had moved on. By his reckoning, Sadie was a kook, Taffy was lost, and the two occurrences unrelated. He’d dismissed everything Sadie had said. Mary looked at him a little envious. It must be nice to have such a well trained gerbil.

Hank awoke to his father’s snoring, but that wasn’t what urged him from his sleep. He scrambled out of bed and shuffled down the hall to the bathroom, with barely enough time to unzip his one-piece-footy PJs and tugged them below his knees. As he stood before the toilet, he heard a cat mewing. The sound drew him down the hall past his room and through the laundry room doorway. He stood in front of the dryer. The circular door swung open and revealed Taffy perched at the back of the drum cleaning her paws.

Hank held out his arms for the cat but she didn’t come like she usually did. He reached for her and stepped closer. Taffy moved deeper into the dryer. Hank leaned in and stretched and the cat edged away just beyond his reach. Hank crawled in after her. The back of the drum shimmered and fell away leaving a dark hole. The void started to swirl and draw air inside. The power of the vortex sucked Hank toward the dryer. Taffy smiled and disappeared through the opening. Hands reached out from the blackness, grabbed Hank by the arms, and pulled him in. The dryer door slammed shut.

The smell of brewing coffee filled the kitchen as Mary worked over the sink trimming the rind from a cantaloupe and cutting the flesh into cubes. Lou walked in scanning the headlines in the morning paper. He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“Smells great. What are we having?”

“Toast, fruit, and coffee. Is Hank up yet? He’s going to be late for preschool.”

Lou sat and dropped the paper on the table. “I haven’t seen him.”

Mary poked her head out of the kitchen and yelled down the hall, “Hank Givens, get a move on. You’re going to be late.”

She set a plate of buttered toast and a bowl of cantaloupe in front of Lou and poured him some coffee. “What’s keeping him?” she asked. The question was rhetorical and Lou didn’t bother to look up. Mary’s temper began to rise. She charged out of the kitchen and down the hall with her lips pursed.

Hank’s bedroom door stood open. Inside, his bed was unmade. “Hank! Where are you? You’re making me very angry, little man.” She listened. There was no reply. Mary went room to room checking for him. By the time she reached the laundry room, the warm flush of anger had melted into a queasy flutter in her stomach. Maybe he was hiding. Maybe the explanation was innocent. Despite trying to remain positive, she couldn’t push back her growing sense of dread. In the living room she stared at the child gate at the base of the stairs. It was closed.

“I can’t find Hank,” she told her husband. Lou looked up and set the paper down. “Do you think he could get past the gate?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “I’ll check upstairs. You recheck the downstairs including the closets in case he’s hiding.”

While Mary searched, she listened for sounds from upstairs that Hank had been found. Hope slipped away when Lou came down the stairs and shook his head. “No sign of him,” he said.

She wanted to vomit. “I’m calling the cops,” she said.

Lou nodded. “I’ll call work to tell them I’m not coming in.”

A Philly PD blue and white pulled to the curb with its lights going. Two officers climbed the steps and Mary had the door open for them before they reached the landing. They came in and listened as Mary and Lou recounted the events of that morning. The older of the two, Officer Gomez, did most of the talking. He was tall and slender and devoid of emotion. From his sullen and world-weary demeanor, Mary got the impression Gomez had seen it all. His brown eyes measured her, probed for information, and weighed what she said. She couldn’t shake the feeling that Gomez thought she was lying. The other, Officer Wettle, scribbled notes on a pad while Gomez questioned them. “Which room is your son’s?” Gomez asked. Mary led them down the hall. “Do you mind if we take a look around?”

“No of course not,” Mary said. She stepped away from the door to get out of their way. Gomez gave an upward jerk of his head and Wettle left the room. Mary heard him climb the stairs to the second floor. Gomez checked windows, searched closets and under beds. Mary waited with Lou in the living room already sure of the result, though inside, a small twinkle of hope burned.

The two policemen rejoined them looking grim. “Were your doors locked last night?” Gomez asked.

Mary nodded. “Dead bolted. I had to unlatch it to let you in.”

“Do you have a recent photo of your son?” Gomez asked.

