**Visiting Hours**

Andrew Patrie

Early dark. We pull into the drive of my childhood home. “Surprised Dad hasn’t shoveled,” I say.

“I’m not,” my wife says. “It’s freezing out.”

“When has that ever stopped him?” I ask.

We rouse our daughter from the backseat before exiting the car, crunch our way through snow, clomp our feet at the threshold, and pass through the front door of my parents’ split-level.

Mom greets us from the top of the landing. My wife goes for a hug. Dad is absent and does not appear at the sound of our voices. Our daughter descends to the basement and its closet of riches: toys, crayons, games. “Hi, kiddo,” my mother calls after her. “Hi,” she replies and then only the *thud-step* cadence of her footfalls.

Dad does not rise to greet his granddaughter, a blur now that she is free of the car, the cold and her winter clothes. He is lost in baggy blue sweatpants and a T-shirt one size too large, the splayed pages of a newspaper at his feet, dusty peanut shells splintered in a bowl near the remote.

She pauses, as if she has mistakenly stumbled into the den of some hibernating animal.

“Now don’t come running down here and make a lot of noise,” Dad admonishes. “I’m trying to watch TV. Go on upstairs if you wanna raise a racket.”

We have only just settled into chairs around the kitchen table when *thud-step*, *thud-step*, “Mom! Dad! Grandpa yelled at me.”

“What happened, sweetie?” my wife asks.

“He told me to go away,” she cries.

“Why don’t you go play in the living room?” I say. “We’ll be in here and no one will bother you.”

“But all the good stuff is downstairs,” she says.

“Here, sweetie. You can have my phone.” My wife taps in the passcode before handing it off.

I wait until she is out of earshot, look at my mother, and say, “Some welcome.”

“He’s forgetting things,” Mom says, looking at her hands, “Misremembering things more often.”

“Like common courtesy?” I ask.

“Like time,” she says. “Geography.”

She says she’s had to remind him it has been six years, not days, since he last visited the courthouse where he worked.

“He was driving us home the other week,” Mom continues, “and I had to navigate him through the neighborhood where he grew up.”

I imagine shadows shifting in the moonlit snowdrifts, childhood streets suddenly menacing and unfamiliar, like some twisted twilit carnival ride, and my father’s eyes welling and red in the glow of the brake light from the car ahead.

*Decades before, my grandfather did not rise to greet me either. As we entered the living room, I could never pass the candy dish without swiping a mint meltaway for now and later. I took a seat on the couch next to my dad while Grandpa rocked in time in his chair. I remember trying to reconcile the photo on the wall: black and white and he is young in a soldier’s uniform with the bald head and bespectacled face before me forced finally to acknowledge us when my dad said, “Hi, Dad,” and Grandpa’s head turned to us, his eyes attempting to focus their faded light guttering like blue flame glimpsed through fog. “Oh, hi,” he said.*

“Honey?” My wife’s voice. The past recedes like breath on a mirror. “Thought we lost you, too.”

“Anyway,” Mom says, “can you forgive him?”

“Maybe I should go down and check on him…” I say without the certainty of statement.

My wife squeezes my arm before I rise and move to the steps.

When I was a kid I was afraid of the basement shapes in the dark and the dread silence before the furnace kicked on or Dad’s work saw shrieked, my head filled with my grandfather’s stories of varmints and Gila monsters in the crawlspaces. I feel that fear return when faced with the prospect of descending those stairs to see how Dad is doing, how much of the darkness has claimed him.