

The Sum of Sorrows

by Erik Rask

Ann's psyche shattered the winter day her son died. Doctors and time managed to fit some of these pieces back together, but the cracks never faded, and some fragments of who she'd been could never be recovered. There would always be a sense of guilt, a sense she could have done something to prevent it. She'd bundled eight-year-old David up in hat, gloves, scarf, and the cutest blue coat, good armor against the biting wind but little help against the speeding car that jumped the curb and struck her boy. A seizure, they said, just a random fluke. But how could something that cruel be random? How could it be attributed to anything but a spiteful God?

She continued to blame God or some unnamable malevolent force for the path she'd been set upon. She could not find the mental fortitude to manage even her most basic needs like food and hygiene. She couldn't work, couldn't sleep. Even breathing felt like an unwelcome chore. Deemed to be a danger to herself, she suffered the humiliation and despair of being committed to a psychiatric hospital. After two weeks, she was transferred to long-term care where that embarrassment turned into bottomless grief and guilt. Finally came Hopewell House, a purgatory of sorts meant to help her regain some semblance of her former life. But was such a thing even possible?

"I think you'll like it here," Dr. Mendelson said as he showed her to her new room, a bleak ten-by-ten space, occupied by an austere-looking bed, unvarnished dresser, and the smallest window that would most definitely not serve as an escape in case of a fire. The pale gray walls reminded her more of a prison than a welcoming bedroom. The only thing distinctive about the room was the full-length mirror affixed to the closet door.

"I know it's a bit... sparse," Dr. Mendelson said, clearly noticing the frown spreading across her face as she set down her suitcase. "But that's the point. It's meant to be a blank slate, something you can bring your own voice to."

In response, she simply asked, "Bathroom?"

Dr. Mendelson shook his head. "I'm afraid we do a lot of sharing here. There's one on the first floor just off the kitchen, and one here on the second floor. Second door on the right when you come up the stairs."

Words were still not something that came easy for her. They stuck in her throat before she could give voice to them. And so, she only nodded.

"Why don't you get settled in," he said. "Dinner is in about an hour. You can meet the others."

And meet the others she did, an odd assortment of damaged individuals. Miguel harbored a quiet rage, visible only in his intense, unblinking eyes. Barbara had a childlike quality disconcerting in a voluptuous woman in her late twenties. Nisha moved with mannequin-like stiffness, which made it feel like every movement was the result of extreme concentration. Ann

eventually learned the language of the house. Everyone's wounds were apparent, but it was impolite to talk about each other's scars. In time, they understood one another's idiosyncrasies, understood what topics to steer clear of, which triggers to avoid at all costs. They became friendly without ever becoming friends.

But she also learned something deeper was going on here. In those early days, she could not name it. She could sense things were not quite as they appeared, a faceless, shapeless wrongness.

As for her room, she made only one change to the decor. She placed a framed picture of David atop the dresser. Was that a good idea? She didn't know. It brought both sadness and joy every time she looked at it, which was nearly constantly. Was it her way of holding on to the past and the guilt? Again, she couldn't say. But Dr. Mendelson never mentioned it in their daily sessions, so he must not have thought it too destructive.

Instead, he opened their sessions with the same cookie-cutter question, "How do you feel today, Ann?"

And she responded with the same cookie-cutter answer, "fine."

Despite his clinical way of speaking, there was something reassuring about their sessions. There was no judgment in his words, no pity in his eyes, only a detached desire to help her. At least, that's the way it felt. For all she knew it was just a mask, hiding a complete indifference to her plight.

Eventually, Ann developed a ritual, a way to glide through the day with as little effort and pain as possible, and the most important part of this routine was bedtime. Before she slipped beneath the covers, she'd present herself before the full-length mirror, David's portrait clearly visible over her shoulder. In that glass she looked so normal, whole and unbroken. There was no outward manifestation of those inward cracks. She told herself that no one could see her flaws, her shame, her guilt, unless she allowed it. She could rebuild and hide the missing shards of herself.

"I can do this." was the mantra repeated dozens of times before she could almost believe those words and allow herself to sleep. But at the last, inevitable, moment she'd throw in the question, "Was I a good mother?" undermining the whole silly exercise.

Of course, the portrait of David did not answer.

Ann did make improvements over time. Certainly, there were moments of backsliding, days when the crying was so uncontrolled she couldn't get out of bed, but slowly she found those scattered pieces of her old life and began to put them back into place. Whether that was with Dr. Mendelson's help or just the passage of time, she could not say. She started venturing out into the world and even submitted a few resumes at some local shops.

But she still couldn't shake the feeling there was something wrong with this place, something beyond the house, beyond its wood floors and drably painted walls, beyond its

peeling siding and roof in need of repair, something more than the broken souls that inhabited it. What that thing was, she still could not say.

"It wants you to be sad," Nisha said one night after dinner. The two women remained at the table after the others had scattered to the four winds, nursing their cups of coffee and the few crumbs of apple pie still left on their plates.

"What do you mean?" Ann asked.

