

**shame**

**R. E. Heinrich**



# **Shame: A Novelette**

R.E. Heinrich

Shame: A Novelette  
By R. E. Heinrich

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**1**

"Shame..." Sara Meredith whispers, her frail birdlike voice barely audible.

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"Rita, I think you better come over," George speaks into the cordless telephone. The middle-aged man's voice shakes uncontrollably, cracking like a child's during puberty. He stands in the kitchen doorway watching Sara, his wife of twenty-five years. Her eyes are blank, lifeless, and she is muttering something he cannot understand or hear.

"What's wrong, George?" Rita asks. Several blocks away, she sits up in bed. Moonlight glimmers between the slated shades. Several years younger than Sara, Rita instantly senses the fear in her brother-in-law's voice. "Did something happen to Sara? George, what's wrong with my sister?"

George swallows hard, trying to maintain control. "Yes... They arrested Robert tonight... Something's wrong with Sara."

"I'll be right there."

Without another word, George hangs up the telephone.

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The muscle above Sara's left eye twitches as she stares at the ruin that was once her sanctuary, her home, her living room. She feels insignificant as unfamiliar emotions bubble under her usually passive exterior. Imaginary mental circuits crackle like white-hot charges of electricity across her fifty-three year old brain, pushing her closer to an inevitable breakdown. Her bathrobe-clad body reacts to these

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charges as if being electrocuted - it spasms, releases and Sara takes a deep cleansing breath; it spasms, releases and she takes another breath, all the while muttering the disturbing mantra she has condemned on herself: "...Shame."

The living room is in complete disorder. Possessions are beyond repair, soiled to the point of replacement. During the savage invasion by the Potter's Field Police, they pushed an overstuffed chair out of their path and accidentally broke off the right back leg; knocked several framed family photographs from the paneled walls - cracking frames, shattering glass, corrupting memories; the mahogany coffee table in front of the rolled-armed sofa lay on its side, the contents littering the dark blue carpet, staining the synthetic fibers with cigarette ashes and two nearly full glasses of cherry Kool-Aid; entertainment and sports magazines lay in tatters, their high-gloss pages scattered across the floor; a multitude of footprints stain the once clean carpet.

Oh my God, Sara silently curses, look at all these muddy footprints! How am I going to clean this? Ruined, that's what everything is - RUINED! The carpet, our lives...

In Sara's current state, she knows the only method to rid the vile stench that permeates from everything the intruders handled is to throw it out and start over. No amount of scrubbing could ever clean the Meredith home from the disgrace the Potter's Field Police and her son, Robert, brought upon them. Nothing, not even a professional cleaner educated in the talents of removing other people's filth could repair the damage.

There is a sound at the front door - a loud thud, then the squeak from the aluminum screen door opening and closing. Someone enters the room and moves slowly toward the distressed woman.

Sara freezes, her back to the door. Her heart leaps to her throat. Not again, she begs frantically. Her blood runs cold and fear paralyzes her. She wants to escape, run as far as she can from the imminent danger, vanish from the nightmare and reclaim the quiet life she knew before the raid; but her feet will not move. Glued to the spot, Sara's overloaded brain is unable to process the simple request to flee.

The sound of the approaching footsteps stops and Sara feels the stranger's presence behind her. Time slows, then suspends... She clutches at her chest, her heart pounding insanely, feeling as if it is about to explode. Demented images and disjointed words flash continuously through her brain - visions of the hostile assault, the verbal accusations, and the humiliation of realization. Sara begins to chant quicker, the words growing in strength: "Shame... shame... shame... shame..."

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Parker, the youngest member of the Meredith family, steps from the shadows. The nine-year old passively watches his mother for several long drawn-out seconds before beginning to repeat her words, softly and soothingly, in time with her: "Shame... shame..."

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Rita opens the screen door, steps into the house, and represses a gasp at the sight of the living room. Sara stands in the middle of the room, her back to the door. Rita steps into the house slowly, cautiously, not wanting to startle her sister. Halfway into the room, she reluctantly turns from Sara and searches the room for George. Nothing, no one, her sister is alone.

"Sara, baby, it's going to be fine now," Rita says softly. She steps closer, her heart breaking. "Please, Sara, you have to calm down. I'm here now. Come on, calm down. Where's George? GEORGE! Sara, sweetheart, where's George?"

Sara does not respond.

Her eyes shift from the sight of destruction surrounding her and catch the reflection in the oval mirror above the fireplace. The image reveals a weary, unsympathetic woman trapped in an inescapable reality. Sara sees herself as others do - an aged, pathetic woman. The reflection cackles silently and speaks in a tone both humiliating and threatening: "If only you were a better mother, none of this would have happened. How can you even call yourself a mother? Mothers are there for their children, standing beside them, supporting them... If only you were there when your family needed you, none of this would have happened. Turning your back, looking away, believing only what you wanted to believe... If only you weren't so spineless, none of this would have -"

The negative allegations grow louder, stronger. The hag reaches from the mirror, trying to clutch Sara's throat within its gnarled fingers; the long nails chipped, broken, dirty. A deafening cackle bursts from its mouth: "How could you have been so blind? Why didn't you do something before it was too late? Who do you think you are! George," the beast spits out the name in disgust, "Where's George now? Just like last time - you are alone. Your family has abandoned you! Robert is no longer your son. He's a monster! He needs to die - all of you need to die..."

"You don't understand!" Sara swings blindly at the reflection's grasp, her arms waving at the empty air. She stumbles backwards, trips over her own feet, and crumbles to the floor. On her knees, her

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small dish-worn hands tighten into fists and she unleashes a thunderous assault against her so-called God: "Why's this happening to me? Why, I ask you! Why are you torturing us? What do you think you're doing! I can't take anymore, you hear me?"

The moment Sara's knees touch the floor, Rita rushes forward. She moves swiftly across the room and kneels beside the raging woman. She wraps her arms around her protectively, pulling her close. "It's all right," she says, stroking Sara's hair. "Come on, please, calm down for me. Everything is going to be fine. I'm here now."

"Shame shame shame shame -" Sara mumbles, her body pressed against Rita. Somewhere, past the darkness, Sara feels the security of family. She leans against Rita's chest and whimpers softly. They begin to rock slowly, like mother and child. After several comforting moments, Sara speaks quietly: "Our lives are over. Shame, that's all we'll ever know. That's all I'll ever know. God has deserted us, Rita."

"Don't talk like that. Everything's going to be fine." Rita tightens her grip around Sara. She kisses the top of her head, nuzzling into her hair. With a sickening sense of déjà vu, she pushes back the troubling memories of another time, in another city, that race through her mind. Memories of the last time shame descended on the Meredith house.

"I'm alone, completely alone..."

"No, no, you've got me... I'm here... I'm here this time."

\*\*\*\*

A cornfield at dawn... the sun is rising, pushing back the darkness in bursts of colors - reds and oranges and yellows. Fog rolls across the green rows. A silhouette of a maple tree stands in the center of the cornfield. A breeze blows across the field; rustling the stalks... the limbs of the tree sway... crows take flight...

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George sits at the kitchen table, wearing a tightly wrapped flannel bathrobe over a pair of wash-worn cotton pajamas, watching the two women in the living room act out their overly dramatic scene of despair. Quite an Academy Award winning performance, he thinks. Disapprovingly, he wonders why Sara and Rita need to behave in such a manner. No matter how many tears they cry or how many times they scream pointlessly in rage, it will not help. Nothing changes... He inhales deeply on a half-burnt cigarette, allowing the nicotine to soothe his frayed nerves. The performers are releasing negative emotions, emotions better directed into something more worthwhile - like how they are going to deal with Robert's arrest... George exhales

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the smoke and the blue-gray haze floats around his head. The voices in the living room increase in loudness. He's too far away to understand what they are saying, but knows it has to be something against him. It's his fault - it always is. They will twist everything into knots, truths exaggerated, and he will become the true monster.

Breaking past the imagined commentary writing itself in his mind, he hears Sara's timid voice: "Completely alone..."

