

BASED ON A TRUE STORYby Christine Lewis

Years of long-distance cycling kept 60-year-old Dom trim and tanned. Standing at 6'3" with a full head of salt and pepper curls, he was a striking presence on the floor of his tool and die shop, but his warm-eyed grin and disarming laugh made him approachable. When disputes about overtime or contract issues ruffled the ranks, Dom could walk into an office of angry staff members and exit with a crowd of back-slapping colleagues. He could solve people problems. And all problems at work, one way or another, had something to do with people.

But today was Saturday and there was no negotiable solution to the catastrophe before him now. The only merciful option was to murder his mother. But, of course, he wasn't capable of that.

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"Where was this taken?" Nora asked, holding up the dog-eared old snapshot. "I don't remember this."

The matte image showed a group of three teenaged boys, all in mock-serious firing stance with water pistols aimed at a laughing woman in the foreground. She adjusted her glasses and flipped the picture over to look at the date. "It says July 1975."

Dom stepped back from the window, letting the blind snap shut. Dust jumped off the slat. He felt perspiration forming on his forehead, but fixed his face to calm before looking at her. He smiled, making sure his mouth and eyes showed no concern.

She held the photo out as if he could see it from across the bedroom. As he neared her bedside, he squinted. "That's when we went up to Lake Seville with the Krenshaws," he said. "It was the summer grandma died, Mom. Remember?"

"Oh my! I forgot all about that trip! Must be my old-age-itis," she joked. She pointed to two younger boys in the background, their backs to the camera. "Is that Sebastian?" she asked, pointing to the round-faced, shirtless boy looking back at the photographer, his expression unsmiling and suspicious.

Dom let out a slow, measured breath as he settled into the armchair. He sipped from a bottle of water, glancing over the rim to gauge her demeanor. Looking again at the photo,

he said, “I think so.” He set the bottle down on the nightstand next to the medicine cup half-full of her midday pills. He started picking at the callus on his thumb.

She handed Dom the picture. It smelled like the old army trunk where Nora kept her memorabilia—the hundreds of photos and scraps of paper souvenirs. Travel diaries from her lifetime before marrying his father, mementos of motherhood nested in shoeboxes—babies’ first shoes, old toys, report cards.

A few years back while Nora was away on a cruise, Dom went through the trunk on his own and discovered she’d discarded nearly all traces of Sebastian, his younger brother. All he found was a birth announcement and a lock of his fine red hair taped to a ripped-out page from a baby book. The memory of adult Sebastian’s unkempt frizz and thin, stubbly beard sickened him.

She continued to study the picture, looking bothered. “Who’s that with him, can you tell?” she asked. “There’s something familiar about that posture.” Looking up at him she said, “It’s funny I barely remember the worst of Sebastian’s co-conspirators. Why is that?”

“Self-preservation,” said Dom. “And how can you tell he’s up to no good, Mom? Maybe it was one of the Krenshaw boys.”

She dropped a wrinkled hand to her lap and, head tilted, gazed squarely at Dom. “Please. The Krenshaw boys were too polite for Sebastian. If this boy,” she pointed accusingly at the stranger in the picture, “if this boy was hanging around with Sebastian on a summer holiday, he’s guilty.”

Tell her now, Dom thought. *Mom, Sebastian is dead*. He thought if he said it quickly, she would feel a moment of relief before he told her the rest of the news.

“I can’t argue with that, Mom.” he replied instead.

He put his hand on her frail shoulder. She was skin and bones now, and she looked tired. But content, her eyes illuminating tranquility. That would be shattered the moment he told her.

“Mom?” She looked up at him and smiled. He hesitated. “I think it’s time for your medicine,” he said.

“Already?” said Nora. “I lose track of time when I’m looking at old photos.” She placed a pile of pictures back into the musty shoebox, then looked up at Dom. He handed her the small pill cup and a juice glass.

Dom watched her take the pills and wash them down without hesitation. Complete trust. The sedative would give him some time to think, to decide. *God! What am I doing?* he thought.

