

The Waning Crescent.
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They were posed like mannequins. Caked in makeup and adorned in pressed, clean clothes. Their wide, dead eyes glared at me all around the dining table.
“They're just so talkative, aren't they, Julia?”

Andrew Jerenham had always had quite a reputation in Irvington. Even those who didn't know him personally knew that he was a perfectionist as well as an eccentric owner of a house renovation business. He was well known in the neighborhood for his ability to bring a house back from the dead, even if the wood was rotting inside the walls when he first stepped into the home. He made homes look alive again, as if they had never been so decrepit in the first place.

Andrew had a grin that tended to hang in the air long after he left the room. The sort of smile that revealed pale, stiff gums and teeth that were so white they stood starkly against the blackness that he spoke from at the entrance of his throat.

He dressed in bright button-ups which were always tucked into his shining brown leather belt at every side. The belt's golden buckle would gleam, calling anyone's attention to it, and to the strange man wearing it.

Those who worked for Andrew always said that their business was like a family. That was until they inevitably up and left town without so little as a goodbye. Their house would go straight on the market and a new hire would join Andrew's business. Excuse me, Andrew's “family.”

“Well, Julia, you're hired.”

I didn't want this job.

“Great. Will I need to come in for training?”

He chuckled at my question, so I decided to ask no more.

“Don't be silly, Julia. You start Monday. You won't need training to be a part of this family. Just think of me as your dear old dad, Jules.”

I felt my heart shake and my stomach tumble. Jules. He had no right to that name. Now that my dad had passed, now that his bones were stiff and rotting, no one had the right to that name. I mustered up some authority to use in my response to this name.

“Please call me by my full name.”

He chuckled again.

“Alrighty Jules, my dear. Be back on Monday at 8am.”

My request went unheard.

Many times since I had moved to Irvington, my feet cascaded over piles of leaves that sunk against the concrete and created that brittle sound of fall. My whole life, I could've sworn that the crunch had a smell. The leaf was dead, it had gone into rigor mortis. It was dead, yet it smelled of freedom and autumn, its color was alive.

Old houses creaking with dusty bones loomed over me as I walked. I was attempting to get used to the neighborhood, to create a mental map, but the winding roads and infinite clutter of the Halloween decor placed in front of each house made that seemingly impossible.

The Halloween season - no, the prospect of any part of fall, had awoken something so electric in the streets of Irvington. Even though the spring radiated a mysterious feeling through the bones of anyone walking or driving through it, fall had created a whole new festive beast. And we all felt it.

Before I knew it, my body had drawn itself up to the cracked sidewalk in front of my home. My eyes felt called towards the wood-paneled house directly across the street, Andrews house, his front window specifically, if I had to guess, it was his dining room. Yellow lighting cast silhouettes of people sitting at a table. I saw them through the sheer white curtains. It was uncanny, extremely unsettling, just how stiff the silhouettes of those at the table were. They seemed to be bored with their body language. What made what I was seeing all the more wrong was the way one man seemed to be laughing maniacally. He slapped his hand against the table's surface. Andrew had just heard the funniest joke on Earth, but who of these unmoving, untalking apparitions was the aspiring comedian? Or perhaps Andrew saw himself as the next Robin Williams. All I entered my home thinking about was how highly Andrew thought of himself. Those who see themselves as so amazing must have never had to hear others talk about them, or perhaps criticism was only listened to, not heard by egotistical sets of ears.

A knock at the door. Three of them. Firm and made with intent and a sense of importance. I had fallen asleep on the couch, my laptop still open to a screen of spreadsheets on the coffee table.

I eyed the baseball bat I kept in the corner of the living room as I edged closer to the door.

My hand slipped over the knob of the door, met with my sweaty palm.

A sudden burst of adrenaline drove me to fling the door open.

I stood there, my chest heaving as the night air flooded over me.

Nothing.

Nothing but the orange glow of the streetlights over the road and the old houses daring me to further interrupt their creaks and slumber.

For a moment, I suspected myself to be insane. That was until I saw Andrew's obnoxious yellow door thud close.

Though I had not seen him that night, his smile lingered. His smile hung in the night like the waning crescent above me. I knew that his teeth had been shining bright like the moon as that

niggling grin hovered on my porch, waiting for me to crack the door. I was paralyzed by the thought that had Andrew not run the bell, he could have stood there until morning, or even worse, I would've never known he had been there watching at all.