They're blaming me already, he sighs.

He turns from the numbing scene. His attention moves across the kitchen counter, past a small toaster oven, a rack of drying dishes, a half-full bottle of vodka, several sickly plants of various foliage, a dented canister of flour with a matching sugar can setting next to it... his attention returns to the bottle of vodka. The glare from the overhead light catches on the fifth. It twinkles enticingly.

George's mouth begins to water. The trembling in his hands stop and a much-needed grin crosses his face. Silence engulfs him; all distractions vanish. He sits passively, staring at the shimmering bottle. He tries to remember the last time he had a drink, having given it up after realizing he was an alcoholic. When was it? 10 years ago, no, it had to of been 12 years - that was when Parker -

"George," a woman calls from a long distance, interrupting the unwanted memory.

"One little sip won't hurt."

He stands, his legs wobbly from the night's physical and emotional turmoil, and walks to the sink. Cautiously, he takes the bottle. He inspects the fifth: the clear liquid, the shapely curves of the bottle, the thin layer of dust covering the cap. He frowns and wipes the dust away with the most delicate of movements. With his attention focused solely on the bottle, he removes the cap and lifts the fifth to his watering mouth.

"George," a woman's voice interrupts his sweet reverie.

He stops in mid-movement, turns toward the distraction. Rita is standing in the kitchen doorway. She is speaking to him, her words stern and disapproving: "George, what are you doing? When did you start drinking again?"

He doesn't answer, stationary in his movements.

Rita sighs, "You do whatever you want, I guess. Sara's going to stay with me tonight. She'll call you in the morning when she's feeling better."

In silent reply, George nods. He turns his back on Rita and then swallows the burning liquid... once, twice, three mouthfuls before lowering the bottle.

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"Good morning, this is Lana Chang, and welcome to the first edition of the Potter's Field Channel 6 morning news. Our top story: Late last night, Potter's Field Police arrested Robert Meredith for the sexual molestation of an eight-year-old boy. Police arrested the alleged perpetrator at his parent's home and charged him with the sexual assault and abduction of the child. Meredith, a twenty-three year old factory worker, abducted the boy while he was playing at a neighboring park. Police say -

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Slouching on the couch, George drunkenly grips the empty bottle of vodka in his right hand. He glares at the television set, hatefully watching as the female news correspondent reveals to the entire city of Potter's Field the events that took place in the Meredith house. The woman's words begin to run together, causing a fragmented montage of language to vibrate within George's foggy head. He studies the appalled sneer on the anchor's rose-pink colored lips whenever she says Robert's name.

Maybe it's a case of mistaken identity... Maybe the child's confused and said the first name that came to mind. There's always the possibility that Robert didn't do it... There has to be some logical reason! So many different possibilities...

The correspondent's face hardens with each detail concerning the abduction. She relays to the entire city about how the child was found roaming the downtown streets, naked, with blood, feces, and unmentionable bodily fluids running down his legs; she tells of his rescue in the form of a group of concerned commuters waiting at a bus station; and she repeats, over and over, the name of the savage who did this to such an innocent child - Robert Meredith, Robert Meredith, MerediTH, MereDITH, MEREDITH. The so-called unbiased anchor does not care anything about the disgrace of the Meredith family; her only concern is the further degradation of their son.

George's hand tightens around the neck of the bottle.

He squeezes - imagining, wishing.

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A large weather twisted maple tree stands in a recently detasseled cornfield, surrounded by row upon row of brown damaged cornstalks. The sixty-year old tree is well proportioned and widespread; its trunk contorts at a thirty-degree angle before branching toward the sky with its massive dome-like crown of colorful autumn foliage. Deep grooves

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and veins run the length of the broad multicolored leaves. A cooling wind rustles the branches, allowing many of the falling leaves to take fright over the dying field.

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Drunk - sleep - dreams - nightmares - memories best forgotten... George, six years old, is hiding in the darkness of the barn. He is in the farthest corner, kneeling behind several stacked bales of hay. He is breathing hard and shaking with fear. The groan of the barn door opening chills him. His body tenses.

"George," his father calls into the barn, "Don't make me come find you. Daddy has something just for you."

George sobs, then loses control of his bladder.

\*\*\*\*

With half-open eyes, teetering on the edge of sleep, George watches shadow's dance across the living room walls. The sun is rising, and he hears the sounds of early morning activities playing out around him: the crash and clang of a garbage truck, cars starting, birds singing, and life continuing without missing a beat. He feels relaxed, having slept on the couch - the fifth still clutched tightly in his hand. He opens his hand and the bottle falls with a dull thud to the floor and rolls toward the muted television set. George rubs his forehead, his mouth tasting like cigarettes.

There's a flicker of movement by the fireplace.

George turns and sees the shadowy form of Parker standing in the corner. The boy stands quietly, impassively watching the conflicting emotions play across his father's tortured face. The boy says nothing. George's eyes widen. He raises his hand and tries to wave the apparition away. "Go," he mumbles. "Leave me alone. Go haunt your mother for once."

"Yes, father." Parker replies quietly, and steps back into the shadows.

## 2

At 7:30 in the morning, the telephone rings and wakes George from a drunken slumber. Reluctantly, he picks it up. "Yeah," he slurs into the receiver.

"George, how are you this morning?" Rita asks in a low voice.

"Fine, Rita. How's Sara?"

"She's still asleep... She calmed down once we got over here, but she's still pretty upset. Umm, just wanted to call to see if you've seen the news yet?"

"Yes, I've seen it." Silence, stifling and prolonged. "And?"

"Well, what're you going to do?"

"Do, Rita? What do you mean by that? I'm going to do what I do every weekday: I AM GOING TO WORK. We didn't do anything wrong here, Rita."

"But all the stations are covering what Robert did... George, you've any idea what's going to happen when -"

Knowing the next several words, George slams down the receiver before she can say them.

\*\*\*\*

Act like nothing happened... act as if nothing happened...

Twelve minutes before nine, amid the finger-pointing of coworkers, George enters the office building of his employer, Ellison Insurance. He wears a typical dark blue suit with a matching nondescript blue cotton tie. He carries his briefcase in his left hand and uses the other to pull open the glass doors that lead inside. Holding his aching head high with a nervous smile on his freshly shaven face, he tries to act nonchalantly as he walks to the bank of elevators at the far end of the marble lobby.

Act like nothing happened...

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Crowds disperse without comment as he makes his way to the elevators, reminding him vaguely of Moses parting the Red Sea. He moves through the openings unencumbered. As he passes the same friendly faces he has seen for years, their social interaction stops. Another religious analogy occurs to him - he has become a leper and Jesus has refused to heal him. No bright sunny "hello's" from the security guards; no groups of disheartened nervous temps rushing about in a blind panic of lateness; no mill-about's prolonging a few more seconds of freedom before the clock strikes nine. People move from George's path, observing him from the corner of their eyes, watching his every movement. He is a walking spectacle, a living sideshow. No longer the happy-go-lucky insurance manager whom everyone adores; he is an oddity to be stared at, whispered about, and even feared.

Arriving at the elevators without incident, he presses the button marked with a red glowing outline of an "up" arrow. Time stops moving. No one, not one person, acknowledges his presence; no one, not one person stands at the elevator with him. They all hang back, waiting in anticipation... He looks up at the glowing numbers above the polished metal doors, counting down as the elevator nears the landing... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... He smirks, knowing if he makes it to his office without interference, he will be safe for the next eight hours. Once behind the locked door of his private, windowless office - with strict orders to hold all calls - he could then privately start to pull his life back together. That's all he needed, just a few uninterrupted hours... 3... 2... The elevator arrives with a ding and the double doors slide open. George steps forward and -

Someone seizes his arm.

He turns to find Harold McComb, his boss and longtime friend, smiling kindly and holding his arm. The balding man clears his throat and speaks: "Excuse me George, how're you this morning? Umm, you think we can talk for a second?"