His insides ached imagining his mother's final few years spent in powerless, despairing grief over the horror committed by her deranged son. She had already endured a near-lifetime of fallout from Sebastian's violent lunacy—court fees and lawyers, psychiatrists and counselors.

When their father died, Sebastian wasn't expected to show for the funeral mass. And he didn't, but as the procession drove up to the cemetery for the burial, they saw him pacing wildly behind the headstone, fists clenched and arms swinging with each long stride. He would stop every few paces to shout down threats and obscenities into the open grave. Before the burial could proceed, Dom's sons, two nephews and a shovel-wielding cemetery worker tackled Sebastian and kept him pinned until the police came to cart him away. This scenario wasn't extraordinary; every upheaval, no matter the degree, was a trigger for chaos.

The memories made Dom want to take Nora's hand.

He leaned in to reexamine the photograph. "How did we end up on a weekend with the Krenshaws, anyway? I don't remember their being particularly close friends with you and Dad."

"We weren't close, but Loretta Krenshaw was a compulsive Florence Nightingale. She couldn't stand to see a mosquito in a crisis. The first few weeks after your grandmother died, she was over at the house every day trying to be a helpful distraction. And she was. Helpful, I mean. I think Sebastian wore her down, though. She never came around after that weekend in Seville."

Dom stood again, making an effort to look relaxed. He pet the sleeping cat curled up at the foot of Nora's bed. It responded by stretching and yawning. Dom caressed his fur, scratched his head, then moved toward the window.

"Didn't Dad and Mr. Krenshaw get into a shouting match over something?" he asked over his shoulder. "I remember them arguing about some indiscriminate Civil War detail." When Nora didn't answer, he looked back and saw she had her eyes closed.

"I feel sleepy," she said, taking off her glasses.

"Why don't you nap awhile, Mom? Aunt Barb is coming over later to make baklava. I need you to be rested and alert so you can show her how it's done," he said. He rubbed a knot on the back of his neck as he studied her serene expression. His gut wrenched worrying she could somehow read the misrepresentations in his demeanor, hear the untruths in his voice.

But Nora smiled without opening her eyes. “It sounds like there’s a lot of traffic in the neighborhood today. I wonder if the people next door ...what are their names? I wonder if they’re having a family reunion. They usually do that this time of year, right?”

Dom said nothing. He pulled the drape back carefully, looking back once more at his mother before peering through the slit in the blinds. He could see that the convoy of media trucks had grown; it now extended around the corner and out of sight down Porter Lane. The low, gray clouds gave a pallor to the vans, their station logos like victory flags at a battle parade. The front sidewalk was a sea of imposing black cameras perched on tripods; operators were positioned like gunners ready to fire at first provocation—his front door, the target. Filling every gap between cameras were photographers and reporters talking among themselves, scanning their phones, readying themselves and their devices for an encounter.

A slender Indian reporter from News10, Garima Shaw, stood on the invisible demarcation between her public and his private domain. Dom recognized her from the local TV station. She checked her teeth in a compact mirror, adjusted a strand of hair. She was barely five feet tall, but there was tenacity in her posture. He recalled meeting her briefly when she covered a protest he’d attended. She’d carried herself like nobility while a slim, white, neo-Nazi yelled racial perversions in her face, her microphone held discreetly but firmly at her side. When she’d interviewed Dom later, she was as poised as Joan of Arc. Fearless and unperturbed with no trace of the righteous outrage he felt on her behalf. Now he wished he could open the door and speak with her, and only her.

He’d have to make a statement eventually, a thought that caused sweat to form at the base of his tailbone. He dreaded the now preordained questions and probing character dissections that would come from every direction, private and public.

Did your brother have a history of violence? she would ask.

Yes, Ms. Shaw, he would respond. *I’m sure you’ve done your homework. You know he did.*

Yes, I do know that, Mr. Pulaski. I understand your mother has had a restraining order against him since 2006. When was the last time you talked with him? Was he on medication? Did you think he was capable of such a crime? You’re his older brother, right? How is your mother taking the news? Was your family close? When did you first know he was...disturbed?