“Somewhere in this mess,” Mary said. She sifted through the boxes stacked against the wall. “We just moved and haven’t had a chance to unpack everything.” She found an album and pulled a photo of Hank from under the protective plastic sheet. Mary passed it to Gomez.

“Do you mind if we take it with us? We’ll be putting out an Amber alert and a photo will be very helpful.”

“No, of course not. It’s yours,” Mary said.

“Does your son have any distinctive birthmarks or scars?”

Mary glanced at Lou who shrugged. “He has a burn on his right forearm,” Mary said.

“How did he get that?” Gomez asked.

“He bumped up against the barbeque last summer.”

Gomez gave his partner a look and said, “I think we have everything we need.”

“What do we do now?” Mary asked.

“You wait,” Gomez said.

Wait! The utter helplessness implied by the word crushed Mary. Her eyes stung and brimmed with tears. She managed to tough it out until the officers left and the door closed before she started to sob. Lou tried to comfort her, but there was no way he could. She ran to Hank’s room and curled up on his bed. She could still smell his presence on the sheets.

The doorbell rang at two in the afternoon. Lou answered it. Mary sat at the kitchen table, her eyes swollen and head sore. She felt tired and wrung out. Two men dressed in slacks and sport coats followed Lou into the kitchen. Badges hung from their lapel pockets. They were Mutt and Jeff, one tall, white, and balding; the other short, heavy-set, and black. When she made eye contact, she sensed them practically cringe in anticipation of the question permeating the air.

“Did you find my son?”

“Not yet, ma’am,” the shorter one said. I’m Detective Jackson and this is Detective Mandell. We’d like to ask you a few questions.” Mary remained seated and kicked out the two chairs on the opposite side of the table. Mandell glanced at his partner and they both sat. “We realize this is a difficult time for both of you,” Jackson said, “and we’ll make this as brief as we can. When did you realize your son was missing?”

“About seven-thirty this morning,” Mary said.

“And when was the last time you remember seeing him last night?”

Mary turned to Lou, her face twisted in confusion. “We answered these same questions this morning. Don’t you guys talk to each other?”

Jackson gazed at her a moment, his face unperturbed, heavy lidded eyes unblinking. “Ma’am, sometimes when we ask the questions again, people remember something new. It also gives us a chance to reconfirm our information. That’s why we do it.”

Mary propped her elbows on the table and settled her chin on her hands. “The last time I saw him was nine o’clock last night.” Jackson nodded and Mary recognized a trend. Jackson took the lead and did all the talking while his partner remained silent and took notes, much like the uniformed officers earlier that day.

“Are you both light sleepers?” Jackson asked.

“I am. Him, not so much.”

“Did you hear anything during the night or have any reason to visit your son’s room?”

“No,” Mary said.

“What about you, sir?”

Lou wagged his head. “I went out like a light and didn’t wake up until seven.”

“Is that true, ma’am?”

“Yeah, if he gets out of bed, I know.”

Jackson paused. His eyes shifted between Mary and Lou. Mary could feel he was building to something. “Did either of you find an unlocked window or door first thing this morning?”

Mary looked at Lou who was staring back at her. Lou shook his head. “Me either,” Mary said. “I locked the doors last night before heading to bed. And they were still locked this morning when I let the officers in.”

Jackson sat back and let out a heavy sigh. “See, that’s where I have a problem.” His eyes settled heavily on Mary. “How could someone break in here and take your son, and then deadbolt the door behind them. It just doesn’t seem possible, now does it?”

Lou’s mouth hung open. His eyes glazed with confusion. “What are you trying to say, Detective?”

“I’m not trying to say anything. It’s just that unless I’m missing something, whoever took your son was inside this house last night. So I figure there must be some detail you haven’t told us. Maybe if we talk it through, I can fill in the missing pieces.”

“Missing pieces?” Mary smacked her hands down hard on the table. The two detectives flinched. “What missing pieces? We told you everything. Our son is missing and instead of looking for him, you’re here accusing us. Out! Get out!” She felt Lou’s hand on her shoulder and jerked away. She pointed to the door, “Go!”

Detective Jackson begrudgingly lifted his bulk from the chair, his mouth set in a tight line. “Maybe we picked a bad time. But we do need to talk. You’ll be seeing me again, count on it.”

