

The Comforts of Home

By Chloe B. Young

"You aren't really doing this."

Christine smoothed her skirt over her knees, running her hands over the flowered pattern that lay in a straight line six inches above the hem. It was her very best skirt. The one she wore to meetings and appointments, but never birthdays or baby showers. The red of it clashed horribly with the light pink sofa, but she didn't want to stand. Besides, there was very little light by which to see the conflicting colours, anyway.

"Christine? Did you hear me?"

Christine took a deep breath and looked at her husband. He stood by the window, dimly lit by the dying light outside. The sky behind him was orange, which would have suggested that the sun was nearly set, but the sky was always orange these days. An ashy burnt apricot, like the sky in that famous painting. What was it called, she wondered. The one that was stolen.

"Christine," David snapped. Christine startled, even though she'd been looking right at him.

"What?" Christine said.

"I asked if you're still insisting on staying," David said. His fingers gripped the windowsill, and he didn't look at her longer than a second at a time. He was too busy watching for the sun to disappear.

"David," she said, patiently. "Why do you keep thinking I'll change my mind?"

"Because it's insane. It's stupid."

"Oh, I'm stupid now? Of course. 15 years of marriage and *now* you tell me what you think of me."

David sighed, blowing out an unsteady stream of air. His hand tightened on the strap of the army green duffle that almost blended into the darkness under the window.

"I don't think you're stupid," he said, his calm tone completely forced. "But what you're doing is ridiculous. It's selfish."

Christine sat up straighter and squinted to see David better in the rapidly disappearing light. "Selfish," she said, blankly. "I decide that I would rather stay here, in my own home, without putting myself through the torture that's out there, and you think that's selfish?"

David said nothing, which was as good as the accusation he'd already made.

She looked away from him, her eyes finding the top of the bookshelf even without the lamp. She couldn't make out all the details of the pictures that sat in their frames, but she knew them well enough from memory to trace the outline of familiar faces with her eyes. On the wood next to them, she could just make out the pretty notebook she'd bought years ago which she'd never gotten around to writing in, and a clump of thick grey dust that she'd missed in her hasty cleaning earlier, while there was still light to be had.

"Well, I think," she said, tightly, "that it's pretty selfish of you to want me to leave everything I've ever known. My home. My life. And for what? Some pipe dream of life outside the city."

David bared his teeth and they stood out starkly white in the dark. "You don't know that there isn't help out there--"

"Well, you don't know that there is," she snapped. "It could be even worse. So, if it's selfish of me to want to hold on to *stupid* things, like our bed and our towels. Our photographs. Then please, David, call me selfish."

"But all of that is gone already," David said, stamping his foot like a toddler because he couldn't pace like he usually did when they argued, glued to the window as he was.

"Nothing is the same as it was, so why are you holding on to it?"

She gripped her knees tighter, digging in with ragged nails. "Have you ever thought that maybe I don't *want* to live without the comforts I've known all my life? The internet. A dishwasher. Food from a grocery store, not from some abandoned field, or god forbid, an actual animal that I have to slaughter myself. Maybe if I'd been born a few hundred years ago, I would've been perfectly happy to live without toilet paper. I was not, so I am not."

That was what finally made David leave the window. The duffel bag was dropped with a thump and stalked over to her, pulling her up from the couch by her arm.

"I cannot believe you," he hissed. "You'll die, Christine. You'll starve to death or be suffocated when the house collapses around you, or *worse*, just because you can't use your fucking iPad anymore."

She tugged against his hold, but it was strong. "Well, when you say it like that, yes. Exactly."

His lips trembled as he shouted in her face, "You're going to *die*, Chrissy!"

She wrenched her arm away. "*I'm already dead.*"

He stumbled back and lurched toward the window again. Watching again for the orange light to dim.

"I don't know how you're still alive when he isn't," she said. David flinched, though it hadn't been her intention. "I can't continue to live with you without hope that our lives will ever be normal again. They won't. You know that. So what is the point?"

Christine saw the defeated slump of his shoulders. The tired slouch of his strong back. He'd shouldered so much. They both had, but she had reached her threshold while he was still waiting for the final straw. He still had a spark of hope. Hers had gone out a long time ago: The moment a smaller spark had been extinguished.

The sun was barely there, now, the apricot orange faded into a deep burnt umber that was almost black. Somehow, she thought it might be better if it was black, because then, she could at least look up to the sky and pretend that everything was the way it used to

be. It only showed her how accustomed to the dark she'd become without the blue glow of a phone or a computer that she could still make out the details of David's familiar form.

"You'd better go, darling," she said softly. She wanted to go to him, but she didn't dare, in case she found herself following him out the door, despite her best intentions. "I wish you luck. Truly, I do. I want you to be happy. But I can't go with you."

He nodded, jerkily and walked over to her on stiff legs. She rooted her feet to the floor as he kissed her, harder than he ever had. Her mouth followed his when it was over, but she stayed in place. He took her face in his hands and pressed their foreheads together.

"I love you," he rasped.

She squeezed his forearms until her fingers shook and hurt. "I love you. Always."

He pulled away. She shivered in the breeze he picked up as he grabbed the duffel bag and slipped out the front door as quietly as he could. His boot scuffed against the scratches on the bottom half of the door as he passed, and they both winced at the noise. Then he was gone. She sank back down onto the pink couch, smoothing her skirt again, even though there was no one to see it. Not even herself. She was alone and nearly blind in the dark.

She twitched at a shuffling sound outside that could have been David, or the wind, or something else altogether. She was almost positive that he'd left in time, but there was no way of knowing. The cover of night was an illusion. David could have gone at any time of the day, but he'd thought they had a better chance if they could hide in shadows. Christine wasn't so sure of that. How could he hide from something made no sound and didn't need sleep?

They didn't need much of anything to live or be stronger than they could hope to be.

David hadn't listened to her. He'd timed his exit between the setting of the sun and when the scratching would start. Christine hoped he was right. She hoped that he made it to whatever sanctuary he thought was out there.

The thought made her feel guilty. If he made it there, lived through this and it became a footnote in human history that they managed to overcome, then he would have to live without her, knowing what had happened to her. He'd have to do what she couldn't: Live without--

Two thumps on the door.

One right after the other, just like the night before. And every night before that since this misery started. She was ready for what would come next, or at least as ready as she would ever be.

The latch on the door was tested, but instead of finding it locked, the hand that tried it pushed it open. His form was silhouetted in darkest orange, but he stood out in the blackness because he was so pale.

She nearly laughed. What a strange thought, that she would worry about his pallor when he was like this. She never would stop worrying, she supposed. Not until the moment of her death, which grew closer with every uncertain step he took into the room.

Her cheeks became wet when he came near enough for her to see clearer. He'd been getting so tall, just like his father. David had been so proud. His hair...it hadn't grown any longer, but it had needed a trim.

"Mom?"

She smiled, blinking away the tears so she could look at him. "I'm here, baby."

"I'm hungry."

"I know, baby." She reached out her hand. It didn't shake. "I know."