

Disc Stutter

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My mother asks if we want gingerbread again—third time in a row, disc stutter. “It just came out of the oven!” she says, and her wrinkled face is a great smile framed by hair like tundra grass.

The aunts and uncles glance over, fears of senility in their puzzled eyes. My brother lowers his martini, and I wonder how many this is for him. Five? Six? He’s been pounding them ever since he arrived; his eyes dart anxiously over the holiday gathering and zero in on Mom’s strange antics.

“Mom!” I say, steering her by the arm into the kitchen pantry.

“I have gingerbread! It just came out of the oven!” she tells me.

In the small pantry surrounded by bags of flour, smelling of spices and old mops, I log out and face the computer screen.

The party is gone, fading from my eyes like the afterimage of a firecracker. My den is unlit and very cold; my hands are almost blue, the digits stiff. I eject the disc from the multidrive and examine it by the silvery moonlight leaking in through a cracked window stuffed with newspapers. The disc is cold to the touch, and a pencil-thin scratch interrupts its rainbow circle of gold nanorods.

I blow against the disc, and a mote of dust leaps off its circular edge and soars through the chilly air towards the dead fireplace.

I place the head-rig back around my shaven scalp, snap the lens back over my eyes, and hit PLAY.

The pantry leaps back to my eyes, and Mom is brushing past me to leave the pantry. The door swings like that of a saloon. I follow her out and my brother is standing there, waiting for me.

“When did she die?” he demands.

I shiver from the cold of my den and the accusation in his eyes.

“Two months ago,” I say quickly, rubbing my freezing hands. “Josh, you were away. I’m sorry.”

My brother’s gaze flicks away, back to the living room where the aunts and uncles and cousins sit around, pow-wow style, to play a group game of some kind. “I think you need therapy.”

“Josh—”

“You paid for a digital copy of Mom to be made? You inserted it into our virtu-meet? That’s sick!”

I shiver in place. “I only wanted—”

“I know we haven’t spoken in a long time, but do you think you could have told me that our mother died? Were you ever going to tell me?”

From the living room, Mom’s voice rises above the pleasant music and mild conversation:

“I have gingerbread! It just came out of the oven! I have gingerbread! It just came out of the oven!”

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My brother looks at me. “How many of us are dead?”