Lou led the detectives out. When he returned, Mary saw something on his face that scared her. Doubt. “What’s eating you?” she asked. “Go ahead and spit it out.”

“What happened here last night, Mary?”

She closed her eyes. “Not you too.” She felt weak and weary, betrayed. She wanted to cry but tears wouldn’t come. “I don’t know what happened. The only thing I’m sure of is that you and I would never hurt our son.”

“But the locks, how do you explain that?”

“Do you understand what you’re saying?” Mary shook her head in disbelief and pushed past Lou to get out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Lou demanded.

“Leave me alone. I can’t talk to you right now.” She rushed down the hall to Hank’s room and closed the door. Where was her little man? His Teddy bear rested near the head of his bed. She sat, picked up the bear and hugged it in her arms. The front door slammed. Lou had left. She wondered if he’d ever come back. She settled onto her side and breathed in the scent of Hank’s pillow. It had only been hours and already small details of his face were fading.

Night had settled over the house when Mary woke. It was dark and she was disoriented. When she realized she was clutching Hank's Teddy bear, it all came back. She pushed herself up and sat on the edge of the bed.

Locked doors. Detective Jackson was wrong about she and Lou, they could never hurt Hank. But he was right too. It did seem impossible that someone else took their son. How could it have happened? It didn't make any sense.

She heard a voice calling to her from the hall, faint and indecipherable. Mary stood and opened the door. She waited in the hall, listening. She heard it again and recognized a single word - "Mommy." It was Hank's voice.

"Where are you, baby?"

"Help me, Mommy," Hank pleaded.

Had he hidden and somehow become trapped? How long had he been calling for her, waiting for rescue. She honed in on the sound.

"Help me Mommy, it's hurting me."

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Help, Mommy, help." Hank screamed.

"Mommy's coming," She yelled. "Hold on Hank."

Mary rushed into the laundry room and flipped on the lights. The brightness stung her eyes. The room was empty. She was so sure. Had she been dreaming?

"Hank?" she called.

"Help me, Mommy." Hank's voice echoed from the open dryer. Mary crouched down and peered inside. The back of the drum appeared to have been peeled away like a manhole cover to reveal an abyss. Hank floated in the void with his arms outstretched.

"Help me, Mommy."

Hank started to fall.

Mary lunged into the dryer and snatched his wrist. Something was sucking her son down like a whirlpool. "Give me your other hand, Hank." Mary stretched out her free hand and Hank took it. The pull of the whirlpool grew. Hank's expression changed. His fearful eyes turned mean and a leer exposed jagged teeth. This wasn't her son. She tried to let go, but it had her. It jerked. Mary's feet lifted off the floor and she flew into the abyss. The dryer door slammed closed in the empty laundry room.

Sadie McFadden watched from her apartment as the police came to the loony bin - first the blue and whites, then later, an unmarked detective car. She'd seen the Amber alert for Mary's boy on the news. It was so sad. The next day, Mary's picture showed up in the Inquirer. They said she had fled and was wanted for questioning as a person of interest in her son's disappearance. The police considered her a fugitive. Sadie didn't believe it. Mary didn't seem the type. Sure, she was out of sorts the day they talked, but who wouldn't be the day after a move with the family pet missing.

And her disappearance was so odd. They found her purse slung over the back of a chair at the dining room table as was her habit. Her wallet was still inside with all her ID and credit cards. Nothing was missing from her closet. If she'd run, she did so in her pajamas without a dime to her name. The house was to blame, Sadie knew it.

A week later the moving van came. Men loaded up Lou Givens' things and drove off. It must have been hard for him. Sadie wondered if he believed any of it. Did he actually think the woman he loved killed his son and hid his body? Did he believe she

had fled prosecution? Surely he couldn't. But what other explanation could he come to? He didn't know about the house and what it could do. Sadie wanted to tell him, to explain so he wouldn't have to be so sad, so he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his life wondering, but he left before she got the chance.

A 'For Sale' sign went back up days after Lou Givens moved out. The house was famous, having been the backdrop for so many news stories. Maybe infamous was a better choice of words. The price was lower than ever. Real estate agents in their bright, red blazers held open houses and led hapless couples on guided tours. Fresh meat for the grinder.