I blinked and when I had opened my eyes a red gleam caught my gaze. A bottle of wine very near to my left foot.

The bottle was not of a brand but instead included a note taped to the front of the bottle.

The note read, "Hey, Jules! Lovely Aunt Theodora has taken up wine making in the basement as a hobby. She's such a delight. Hope you like it, dear! And once again, welcome to the family!" The worst part of this horribly cheery note was the bright red heart drawn at the bottom.

The wine was a dark crimson. Its color pierced through the thin white paper taped to its bottle. Something primitive from the bottom of my soul made me swear to myself that I would not take a sip. I wouldn't even open the bottle.

I locked my front door. I unlocked it and locked it again just to hear that click, that sound of a barrier sealing.

I didn't sleep that night. Andrew's smile would no longer hang in just the air but in my every thought and breath.

"Good morning, Jules!"

My chest tensed and spine stiffened. He was too awake, too alive for this time of day.

I slowly turned to meet his gaze but not before I noticed his coffee mug. "World's best dad" said the mug.

"Oh Jules, my dear, do you like the mug?"

"Well, you don't have any kid-" I was cut off.

"Reymond bought it for me! It's so beautiful!"

I looked over to Reymond's desk. It was vacant. His mall photo shoot portraits of his wife and sons no longer lined the back of the desk at all.

"Where is Reymond?" I asked in a timid voice that I didn't recognize. Andrew had that effect on people.

"Oh Reymond? My lovely boy Reymond is taking a sick day."

I peered at the desk and then back to Andrew, Something about his eyes told me to ask no further questions. His eyes. He smiled with such tremendous movement and holding of his face that his crow's feet wrinkled but his eyes never smiled. His pupils remained without a soul.

Reymond never returned to work.

Nights passed, and each time I would lay in bed and see the moon gleaming in the dark sky over Irvington. I felt a chill cling to my bones. That terrible gripping grin hovered over all. He had made me paranoid, as if he was present just outside and I would never know it.

Two days before Halloween, Andrew did appear outside of my home.

He did not greet me at first, instead, he practically shoved an envelope into my hands the moment I had cracked my heavy front door.

“My family is having a Halloween Party the night of the holiday. We wanted to invite you, darling.” Andrew chuckled before letting a twinge of annoyance slip into his next words. “I personally just wanted to invite you verbally but that darn cousin Ray and his formalities. Join us for food and conversation, Jules. I need you to meet your family.”

“My family?” I had said rather quietly.

“Oh, I apologize. *The* family, Julia. But it may be best to think of them as family. I just think that the world would get along so much better if we all saw each other as family. If we loved as family. If we kept each other pristine as family does. If we bleed and pray as family.”

He took my hand and a ball formed in my throat. His hand radiated a chill against my shaking hand.

“Will you join us for dinner? We can’t have you all alone on a holiday.”

I don’t remember the rest of our exchange that day to be truthful.

There was, at a point, a look of great disapprobation on Andrew’s face which was soon replaced with a grotesquely positive retelling of that disapproving former expression.

Two blurry days later, my body trembled and grew nervous upon just stepping up Andrew's porch. I had agreed to come to meet the family, never to stay for dinner.

The lights in Andrews house glared orangish over the navy walls and dark rosewood furniture.

Andrew paused in front of me and peered up and down at my clothes with those cold eyes embedded into a joyful face. But his shining belt buckle quickly stole my attention back.

“Your outfit dear, Jules. How beautiful.” He jammed his hands into his pockets for a moment.

“You know, Julia, I consider it in good practice to dress in only clothing that you'd love to die in.”

My train of thought came to a halt at such a statement. “Clothes that I'd love to die in?”

His smile lines shrunk down, but did not disappear.

“Oh I mean nothing morbid, Julia. I only mean that you really never know when you might die.

What clothes your soul will have to reside in for all of eternity, it’s best to dress as if you might die every moment of your life.”

I said nothing as he stepped behind me nearer to his yellow front door. *Click*. The door had been locked, the barrier had closed, leading panic to rise up from my toes to the ends of my hair which were no doubt standing on end.

I laughed. I laughed because I felt frozen.

He laughed. He laughed because he found it comical.

“Join us for a glass of wine, won’t you, Jules? Aunt Theodora might be offended if you don’t.”

