

Remembrance

WENDY WEBER CÉSPEDES

Run, run, run. The hallways, the darkness. It's there, just run. Run, run, run. A laugh! Shoot it! Kill it! The blood, the blood splutters everywhere! Scream. Screaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaam!

Chester Sanders woke up with a gasp. He was covered in sweat, trembling in fear. He took a moment to stabilize his breath, then sat down on the edge of the bed. The words still rang in his ears, nauseating him: "You know?" the monster had told him, as he agonized. "You're my best friend." Chester shivered.

It had been months since the last time he had had the dream. He had even begun to go to bed without the fear of having it again! Silly him, believing it would go away for good. He listened to the house in the dark. His wife Reba was still sleeping serenely. She slept better since they had moved to that house in the suburbs, he wouldn't bother her. He got up quietly and went in search of the only person who could put him at ease. He found his baby daughter snoozing in her crib, her little chest softly raising and falling with peace. He sat beside her and touched her hair until the hellish flashes of blood and of the smiling corpse stopped. He would

have to tell his psychologist about the dream tomorrow. She would want to prolong the therapy.

Chester sighed at the realization. Surely therapy would be all nice and good for the first months but at some point you had to keep going on your own. It had been more than five years since he had caught the Rochester Killer, six since he'd married, and almost four since his girl had been born. He had already moved on, it was just a war wound that would annoy him from time to time. Those always got cops really hard.

He contemplated his little girl. A big poster with her name, Annie, twinkled with the light on her nightstand. He kissed her and returned to his bed. If she was alright, so would he.

When he returned home from work next day, Chester couldn't believe Jessica Dunham was waiting for him in the porch. She hugged him quickly but tightly, and he felt weird. It had been almost two years since he'd heard from her, a much longer time since he had last seen her. She was getting older, and she looked now more than ever like her sister, Tori. A quick flash of a twisted girl covered in blood crossed

his mind, but he shook it off and invited her to come in. Jess was better, he judged. She wouldn't let go of her purse, though. He guessed at once why.

He offered her a chair in his study. It was his and Reba's, actually. The shelves and boxes were all tagged with their initials to differentiate between police and lawyer stuff. It was very cozy and warm, in spite of its nature. Jessica didn't seem to pay much attention, and replied as she sat down.

"Are you a believer, Mr Brown?" she grinned nervously, putting her purse on her lap.

Honesty above all, Chester reminded himself.

"You mean, in religious stuff? Not really, no," he sighed. "But I can see how believing in something can help someone, especially in difficult times."

Jessica flashed a smile again. "I have to believe, Mr Brown. For her sake."

Chester only replied with half a smirk. "That's what you wanted to discuss with me, Jessica?" he leaned on his desk. His guts were telling him there was something and so far they had never betrayed him.

"No. Yes. I mean..." she looked down, "I don't know. It's just... Mom and dad won't even mention it. But Tori believed in all that after-life stuff. She even believed in reincarnation and all that."

At that moment a woman appeared at the door of the room, and announced she was leaving and that Annie was upstairs, finishing a drawing. Chester thanked her.

"And that's why you bought a gun, Jess?" he added, when they were alone once more.

She was startled and gripped her handbag even more strongly. "I-I... It's

just... I'm going to uni now. I didn't want to go away... without saying goodbye. Or without... protection. I keep seeing... I keep hearing..." her voice cracked a bit. Like Chester, she'd witnessed far too much for her own good. He patted her hand and Jessica recomposed with an effort. "Can... can you check it? I don't know who else to ask." She took the gun out and put it on the desk, shyly.

Chester's instincts warned him against it. Because of their jobs, Reba and he had promised to only keep a registered Glock under safe in that very same desk, and no other gun was ever to enter the house. But Jessica's distraught face and Tori's face and Annie's face kept popping up in his conscience. He consented with a sigh and went around the desk, so they could talk in a whisper. He took the gun, examined it, and returned it with a satisfied nod. Jessica smiled gratefully and took it back clumsily.

"No, no, honey," he said, sweetly, holding the gun again with a proper technique. "Like this, okay?" he insisted on showing her. "I don't want any accidents, okay?" Jessica nodded with tears in her eyes. It was always like this when they talked.

"Daddy?"

They both turned around, startled. Annie was standing in the doorway, the limit she'd been taught never to cross. Her eyes had widened and she didn't stop looking at the gun. She was visibly afraid.

"It's okay, honey," Chester placed the gun in Jessica's handbag at once and motioned to pick his daughter up. "I'm a policeman, remember? Miss Dunham is a friend and I'm just telling her that she has to be very careful with

her gun." And he kissed her. Annie looked doubtfully at the girl, utterly confused.

"Guns are bad," the toddler said, softly.