Appliances Included Tidbits

This story first appeared in the Pill Hill Press anthology, *Haunted*, on June 15th, 2010. When I saw the theme, I thought of two the things that scared me most. The first was the disappearance of a child. Anyone who has lost track a child for a few minutes in a department store knows the feeling and has felt the panic. The other is being accused of a crime you didn't commit. Quite often it's easier to prove guilt than innocence. And despite one's innocence, even friends and loved ones may have doubts if the evidence seems strong – and what could be more horrible than that?

The character Sadie is based on a woman my wife and I encountered at the drive-thru of burger joint while passing through the Eastern Washington town of Wenatchee. We were placing our order when I noticed her wheel up behind us on a Rascal motorized scooter - I kid you not. She wore nothing but a hospital gown - the kind with ties up the back that let a little too much sunshine on the back porch, if you know what I mean. After a few seconds, she seemed to grow impatient and pulled up to my wife's window to complain. But complaining was the last thing on her mind, she just wanted to shoot the breeze, a lit cigarette dangling from her mouth, a clear tube pumping oxygen through a cannula fixed under her nose. She explained that the food at the hospital was crap and she busted out of there. They wouldn't let her smoke, neither (her words); so her first stop was a convenience store for a pack of Camels and a Zippo. And then it was chow time. She had a little dirt on just about everybody in town and had no qualms about sharing it with us while we waited for our food. She was someone I'll never forget, and now, neither will you.

About the Author



Mark Souza lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife, two children, and mongrel beast-dog, Tater. When he's not writing, he's out among you trying to look and act normal (whatever that is), reminding himself that the monsters he's created are all in his head, no more real than campaign promises.

Upcoming Titles

My novel *Robyn's Egg* will be released in the spring of 2012

A collection of my short stories, *Try 2 Stop Me*, will be released in September of 2012

Other **FREE** short stories coming soon:

Cupid's Maze (Already Available)

Murphy's Law (Already Available)

The Diary of Horatio White

Second Honeymoon

The Comfort Shack

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My Website: <http://www.marksouza.com>

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An Excerpt From

Cupid's Maze

Sean gazed out the windshield at a low ceiling of winter clouds sagging over an ocean of dead corn. The flaxen and gray landscape of straight lines and right angles repeated mile after relentless mile creating an uneasy feeling of déjà vu. The car hummed on cruise control over a strip of asphalt slicing a furrow across the bleak Kansas landscape. Ahead, the road seemed to narrow until it disappeared at the horizon. Sean

remembered a term from perspective drawing for where all lines converged at infinity. They called it the vanishing point.

He looked over as Janet pushed her hair back, hooking it behind her ears to keep it out of her face while she read. Her blue eyes wove back and forth across the page, her expression changing as the words conjured images in her head. Sometimes she even laughed aloud. Her mind resided in a different place, a better place. Maybe the sun shone in her world. Maybe there were hills and trees. Meanwhile, Sean dealt with the numbing monotony of the Great Plains. It hardly seemed fair.

“What’s the State tree of Kansas?” Sean asked. Janet looked up, but before she could answer, he blurted, “A telephone pole.”

“Ha-ha,” she mocked. She dog-eared the page and set the book in her lap. “That stopped being funny a hundred miles ago. But go ahead. Get it out of your system now, because it sure won’t play with my folks.”

Corn stalks whizzed by in a blur giving an impression of speed which seemed at odds with a stationary horizon and repetitious landscape that hadn’t changed in hours. It felt as though they were trapped on a treadmill with the same scenery scrolling past without end like the backdrop in a stage play. “I didn’t think I’d miss them,” he said.

“Miss who?”

“Telephone poles. I haven’t seen one for about an hour. And I haven’t seen another car for nearly as long.” He glanced at the gas gage. The needle teetered past the halfway mark on its inexorable fall toward ‘E’. “Are you sure we aren’t lost?”

Janet glanced at the dashboard. “Not according to the GPS.” She folded her hands over her book and gazed at the ring on her finger. A satisfied smile spread across her face.

“I haven’t seen a house in a while, either,” Sean said. “And what’s with all this corn? The ears are still on it. Why hasn’t it been cut down and harvested?”