The cat had roused itself and was now rubbing affectionately against Dom's bare calf. The gray tabby resembled the one they adopted the summer grandma died. Sebastian had named him Rover because he fetched balls and liked to swim. After Rover was hit and killed by a passing car a few months later, Sebastian offered Dom two weeks' allowance in exchange for the dead body. *We always knew, Ms. Shaw.*

Dom let out a sigh and stared searchingly at the ceiling, tormented, silent and nauseous as he remembered their boyhood.

"How would you rather die?" young Sebastian would ask. "Hit by a train or impaled by a sword?" He fantasized out loud about death and dying at every opportunity—whispered while they camped in their sleeping bags, while they waited at the bus stop or rode their bikes. It was Sebastian's favorite pastime. Scenarios became darker as he grew older and more unhinged. By the time they were teenagers, they were frighteningly intricate, the details more gruesome and macabre. Bludgeoned to death or dismembered? Decapitated or burned alive? Torched with a flamethrower or pulverized in a limb shredder?

We're going to crucify your mother for your brother's offenses, Ms. Shaw would declare with her eyes, giving him that same level stare she'd used on the neo-Nazi.

Nora slept now, still ignorant of the lacerated world outside. Dom stood at the window watching the media throng. Sebastian had done his worst, and now the press were calculating against his mother's contentment. He envisioned their "new normal" beginning with an arbitrary drive to the pulmonologist, the garage door lifting to reveal a horde of reporters on the attack. He could see Nora's emaciated frame shrinking in on itself. The concept was intolerable.

"We won't tell her," Dom had said to his wife, Natalie, that morning. She was too anguished to respond. When the news was fresh, before the raw reality had set in, he was sure that was the way to go. Now, though, standing at the window looking out at the reporters, he knew it wasn't possible. "Stupid!" he spat under his breath. "Naïve idiot!"

Still, he went through the scenario again looking for fault lines to troubleshoot: he would explain away the sea of reporters outside—someone else's tragedy. He'd replace the battery in her hearing aid with a dead one so she wouldn't hear the questions they shouted at her. And after a while a new catastrophe would lure them away. He would tell everyone—family, friends, friends of friends—that she was never to hear of it, that they mustn't speak of it ever. He would stop the newspaper delivery and shut off the cable until it all blew over. He would manage

incoming calls. He would strictly control the flow of information. He'd make her world small, very small.

Dom's head ached. He turned and scanned Nora's room. The television sat dusky and mute at her sitting spot in the corner. He walked to the cable box, then crouched as he traced the wire to the wall. Squatting at the baseboard, his fingers on the cable, he looked over at his mother, who was now snoring quietly. Then he unscrewed the connection.

He felt dizzy as he unfolded himself from the floor. He was "loud breathing," as his daughter called it—the cyclist's breath control for uphill climbs. Steadying himself against the wall, he closed his eyes, took in a slow, restrained breath; held it briefly; then exhaled slowly until the last bit of air was gone. Then again—breathe in, hold, exhale. And again.

With a degree of calm, he opened his eyes. He would leave her awhile, think things through. As he moved to the bedroom door, a vague sense of control elevated his bearing. She'd sleep for an hour, at least. A quick bike ride, maybe half an hour on the wooded trails behind the neighborhood, would bring some clarity. And courage.

The red-lighted digits on Nora's clock radio showed the time was 12:18. Dom's eyes fixed on the device. Nora often woke from a nap to turn on the radio, which then lulled her back to sleep. *This is Garima Shaw with WSCL and News10 bringing you today's top stories.*

Dense silence filled the room. Even the noise from the trucks outside was smothered by the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. Eyes fixed on the clock, he slid down the wall and sat on the floor. Dread seemed to expand in him again like a dense, dirty smog, stretching across every familiar path and landmark, suffocating everything his mother had ever loved. "Goddammit," he whispered to the radio. "Goddammit."

She should suffocate in her sleep, he thought. It was plausible. How many times now had he come in to say good afternoon when he found her gasping for air. The attacks were getting worse all the time. Maybe today was the day she'd succumb to the asthma that had threatened and tormented her for so many years.