"I'm fine Harry," George says with a hint of impatience in his voice. "Rough night, but the morning sure -"

"I'm sorry George, but we need to talk." Harold's grip tightens; he appears uncomfortable when their eyes lock. "Now, George."

"OK, I'll meet you in your office." George says, dreading the context of the conversation. He feels the warmth of Harold's hand through his suit, clutching at him, preventing him from moving. George nervously laughs: "It's not too private here. Let's go upstairs, to your office, discuss this over a cup of coffee. Just let me put my briefcase down -"

"Let's just walk around the corner," Harold talks quickly. He tries to pull George to the right, to lead him away from the elevators and into

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the security booth down the hall. The tug is friendly, though dominant. "We can talk privately in the security booth."

"No," George jerks free from Harold's grasp. The two men begin moving - one to the left, one to the right, hesitant steps, circling each other. People stop and watch the dance. Harry quickly fakes to the left, dodges right and somehow the two men switch position with Harry standing in front of the elevator and George on the outside. George raises his hands in frustration. "I haven't done anything wrong," he says several decibels louder than he intends. "If you want to talk upstairs in your office, fine, I'll do that; but you can't treat me like this! Harold, I've been with this company for too many years!"

"George, I know damn well how long you've been with the company." Harold retorts, his tone becoming tougher. "That's not the issue here."

"Then what is?"

"Fine, I thought I could've spared you the shame." He looks around the room, disgusted and beaten. "George, I guess you know why I'm doing this. First, I'd like to offer my deepest sympathy to you and Sara. This incident concerning Robert... well, it must be a shock."

"Yes, it is. We had no idea that he..." his voice drifts off.

"I can imagine." Harold nervously straightens his pinstriped tie, adjusts his eyeglasses and takes a deep lungful of air for courage. "George, I'm really sorry about all this, but... See, the Board of Directors has suggested that you take a little vacation. You know, only until this unfortunate incident dies down some. We'll continue to pay you your normal salary, of course. Besides, you have the time coming... Why are you looking at me like that? Listen, before you say anything, try to look at this from the firm's view. Your son has committed an atrocious act and the Board wants to prevent any bad publicity. They've assured me that once the trial's over... It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you?"

George nods, understanding perfectly: He has shamed the company.

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"It's illegal! Gave them the best years I have and they stab me in the back! Get out of my way prick," George demands at the top of his lungs at a yellow Pinto moving much too slow for his liking. He sits in the driver's seat of the family's ten year-old Pontiac four-door maneuvering through the busy downtown morning traffic. After Harold's speech, George did not stick around for any clever retort. He turned at the end, marched through the gawking crowd the same way he entered - his head held high - and drove off. When he pulled out of

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the employee parking lot and onto Sheridan Highway, his blood was boiling. He will get a lawyer! He will take this to court and prove that they could not do this to him. "They can all kiss my... Why are you driving so slow, you moron! Step on the gas."

A flick of the left blinker, a haphazard glimpse into the rear and side mirrors, and George stomps on the gas and makes his move around the annoying vehicle. He swerves into the left lane and a horn blares from an unseen Porsche zooming past him well beyond the standard Illinois speed limit of 65mph. George hits the brakes, moves back behind the Pinto, and slaps his hand on the dashboard in frustration. "Ah, Jesus Christ," he moans. Need to calm down, he reminds himself. Nicotine is the first natural stimulant that pops into his mind. Nothing could be better than a soothing cigarette. He reaches into his jacket pocket, fishes round past several books of matches and credit card receipts and pulls out a soft-pack of Marlboro. The cellophane crackles as his forefinger eagerly probes the open hole, searching in vain for a cigarette inside an empty pack.

"Damn," he snaps, crumbling the useless pack and throwing it to the floor.

The car crests a hill and George sees the flashing neon sign over a small barnlike graffiti covered building, waving him over to the side of the road: Liquor Oasis... Liquor Oasis. His ravaged mind quickly adds one-and-one and, in a split second, concludes that a liquor store would also sell cigarettes.

"Bingo, my luck's changing already."

He pulls the car into the parking lot and stops in front of the building. Checking his pockets for his wallet, he exits the car and walks into the store. The odor of old booze and highway fumes assaults his nose the moment he enters. He walks through a metal detector and into the harshly lit interior. Bottles and canisters of all shapes, sizes and brands are stacked around the store in brown cardboard boxes, and three fifteen foot metal aisles of shelves filled with shimmering liquids of varying colors glow under the neon advertisements. The shelves form a maze through the store leading from the entrance to the cashier on the other side of the building. Beer signs with big-busted bikini clad blondes hang from the ceiling, twirling slowly from the force of a large fan placed in the corner, out of the customers' way.

At the cash register, two older gentlemen stand in front of the counter playfully talking to the overweight, red-haired woman running the store. The cashier sits behind a small, wooden, age-worn counter on a padded bar stool, putting a pint of the store's cheapest whiskey into a brown paper bag. She speaks freely to the two men and takes her time with the purchase. The men, obviously from the 'South' side

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of Potter's Field, dressed in dirt-stained overalls and tee shirts, laugh loudly at something she says. For no apparent reason the three turn in unison and assess the stranger, each trying to judge him and the possible threat to either their safety or the stores. Satisfied that the white middle-class businessman standing nervously in the doorway didn't pose a threat, they resume their conversation.

George begins the journey through the store, while the easy listening version of Abba's Waterloo plays softly on the intercom. Past the bourbons and scotches, turn the corner to the shelves of tequila and gin - all brands, all prices. He turns another corner, becoming agitated for having to walk through the store like a laboratory rat in a maze. Over the store's sound system, the Abba song ends and the deep baritone voice of a male announcer speaks: "This is Vince Jones, and you are listening to the mellow songs of your generation on WLPF. We will return to the music right after the morning headlines. Our top story -"

George freezes as the deejay recaps Robert's arrest and crime. The summary is concise and brief, with the deejay quickly moving to the weather and traffic. Vince almost seems glad to get back to the music - almost as if he does not want to shatter the tranquil zombie-like state his listeners are in by detailing the horrors of child abuse. Now here is a man that George can respect: a news announcer reporting the facts and not the fiction of the crime. Not a moment too soon, Vince's voice disappears and another song begins.

Relief washes over George as he turns the final corner and proceeds down the aisle toward the cashier. Nearing the group, he hears the older of the two men say: "Damn, what ya' think of that crap? Ya' hear about that sick mother they arrested last night?"

"That's \$5.57, Charley. You talking 'bout the guy the police caught last night?" The young woman asks, holding out her hand for money. George steps behind the men and waits patiently. He tries to block the dialog from his head by humming with the song playing over the intercom. "Heard 'bout that this morning. Real sick, if ya ask me."

"What a disgrace," the man shakes his head in repugnance. He digs in his pocket and comes out with a handful of crumpled dollars. Counting out six bills, he gives them to the cashier. "Kids aren't even safe on their own street anymore, know what I mean."

"He won't be worth a damn if he makes it to prison." The woman states matter-of-factly. "These child molesters are the lowest scum on the food chain in those places. My brother-in-law, who did time in Vandalia a few years back, told us about how they took care of one sick dude who was molesting his five-year-old daughter. Sure wasn't pretty... "

"They need to castrate them," the other man adds.

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BAM - the words hit George like a physical slap in the face. Involuntarily he steps back, away from them. Dots flash before his eyes. George's stomach clenches in disgust as the strangers vocalize how they would handle such a monster: "... the boy's parents should put a bullet in his head... tie him down and screw him with a shotgun... put him out of our misery..." On and on it goes; not slowing, not stopping. Imagined words and expressions from George's warped psyche mix with those of reality, creating an imagined truth. He tries to speak, to defend the monster that is his son, but nothing comes from his mouth. The walls close in, and he gasps for breath. He grabs at the choking tie around his neck, yanks down the knot and quickly undoes the top two buttons of the white shirt under the suit jacket. Perspiration runs down the side of his face.

"They arrested 'em at his parents' house, I hear." The woman says abruptly.

