

## Broken Down

From the highway that courses past it, the house looks like nothing more than a Victorian eyesore. Its pinewood has rotted, the paint thinning, tearing, until it appears like the carcass of a cow laying in fresh grass, the wood a diseased flesh upon its backdrop of fields and hills. This house creaks and crumbles, bursting with memories. I have lived a good life, it thinks to itself. From the molded wood below its empty upstairs windows, a single droplet of moisture trails all along the wood, dripping from the second story banister and onto the head of the man unraveling a "CONDEMNED" sign across the walkway. His federal badge had a glimmer in the afternoon sun that quickly disappeared as he prepared to enter the once-upon-a-time home. Wiping his brow, and setting his hard-hat upon his head, the inspector sighed to himself. "I should've come back earlier." He tapped the wood of the porch's entrance. "I'm sorry." With another sigh, deeper than the first, he stepped over the sign and carefully tested the strength of the boards of the once-lovely porch.

The whole house smelled of fresh paint, just barely dried in the bright California sun. Whisking his wife out from their '57 Chevrolet 3100, the 'newly married' cans resting on the ground behind it, the husband carried her right up to the porch.

"Henry, darling, may I please take this terribly dark blindfold off?"

"Eliza, sweetie, you may. Here's my wedding gift to you."

Removing the blindfold with a swift tug, Eliza's eyes blinked the glare of the sun away,

"Henry! You didn't!"

"I sure hope I did, otherwise we're just standing in front of some poor man's new house."

Playfully striking him on the chest, Eliza giggled as she hopped from his arms to the porch. "You, my love, are insufferable."

"Alas, it's my gift and my curse." After sharing a quick kiss, Henry extravagantly gestured towards the door. "I'm sure you'll love the inside even more."

"I'm positive I shall." Grinning wildly at Henry, Eliza grasped the doorknob and pushed her way inside the house.

The inside of the house was even worse than the outside. The inspector's boots crushed disfigured picture frames, molded-over books, nearly cracking through the floor with every step. The first whiff of air from within the house threatened to suffocate him. His raucous coughs filled the home, echoing from room to room. Eventually regaining his composure, he managed to wade through the garbage strewn floor to the dining room, where a porcelain doll sat, untouched, upon the dinner table.

"Henry, why on earth would you buy such a ghastly thing?"

"My mother used one to prepare for motherhood. I thought it'd be a grand addition to the baby's room, and we could use it for practice!"

Eliza nervously pawed at the doll on the table, tracing its every feature until her fingers felt raw.

"Love, I promise you it will be fine. You, me, and the child." Henry took her hands in his. "This house is our palace. Life will be nothing but a dream."

Taking her hands back, Eliza simply ran her hands along her stomach, over and over and over, 'til the candle on the table burnt out.

Every step he took squeaked and creaked, threatening to crumble and plummet him into the dirt below. Nevertheless, the inspector went on, making his way up to the second floor from the staircase adjacent the kitchen. Upon reaching the second floor, he observed his surroundings. Decrepit was an understatement. The carpet was more mold than material, and the paint had chipped off on every door, wall, and liner in the house. Readjusting his respirator, he chose the first door to his left. With a few trepidatious steps, he reached the door. Threatening to crumble in his hand, the rusted iron of the door's handle squeaked, turned, and finally the door opened.

"Isn't he just precious?" Henry asked. "Darling?"

Eliza had her eyes locked upon the child. "I don't see what's so special. He's just a sack of meat that breathes. Six months and he hasn't even managed to say either of our names."

“Darling! Perish the thought! He’s an utter angel. I’ve never seen such a strapping and handsome creation of God.” Reaching in, Henry pulled the young child from its crib, and cuddled it close to his chest. The baby reached out and thwapped one of the straps of the man’s dago tee, revealing the dark lines of a farmer tan beneath. “Aww, who’s papa’s little slugger?”

Eliza’s eyes set upon the child and burned, burned hotter than the heater in the corner. Realizing her opportunity, she quickly and quietly rose and walked to the freshly unpackaged radiator, turned up and piping hot. “Agh!”

“Darling! What on earth happened?” Henry set the baby back onto its pile of cloth and rushed to Eliza’s side. The skin on her hand was already turning a bright crimson, and blisters would soon follow. “Let me see.”

“It’s nothing, I-” Eliza was interrupted by Henry’s fretting.

“Darling, it’s so red! Are you a child? You should know never to grasp heated metal!” Reaching for a spare swaddling blanket, Henry went about fashioning a makeshift bandage for his wife. Meanwhile, the burning in Eliza’s eyes had been replaced by a mad glee, as the baby cried out for his father.

After a series of brusque pushes, the door finally swung fully open. The room was in shambles, a radiator sat in the corner, a handprint burnt upon the metal. What was once a child’s crib was left in the corner, now dismantled and splintered. “Age sure as hell didn’t do this.” The inspector kicked a dusted old children’s book, *We All Poo*, to the side. “What was going through her mind?” Shaking his head, he left the room, and made his way to the next of the three rooms. The doorknob was again, rusted, yet this time the door wasn’t nearly so obstinate. A simple push, and the door came down with a thud, nearly cracking the floorboards of the home. “Jesus!” He yelled, holding onto the door frame for dear life until he was sure the whole thing wasn’t about to collapse. Finally, he let go of the frame, and with a deep breath, entered the room

“I don’t see what the problem is. He’s just a boy, boys play in the mud! Let’s just clean him up and send him back out to play.”

“You don’t see? You don’t see? Take a look at my new carpet, the mud stains that he tracked all over the house, and then maybe you’ll see what the problem is, Henry!”

“Eliza, sweetie, calm down. He’s just a child.”

“Well this ‘child’ has ruined my parlor!” She shrieked, “Bridget and Margaret are coming over for bridge in an hour and you expect me to clean all this before that?”

“Naturally, I’ll help, but yes, I expect us to clean it and him up.”

“Henry, you will take the belt to that child. And God help me, if you don’t, I will.”

“Eliza, it doesn’t need to come to tha-”

Eliza marched furiously towards the closet, and took out the thinnest of Henry’s belts.

“Fine! I’ll take it. Just stop with this madness.” Henry yanked the belt away from her.

“This is not how to raise a child, Eliza.”

“Remember when you were out discussing grain with the other farmers and I had to discipline him? Well, the little creton hasn’t backtalked since.”

“Because he’s terrified you’ll draw blood again!”

“Good! Let him fear me!” Eliza said, turning away from Henry and sitting on the bed.

Henry reached out to touch her shoulder, only to be swatted away. Heart heavy, he took the belt out, and stopping at the door, looked back at his once-upon-a-time angel. He opened the door, and a small, frail looking young boy thumped to the floor in front of him.

“Papa, I heard yelling! Is mother okay?”

Through sniffles, Eliza spluttered, “Don’t call me that.”

“But, mother-”

Eliza sprang to her feet and rushed the boy, grasping him by the throat. “Do not call me that!”

Henry tore her away from the child, and grasped him in his arms. Without a second thought, he flew down the stairs, Eliza screaming bloody murder after them.

“Henry! Don’t you do it! Don’t you dare leave me!” Every syllable got more and more shredded, her throat raw from screaming. All she heard in response was the door slamming.

She ran to the window, yanking the glass down until she could scream into the darkness of the night. The familiar sound of a '57 Chevrolet 3100 starting up, and speeding down the driveway.

The inspector peered out the room's window, sitting on the bed, the last place he ever saw his mother. "I'm home, mama. I'm home."