A few weeks earlier, he heard a crash in the night. When he raced into her room, he found her sideways in the bed, panic-stricken and gulping for air, tears streaming down her face. Once she'd calmed, she told him she'd been dreaming about Sebastian. "He was standing over the bed trying to smother me."

Dom sat on the floor of her room now imagining himself—rather than his dead brother—crawling over to her bedside table, opening the drawer where she kept the inhaler, removing the device and the lifesaving cylinders of albuterol. She would suffocate without it; he could see her clawing at her throat, searching wildly for relief before collapsing and shuddering as the life wheezed out of her.

He bolted up from the floor, sucked in a breath of air, and walked quickly out the bedroom door. He didn't glance back at Nora. As he strode through the house toward the back door, he looked around the living room, the dining room, the kitchen—all draped and dark, quiet. He could hear Natalie in the bedroom murmuring concerns to the telephone. "I'll be back in a while," he announced through the bedroom door. He was out the back door and walking through the yard before she could respond.

He yanked his bike out of the shed, mounted and made a break out the back gate toward the canal path. A patch of dense spruce trees shielded the area from street view. Unless the reporters were hiding out along the canal—*highly unlikely*, he thought—he was safe.

He pedaled like someone pursued by a rabid dog, and soon he was on the trail. He'd ride up to Mountainside Cemetery, then take it slow through the grounds.

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Nora had been dozing. The sound of a gasp roused her from a light sleep. When she opened her eyes, Dom was walking briskly out of her bedroom. Something in his posture and the urgency of his stride alarmed her. The door shut behind him before she could clear her throat and ask him what was the matter. Lying back on her pillows, Nora wondered what was on Dom's mind today. She'd noticed he seemed fidgety earlier, but he often seemed anxious when he missed his morning ride.

She supposed the picture of Sebastian had rattled him; she'd seen it. On the other hand, any mention of him provoked a physical response. What was it? Fear or hatred?

And what was it in her? Fear, yes, but did she still hate Sebastian or had that diminished to something quieter, less toxic? Nora sighed. Wide awake now, she lay there staring up at the ceiling remembering a time soon after the Lake Seville trip with the Krenshaws. Sebastian and a friend were in juvenile detention; they'd lured a classmate into the woods, then beaten him so severely he lost an eye. Nora, still teaching literature at the time, not only knew the boy personally, but had traveled with his mother countless times during school breaks on literary

excursions. The summer before, they'd gone to Hawaii and Alaska on a Jack London-themed vacation. The assault, understandably, irrevocably changed their relationship. Because back then Nora still hoped that Sebastian's issues were correctable, something he'd grow out of with time. While she never justified his crimes or defended Sebastian publicly, her colleagues on campus knew she mourned his loss of freedom, and that it was Sebastian, not his victims, who had the greater part of her sympathy. Back then, she would take every collect call he'd place from jail, despite the abuses he'd scream at her from the other end of the line. She would prepare care packages and deliver them to the state detention center, knowing he wouldn't see her no matter how far she'd driven.

But those days were long past. Sebastian was like a cancer growing outward, spreading decay like a rotting bog. Resentment gave way to anger, and as Sebastian's laundry list of violent criminal offenses grew, Nora's anger transformed itself to the shape of apathy and numb dread each time he was released from jail. Strangely, the change for Nora, the last of the letting go, happened one Sunday in church. The parable of the prodigal son. Listening to Father Munro speak about redemption and the so-called divine mercy of God, she was suddenly struck by the absurdity of the tale and her own faith convictions as they pertained to Sebastian's redemption. Abruptly illuminated in her mind: *my son is irredeemable*. It was a life-altering moment of clarity, realizing that Sebastian wasn't simply ill, willfully misguided or disturbed; his commitment to evil was absolute and irreversible. He was malicious, calculating, and dangerous.

At that moment, that ordinary Sunday at St. Luke's, Nora turned to Ed, her husband of 42 years, and whispered, "I'm so sorry." He looked at her face, searching for her meaning, before kissing her on the cheek and patting her hand. After church, she explained, alternately sobbing and laughing, releasing decades of anguished guilt.