"It's a shame," the men add together.

shame... Shame... SHAME... SHAME!!

Blindly, George turns to escape - to flee from the voices. He bumps against the nearest metal shelf holding dozens of bottles, causing the clinking of glass to echo throughout the store. One bottle begins to rock, inching closer to the edge... kill him, shame, castrate him, shame... George watches the bottle. It sways slower until it stops moving, perched precariously on the edge... shame, deny everything shame, it didn't happen, shame, it's not going to happen again, shame... George sighs in relief. He reaches to push the bottle back among its comrades and, without warning, the container unexpectedly tilts to the front and falls forward... our boy is gone, kill him castrate him, shame, got some bad news for you Mr. Meredith, kill him castrate him, shame... Flipping end-over-end, the fifth crashes to the cement floor. There is an explosion of glass as it smashes into thousands of different sized pieces, spraying everything in its way with the liquid it once held.

The room becomes deathly silent.

The voices in George's head stop.

"It's all right, dear." The cashier laughs, cracking the silence. "Give me a sec and I'll clean it up."

George stares at the remaining bottles. His vision becomes clear, clearer than he has experienced in years. Gone are the dots, the rose-colored glasses - he sees reality for what it really is, a living HELL. The fifths shimmer enchantingly on the gray shelf. Reflections from the neon flashing over the refrigerators cause rainbows to appear in the clear liquid. They dance before George's eyes. It is a beautiful sight. A smile forms on his lips, finding calm in the abstract light show. He reads the label on the bottles - Vodka.

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"Let me help," a woman's voice offers delicately.  
George nods, and then lifts two fifths from the shelf.

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Sara sits at the kitchen table in Rita's apartment, staring vacantly at the wisps of steam dancing above the cup of strong black coffee sitting before her. Even though she feels relaxed in the comfort of Rita's home - finding solace in the security of the familiar items, odors and memories - she still did not get much sleep the night before. Sara laid in the guestroom, under a hand-stitched quilt her mother made over forty years ago, and evaluated every aspect of her life to the furthest decimal she could imagine. All of these memories made her weep. She cried for the happy ones, she cried for the sad ones, she cried for the forgotten ones. She spent most of the night trying to find understanding in a situation that had no understanding. Every twenty minutes or so, when Sara least expected, Rita would quietly open the door to check on her. During these moments, Sara closed her eyes and pretended to sleep peacefully. She hated lying to her sister but didn't want to upset her any more. This was a Meredith family problem - no need to concern her side of the family. As much as she wanted Rita's help and understanding, this was something only she should deal with.

"I can't go back," Sara says to Rita. She lifts the coffee cup, blows across the scalding surface and cautiously takes a sip. The bitter taste floods her senses and she wrinkles her nose, never one for the flavor of coffee but, having not slept, she is in need of the caffeine. She places the cup back on the table and carefully formalizes her thoughts before speaking: "I thought this over long and hard, Rita. I can't go back - not this time. It's time I take my life back. I haven't been me for such a long time."

"You're talking silly," Rita casually laughs. She sits across from her sister, showered and dressed for the day in a pair of blue jeans and a pullover shirt, also nursing a cup of coffee. The spinster of the family, Rita tries hard to be everything for everyone. Having failed in her life as a repressed lesbian, she has settled in comfortably as Sara's voice of reason. The sisters have always been close, then and now, counting on each other when having no one else to turn to for support. Growing up on a horse farm on the outskirts of Potters Field, they didn't have many friends to play with during their formative years. Their lives were consumed with the backbreaking chores of taking care of the animals and living in the middle of nowhere with cornfields surrounding them on all sides. The sisters did the best they could while being raised by an abusive alcoholic father and a mother who turned away from the assaults. When the beatings started, their

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mother looked the other way and, after, would tell them how much their father loved them and didn't mean to hurt them.

"He's a sick man," their mother would clarify, "And we are family. That's the one thing you must always remember, girls - family always comes first."

As the years passed, Rita grew into the tougher of the two. She knew that Sara was different, more emotional, and usually the one who received most of the physical abuse. It became her job to protect the younger girl as much as possible. While lying in bed, late at night, Rita would hold the beaten child in her arms as she wept and continuously asked why her father hated her and why her mother did nothing to help. Rita would make excuses, tell her stories to help the pain go away.

Coming back to the present, Rita stands and walks over to the old-fashioned coffeepot simmering on the stove. She refills her mug while talking: "You can't just up and leave right now, Sara. Besides, George isn't such a bad guy. He doesn't drink anymore, doesn't beat you, and doesn't cheat. Hell, he's even a workaholic! You know how many women would kill just for that. You're just upset right now."

"Rita, you aren't listening to me. I can't go back."

"Well, honey, you know you can stay here for as long as you like." Rita shakes her head disapprovingly and rejoins her sister at the table. "So, you want to talk about what happened last night? Maybe that's why you're feeling so pensive this morning?"

"Rita, this is a well thought-out decision that's arrived at an unfortunate time. As for last night, what's to talk about? My son is a child molester..." her voice catches in her throat and drifts into nothingness. The realization of saying the words, confirming everything she already knew to be true, weighs heavy on her heart. She should have seen the signs - they were all there, mocking her at every opportunity. Robert did not fit in with people his own age, preferring to hangout with a younger crowd; and, though he often spoke of girlfriends, Sara never saw him with a member of the opposite sex. There were even a few teenage boys that hung around with him that were suspect, but Sara kept telling herself that they were there because Robert bought liquor and drugs for them. Nothing more. She could accept her son if he is a homosexual - but not a child molester! Anyone with half a heart would know how wrong it is to defile an innocent child. "Why would he ever want to have sex with a child?"

"From what I hear, it's not always about the act of sex. I hear it's more about the domination over another individual that's usually the driving reason."

"But he raped an eight-year old boy, Rita! Don't you get it? That

boy, my God, that boy was almost Parker's -"

Once again, the words die in Sara's throat. She begins to panic, her heart kicking into overdrive. She stares at the dark, reflective surface of the coffee, repressing memories, pushing them back into the darkness, storing them, forgetting them. A cool midmorning breeze blows in from the open backdoor and gently caresses her face. Sara takes a deep soothing breath and allows the calmness to ease her tattered nerves. "Rita," she starts slowly, "I'm sorry for my outburst. I lost control. I'm fine now. We have to take this one-step at a time if we're going to survive this madness."

"And what's step number one?"

Sara sighs, hoping to have finally convinced Rita that she is correct in her plan: "First step is that I can't go back. I have to leave George."

"Sara, I don't think now is a good time to leave George. If you still feel this strongly about it after Robert's trial than leave him, but your family needs your support now. I'm sorry to sound so cruel but, Sara, you leaving George will only make it look worse for Robert."

"What about me? When do I get to say enough is enough? Look around Rita. I don't have a family anymore. Robert is dead in my eyes. There's no reason for George and I to stay together. Don't shake your head Rita. You know it's the truth. The only reason George and I married was because I got pregnant with Robert. There wasn't any real love between us. We only stayed together for the sake of the children... No, that's another lie. See how easy they come, once you start. Rita, you know the truth - you're the only person who knows the truth."

Rita tenses. "Don't, Sara."

"The only reason I got pregnant was so I could get away from papa. I couldn't stay there anymore and did whatever it took to get out. All the fighting, the beatings... So what do I do? I get pregnant by an alcoholic and then become our own mother! I looked away at everything. Listen, Rita, George didn't become such a good man until that incident with Parker. It was then he stopped drinking. Only then did he become, what you call, a good man. But good men have their share of faults too."

"But he got better, Sara. George is nothing like our father."

Once more, shame floods her body. "Every man has his secrets."

"Why are you saying this? This is not about your marriage, or even the past. It's about Robert, Sara. Robert's sick, and that sickness has nothing to do with either you or George."