"Yes, they are," said Jessica, walking pass them and lingering a little at the main door. "It's just that I want to be a policewoman, and your daddy is the best, and he is helping me learn some hard stuff, okay?"

With the gun out of sight and Jessica's sweet smile, Annie beamed too.

"Okay!" she exclaimed, and hugged him. "You're the best, daddy!"

Jessica laughed fondly and said her goodbyes. Chester waved at her and hoped he had done the best thing.

Run, run. The laugh, there he is! Shoot him, dammit! The laugh! There it is again! Shoot him before he speaks! Kill him kill him kill him. BANG! A laugh! The blood! Scream now! Screeeaaaaaam!!!!

Chester woke up at the screams in his head to realize they came from outside his own door. Reba rose at his side, expectantly. It took them only a second to realize the screams were Annie's. Chester followed Reba down the hall and burst into their daughter's room. He turned on the lights as Reba jumped into bed to hug Annie, but she twirled and twisted in desperate spasms. She was wide awake, and tears ran down her cheeks. She was absolutely terrified.

Chester jumped to hug them too, but the moment Annie saw him she screamed even louder, kicked and cried and tossed herself into the corner of her bed. They tried to hush and calm her, but Annie kept pushing her dad away. Reba asked what was wrong, but she kept yelling. Chester went to the other side of the room, impotent, and Annie allowed Reba to hug and kiss her.

When she asked what was wrong, Annie only repeated the same in sobbing whispers, until she fell asleep: "Dad killed me, dad killed me..."

Reba understood, of course, why Chester had let Jessica in, but after an extensive talk, they decided it was best never to let anyone like that again into the house, it was too dangerous. It was already bad enough they usually brought their work back home as often as they did. Probably it was the gun in Chester's hand what prompted the nightmare, and they hoped they could talk it out that morning. Annie had always been a precocious child, highly intelligent. There was no reason why she wouldn't handle this as well.

When Annie finally came down for breakfast the next day, Chester noticed she wouldn't stop staring at him, with very suspecting eyes. Reba then explained to Annie that sometimes people dreamt about awful things that never happened, and that those were called nightmares. Annie nodded with a smile, and Reba left to court quite satisfied, leaving her and Chester alone. He smiled at Annie but she wouldn't reply.

"Dad?" she asked, after a while, more light-hearted. "Have you had bad hair days?"

"Oh, yes!" Chester was happy she wanted to talk again. "All the time. Especially when I had it longer."

"Long like this?" and Annie touched the nape of her neck. Her own hair fell a little further down.

"Oh, yes! That was a nightmare!" and he laughed at his joke, but she just smirked politely and returned to her cereal. Chester spent that day brooding in his office at the police station, with a strange, ominous feeling in his heart. He thought about the nightmares, that

seemed to be coming back, and how they always made him jumpy. His biggest fear was that they would affect Annie or Reba. Maybe he would have to look at the pictures again. He hadn't done that in years, but sometimes, looking at them would help. It had been a long time ago, but it had scarred him so much. Nine self-attributed victims over two years, only two proven with hard evidence. The madman had even got a dramatic vibe and sent cards to the police station. And then the fucking weirdo had figured out Chester was in charge of the case, and had addressed them only to him. For about a year and a half Chester had played along, and his skin still crawled at the memory. The Rochester Killer had enjoyed every second of it, he was sure. Thank God that was over, thank God... Chester blinked some tears back and returned to the present. He contemplated one of the pictures on his desk, back when he and Reba dated. His hair did fall to the nape of his neck, and it looked incredibly ridiculous. He made a point of showing it to Annie.

Some weeks later, while Reba worked downstairs in the study, Chester was watching Annie over her nightly bath. She had finally stopped being afraid of going to sleep and was being nice to him again. They played with toys and water and foamy soap for a while, and then he helped her out. They laughed and joked while he dried her, and she responded candidly. He was proud and content once more, and let Annie covered in the towel while he looked for her pajama. He leaned over to kiss her nose and she looked at him directly into his eyes.

"You know, dad?" she said, seriously. "You're my best friend."

A chill ran down Chester's spine. A smiling man appeared before his eyes for a moment, covered in a pool of his own blood. Shut it up, shut it up, Chester screamed internally. He forced himself to breathe and smile for his girl. He was about to respond when he noticed Annie was touching three moles in her chest. "Bop, bop, bop," she said, following the trace of a perfect triangle. Then she looked up and smiled again. "Right in my heart," she commented, and asked for her nightshirt.