In the eight years between that Sunday in church and Ed's funeral, Nora never saw or spoke with Sebastian. She was like a woman released from an insane asylum, glowing with a new lightness of spirit. She and Ed, both retired, became active library volunteers, leading Tuesday evening writer workshops for young authors, orchestrating efforts for zoning approval on a building expansion, and recruiting their teenaged grandchildren to help with Books for Africa drives.

The spectacle of Ed's burial brought about in Nora a deep loathing. She hated Sebastian, considered him a palpable threat, not only to herself, but more importantly to Dom, Natalie and kids. She abhorred the whispers among the gathering of extended family and friends, hearing them recount Sebastian's various crimes. Everyone there that somber afternoon knew someone he had physically violated or verbally abused. He was like poison in the drinking water. But he never appeared again.

At the reading of the will, the attorney urged Nora to file a restraining order, as if such a thing could actually deter Sebastian if he was set on terrorizing the family again. But she'd done it to satisfy Dom.

Lost in thought and bordering on sleep, Nora was startled by the sound of a car horn outside—one long, deep honk followed by a series of demanding wails. She sat up in bed and reached behind her ear to turn up the hearing aid. She could hear muffled voices and yelling outside. For one surreal and terrifying moment, she thought she heard Sebastian's voice among what sounded like a crowd.

Her posture straightened and without looking she reached for her inhaler on the bedside table. When her hand didn't find the device, she looked over. She didn't remember putting it in the drawer, but maybe Dom had. When she opened the drawer, it wasn't there. Then she remembered she'd cleaned it that morning and left the cartridge in her bathroom. She was surprised at herself; she kept the inhaler within reach always.

Nora pushed the covers aside, slipped on her robe and slippers, and headed to the bathroom, but stopped when the car horn started again. She changed course and walked over to the window, which was shuttered tightly. As she lifted back the drape and cranked open the blind, she saw two columns of news vehicles parked on the street. Trying to navigate between them was a gold Hummer, but two news vans had created a traffic needle too narrow to thread for the massive vehicle. The driver of the Hummer, a middle-aged man she often saw walking a poodle, was yelling at someone she couldn't see. As her field of vision widened, she realized the driver was shouting at people on the sidewalk. They were in front of the house. Nora blinked and squinted, trying to bring the scene into focus. She let the drape fall; she needed her glasses.

As she walked away from the window, she began assessing what she'd seen. News trucks, a crowd of strangers near their driveway. Had she seen cameras? She mentally inventoried the nearest neighbors and their children, reminded herself what day it was, what time

of year, looking for clues to explain the scene outside. She felt a familiar sense of dismay verging on dread. She picked up her glasses, but instead of going back to the window, she reached into the bedside drawer, pulled out an albuterol cylinder, and walked to the bathroom to reassemble her inhaler.

When she turned on the light and saw it, clean and dry on some paper towels, she sighed with relief. She quickly snapped in the albuterol cylinder, shook the device, and brought the inhaler to her mouth. It made the familiar *puff-eezz* sound as it dispensed the medicine. She held it in a moment before exhaling. Nora preferred to be seated when using the inhaler because a headache and dizziness always followed that intake of steroid-laced breath. But she was anxious to get back to the window. She stood a moment, hand gripping the edge of the sink, and waited for the sensation to pass. When it did, she slipped the inhaler into her robe pocket, turned back toward the bedroom and the window.

She lifted back the drape again. One of the offending news vans was gone and there was no sign of the Hummer. But she could see now that there were indeed news folks out front with cameras that appeared to be angled toward their house. Mostly men in jeans and t-shirts or polos carrying equipment—large cameras, lighting gear. She recognized two reporters, a young woman and an older gentleman who had covered local news events as long as she could remember.

Where was Dom, she wondered with increasing anxiety. She began to replay things in reverse order: his sudden exit, his subtle preoccupation with the window, the fidgety tics and conflicting expressions. He was not himself.

Nora turned and looked around her room for a sign. He'd brought out the box of photographs. Nothing extraordinary about that considering Dom's cousin Marc had passed away last week; maybe he wanted to reminisce. But she was surprised to find an old photo of Sebastian. She didn't recall that picture, and she was certain he'd gotten rid of virtually all photographs containing even a suggestion of Sebastian's presence. Nora shook her head, trying to dislodge paranoid notions before they could roost.