"It has everything to do with us!" Her voice rises and finds the conviction deep within herself to stand and fight for her soul. "You know what's going to happen, don't you? Once the press starts digging around and dissecting our lives, we - all of us, including you - are

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going to be the newest media darlings. You won't be able to turn on the television without seeing some reference about us and our disgusting son. No one will let this drop until Robert's locked in prison or murdered. As far as everyone here in Potter's Field is concerned, we're as guilty as Robert. WE CREATED THIS MONSTER, Rita. George and I made Robert into the person he is - no one else. Mark my words, none of our lives are private anymore. All the Meredith family secrets are about to become public knowledge."

Not knowing how to reply to such a deep truth, Rita simply says: "You're talking nonsense, Sara, just plain nonsense."

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Ring... the cordless phone sits on the end table next to the couch, calling out for someone to answer.. Ring... the sound of children laughing is heard faintly outside the Meredith home. The house is next to a vacant lot the neighborhood children use as their personal playground for all sorts of summer sports... Ring... George slowly drums his fingers on the arm of the sofa, tense from the mystery of not knowing who is calling. Wearing only boxers and a tee shirt, having discarded the suit soon after arriving home, he prays the phone will stop ringing... Ring... somewhere a dog barks, a plane flies overhead, an engine backfires... Ring... the living room is still a mess from the night before, the muddy footprints dried to a dark brownish-gray color... Ring...

"God dammit," George says, "Just hang up."

Ring... the LCD on the answering machine flashes the digital number 74, the machine filled to capacity, unable to answer any more calls... Ring... George reaches for the small beige telephone sitting less than two feet from him. He picks it up, presses the transmit button, and holds it to his ear. He listens quietly - hearing the faint hiss of nothingness, dead air.

He is about to hang up when the nauseating voice of his sister-in-law speaks: "George? Hello? Are you there? No one's answering, Sara. Something must be wrong with the machine."

George swallows hard before speaking: "Yeah, I'm here."

"Ummm, George, this is Rita..." she hesitates, trying to find the right words to say. Having already called Ellison Insurance and told that 'Mr. Meredith is taking an unexpected vacation,' Rita quickly phoned the house. She tried calling three times, in the span of an hour, and let the telephone ring twenty times each before informing Sara that neither man nor machine answered. At 12:47pm, the two women were so consumed with dread that they were about to call the police when George unexpectedly answers the phone. Quickly getting

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over the shock, Rita nods to Sara that she is finally speaking to George: "Sara and I, well, we just wanted to call and see if everything's all right. We called the office and they said you're on vacation. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine -"

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Hello, please leave a message after the tone:

"Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Meredith, this is Lana Chang with the Channel 6 news. I am calling to first offer my condolences concerning the arrest of your son, Robert, and to see if either of you would like to appear on -" DELETE

"...he should be murdered. God will see his Will done -" DELETE

"...bastard, child molesting bastard -" DELETE

"...we know this can't be true, George. You and Sara must be going through hell. If there is anything I can do to make this easier for you, all you have to do is ask -" DELETE

"...this is Michael Sheller and I'm a freelance writer working exclusively with the Weekly World Reporter. My editors have contacted me in hopes of securing an interview -" DELETE

The messages go on and on, alternating between the hungry reporter looking for an exclusive interview to concerned family and friends to the average demented Potter's Field inhabitant who believe the only answer is death. 74 messages and most of them made before George arrived home after the incident at the liquor store. He started to listen to them, hearing about twelve before hitting the Stop button and leaving the rest to collect. At first, he was going to delete everything, but decided against it when the telephone continued to ring obsessively. Most of the time the instrument only rang five or six times with the unidentified person on the other end hanging up, but the last few callers seemed determined to reach him. Whoever it was allowed the phone to ring and ring and ring...

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"- and why wouldn't it be? My son's been arrested for child molestation, and I've been laid-off. So you tell me Rita, what more could a man want?"

"You don't have to be rude." Rita snaps, shocked at his outburst. "The office said that you're on vacation and we've been trying to reach you for over an -"

"Don't you think I should be discussing this with my wife, Rita? Huh? Suddenly I need an arbitrator to talk with my own wife."

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The receiver on the other end of the line is badly covered, but George hears the combined muffled voices of the two women: "He's not being nice... Maybe this wasn't a good idea, Rita... You have to talk to him. Just let him know that... I can't Rita. Please, just tell him I'm going to stay with you for a few days... Sara, I can't. You should, ok, fine, please don't start crying again. I'll do it..." Rita removes her hand and her voice comes back loud and strong. "George, Sara wants me to tell you that she's going to be staying with me for a few days."

George laughs. "She won't talk to me?"

"She's a wreck and needs time away from the house to recuperate. It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you -" Quick muffled words to Sara. "What... Don't say that... Sara, would you calm down. I'm taking care of this..." The hand uncovers the mouthpiece. "Sara also wants me to say that she's sorry, but needs some time alone... You understand, don't you? George... hello, you still there?"

It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you, Harold McComb said when he tried to go to work this morning; it's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you, Rita just said to pacify him into not feeling guilt for his wife leaving him.

George nods, understanding perfectly once again.

Although he wants to speak, to inform the entire world that he's still part of the living, feeling population, nothing comes from his mouth. It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you? Why would any of this be about him? He's never done anything wrong in his life to even suggest such a thing - never done anything to even allude to the fact that any of this is might be about him. It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you? Everyone assuming what they want, drawing baseless conclusions without any facts. Now Sara is backing out without any thought of the consequences. It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you? From outside, an unidentifiable noise catches George's attention. He leans forward, turns around to face the bay window behind the couch and parts the curtains. It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you? The afternoon is sunny and warm. The sky is cloudless. A cool breeze gently shakes the trees. Several neighborhood kids playfully toss a baseball to one another in the lot next to the Meredith house. It's not about you, George. You understand that, don't you? Through the closed window, George can hear their laughter.

"It's not fair," he says softly.

"What did you say, George? I couldn't hear you," Rita says, her voice droning aimlessly through his head. "Listen, everything's going to be fine. Once the truth comes out -"

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... the truth will come out... George walks up the stairs from the basement, covered in sticky rancid smelling sweat. He is tired and breathless... truth... the desire to take a hot cleansing shower and rid himself of the stench is unbelievable... all the Meredith family secrets, all the shame... and, after the shower, all he wants to do is sit on the sofa and stare at the television for the rest of the night... all the carefully hidden secrets... he feels dirty, both physically and mentally and his thoughts are distant as he opens the basement door and steps into the bright sunlit kitchen... everyone in Potter's Field will know, nothing's safe anymore... George turns, not expecting anyone else to be home, and sees Sara standing in the living room... no one will be safe once the truth comes out... their eyes lock.

Neither speaks.

Sara lowers her eyes, and turns away.

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"- you need to relax and calm down. George? George, hey, you have to talk to me. I understand what you must be going through. Please, let's talk this -"

Nothing the voice says makes sense to George. All he hears is an endless barrage of squawks and squeaks. Without malice, he decides enough is enough and sets the receiver into its cradle and disconnects the call. He then reaches to the back of the telephone and unplugs the cord, making sure no one else can disturb him for the rest of the afternoon. It is official, he tells himself, he is alone. No one is going to help him deal with the family's degradation. If he is going to survive, he needs to stay strong and keep focused. Calmly, he reaches for the vodka and tonic sitting on the coffee table. He lifts the container to his mouth and downs the contents in one gulp. He smiles and finds strength in the warm, numbing effect of the alcohol.

"I can make you stronger," a woman's voice softly drifts through the room.

"Yes," George agrees. That's what I need, he says to himself, but the next one will be stronger.

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It is night. Hours have passed without notice. The sun sets, the sky darkens, the liquor flows, and movements become distant memories. George roams from room to room, talking quietly to himself, muttering about injustices, heartbreaks and circumstances he no longer understands. With each swallow of the liquor, now without any

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mixer, he slips deeper into depression.

He is drunk, without question, and slipping beyond...