“How should I know?” she said.

“It’s your state.”

“Uh, well, I don’t want to bust your balloon, but we don’t all farm. There’s supposed to be a Federal research farm around here someplace. Maybe it’s a part of that.”

“Research? What about corn needs researching?” Sean asked. “Pick, boil and eat. It’s nature’s perfect food.”

“They’re doing genetic stuff to enhance resistance to drought and pests, and to increase yields. I think they’re also working on alternative fuels.”

“In other words it’s a boondoggle,” Sean said. “My tax dollars dumped into a Kansas corn field. Sure. Why not?” He scanned the scene outside and shook his head. “How do people live like this? I’d put a bullet in my brain.”

“It’s not so bad,” Janet said.

“No, it’s a real garden spot. Cut down all this corn and it’s view property in every direction. Look south and see Oklahoma. Look north and see Nebraska. I can’t understand why people aren’t flocking here in droves. And the roads. The military could use them to calibrate lasers. Look.” Sean lifted his hands and braced them against the headliner as the car raced ahead.

Janet shot a hand across the gap and grabbed the wheel. “Knock it off, Sean. Please keep it together. It’s just for a weekend.”

Sean took back control and nodded. "It's going to be a long two days. Your father hates me."

"No he doesn't."

Sean turned toward her, a skeptical look on his face.

"Okay," she said, "but it's not you. It's your major."

"What's wrong with sociology?"

She smiled as if it should be obvious. "To Dad it's not practical. He thinks it's wasted money and smells of bleeding-heart liberalism. He wonders how you'll get work and pay off your loans."

"Yeah, like I said, he hates me."

"He'll come around. What choice does he have? It's my mother you need to worry about. She's the real power behind the throne. Win her over, and you're in." Janet plucked a pink envelope off a heart-shaped box of candy sitting on the rear seat. "You still haven't signed Mom's card."

"I will. I just haven't thought of anything pithy to say."

"Promise you'll do it when we stop for gas, pith or no pith."

Sean nodded.

"Pinky swear?"

"Pinky swear," he assured.

Janet placed the envelope on the dash. Her left hand lingered in the weak light near the windshield while she admired the diamond trapped in the prongs of her ring. "How long do you think it will take her to notice?"

"If you keep sticking your hand out that way, I'd say about three seconds."

"I haven't been that obvious, have I?"

Sean tried to hold back a grin. "No, not you. Never!"

Janet pulled her hand back and stuffed it beneath her thigh. "My second husband is going to be nice to me," she said.

Sean laughed. A pungent odor filtered through the vents. "That sure brings back memories," he said. "Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

"Come on. It smells like a summer frat party."

"I still don't..."

"Whoa, check it out."

Janet followed Sean's gaze out the passenger window. A mile-long, black scar stretched back from the roadside. Corn stalks singed to nubs studded scorched earth.

"I guess in Kansas that qualifies as a forest fire," he said.

"Some motorist probably tossed a lit cigarette. It happens all the time," she said. "Speaking of cigarettes, please don't smoke this weekend. Not in front of my folks and not in their house."

"You already told me twice," Sean said. "Relax, I packed patches."

A hundred miles from her parents' place and Janet was already getting wound up. She'd fret all weekend, worried about what her parents thought of their soon-to-be son-in-law. Sean could hardly wait for Monday and a return to the university and normalcy. How quickly he tired of playing the perfect fiancé.

He spotted a sign nailed to a stake next to the road. "Hey, a free corn maze ahead. Let's stop."

Janet shot him a pained look. “But we’re making good time.”

“Exactly. I’ve been driving for hours and I need to stretch my legs. We’ve got plenty of time. Besides, I’ll finally get to sample some of those down-on-the-farm, Kansas-style, good times you brag about. It’ll be fun.”

Janet sighed and put her book in the glove compartment. “Sure, why not. I guess I could use a good stretch too. But we can’t stay long. My folks are expecting us for dinner.”

Sean turned off the highway onto a strip of rutted dirt carved through the corn. Weeds scraped along the undercarriage as the car bounced over the two-track. The lane opened into a circular parking area ringed with cars. “Wow, who knew it would be so popular?” he said.

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