Hesitant, and shaking, I followed him. I could not get out the front door so I saw no point. I would meet the family and tell Andrew that I had to be on my way.

I stepped into the dining room and in an instant became frozen with tears, the only true product of this terror that I felt. They were posed like mannequins. Caked in makeup and adorned in pressed, clean clothes. Their wide dead eyes glared at me all around the dining table.

“They're just so talkative, aren't they Julia?”

Only a small yelp escaped my lips in place of the scream held in my lungs.

Dead. Unmoving. Their eyes held not a thought or feeling. Not a thing.

I took a small stride backwards when my eyes came into contact with Raymonds stone eyes, shining like stiff plastic. He looked back at me though he saw nothing.

I shuddered and felt my right knee buckle because I had become so restless with fear.

I stood there, dying. Letting this feeling crush me.

He poured the wine from its unmarked bottle.

The only sound I had been able to let out was one word.

“Blood.”

Andrew met my frozen gaze with his terrible smile and his same joyful inflection.

“Oh yes, Jules. Blood is thicker than water. Blood is *much* thicker than wine and as a family we must remember that. Right, dear old dad?”

Andrew seemed to shake as he crouched to kiss the forehead of a long dead man. His insides were rotting but Andrew, Andrew had made him look so alive.

I looked around again at the once living statues positioned like dolls. Andrew had clearly taken great care in preparing this turkey dinner, though most of the food would never be digested, it would never even be tasted.

I began to look around, trying to find something or somewhere that could help me get away. I couldn't call 9-1-1 here; I was sure that Andrew might do something drastic before the phone even rang once.

I found no solace in the idea of escaping to the second floor either. The hall at the top of the stairway was like the deepest trenches of the ocean. It was darker than one could imagine and held a vast expanse of uncertainty. No, the stairs were not an option.

My eyes fell to a door across the house. Across the kitchen which was filled with empty glass wine bottles, all lined up in arrays. They were ready to be filled, filled with blood that Andrew no doubt had intended to be mine. The basement door longed to be opened for the sake of my life. I saw no other exits and refused to run blindly through this house. Yes, the basement would have to do.

A fleeting memory of myself as a child sobbing and explaining that I could not go into the basement because of the spiders came to my mind. My father had held his hand over my shoulder until I was calm. For a moment I felt that comforting hand again. Fleeting. I had no

spider webs to fear down there. I couldn't possibly find any trickier webs than the one I was already in.

So I bolted in 15 strides to the door and disregarded Andrews questions about where I might be off to, which I know sounded rather calm. I swiftly turned the knob and tucked myself behind the door. I never questioned the presence of a lock on the inside of the door, instead I thanked it.

My eyes remained locked on that door. I let my breathing slow and my body started to settle as I stepped back down a handful of steps. My hand clutched the rail, my knees shook and buckled with each movement, and my stomach turned over and over.

I turned and darted farther down the stairs, to safety. I exhaled at the base of the stairs when my feet disrupted the dust on the concrete floor. I had reached some form of salvation. I had found peace in a basement, a place generally of fear.

But when I looked up my expression gapped and twisted as tears strung themselves in my eye lashes. My breath caught in my throat, my stomach finally ended its sequence of tumbles, and my cry escaped only as a whimpering exhale.

Dimly lit in the orange glow of a single suspended bulb they stood. They all stood there. All of their eyes fixed on me though I know they had no mind to process the sight.

A woman sat at a desk, her gray and rigid grip mocked a still image of her using a sewing machine.

A raggedy middle aged man stuck for eternity sipping out of a coffee cup.

A woman, no, a girl, no older than 22. Her life cut short but she lived on as a well dressed corpse.

Many more bodies, no souls! Lives held in one moment! They all grinned at me with Andrew's smile.

The stairs creaked behind me.

"You're the only one here without a smile on your face, Jules. You're never dressed without one! Isn't that right, Arnie?"

Andrew gestured to a man in the corner who had been posed with a paintbrush in hand. The bristled hovered over an endlessly gray canvas.

"No." I pleaded in a hushed manner. I stepped back and collided with the man's canvas. Still, my wide eyes and twisted face were zeroed on Andrew.

"Oh yes, my dear Jules."

I died on October 31st, 2024. My spirit went nowhere but I kept on being. I was red flowing in a cup. I was a doll holding a bouquet of posies. I was an empty desk and a newly painted home for sale. I am that waning crescent grin hanging over Irvington.