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Sitting at the kitchen table, George picks drunkenly at the remains of a microwave dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and peas. On the table is a half pack of cigarettes, an overflowing ashtray with the butts burned down to the filter, a recently emptied bottle of vodka, and several scattered piles of family photographs that he does not remember bringing to the table. He is lost in his own mind, not focusing on any one topic - moving from the tasteless food to Robert's arrest to Sara abandoning him during his time of need. It all replays repeatedly in his mind as if on an unstoppable loop.

As he sits there, the effect of the alcohol overwhelms him. His eyes close and his head drops. He begins to dream. Flashes of his family assault him: Sara from the time of their first meeting when she was 16, which melts into the horrifying image of her as a hideous hag, with deep lines ruining her face and wiry hair dancing around her head... Robert as a baby, with George and Sara holding him lovingly in their arms, cooing at the small innocent bundle of joy... Christmastime, the family together, laughing, opening gifts... Parker, 9 years old, staring up at his father with horror in his eyes, shaking... to a maple tree growing in the middle of a cornfield. A shadowy figure of a man, his head bowed low, carrying a shovel, moving away from the tree. Threatening clouds roll swiftly from the horizon, darkening the once clear sky within seconds. Lightning flashes, once, twice, building in force. The sound of rolling thunder echoes across the field... Parker's eyes fill with tears, he begins to beg: "No no no no..." A sharp, loud crack of thunder shakes the tree just seconds before a bolt of electricity strikes it. It explodes in a burst of smoke and fire -

George's head snaps up, his eyes open. The first thing he sees is the empty bottle sitting in front of him. He points a shaking, accusing finger at the fifth. "This is your fault," he slurs. "You promised you'd make everything better."

The bottle remains speechless, standing tall and proud among the clutter on the table. The only sound in the small kitchen comes from the constant ticking of the clock on the far wall. The dial reads 2:45.

After a few moments of silence, George lovingly strokes the side of the bottle. "Please, you've got to talk to me," he mutters. He continues to caress the bottle in hopes of loosening its tongue. "I can't lose you. You promised me that if I did what you asked you'd make everything better. You promised to help me..."

When no voice comes, he leans forward, rests his arms on the

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table and lowers his head in defeat. He begins to cry. The room rotates slowly from the right to the left, and then back. His body starts to shake uncontrollably as a knot forms in his bloated stomach.

"Why aren't you helping me? You promised you'd help. All I wanted was your help... just help, that's all."

"Please," a muffled feminine voice answers in a soothing tone. The sound comes from the closed cabinet next to the kitchen sink. "Give me time."

George's head lifts at the sound of the much-needed vocalization. He beams like a young boy hearing the voice of his true love for the first time. He turns and gazes at the cabinet.

"You've come back," he responds. "I knew you couldn't stay away."

"I want you, George."

"Damn right you do." He stands, shuffles across the linoleum floor and opens the cabinet. An unopened fifth sits on the bottom shelf. Like a man ogling a beautiful woman, his eyes move seductively down the shape of the bottle, becoming sexually excited at the curves. "Hello my beautiful love. I knew you'd never leave me. You'll make everything better."

"I'm here to nourish you and take away all your pain. You have to trust me."

"I'm sorry I doubted you. Please forgive me."

The bottle purrs seductively. "There is nothing to forgive. Take me, and let us grow together."

George hungers in anticipation. He, ever so lightly, takes the bottle out of the cabinet. It vibrates softly, suggestively, in his hands. He cradles the savior to his chest, like a newborn baby. The bottle's hardened, smooth physique feels cool beneath his fingers. Pleasant memories invade his mind. For the first time in hours, he allows himself to relax.

"No one can tear us apart," he repeats. "Nothing will come between us again."

"That is correct, my lover. I am the only one who cares. Nothing can tear us apart if we maintain faith in one other. Please, George, drink from me and exist."

In a moment of lucidity, George uncaps the fifth and brings the container to his mouth. His lips close snugly around the bottle's mouth and he tilts his head, passionately suckling the smooth liquor. After several mouthfuls, he lowers the bottle. It is in this movement that his eyes lock on the Colt 45 pistol once hidden behind the bottle. The gun, pushed slightly behind several cans of peaches, sparkles in the kitchen light

George grins.

"I wonder," he muses, "Who wants me more - death or Salvation?"

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"Salvation," the vodka whispers ardently.

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Parker sees his opportunity. Without hesitation, he steps from the shadows and makes his presence known to his father.

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"If this is an open vote, I cast mine for death." Parker states matter-of-factly, stepping into the kitchen from the living room.

"What," George turns toward the unexpected intrusion, almost dropping the vodka bottle, and sees the nine-year old boy standing only several feet from him. George's mood darkens instantly. "Why are you here? You've no right being here."

"Forget the child," the vodka bottle wails in terror. "The juvenile is trying to destroy our reality. He must leave if we are to succeed!"

An offensive smirk crosses the youngsters face as he walks to the kitchen table and nonchalantly sits. His pale-blue eyes widen in mock surprise as he surveys the disorder on the table's surface. "What's this, Dad? Having a party without me?"

"Parker," George speaks slowly, ominously, "you shouldn't be here."

"Why? Seems you've already reserved this night for spirits. Besides, I'm only here to help."

"You're just a child, how can you help?"

"I can provide knowledge and retribution." Parker speaks deliberately, as though explaining ideas of importance to a child. "See, Dad, my advice allows both of us to live in peace. Now, pay close attention... All you have to do is get the gun from the cabinet, put the barrel in your mouth and... BANG! You will finally be released from the nightmares of your past and I will be released from you."

The bottle strikes like a viper: "No! The boy is implying that extinction is acceptable. This phantom sincerely considers death freedom. He doesn't understand that survival is the only honorable realization."

"Survival for whom," Parker asks the bottle. "You must remember this: Your survival allows mine. Death, plain and simple, is our only release."

"Do not think about his incoherent ramblings, George." The vodka says in a low voice, hoping Parker cannot hear. "His argument has no basis in fact. Death is the coward's way out. We need to stay strong together and fight this nightmare. I have always been here for you. He is the trespasser, not me."

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George laughs. "She knows you too well, Parker. On that note, I think it's time you left. Go haunt your mother for awhile."

"More games," the boy snarls coldly. "You know what your trouble is? You've mistaken enemies for friends."

"You're claiming to be a friend?" Sarcasm fills George voice.

A dark cloud of emotion covers the boy's face. "More than that bottle ever hoped to be."

"Why are you doing this?" George begins to tremble with rage. "I'm your father, for chrissakes! If anyone's to blame then why aren't you haunting Robert? He's the one that abducted that boy, not me! He's the one who has tarnished the family name, not me."

"What're saying? Dear God, you're diluted in your illusions. Don't you understand that you stopped being my father the moment you -"

"That'll be enough," George screams in full voice. "You've no right doing this to me!"

"I've every right." Parker turns his attention to the mess on the table. He selects a photo of George and Sara dressed in their Sunday best, standing in front of a small settee that holds Robert and Parker. The boys, ten and eight, stare at the camera with forced smiles and distant expressions in their eyes. He examines the photo for several tense seconds before speaking: "This is the reason I have the right."

"It's only a picture," George's hand tightens around the neck of the bottle. "What are you getting at?"

"It's all here, in black and white. Can't you see the shame on our faces? Here, look at it! There's not one person in this photograph who wants to be standing there with you. Not me, not Robert, not even your wife wanted you in any of these pictures! Tell me, Dad, do you remember when this picture was taken?"

"I think you better leave," George warns.

"Almost one year before this one," Parker continues. He lets the picture fall from his fingers and selects another. The new Image contains the entire family, except Parker. "Do you remember this one, Dad?"

"Stop," George orders. Nervous sweat rolls down his face and he steps closer to the boy.

Parker ignores the warning. "Where am I in this picture, Dad? Oh yeah, I couldn't make this session. I wonder why... Well, from what you told the police, I ran away from home. Isn't that what you said? I wasn't happy because you grounded me, so I packed a bag and hit the road." Parker winks at his father. "A little white lie, huh, Dad?"

