

Deleted Scene
THE OBVIOUS GAME
by Rita Arens

We were getting worried about Pa when Jesse arrived. Pa wasn't home for dinner hours earlier, and – unlike him – he hadn't called. In winter so many things could happen. You could hit a deer, hit black ice, face a car that wouldn't start in sub-zero weather – and any of these things could result in being stranded on a deserted highway for hours in freezing weather with no way to call for help. We all knew it, and it lay below the surface of our conversation: the fear.

Ma bustled around the kitchen making popcorn, pretending to be focused on Jesse, but we all visibly relaxed when we heard the crackle of tires on the gravel driveway. I ran over to the window and saw Pa's headlights.

Jesse came over behind me and waved as Pa got out of the car. It felt so good to have him in our quiet house. Jesse's voice and movements filled the room in a different way – he brought life in with him like the cold wind that swept in with Pa when he crossed the threshold, stomping his feet to get the snow off.

"Sorry I'm late, guys," he said. "Hi, Jesse." Pa's face broke into a self-conscious smile. I realized he hadn't known Jesse would be here.

Ma walked over and kissed Pa quickly on the cheek, taking his jacket. "Did you eat on the way?"

"Yeah. Something strange happened on the way back, though." Pa walked over to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee, setting it down on the table before lowering himself slowly to a chair. We gathered around. Pa never told stories.

"I was coming up Highway 275 when I thought I saw something down in the woods," he said, then paused to blow steam off the coffee and take a slow sip. "I thought it was a deer, so I slowed down to see."

We all waited, looking at him expectantly, but Pa didn't seem to notice that his story was too slow-paced for its audience. That was the thing about Pa: You had to shift gears and do things on his time or they'd never get done, dragging out forever like the numbers of pi.

"I stopped when I realized what I'd seen was a car in the ditch."

"And?" I asked.

"There was still a man in the car."

Jesse sat up straighter, leaning in. Now Pa had our full attention.

"Were you the first one there, Mr. Keller?" Jesse asked.

Pa nodded, leaning over to peer into his coffee cup. Ma came up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Was he okay?" she asked, tucking a lock of wig behind her ear.

"No," said Pa. "He was actually dead."

I met Jesse's eyes. He didn't know Pa that well. Jesse's eyes were asking me if he should laugh, if this were a joke. I didn't know the answer.

We both looked back at Pa as Ma sunk into the chair next to him. Her face was white. We waited for the punch line, but it didn't come.

"He was really dead?" Ma said. "How did you know?"

Pa sipped his coffee again, forcing us to wait. "He didn't have a pulse."

Jesse leaned forward, his knuckles white as he clasped his hands on the table in front of him. "You checked?"

Pa nodded. "I climbed down there. The guy didn't actually look that bad. The car was embedded in a tree. The guy had a cut on his head and a bit of blood, but it sort of looked like maybe he'd had a heart attack or something. It didn't look like he'd died from the crash."

"What did you do?" I asked, my voice breaking into a squeak, higher than I wanted it to be, higher than I'd expected. It sounded like someone else's voice, or maybe my voice as it had sounded in that photo Ma showed me of Christmas so many years ago.

"I felt the hood of the car," Pa said, as though it were the natural next step. I supposed to him, it was. "It was still warm, and the engine was ticking."

"So it had just happened?" asked Jesse. I looked over at Ma. Pa reached out and took her hand.

"It's okay, Evelyn," he said. "I got back in my car and drove to the nearest house and called 911. Then we went back down and waited until the ambulance arrived."

"What did they say?" Jesse asked. Ma had gone mute, was crumpling before our eyes into a much older woman.

"They couldn't really tell me anything other than that he was dead and it was good I'd called the ambulance and stayed. The police showed up and asked me a few questions, then I came home. The roads were slick. I think he had a spell of some sort and just went off the road." Pa rose and went to the coffee pot to pour another cup. With his back still to us, his voice sounded softer than usual. "Then I came home," he said again.

"So this just now happened?" asked Jesse. I could tell he was having a really hard time processing the story. I stared at the whorls of the wooden table, picturing Pa struggling down the ditch, holding on to volunteer trees to keep from slipping on the snow, opening the car door and gently shaking the dead man's shoulder, waiting for him to answer. I imagined the entire scene playing out, up to the small talk Pa would've made as they waited for the ambulance to arrive.

"Did they think you had anything to do with it?" Jesse asked. "I mean, you just drive by and this guy is dead?"

Pa walked back to the table and smiled sadly. "Son," he said, "People die every day. I just happened to be the first one to arrive."

Nobody spoke then for a moment. Outside dusk had fallen, and the moon illuminated the hard crust of snow beginning to freeze on the grass.

Ma wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and reached for Pa's hand. "I think we should say a prayer," she said.

I glanced at Jesse, not sure how he'd handle the religion. I didn't actually know if he was a religious person. He had already bowed his head and folded his hands, his eyes closed. I dropped my own eyes and saw the veins bulging again over the backs of my hands.

"Heavenly Father," Pa began, then cleared his throat. "We just ask that you welcome this new soul into heaven, forgive him anything he'd done wrong. We pray that you give his family strength, whoever they may be. We thank you that we are here together and safe. We thank you that Jesse could be with us as we decorate our tree to celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ."

"Amen," I squeaked.

"Amen," said Jesse, looking up.

Ma remained in prayer position, her eyes closed, lips moving. Then she looked up, and her jaw was set.

"Well," she said, letting go of Pa's hand. "I'm glad you are safe. I don't like the idea of you climbing around in the snow like that."

Pa shrugged. "Somebody had to do it."

I stood, my legs still kind of shaky. "Are we still going to decorate the tree?" I asked. "Or is this a bad time?"

Pa walked to the center of the room and looked out the window out at the moonlit front yard. "The tree has to go up sometime, and we're all here. I think we should do it now."

He walked over to the tape deck and put in Mannheim Steamroller. Without thinking, I began humming along, my voice rising above the music.

Jesse, Ma and I followed over to where the green plastic tub sat by the couch, filled with the Christmas ornaments we'd collected over the years. Ma told Jesse the story behind every one as we hung it on the tree. By the time it was lit hung with baubles, the night felt normal and right again.

At 9:30, Ma excused herself to the bedroom. "Good night, Jesse," she said, touching him lightly on the shoulder. "Thanks for coming over tonight. It meant a lot to me to decorate the tree. I like rituals."

"No problem, Mrs. Keller." Jesse said. "I like them, too."

Pa settled in his chair and flipped on the news, and Jesse and I went downstairs to watch TV. Once the volume was loud enough to cover our voices, we rehashed Pa's story.

"That is insane," said Jesse, tracing his finger up and down my forearm. It gave me tingles to feel him there. I wanted to kiss him, but the sound of Pa shifting in his chair upstairs made me too nervous. I didn't want my parents to have any reason to keep me from Jesse.

"I know. But I believe it. Pa's right. People die all the time. You just don't normally see them do it."

“He didn’t really see it happen.”

“Yeah, but the engine was still warm. That’s the part that gets me.”

Jesse leaned in to me. I could smell his cologne clinging to his sweater, the combination of scents creating a heady musk. He tried to kiss me, but I turned my cheek.