**All My Children**

Arthur Davis

I drove back to 1100 Dryer Place, my only companions a half-empty bottle of McKinnon’s whiskey on the front seat of my car and a list of food Jenny forgot to pick up at the grocery yesterday in my pocket.

More forgetting. More absent looks.

She was slipping away more every day.

A living curse with a terrible finality was our future.

The street crackled with crumbling cement under my tires, trash and graffiti coating Dryer from end to abandoned end.

After thirty-one years working in the Indiana plant, I needed closure. A last goodbye.

When I was hired, the Hurley Mannequin Company had 180 employees on two floors and was the second largest mannequin manufacturer in the Midwest. But times changed. Technology advanced, making human forms easier to produce and more resilient. We didn’t keep up, and the plant was shut down exactly a year ago today.

I unlocked the battered metal door and let myself in.

I was home.

Damaged and incomplete male and female body parts littered the 16,000 sq. ft. first floor. The eight large spin-casting machines had been sold as scrap. I moved about the remains of a million hours of sweat, toil, and pride as though I was searching for something when I heard a low, drifting whisper.

“Who’s there?”

Ghosts, but no Valentine.

Born on Valentine’s Day, she was my first redesign of the premium line and, except for a hairline crack in her right shoulder, a perfect trial run.

I started for the staircase in the corner of the first floor. The steps were clean. Not a particle of dust or speck of dirt anywhere.

I made my way up to the second-floor landing. No scattering of limbs, heads, torsos, no drums of dried-up chemicals, broken bottles, documents littering the floor, and no rusty equipment and tools not worth saving, like on the floor below.

My pulse spiked. My first thought was that I was going to die.

I’ve had those thoughts since we first heard my wife’s diagnosis last year. Does that make me a terrible husband, not wanting to watch my wife suffer more every day until there was nothing left of either of us worth salvaging?

All the windows were cracked or broken. A torrent of yellow and fresh air poured into the spotless space.

“Who’s here?”

“We are.”

I moved toward the center of the emptiness where my office had been. Up here, I was the ringmaster that drove the living heart and hope of the beast that filled retail windows across middle America.

A sliver of movement caught my attention. “Who’s there?”

“Your children,” the woman’s voice echoed, now clearly, from all sides of the empty space.

“I don’t understand,” was all I could come up with just before blanched white forms broke through the sun-streaked shadows. Hundreds of them. Men, women, and children. I started to tremble. My pills were in a little antique container Jenny bought just after my first heart attack.

I was just too terrified to reach into my jacket pocket.

An assembly of phantom forms and specters filled the second floor.

“Hello?”

“We have come back just like you, before all this is gone,” she said stepping fully into sunlight, a glazed, stark white face I had seen thousands of times and wondered as many times where they were headed and how long they would last in the steaming and freezing glass displays that would condemn them to eventual disintegration.

“I don’t know you.”

“You sent us out into the world,” she said, moving closer, “and now here, just this one time, like you.”

“Did you clean up the floor?” I asked. If I didn’t take my pills soon, I would be a phantasm too.

She smiled. I hadn’t seen her lips move when she talked, but now, the spin-cast woman was smiling cheek to cheek as though warm blood flowed in her veins. “We wanted to remember it as it might have looked. We wanted to return it to a clean innocent space before we leave forever.”

“Leave?”

“Yes. Of course. We are last-time visitors here, just like you.”

“But you’re alive.”

“In a way yes; in a way, not really.”

*“My wife is dying and I’m dreaming,” I said, holding back a swell of tears.*

I reached into my pocket and swallowed two pills.

*“I don’t know what to do.”*

“Bring her here.”

“Who?”

“Your wife.”

‘What about her?’

“You said she was dying.”

I would never have shared that with anyone. We figure to tell our children when it became too obvious. “I never said that.”

“Then how would I know. Bring her. There is little time, for all of us.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Robert, it’s your Valentine,” another woman said stepping out of the shadows.

Valentine, as I first breathed life into her. Still tall and statuesque, and golden with character and humanity.

“I brought all of them here. As your first child, it was my duty.”

A faint crack was visible on her right shoulder.

*“All my children.”*

“There is little time left for us here. Bring her and leave her.”

“Valentine, what are you going to do?”

“We are your children. Who better to care for our mother?”

I had spent thirty-one years making people that didn’t exist. Now, they had come back as an impossibility that had become my reality. Could they help Jenny? Could anybody?

“How much time do I have?”

“Terribly little,” Valentine said.

I raced downstairs, called Jenny and told her to be ready for a short trip. I switched on the engine and jammed my foot down on the accelerator forgetting that I had pitched my front tires to the right when I got here.

There was a haze, distant voices, white and pain.

“How long have I been here?” I said to the nurse at my bedside.

“A few hours. But, not to worry you’re going to be fine,” she said right before I started to cry.