"Go to hell!" George erupts. Hatefully, he lunges across the room and seizes Parker by the front of his shirt, knocking him off the chair. Together they roll onto the floor, with George on top. "Why are you doing this? I wasn't the one who abducted and molested that child!"

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It's Robert! He did all of this to us. He's the child molester. Not me!"

"No," Parker speaks softly, carefully, looking into his father's bloodshot eyes, "The only children you abused were -"

Without warning, George raises his hand and brings the vodka bottle down across the boy's face. The bottle explodes in a spray of glass, liquor and blood. Parker's nose breaks with a sickening pop and several large chunks of glass embed themselves into the soft cartilage. Parker howls in pain, blood flowing freely from the tattered flesh.

The shattered bottle begins to laugh hysterically. "That is it, my lover. Stop the boy, quiet him before he destroys both of us. Teach him a lesson that only his father can..."

The sight of Parker's badly cut face, and the bottle's encouragement, intensifies George's anger. No longer caring about the consequences of his actions, his hands wrap around the boy's throat and he starts to squeeze, tighter and tighter, feeling the bones in the child's neck beginning to snap and break. Parker gasps for oxygen, his face turning red, purple, and his small hands clawing frantically at his father's grip. He desperately fights back, trying to save his life.

"I warned you to stop!" George hollers, inches from the boy's face, feeling nothing as he watches Parker's eyes glaze. He raises the boy's body several inches from the floor and slams him back down, causing his head to bounce on the linoleum - again, and again, his hands cramping from the strength he is using. The back of Parker's head splits open and blood pours out, forming a pool around the child. "Why can't you leave me alone? You deserved everything you got. Once and for all, let the past die! It's over and done, nothing can be changed."

"Oh my God, George," Sara's voice breaks through his nightmare, "What have you done."

George stops, his heart thumping insanely, madly, and looks up. No one is there; he is alone. He looks back down at Parker and sees the horror of what he has done. Instantly, he releases the child's neck and yells at the top of his lungs: "OH MY GOD, oh God... What've I done? Please God, not again -"

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George is leaning over Parker, staring at the nine-year old's naked corpse. He reaches out, his hand shaking, and gently nudges the boy. Parker remains motionless, lifeless.

"Oh my God," George mumbles, "What have I done?"

The sound of the basement door opening makes George turn to see who is coming. At the top of the stairs is Sara. She looks down into the gloom of the basement.

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"George, is everything all right? I heard yelling."

Quickly moving from the boy, George stands, blocking any view of Parker. "Everything is fine. Just go back upstairs. I'll be up in a minute."

Sara takes one tentative step down the stairs, then stops. In the gloom, just behind George, she can see the foot of her youngest child. Without another word, she turns and leaves the basement - closing the door behind her.

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"God can't help you now, Dad." Parker's voice drifts through the room.

George's head drops to confront the boy but finds nothing. He is sitting on the floor, in a pool of liquor and blood, staring at the broken remains of the vodka bottle. He brings his hands to his face and sees shards of glass sticking from the puncture wounds. Blood drips to the floor. Large amounts of adrenaline flood into his bloodstream. He begins trembling, gasping for breath. His heart palpitates violently, causing severe chest pains. Vertigo overcomes him and he becomes nauseous and dizzy.

"No, I can't do this anymore. Parker, please, please, make it stop," George implores the empty space around him. "I didn't mean to do it. You have to understand. Please, help me make it stop."

"I can help you," Parker answers peacefully.

George turns toward the voice. The boy, his son, his baby, is standing in the kitchen doorway.

In his small hands, he is holding the revolver.

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At the sound of the closing door, George goes to the front window and cautiously parts the curtains. He watches silently as Sara helps Robert into the car. They are going shopping for school clothes, leaving Parker in his father's care. Robert looks back, knowingly... The middle-aged man grins as heat rises in his pants... fifteen minutes after Sara leaves, George turns from the window and calls for Parker... "You listen to me," George orders, leading Parker into the basement. "Don't make me do something you'll regret. Jesus, Parker, your brother doesn't fight this much. Why don't you be a man, like your brother?"

Parker stutters, holding back tears, "I'm gonna tell." These three words pierce George's soul like a dagger. His hand balls into a fist and he punches Parker in the face. A thin line of blood runs down from the

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corner of his mouth... Parker fights back, his clothes torn from his body, his naked form pressed in to the dirty mattress lying on the basement floor. George hovers above him. "Just relax, this won't hurt. Robert tells me that if you close your eyes -" Parker screams, unholy pain courses through his body as George pushes his hips forward, thrusting his penis deep... the child's high-pitched scream echoes throughout the basement... George's mind fills with blind lust; he pushes Parker's face into the pillow to muffle the noise. "That's it," George sighs as he pumps his hips. "Just relax. Everything's going to be fine... Yeah, oh God, everything's going to fine."

Fifteen minutes later, once satisfied, George realizes that Parker isn't breathing.

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Parker steps closer, he lifts the gun and points it at George's forehead. "How many times are you going to kill me, Dad? You keep begging for release, but what about me. When do I get to find my peace? Every time you drink, every time your mind slips back to that time I'm forced to re-endure the horrors you put me through. When do I get to rest in peace? How many times must I die before -"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Like a deflating balloon, George falls to the floor and rolls himself into a fetal position. He covers his head with his hands to block the boy's taunting voice.

"You don't know?" Parker repeats in mock surprise. "Is that supposed to make everything better? Do you have any idea how Robert and I felt whenever you walked into a room. The very thought of calling you 'father' sickened us. We were innocent children, you bastard! You weren't supposed to rape us!"

"I COULDN'T STOP MYSELF," George hollows. He raises to his knees, his hands clutched tightly into fists, and lets forth all the pain and suffering that he has repressed for too many years... gotta think, gotta think, shame, gotta hide the body, think think THINK, the cornfield, under the tree, bury the body in the cornfield, shame, no one will know, "Please, Daddy, don't", have to hide the body, pleading voices, SHAME, begging, screams, children, his own children, screaming, begging, pleading, STOP STOP STOP, shame, sexually molesting his sons, standing over their naked abused bodies, "No one will ever believe you if you told," their screams, leading them, forcing them, into the basement, death, Parker's dead, "He ran away officer," sob, wipe a tear, "He broke Mother's vase and I grounded him," shame, it's all a lie, shame, they believe me, they believe me, THEY BELIEVE ME!! Robert knows, Sara knows... shame, gotta think, gotta think, can't stop, someone stop it, can't can't can't, power, shame,

## Shame: A Novelette

R.E. Heinrich

SCREAMS, WHY ARE THEY SCREAMING, SHAME, SCREAMING, HOWLING IN PAIN, SCREAMING, SCREAMING... as the memories became too much for his exhausted mind, George leans back his head and wails like a tortured animal. The veins and sinew in his neck bulge grotesquely as the years of blocked emotional pain surge from his system. The shriek grows louder, building to an ear-shattering apex before breaking off to a low-pitched moan. He falls back to the floor, devoid of all emotion, all energy, and twitches sporadically.

When he finally opens his eyes he finds himself alone, lying in a pool of broken glass and vodka. He stands, slightly swaying as he gets to his feet. He rubs a bloodied hand across his face. Numb, he sluggishly walks to the open kitchen cabinet. He stands there, staring at the gun on the bottom shelf. For the first time in years, his brain is clear. He knows what he must do. Without a moment of thought, he picks up the gun and places it against his forehead. His finger tightens around the trigger, and -

"George," the liquor calls out in a panic, "Stop!"

The instant he hears that voice, George turns and drops the gun. He begins to cry. He stumbles back to the bloody pool, falls to his knees and stares at his reflection. "Help me," he pleads, "Make everything better. Make the nightmare's stop."

"Drink," the pool says, "Drink and find salvation."

Without thinking, George lowers his head, sticks out his tongue, and laps hungrily from the pool - glass and all.

