

Doug Warshauer

## Store Room

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The front door was still cardinal red. Samantha answered it on the second ring. Her nose was bigger than he expected. *Send me a picture*, he had texted, *so I recognize you*. Which was obviously unnecessary, because who else would be living in their house, but he didn't want to be surprised when he saw her. He wanted to feel like he was coming home.

5 "Is that all you brought from San Francisco?" She backed away from the door so he could drag in his suitcase.

Four years ago, before the divorce, when she was 9 and he was 11, they used to walk home from school together. She would tell him about the girl drama in her grade – who was fighting with whom, who had a crush on one of the boys. Sometimes he gave her advice, platitudes<sup>1</sup> about sticking up for her friends, but most of the time they just laughed together and made fun of the Olivias. The two girls behind most of the trouble in Samantha's class were both named Olivia. Once he got settled, he would ask if they were still causing problems.

He dragged in his suitcase and pushed the door shut. "I figured mom would have repainted the door." He remembered staining it the summer before fourth grade, the summer his fractured tibia<sup>2</sup> kept him off the pitcher's mound<sup>3</sup> for eight weeks. His father had let him choose the color despite his mother's scowl, and he picked it out of loyalty to the St. Louis<sup>4</sup> baseball team. Forever after, she threatened to have it repainted whenever either one of them annoyed her.

Samantha sat down on an armchair that he didn't recognize, holding a textbook in her lap. "She never mentioned it again once you were gone."

20 He left his suitcase and reacquainted himself with the house. The living room hadn't changed much: same olive green sofa, same brown leather love seat that he'd gotten in so much trouble for writing on with his mother's lipstick when he was 3 years old. Same glass coffee table, though it looked cold without his father's *Fantasy Baseball Magazines* all over it. The sameness of it all made him shiver. Pretty much the only thing different was the armchair with Samantha in it, over near the window beside the fireplace. And the biggest disappointment: the same old tube TV in the armoire<sup>5</sup>. He'd gotten used to the huge flat screen that he and his father used to play *Madden* and *Call of Duty*<sup>6</sup>.

He walked past her and said over his shoulder, "Just so you know, you're still not allowed in my room."

30 She shrugged. "I never go in there. It's pretty much the store room. Mom never throws anything away."

"I was told I'd have to cope with what's there. It's part of the 'arrangement'."

The arrangement had been worked out by Uncle Charlie, who had provided him a sofa bed for the last few weeks since his father's heart attack. [...]

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<sup>1</sup> banaliteter

<sup>2</sup> skinneben

<sup>3</sup> *pitcher's mound*: lille høj, hvorfra pitcheren kaster i baseball

<sup>4</sup> *St. Louis*: St. Louis Cardinals, hvis kendetegn er den røde farve

<sup>5</sup> stort skab

<sup>6</sup> *Madden and Call of Duty*: computerspil (fodboldspil og skydespil)

35 Samantha looked up from her textbook. "Have you taken algebra?"  
"Three years ago."  
"Really? Were you in advanced math or something?"  
"Sort of. I was supposed to be in pre-Calc<sup>7</sup> this year, but now I don't know. I think they're going to  
40 make me take some test." On the foyer wall, where the photograph of the San Francisco cable cars  
used to be, there was now a poster of some impressionist landscape.  
"Cool. You're going to be able to help me with my homework."  
"Sure. Remember how I used to help you memorize your multiplication tables?"  
Her eyes went big. "Six and eight went out to skate, when they came back they were forty-eight!"  
It was strange to think he and this girl were the same people who used to take baths together,  
45 who walked around the house stuffed in the same oversized t-shirt, who once kept a balloon in the  
air by heading it back and forth 127 times.  
"You think it's okay if I have something to eat?"  
"Why wouldn't it be?"  
"I don't know. I'm still not sure how welcome I am here." It helped just to say it out loud, if only to  
50 his sister.  
"Brian, she's excited to have you back."  
He squinted, looked at her out of one eye.  
"Really, she is."  
He knew better. His mom had texted that morning to say she'd be working the afternoon shift  
55 and couldn't pick him up from the airport. Her friend Denise needed the day off and she owed Denise  
a favor. You'd think she could have said my son, who I haven't seen in four years, is coming home  
today, but whatever. He could explore the house without her watching.  
A mishmash of magnet-hung paperwork clung to the refrigerator: lists of emergency numbers,  
60 programs from school plays and musical performances, photos of Samantha in her soccer uniform  
dating all the way back to kindergarten. Nothing of him. He hadn't brought his baseball photos with  
him to San Francisco, so his mother must have taken them down at some point, put them away  
somewhere. Maybe they could find them, make room for them in the collage on the fridge. Assuming  
she hadn't thrown them in the trash.  
There wasn't much food to choose from. No string cheese<sup>8</sup>, no salami, no raspberry jam, no Kraft  
65 singles<sup>9</sup>, no leftover pizza, no seven layer dip. Tons of peach vanilla yogurt. He'd forgotten all about  
that. He peeled off the lid, stuck his nose inside. Now it came back to him, the yogurt's sweet smell  
reminding him of afternoons at the piano, his mother beside him, demonstrating how to shape his  
fingers as she held the spoon in her mouth. When he'd finally gotten the Mozart<sup>10</sup> concerto right,  
she'd hugged him so tight she jabbed the spoon into his ear. He hadn't thought about that in years.  
70 [...]  
He went back to the front door to collect his suitcase. Samantha hadn't moved. She looked up  
when she heard the roller wheels scratching along the floor.  
"Brian, can I ask you something?"