She tied her robe closed and walked to the bedroom door. Before exiting, she flipped on the overhead light, and turned back into the room, looking around once again. Her eyes roamed, taking in the contents of the warm, homey space she'd lived in for 11 years. She smiled at the pair of Louis XV Rococo-style chairs she and Ed picked up one summer at an estate sale in Vermont. Ed was so pleased with the purchase. A few weeks later they adopted a pair of Siamese

kittens; Ed named them Louie and Adelaide, and the two cats slept together on one of the chairs, which ruined the upholstery. Wholly impractical, but that was Ed.

Nora admired the tall oak dresser topped with rows of framed pictures: Dom and Natalie; their children, Nate, Gil and Sarah; and in a large, colorful frame, a black and white of Barnaby, Nora's youngest brother. He was a Marine officer only a few years older than Dom. The image was the most recent of the bunch; Barnaby was standing next to his daughter, Chelsea, who died from leukemia only weeks after finishing graduate school.

Nora had known periods of insurmountable grief in this room, but never, not even once, had she felt unsafe here. It was odd to feel so ill-at-ease now. An unwelcome, unholy intrusion.

She turned from the place and opened the door. The house was dark and quiet, seemingly vacant. "Natalie?" Nora called. It came out in a croak. She cleared her throat and called again, her voice audible and, she hoped, devoid of the mounting anxiety she felt.

As she moved into the living room, she heard muffled sounds from the other side of the house, someone moving aside a chair, rustling papers, and then walking quickly toward her up the hall. "I'm here," called Natalie.

Seconds later, Dom hurried into the house from the back door. The two of them walked into the living room at the same time.

Dom's hair was disheveled and his face was flushed. He was sweaty and there were splatters of dirt on his shins. His shoes, still on his feet rather than at the back door, were caked with mud. "Mom?" he said, then looked at Natalie. She shook her head.

"Mom?" he said again, but now his expression changed from alarm to agonized misery. "Mama."

Nora stood frozen, immeasurably distressed by the sight of her son on the verge of falling apart. Tears were suddenly pouring down his cheeks, and his face was contorted into an anguished grin. She'd never seen him in such despair. Out of the corner of her eye, Nora saw Natalie twitch, and expected her to rush toward Dom to comfort him. Instead, she advanced on Nora, took her by the arm and escorted her to the couch.

"Sit down, Nora," she said.

"What's wrong?" Nora asked. "What's happened?" She reached, unthinking, into her robe pocket for the inhaler as Natalie sat down beside her. She put her arm around Nora, gripping her around the shoulders firmly.

Dom pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose loudly as he walked over to kneel in front of the two women. “Mom,” he said, more composed now. He sighed, collecting a measure of resolve. “Mom, it’s Barnaby. He... he’s dead, Mom.” As he said the words, his composure changed. He was hollow and business-like.

“Barnaby? My brother?” Nora asked with vacant confusion. “What happened?”

“He was murdered, Mom.” Dom said, his voice rising as his face again contorted back to tormented grief.

Nora couldn’t process this information. “What? Are you sure? But why?” Her tone was confused, as if she didn’t understand a mathematical calculation. Her gaze moved from Dom’s face and was now absently fixed on an ivory-colored stone statuette of the Virgin Mary on the fireplace mantle.

“Nora,” Natalie said, “The police believe Sebastian was looking for weapons.”

At this, Nora snapped to attention and stared horrified at Natalie.

Natalie continued. “Barnaby’s sidearm and a rifle were missing. He used it to...” she looked at Dom.

“Mom, he went to the library. The book drive...”

Dom presented the facts piece by piece. The numbers, the names, the ages. Family names she knew. Former students, a young writer she’d mentored, two colleagues from school, volunteers from the library.

And the details unfolded. Nora listened, numbed, but alert. Breath steady, gazing at the Virgin Mary. Breathing. Hand in pocket, fingers touching the cool cylinder on her inhaler.