### **3**

The following morning, Sara and Rita go to the Meredith house to pick up some clothes and other necessities. When they arrive, they find the house locked and quiet. Sara hesitates a moment before taking out her key, inserts it into the lock, and opens the door. She takes a deep breath for courage and enters.

The room is exactly as she left it.

All of their material and emotional possessions are still beyond repair: the overstuffed chair with the broken leg still lays on its side; their once imagined cherished family photographs lay haphazardly on the carpet with cracked frames and shattered glass; knickknacks are pulverized; the coffee table is still on its side, surrounded by the ripped pages of magazines; cigarette ashes, spilled Kool-Aid dried to the color of blood, and thousands of various sized footprints discolor the once clean carpet -

A chill slides down Sara's spine. Her stomach clenches in disgust. The vile taste of vomit fills her throat. Spots appear before her eyes and, before she realizes it, she slips back to the moments of the invasion two nights ago...

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Someone knocks at the front door... Sara glances at George, who sits on the overstuffed chair next to the sofa. Confusion clouds Sara's hazel eyes. Something isn't right. It's 11:14 at night - no time for visitors. Sara sets a glass of semi-sweetened cherry Kool-Aid down on to the coffee table. Beads of perspiration roll down the side of the glass. "Who the hell can that be at this hour?" George barks, his voice gruff from years of cigarette smoking. He turns his attention from the local Potter's Field nightly news blaring from the television and stares at the front door in anticipation. Sara is about to answer her husband's

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rhetorical question when another burst of rapid powered knocking echoes throughout the small three-bedroom suburban home. The noise sounds like gunfire - becoming louder and more forceful, rattling the three horizontal panes of glass set in the door. The thin linen curtain covering these windows shakes in reply, vibrating in unison with the door... "What the hell?" George sets down the cigarette he is holding and stands. He shakes his head, muttering more for effect than understanding, and moves toward the door. His bathrobe flutters open, revealing a pair of tattered sky-blue pajamas. "This better not be one of Robert's deadbeat friends. There'll be hell to pay if it is. I've told that boy before about stuff like this happening." The knocking returns, verging on psychotic pounding, rattling the door in its hinges... "Just a goddamn minute," George snaps, moving quicker. "Who is it, George?" Sara asks, pulling her matching robe closer to her body, protecting herself. "Now how the hell am I supposed to know that?" At the door, George pulls back the curtain, leans forward, and peers into the darkness -

The front door implodes. Hordes of genderless figures of all shapes, sizes, and colors pour into the living room in a torrential wave of unrepressed authority. Strangers, individuals of supremacy dressed in uniforms, men, women, all of them screaming and giving orders, none of them making sense. Someone grabs the front of George's bathrobe, shakes him off balance, and slams him against the wall. A framed picture crashes to the carpet, breaking the glass in the process. The intruders bounce haphazardly into one another as they wrestle George and Sara into submission, quickly destroying the families structured order. Sara shouts, "Oh my God, what's happening?" Tears fill her eyes. Uniforms, beige uniforms, badges, guns, all of them barking orders... Slowly, comprehension comes... Police, it's the Potter's Field police unjustly invading the Meredith home. "This is a mistake," George says in defiance. A leather-gloved officer holds George trapped against the wall, a large sleek black gun pointed at his head. The outsider speaks, mumbles, shouts: "... son. Where's Robert... stop moving... Stop trying to resist." George does not hear anything, his eyes locked on the sickening image of two police officers restraining Sara. She is crying hysterically, pleading with them, begging for an explanation. In the pandemonium, the coffee table topples - spilling two glasses of red liquid, a television and stereo remote, several magazines, and an overflowing ashtray to the carpet; there's the sound of breaking glass and another family portrait crashes to the floor; possessions, both tangible and emotional, are ravaged without care as more police enter the already filled house. The new officers join the choir, all shouting for the apprehension of Sara and George's twenty-three year old son, Robert.

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Suddenly, three distinct words break through: "CHILD MOLESTER."

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Sara whimpers. She begins to sway. She reaches for Rita to steady herself. Rita places her arm around her and speaks, but the words do not reach Sara's center of understanding. She closes her eyes and tries to stop the onslaught of memories...

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Down the hallway leading to the bedrooms, Robert opens his bedroom door and steps into the hall wearing a baggy pair of dark-red boxer shorts. "What's going on out here?" He barks in a firm unfriendly voice while rubbing sleep from his eyes and scratching at his semi-hard crotch. Dazed, he stumbles heedlessly into the living room... Everyone in the room turns to look at him... At the sight of the police, Robert's throat goes dry, his heart skips a beat, and he understands... "There he is," someone shouts urgently. Pandemonium ensues. People move in every direction. Several of the officers keep George and Sara detained while the others proceed for Robert. In fear, Robert grabs the side of the wall and uses it to propel himself down the hallway toward the back door. The police charge, the scent of the perpetrator strong in their noses. Pushing past everything in their way, they attack their prey. "What the hell's happening here," George demands from his son, from anyone who will listen. Sara screams and collapses to her knees, begging God for help; George steps forward to help his wife and they shove him back against the wall with orders not to move again; Robert takes seven steps before a flurry of appalled officers tackle and crush his bulbous form beneath their weight. In a barrage of sadistic maneuvers, they render the animal helpless, inflicting justice with no moral consciousness. Robert screams in pain, pleading his innocence to the unstated crime. Officers of the Potter's Field Sexual Crimes Unit swarm his body like sharks to a fresh kill as they handcuff his wrists behind his back.

"Robert," Sara whispers, her voice shaking.

From the center of the group, Robert peers between the beige polyester pants legs of the officer's. He is breathing hard, perspiration running down his face. He makes eye contact with his mother. They hold each other's gaze, silently communicating through facial expressions the severity of the situation. Knowing all is hopeless, Robert silently mouths the words, "Help me."

Sara turns away, closing her eyes, and mutters one word: "Shame."

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Standing at the top of the stairs I turned away, without helping... hearing the offensive sounds coming from the basement, I did nothing... watching the look of horror on the faces of my children whenever George entered a room, I provided no comfort... I blamed the liquor, my father, God, the children... but, most importantly, I blamed myself... I should have left when I realized what was happening; I should have reported George's behavior to the police; I should have protected my children, my babies at all costs; I should have... I should have... mother's words come back to haunt me: "We are family. That's the one thing you must always remember, girls - family always comes first."

She lied!

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"Sara, are you all right? "

Rita's voice breaks through the past. Sara turns her head slightly and looks deeply into her sister's eyes. "We are family. "

"Of course we are, " Rita nervously laughs. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Every family has its own shame... its own secrets."

There is a groan from the kitchen.

"Oh my god, that must be George." Rita says. With Sara still in her arms, they move toward the kitchen. There is another groan, long and drawn out. "He sounds hurt."

They arrive at the kitchen doorway and freeze.

George is lying on the kitchen floor, his face in a gory pool of watered down redness. Broken glass in various sizes surrounds his head. Blood smears his face. Around his mouth, they can see shards of glass protruding from his lips. He is on his back. In his right hand is a small revolver that Sara recognizes as the one they bought for protection many years ago. When Rita gasps, George sluggishly moves his head ever so slightly and stares with bloodshot eyes into Sara's. They hold each other's gaze. Silent communications pass between them... I know what you did George, you allowed it to happen, there was nothing I could do to stop you, there was plenty you could do but you always turned away, I was weak, as was I...

Knowing all is hopeless, George silently mouths the words: "Help me."

Before Rita can react, Sara bursts into the kitchen. She falls before George and pulls the gun from his hand. Rita calls out but the words

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are pointless. Sara knows what she needs to do. Without having the time to think about her actions, she points the gun at George's head and pulls the trigger. The bullet enters George's forehead and exits from the back, spraying blood and large chunks of gray matter onto the floor.

"Oh my God," Rita screams. She is stationary, unable to move.

Staring deeply into George's lifeless eyes, Sara speaks - her frail birdlike voice barely audible: "Shame."

She places the gun against her temple, and pulls the trigger.

End