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<sup>7</sup> studieforberegende matematikkursus

<sup>8</sup> *string cheese*: ostestænger

<sup>9</sup> *Kraft singles*: ost i skiver

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), østrigsk komponist

“Sure.”

75 She hugged the textbook across her chest. “What did they say about Dad at the funeral?”

“I don’t know. The usual, I guess.”

“Have you been to one before?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know what’s usual?”

80 He shook his head, started dragging the suitcase again. “I’ve seen them in movies, idiot. Everyone has.” [...]

Just before he disappeared into his bedroom, Samantha said, “I would have gone if Mom had let me.”

“You asked her?”

85 “She said we had a funeral for them four years ago. We don’t need another one. And it’s true. When the two of you moved away, we had a big bonfire. When it was burning, she looked at me very serious and said they are dead to us now. We will never speak of them again.”

“That’s sick. You know that, right?”

“Well, you’re here now. So I guess that proves she didn’t really mean it.”

90 He knows she meant it. She read the letter he wrote to the judge asking to be put in his father’s custody. From that day until the trial ended, she wouldn’t look him in the eye. And in the four years since, she’d never called. Never even sent a text.

In his room, the bed was pushed against a wall and covered with pastel cushions bordered by fringe. He sat on it, fingered the chenille throw<sup>11</sup>. She hadn’t bothered to move much of her stuff out.

95 [...]

Buried in his suitcase, packed carefully within the cushion of his sweatshirts, Brian unpacked his own plastic bag of treasures. His mother had cleared space for him on the bottom row of a bookshelf. He lined up the three trophies he’d brought with him: the MVP<sup>12</sup> award for freshman baseball and the two first place finishes for his team. [...]

100 That left only one item. The 8x10" photo of him and his father, taken at the World Series<sup>13</sup> two years earlier. His father had surprised him with tickets for his birthday. The Cardinals were playing in it, and even though the two of them had moved half a country away, they both remained loyal to their team. If he moved the trophies close enough that they touched, if he staggered them, there was room for the photo beside them. It wasn’t visible from the bed – the dresser blocked the view, but he’d see it every time he came into or out of the room.

105 Samantha was standing in the doorway. She moved the flap of his suitcase open and closed. “I can’t believe you fit all your stuff in here. I told Mom she had to make more room for you.”

“It’s a little tight, but Uncle Charlie warned me not to bring too much.”

“Who’s Uncle Charlie?”

110 “Dad’s brother. You don’t remember him?”

She shook her head.

“He lived in Brazil when we were younger. But I’ve gotten to know him pretty well since he came back. I stayed with him when Dad died.”

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<sup>11</sup> *chenille throw*: sengetæppe

<sup>12</sup> Most Valuable Player

<sup>13</sup> *World Series*: uofficielt verdensmesterskab i baseball

“Oh. I don’t guess you’ll be seeing him anymore now, will you?”

115 He hadn’t really thought about it. Everyone on Dad’s side of the family, everyone he’d grown close to, his Aunt Rachel and Uncle Allen and his cousins Matt and Anthony, his great-Aunt Millie, his superhot second cousin Shelby, all those people would be yanked out of his life like garden weeds. That was part of the bargain. His mother did not believe in divided loyalties<sup>14</sup>.

120 A sound rumbled in the background. Like a ghost, the memory appeared. The garage door, rolling up.

“That’ll be Mom,” Samantha said. “You ready?”

“Give me a minute. Tell her I’ll be right out.”

125 When he made it into the kitchen, his mother was holding a glass of ice water and saying something to Samantha, but they both froze as they saw him. His mother was taller than he remembered her, which made no sense, since he’d grown eight inches<sup>15</sup> since then. For a long time, the three of them stood mute. Brian groped for something to begin with, other than “Hi, Mom,” which felt altogether insufficient. Nothing satisfactory came to mind.

Samantha looked back and forth between them as if watching a silent tennis match. Finally, she said, “Brian unpacked all his stuff already.”

130 “That’s fine.” His mother drank the last of her water, let an ice cube slide into her mouth, and swished it around. Her eyes fixed on Brian. Her teeth parted slightly, and when the ice dropped with a click to the bottom of her glass, it sounded to Brian like a door slamming.

135 Standing in this kitchen, under his mother’s harsh glare, his sister watching feebly from the side, he felt transported into the past. As if the last four years had been wiped away like an aborted TV plotline. But he knew it was not his past he was looking at. It was his future. His father was gone, San Francisco was gone, everything that had been his life since he last stood here was gone. And if he was going to survive, he had to do what needed to be done.

He gripped the back of a kitchen chair for support. The wood dug into his palms. He forced himself to look directly at his mother and said, “I’m sorry.”

140 His mother leaned her bony shoulder against the refrigerator, bumping one of the magnets. A picture of Samantha came loose and fluttered to the floor. “We’ll see,” his mother said.

145 When he returned to his room, he stood in front of the bookshelf for a long time. It doesn’t work, he told himself. The three trophies were too scrunched up<sup>16</sup>. They’d look better spread out. Much more impressive that way. He picked up the picture of him and his father at the World Series, and with his other hand spaced out the trophies to fill the shelf.

He opened the bottom drawer of the dresser and placed the photograph upside down beneath a stack of sweatshirts.

(2020)

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<sup>14</sup> *divided loyalties*: (her) være loyal over for mere end en person ad gangen

<sup>15</sup> *eight inches*: ca. 20 cm

<sup>16</sup> *scrunched up*: mast sammen