Little by Little by Corbin Boone

 Looking at the sudden crack of sunlight that hit the floor as Gary Mischief awoke, he heard a cry. He stood to look through the small bathroom window only to find that it was the neighbor’s children running rampant in the snow. He gazed at them as if the white sky set an angelic background to their endeavors. It was a small glimpse of what was missing in his own life. This was a life that had no real satisfaction other than the simple pleasure of an occasional alcoholic beverage. Gary was a sixty-year-old widower living in Hot Springs, Arkansas, with no family or true friends to bring the sounds of other life into his.

 As he stood on the edges of the bathroom tub to look through the window and see the small children enjoying the snow that he would eventually plow, he felt a sudden shiver. He slept inside of a tub with a large, checker-print blanket and a not-so-clean pillow to match, but it still was not enough to make the cold go away. It wasn’t a bed, and the broken sink with a trash bag tightly wrapped around it to fill with water definitely did not make it a bedroom. He made his way down to the bathroom floor and kicked over a bottle of rum that was the previous night’s dinner. He always passed by the master bedroom without a single glance, and it showed as the room was clean, vacant, and the only thing that stood out was the tilted writing on the wall next to the left corner of the bed. There was no gesture the room could pose to get Gary’s glance.

 Gary would get to a day’s tasks based on the routine of work, eat, reminisce, clean, and “let me drink a few sips to shut my eyes.” He worked as a snow plowman, and the mornings went by slow with a miniature whiskey in one hand and the other on the wheel. The job did give him time to fall deeper into a depression as he watched the snow fall from street to street. Eating wasn’t his strongest suit, but he would have the occasional meal of white bread, sometimes with a small bag of almonds to snack on. Sometimes, this would be completely replaced by the smooth taste of vodka. Drunk or not, Gary would still turn a page or two of the photo albums that he left on a desk in the dining room. When he would turn the pages, he was able to leave himself for a few moments to enjoy his past. Washing away these efforts, he always found himself at the sink, alone for a few moments.

The neighbor’s boy came to the window that Gary faced as he washed the suds off of the dishes. His name was Michael Humphrey, and this was not the first encounter that captured somewhat of an awkward experience.

“Mr. Mischief, all you do is wash dishes and stay inside. You must be the livin’ dead.”

“Not today, Michael. Don’t you have some graves to rob or other people to harass other than old men?”

“No, I would prefer to annoy yo ol’ self, but what my momma said was that I need to check if you still stayin’ above ground.”

“Above ground?” Gary said in confusion as he placed a few more dishes in the rack.

“Yeah, we don’t get to see you do normal stuff, so I’m here to check if you as dead as the Crypt Keeper.”

“The Crypt Keeper never has and never will be another version of me; now, go on.”

Michael took a few seconds to step back from his comments as he was in awe of the soapy water that went down the drain with a colorful hue left over.

“Mr. Mischief, you love washin’ away somethangs, huh?”

“You have to wash dishes, son; I’m not an animal.”

“Nobody said you was an animal. I just think you like washin’ and gettin’ rid of some thangs.”

“Really? How so?”

“Well, you get rid of snow every morning, don’t you?

“Yes.”

“Well, you must find some satisfaction in getting’ rid of all the dirt n’ snow you do, but I’m different cuz my momma said I can’t get no satisfaction. Reminds me of yo ol’ lady.”

“It’s scattered, trying to find the day’s end when snow rises so far up the street that there is nothing to see. No fresh roses to keep a great deal of red in the lives of people who don’t have enough color to substitute for the ice sickles, ice cubes and snowballs they call their hearts. But yeah, she knew how to pluck the rose straight from any heart. She took her warm hands and pierced through every bit of snow and dirt left because she knew there was still a rose to be salvaged. She kept me alive. She kept everything alive.”

“I see now how you can go on and on about dead people.”

“Well, when you find the woman of your life gone, you’ll be in the same place as me. Frozen over.”

“You as cold as a snowman, but you still ain’t dead, Mr. Mischief. Maybe keep that between them ears.”

The next day, Gary was able to find what energy he had left in him and got out of the bathroom with the same pain and aches he woke up with each morning. There was a soreness that sat deep in his shoulders as he would sit up in the bathtub. He caressed himself and closed his eyes thinking of each task that needed to be done: a twenty minute drive to work just to drive back, a day full of snow just to move snow on top of more snow, and he could not forget to get drunk. This made it a great accomplishment for him to make it to the bottle.

When getting home from work, Gary walked into the house like a lion that had just been hit with a tranquilizer. He swayed back and forth, woozy. He left the door open and crawled onto the floor yawning with his mouth wide open and his nails digging into the floor.

It was tempting to find that single spot to comfortably lie in with the bed sheet so perfectly aligned. He even considered breaking one of her rules: “Don’t you ever ruin this bed while getting in or out of it.” Still, a day’s work had led Gary to fall before the night came. He tried to carry himself through the house, but the bathtub was just too far and too cold. It looked as if a madman was fighting to keep his eyes open as they popped out of his head. The hallway floor conveniently presented itself as a mattress for his body to fall into. He lay there, unconscious.

He woke up the next evening looking at the ceiling with a bumping headache that pounded through his head. Crawling on the floor, palms to the carpet, he moved like an infant into an unknown room. He hit his head on a bed post and looked up.

“There will be many seasons for us to flourish in, see no boundaries” was written in ink on the wall beside the bed. Gary fell into himself as if he was hit with one blow, a punch in the gut stronger than Muhammed Ali could manage. She was gone. These words would soon be too much to bear as they were written on the wall but carved into his heart. Memory after memory flooded in as if the photo albums he had cherished opened themselves and spoke to him. Her voice, the tastes, the smells, especially the rancid smell of tuna fish sandwiches that he never enjoyed ran into his mind. Weakly running into the kitchen, he saw her. There his wife was, making those sandwiches he loathed, but it was her who made everything taste better. “Madeline, I think I’ve lost myself because I invested so much of who I was into us,” he said to an empty room. A shock back to reality landed him back into that current day kitchen that wasn’t as vibrant and full of life. After a small look back and forth through the room, he caught himself saying, “Maybe I do need to find out who I am one more time.” He walked down the hall and into the bedroom and swiftly opened the closet door, staring at cotton, rayon, and polyester. They were all hanging there, glaring at him. He cleared the closet in one swoop, only to leave hangers jittering. Now, all he needed was a garbage bin. While ridding himself of the past, he took back bits of himself little by little.