Chester took a sip at his whiskey as he looked at the photographs. He had smuggled out the file and was sitting in his study, looking over it. There he was, Eric Danvers, self-proclaimed Rochester Killer. Chester had shot him about six years ago, in an abandoned building where the murderer had been hiding. It had been terribly dark and damp, and Chester had never been more frightened in his whole life. The smiling corpse glittered in the photograph, three little holes, forming a triangle, pierced his heart. Chester took another sip. It seemed mad enough that Eric still haunted him in his dreams, it was even worse to believe... He shook his head. But there was something in his guts about this... It was the little things, really. The very small changes that had happened throughout the last year. Annie laughed a little too much at Jerry smashing Tom's head, she was too disperse, started picking up fights at school... He was sure his own problems were probably affecting her. All in all, he was the one who spent more time at home. It had to be him, it had to be his fault... A flood of tears overcame him. His fears, his nightmares, his constant pain... He had killed a man, a man he had spent two years trying to

understand, trying to predict, because it was the right thing to do, because he wouldn't have stopped... It was exasperating that it still hurt this much.

And then, last week, Annie had surprised him with a birthday present. It was a little box, and Reba explained that Annie herself had chosen it.

"It was my favorite," Annie had told him, beaming. "I hope you like it."

Chester opened it and it was a bottle of very expensive cologne. He almost fell backwards with a scream when he smelled it. Annie laughed at it, Reba asked what was wrong. He said it was so good he had almost fainted, but refused to explain more to his wife when they were alone. It was madness, that's what it was. But he'd smelled that cologne before. He was certain. He just needed to make sure.

So there he was, skimming through the files. Some of the cards were there too, in a bag. The smell was faint, but undeniable. He had asked Eric, via newspapers ads, as usual, why he added smell to his cards, some kind of psychological test, the department said. The next card arrived with the answer. It's my favorite. I hope you like it. He'd smelled those cards for years, in any case. He could never forget it. Ever.

Chester sighed and went to the bathroom, then stopped at the kitchen to refill his glass. When he returned to the study, he found Annie sitting at the desk, slowly leafing through the files and pictures. His instincts kicked in again.

"Honey, don't look at those!" he cried out, starting to run towards her. But she looked up, and something in her gaze told him to stop. She spoke slowly, with her baby voice.

"I just wanted to make sure, daddy," she put the files aside.

Chester shook his head, dizzy. "O-of what?" he stammered.

"That you felt bad about it," she said, and put out the Glock from the desk, supporting her little arms on the surface. She had to hold it with both hands, in spite of its lightness.

"What do you mean, honey?" he trembled, beginning to sweat. "Put that down," he begged, softly.

"I remember it, dad," began Annie, looking vexed. "I remember how you killed me. I remember... I hurt people." At this, something inside Chester broke, and tears streamed down his face. Annie continued. "You wanted to stop me. I wanted to stop you, but not really. And then... You shot me. Bop, bop, bop" and she touched the area in her chest where the bullets had entered. "I don't remember a lot now, I think it's going away. I don't know why. But I'm sure I wanted to find you. I wanted to tell you you shouldn't hurt people. It isn't like you. See, daddy, I knew that girl was dead. The girl that came so long ago. I saw her, and I knew she was dead. I was sure I'd seen her pretty hair red with all that blood, but I didn't know where. And then I saw you with the gun. And I thought... I've seen that. I've seen daddy with a gun before. And I was right."

Chester's heart was bumping horribly fast. Annie's eyes reddened as she gazed for a moment at the files.

"You keep looking at them, daddy," she said, pain coming through her voice. "You need to remember, and you killed me yourself. It must be awful." She smiled sympathetically.

"Honey, put that down," he heard himself saying, holding back his sobs.

"No, daddy. I don't remember a lot, but I remember you. I trusted you.

I wanted you to be okay, I remember that. And then you shot me. It felt really, really bad. And then, I wanted to do... bad things to you." And her voice cracked, her hand trembled. Just a child about to be five.

"This cannot be," Chester tried to reason with her. "Honey, I didn't shoot you. It was a dream. This is just a picture of something that happened a long time ago. That isn't you, honey. It cannot be. Please!" he was yelling now in desperation. But Annie didn't stir.

"I can kill you, I guess," she said, dreamily. "I can kill mommy when she comes back from work."

"Honey, please..." Chester's mind banged with confusion. Put the gun down. Give it to dad, he prayed.

"But I think..." Annie added, fixing her eyes on his. "I think it wouldn't be like me. Not anymore," with a sad grin. "I can't even aim the right way."

She put the gun on the desk, cannon turned to him, but she kept a hand on it. Chester gulped, trying to think what to do. There was coldness in her eyes that he knew very well how to attack, but also a fire in his heart that wouldn't stop fighting back that instinct. His heart stopped pounding when she spoke again.

"You know?" said Annie, fixing her little eyes on him. "I'll forget soon, I think. Let's say it was an accident and try it anyways."

NO!

But she had already pulled the trigger.