

A Proud Character Searching for Forgiveness - “Grandma’s Basement”



By
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Charlie didn’t like his grandma’s basement. For one, the staircase leading down was always dark despite the light beaming through the sliding glass doors at its entrance. There were hardly any decorations on the wall, only a cuckoo clock hung above a picture of Charlie’s now-deceased grandfather holding him. He couldn’t remember that moment but still felt as if he knew the man, though he never did. As the staircase twisted, it only got darker, and the strange noises grew louder.

Every day, Janice waned away on her particleboard couch. Her body sank deeper into the cushions each day as she stared absently at her CRTV. Channels Janice flipped to often played reruns of some bland show she couldn’t care less about, though she would usually settle to watch them. On some weekends, though, a movie she hadn’t seen in a while would play. Lucky for her, today was Saturday.

“Oh boy!” she yelled aloud to no one except her dog Honey, who most likely didn’t hear her—being older than Janice herself, in dog years at least.

“*A Fistful of Dollars*. Remember you saw this one, Don?” Her thick Boston accent echoed through the room and down the empty hallway. No voice met her in response. She peered into the kitchen at the wall clock that read 4:15. “Ah, what the hell. Nothing else goin’ on today.”

“Ma!” a voice cried, followed by loud pounding on the screen door beside her.

“Christ almighty, Lara! You’re gonna kill me, for God’s sake!”

“Sorry,” Lara laughed. “Just wanted to get your attention.”

“Well, you got it,” Janice said with a laugh that was somehow both nervously uncontrolled and unquestionably contemptuous. She sighed briefly before heaving herself up and opening the door.

“The kids are upstairs. I’m gonna run to the store real quick. This house has no food, and we plan to stay the night.”

Janice was taken aback. For a moment, she realized she had almost forgotten her grandkids were here, not to mention her daughter. She couldn't remember the last time she went upstairs.

"I've got some microwavable food down here, Lara. You sure you don't want—"

"No, no. I'm gonna make something for them tonight. I told them if they needed help, they could come downstairs and get you, alright?"

A beat passed. Lara scanned the room. Piles of crochet blankets slumped haphazardly across the couch. On the floor were a few crochet animals, among the many others scattered around the claustrophobic space. Tangled piles of yarn strung themselves around, forming a web around her mother's sitting place. Lara didn't hide her appalled gaze.

"It's a mess in here, Ma. Seriously."

Janice groaned with childish exhaustion. "Lara, I just sat my ass down here."

"What example do you think you're setting for them?"

"They're not my damn kids—they're yours," she sputtered defensively.

"Excuse me?" Lara's eyes pierced like daggers into Janice's skin. A sharp pain jolted Janice backward in fear. The movie on the TV desperately sang to the room to save its silence:

"When a man with a .45 meets a man with a rifle, you said, the man with a pistol's a dead man. Let's see if that's true. Go ahead, load up, and shoot."

Lara swiped the remote from the ottoman and paused the movie, "I had to live with this filth for 18 years, and I'm not gonna make my kids see it too!" Lara cried. "It's embarrassing I have to care for you at this age. I'm juggling the kids, my house, this house, and you! And all you do is ride my ass—it's not helping!"

"At least you've got a husband to help you."

"You're right, and he cares for me more than you or my father ever did!" Lara flung herself out the door and slammed it behind her so hard it bounced back open.

For a moment, Janice was wooden. After composing herself, she sat her 73-year-old rump back on her couch and unpaused the TV. "Don, I'll clean if you come back," she muttered.

Just then, she heard a noise down the hallway. Her heart sank. "Who's there?"

"RAAARRH AAAH!" Charlie soared across the room, flinging himself from the loft's sofa. His body crashed through a giant Jenga set his brother and sister had just set up.

"PFEEEW!" he cried as the blocks tumbled.

"Ugh, Charlie! Why'd ya do that!" John cried with fury.

"I'm a cowboy," the 5-year-old declared, throwing his hands up and clasping them together to form a gun shape. "And you're my hostage!" He pointed at John. "Stick 'em up!"

"I'm not playing your stupid game, Charlie!" John pouted. "Rose and I are playing Jenga. Go harass Chris!"

"Fine," Charlie muttered, consolidating his vision of the Old West as he got up. "On the western horizon," he murmured, "Deputy Charlie spotted a scoundrel in the distance."

He picked up a stick horse lying by the couch and eyed his unsuspecting brother on the other side of the loft. "Git', boy, git'!" he cried, galloping across the room.

Chris looked up from the Legos he was eagerly attending to.

"AAAAAH!" Chris yelped, lurching to his side to escape. But it was too late. The two collided with violent velocity, rolling a couple of feet like a Hanna-Barbera cartoon. Just then, several alarming bumps, followed by a crack and a vicious scream, filled the room. Charlie had fallen down the loft's stairs.

"I'm okay..." Charlie wept disconcertingly, perhaps out of shock but more likely embarrassment. His siblings poked their heads from atop the staircase.

"Get Grammy!" one of them said. Charlie wasn't sure who.

"Okay." He composed himself before shimmying a few feet down the hallway to the basement staircase.

“Don’t fall down that one!” one called after him.

Cold stone met his bare feet as he crept to the basement floor. A large radiator whirled before him, causing Charlie to jolt back. It was nearly pitch dark down there; the only light guiding him was the faint glow of his grandmother’s TV down the narrow hallway.

“Grammy!” he cried, the pain in his head growing worse as he ran. “I hurt my head!”

Janice, caught off guard again, clutched her hand to her chest.

“Not another one—Charlie?”

“I hit my head, Grammy.”

“Oh, Josephine, let me see.” She clasped her hands around his head, feeling through his scalp. A bit of blood found its way to her fingers.

“Hold on now, sweetie. Let Grammy get you something to wrap that up.” She shuffled toward the pantry.

“Okay, Grammy.” He stood, wooden for a moment.

“Ignore the mess,” Grammy hollered back. A hint of solace escaped her otherwise distant cadence. Charlie perched himself on the couch’s divot. After pulling snacks from the shelves, she spotted her first aid kit and hurried back. She sat solemnly on the couch as she wrapped his head.

“Cowboys!” Charlie declared, pointing at the TV.

“That’s *Clint Eastwood*, kiddo—toughest cookie in the West. You want Cheerios?” she asked.

“Yes, please.” Charlie watched the TV as his grandmother fetched milk and cereal.

“*You shoot to kill, you better hit the heart.*” Eastwood warned, scowling, “*Your own words, Ramon,*” seconds later, Ramon fired two bullets into his chest.

Janice poured the milk. “Say when kiddo.”

“When.” Charlie gave her a smirk.

She smiled back briefly before frowning with serious retrospection.

“C’mere,” Janice said, pulling him into an embrace. Her heart’s cobweb-ridden doors swung open like they hadn’t been touched in decades.

“Was Grandpa *Ramon* or *Eastwood*?” he asked as they both turned back to the screen.

A moment passed, and the fallen cowboy stood right back up.

“*The heart, Ramon. Don’t forget the heart. Aim for the heart, or you’ll never stop me.*”