"You can feel it. I know you can," Nisha said. "We all can."

Ann shrugged, unwilling to give voice to the shapeless anxiety she had about the place. Instead, she stared down at her empty plate, focusing on her warped reflection in its surface.

Nisha rubbed her eyes with that same strange slowness she did everything else. "It reminds us how broken we are."

"The house?"

"The house or something in it."

Sliding her chair back, she picked up her plate and utensils. She didn't disagree with the woman, not at all, but she also didn't want to talk about it.

"I know you feel it," Nisha repeated as Ann disappeared from the dining room.

It was a Tuesday night when Ann first discovered someone had been in her room. She arrived back from dinner to discover the closet door slightly ajar, just a hair, but enough to be noticeable. Could she have left it open? Not a chance. She was methodical in keeping her room in order and making sure the closet door was closed before leaving the room, wanting to get one last look at the mirror before she embarked upon the trials and tribulations of the day. No way she'd left it open. That meant only one thing. Someone had been in the room. But why? There was nothing to steal, and a cursory search of her belongings proved nothing was missing. The house had strict rules about not entering other residents' rooms without permission, and someone had flagrantly violated that trust.

But who was the culprit? No one seemed a likely candidate, but someone had done it. If she had to put money on someone, it would be Miguel. He was the only resident that seemed to be getting worse, not better, his antisocial behavior on full display at every dinner. Then again, maybe it was Dr. Mendelson. Perhaps he surreptitiously checked on all the patients, looking for God knows what. This time he hadn't been so careful. Then again, maybe she had done it and just forgotten.

Except it happened again the next night, the closet door open an inch further this time. No way she'd done it that time. Someone was definitely in her room. Night after night it happened, and each time the closet door was open wider than it had been the night before. By the end of the week, the door was a quarter of the way open.

"Is there anything missing?" Dr. Mendelson asked when she mentioned it during their next session.

"Well, no," she said, perhaps a bit too harshly. But the point wasn't that things were missing. The point was it was an invasion of her privacy, an invasion of her safe space.

Dr. Mendelson furrowed his brow the way he always did when he wanted to compose his thoughts and get the words just right.

"It might not be someone going through your stuff. It might be something else," he finally said.

"Something else?" she asked.

"It could be the house," he said.

"The house?" she said, and felt like an idiot for not being able to do more than mimic his words.

But her mind immediately drifted back to her conversation with Nisha, and a chill raced up both her arms, settling in her neck.

"Yes," Dr. Mendelson said, a relaxed smile creeping across his face. Clearly, he was more comfortable with this solution than thinking one of his residents was pulling a prank, if that's what it was. "That's probably it. Ann, it's an old house. It has quirks. Doors and their frames warp over time. The temperature changes during the day and might cause the latch to not stick and the door to open."

Ann had to admit that sounded possible, and it sure was a more comfortable solution than the alternative.

"I'll have someone come look at it," Dr. Mendelson continued. "I'm sure we can fix it."

But he was slow to get someone out to the house, and each day the closet door opened just a bit wider.

She found Miguel on a Wednesday morning, his body half in, half out of the bathtub in the second-floor bathroom. He'd punctured those intense eyes with a tiny pair of scissors, the kind you might trim your eyebrows with. While Ann was no medical examiner, she doubted those injuries alone could kill a person. Miguel must have known this as well because he'd stabbed himself in the throat multiple times just to make sure. He'd clearly tried to keep the gore contained in the bathtub, but blood had managed to spray three of the four walls and even reached the ceiling in some spots. The offending implement lay on the tiled floor. What strength of will it must have taken to do such damage with such a meager weapon. Even more astonishing, he had to have done it without a single scream. The bedrooms were too close, the walls too thin to mask any cries of pain. Someone would have heard. Someone would have come to check.

Ann didn't scream either. She stood there, motionless, for almost five minutes, feeling oddly numb to the whole scene. She hadn't disliked Miguel, but then she hadn't been close to him either. He simply inhabited the same space she did, and she hadn't totally let go of the idea that it might be him that was sneaking into her room and not just the house's age.

It was nighttime before Dr. Mendelson gathered the rest of them in the dining room. The police and medical personnel had wrapped up their work by mid-afternoon. After that, the doctor had locked himself in his office for a couple hours. Ann passed by once. Putting an ear to the door, she could hear him on his phone, but his voice was too soft and muffled to make sense of anything but a few fragments.

Dinner was nothing more than sandwich fixings hastily thrown on a platter, but none of them were in the mood to eat. In his typical dry voice, the doctor offered meaningless platitudes without any real insight or explanation for why Miguel had killed himself. He would make himself available to anyone who needed to talk, but Ann suspected none of the three remaining women would take him up on that. Certainly she wouldn't. What was the point? None of them were particularly close to Miguel, and why confide in a man who clearly lacked the skills to prevent one of his patients from killing himself so brutally in the upstairs bathroom? How could he be expected to help them with their shock and grief? She gave voice to none of these thoughts.

Dr. Mendelson finished by telling them Hopewell House would be closed. He'd located open rooms in other transitional houses around the city, and they'd be moving out in the morning. And that was that. They were dismissed with instructions to pack and get a good night's sleep.

Ann returned to her room and was confronted with undeniable proof Miguel had not been the one invading her privacy. The closet door stood wide open, the blackness beyond mocking her suspicions. Unable to muster the energy to close the door, she sank onto the bed and cried. A day's worth of exhaustion, months' worth of grief, flooded out through her tears. Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed, hoping the muffled sounds couldn't be heard beyond her bedroom. She didn't want visitors, didn't want their sympathy, and most certainly didn't want their pity.

But when she finally raised her head, something was wrong. Looking into the closet with tear-stained eyes, she saw subtle differences in the darkness, as if there were shifting shades of black. The more she stared, the more pronounced it became. Something moved in there.

Then came the voice, barely audible above the background noise, "Mommy."

The shifting darkness coalesced into a shape, a silhouette, small but unmistakably human.

"Mommy," it called out again.

She wiped away the tears and squinted to make sense of the scene. As she did so, the shape gained definition as it stepped into the room. Still, it looked like nothing more than shadow. Taking another step forward, this shadow thing reached out with both arms.

A scream worked its way up her throat but never managed to make it past her lips. Caught between disbelief and paralyzing fear, she simply sat on the bed staring. What was this?

Had Miguel's death caused her to slip over the edge into madness?

Color and definition formed along the outstretched fingertips, working their way from hands to arms, arms covered by a fluffy blue winter coat. The metamorphosis continued spreading, moving up and down the child's torso, because yes, it was a child. When the features of the face started to appear, there was no mistaking it. The familiar dimple left of the chin, the nose ever so slightly askew, those beautiful round brown eyes looking at her so lovingly.

This was impossible. David was dead.

She chanced a glance at the picture on the dresser and then back at the boy before her. They were one and the same. It was her son. It was David.

"How?" was the only word she managed to get out.

He moved closer, arms still held out, wanting to embrace her, and she wanted nothing more than to wrap him up and hold him tight. This had to be a dream, maybe a hallucination brought on by the drama of the day. But did it matter? Dream or not, she cherished the chance to see her son again.

"Is that really you?" she asked, finally finding the words.

He smiled, and his eyes held that same magical glint they did every time she offered him a cookie after dinner. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," she said, giving in and pulling him tight to her chest. She buried her head in his tousled, brown hair, taking in the smell of youth with one deep breath, a smell she would never mistake for anything else.

"I don't understand," she said, pulling back and placing a hand on each cheek. "How is this possible?"

"I missed you, and I knew you were lonely."

"I am lonely."

"I knew you were sad."

"I am sad."

They looked at each other for a few seconds, neither saying a word.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I could have saved you," she said, her tears springing to life once more.

"It's okay, Mommy," he said.

"It's not." A tightness in her chest was growing, and she gasped for breath between sobs. "I can't undo that. I can never bring you back."

"But I'm here now."

"But you're not real."

"I'm as real as you want me to be."

And she wanted him to be oh so real.

"I wish you could stay here forever," he said.

The statement surprised her. She hadn't wanted to stay here, hadn't wanted to come in the first place. But she realized that if it meant seeing her son again and again, she would gladly accept the bleakness of this place forever. But that was impossible now.

"I can't," she said. "They're going to close this place."

"I know," he said. "I heard the doctor."

Again, this surprised her, the realization that he'd been in the dining room with the others. Had he been here the whole time, a spirit with total access to the house? Had he lain by her at night, not ready to reveal himself? So why now? Was it because there was so little time left? Had he hoped to ease her into this revelation? So many questions.

"I wish there was more time. It wasn't supposed to be like this," he said, and she briefly wondered if he could read her mind. "But..."

She waited a moment before asking, "But what?"

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head and kissing her gently on the forehead. "Mommy?"

"Yes."

"Are you always going to miss me? Are you always going to be sad?"

She had to be honest. "Yes, I think so."

"Good," he said, and all at once the tenderness disappeared, leaving behind an emotionless, alien expression.

Nisha's words flooded back to her.

It wants you to be sad.

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

David said nothing, just stood there, eyes boring into her. Was that a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his lips?

"You're not my son," Ann said, pushing the boy away with as much strength as she could muster.

"No, I'm not," he said, "but wasn't that fun? Poor Miguel, though. I pushed him too hard. I didn't think he'd actually do it."

For the first time, Ann looked past her son, at the bit of mirror visible on the partially open closet door. She saw herself sitting on the bed, but nothing stood before her.

"What are you?" she asked.

"Hungry," it said. And then, just before it retreated: "Don't worry about me, Ann. There are always more places like this, always more people like you."

With each step, the boy thing's features faded to shadow once more. By the time it backed into the closet, it was merely another shade of darkness. Slowly the closet door closed, until not a sliver of its interior remained visible, and Ann was left to stare into the mirror. A single crack ran through the glass, splitting her reflection in two.