

John Doe (for that is his name in this story and in all stories where names of the wicked and the damned are anonymised for fear of reprisal —pecuniary or otherwise) was curled up on the floor in foetal position. He wanted to close his eyes but was afraid that if he kept them closed for too long, the blood flow from his head would perhaps eventually slow down, thicken, find its way into his eye sockets, and form a seal that would prevent him from seeing what was going on in the final moments of his life. For the past few years, John lived in fear of losing his sight without which he could not enjoy life's pleasures. Given a choice he would rather lose his other senses before sight, except perhaps touch.

He had always taken pride in having near perfect vision and it was only in the last few months that he had needed reading glasses, which he only used to net, which was something he rarely did these days. Everyone who knew him agreed that John was a fine specimen for an octogenarian. His family doctor had recently commented on how rare it was for someone born before the war, to be so free of the usual ailments that plagued the elderly.

John opened his eyes slightly to see that his mobile phone was only a few feet away on the armchair. He remembered placing it there only moments before as he had planned on calling his daughter Daisy to wish her a Happy Mother's Day when someone knocked on the door. He usually ignored people when Betty, his wife for almost sixty-years, was out shopping out with her girlfriends. There were just so people trying to save everyone's soul these days, the Jehovahs, the Scientologists, the Mormons, and all the new churches whose names he couldn't remember. John only answered the door on this occasion because he had assumed that it was Betty returning home from the shopping center a little earlier than usual and had forgotten her keys. She was a woman of habit and rarely skipped a beat in her routine

but lately had been rather absent-minded. The other day, for example, she had left her wallet at home when she went out with her girlfriends for high tea at the new cafe down the road.

He knew he shouldn't have opened the security door the man claimed that he was a courier from FedEx—no one used FedEx in this part of the world. The wore a Bintang beer singlet top, which revealed his translucent skin, and his beige flat cap was pulled over his eyes. He had a very thick neck, but there was no way the man would have overpowered him had John been a few years younger. Even now John, though not tall, was a strong man, and had developed his own thick muscular neck through years of hard work on the family farm. The man at the door probably got his from months of working out at the gym, lifting weights, drinking protein shakes and injecting steroids. That's what young men did these days. They knew nothing of the rewards of hard work and sacrifice. *Give them a decade on my father's farm, John sometimes thought, lift some pig feed, carry an animal to their slaughter...they wouldn't last half a day.* John never understood why people wanted to give the impression that they worked the fields when in fact, they had spent their days indoors in front of a computer screen. There was a time for recreation and time for hard work, and back when John was more hard work than play. Nothing irritated John more than overfed and underworked young people who took everything for granted. All his children were like this, Daisy a little less so, but his sons Dennis and Pete certainly were. Both had thin necks and smooth hands. At least Dennis, the oldest, still took his family to church at Easter and Christmas, and he got married in a church. Pete disregarded his parents, their traditions and the church. John knew some of the refugee families who attended his church and both he and Betty agreed that the young Sudanese were very polite and pious their elders. He liked that they always called him "teacher" even though it had been years since he taught. They said, "Once a teacher, always a teacher". How he wished Pete were more like the Sudanese. Respectful.

There was no doubt in John's mind that the assailant was a professional. It had happened so quickly. The man at the door knew his name. He had said, "Mr Doe?" before he made his move. The only suspect

he could come up with was Pete's wife, his daughter-in-law. The accountant.

How John had wished his younger son Pete had joined the priesthood. For a long time, John thought that Pete was headed that way. When he was in high school, he had expressed an interest in joining Father John's mission to refugee camps in Africa. Pete had gone as far as getting a passport, but then decided not to go when getting a visa proved too challenging. Pete always gave up too easily and never made the most of his opportunities. John remembered that when Pete was nineteen, he was offered some work as a model for a telecommunications company, but he declined. Even though Pete was a very handsome man, *like a young John Doe*, but never seemed to like girls the way his Dennis did. When Dennis was living at home, he was always sneaking girls into his bedroom. "Boys will be boys," John would say to Betty when they saw the girls, mainly long legged blondes, climb out of Dennis' room and scuttle down the driveway. Parents always knew what their children were up to. How could they not? Their children were part of them. These days, Dennis was married to a good-natured woman but they had not yet been blessed with children. John was hoping that Dennis would one day have a son who would carry on the Doe name. Pete had two sons and their mother had insisted that they carry the maternal name instead, since she was the only child in her family and Pete had agreed to it.

Pete had probably spent too much time with his sister Daisy when he was a child. John would often take both his sons on hunting trips up north, but Pete would refuse to shoot the animals even when he was told that they were pests that needed to be culled. He did not have the bloodthirstiness that a man needed to survive in the world and was now married to that Indonesian or was she Malaysian, somewhere from that part of the world. She had a Muslim father, which is why she sometimes wore that scarf around her head. There were so many of them in the world, surely another one of them could have preserved their family's name.

"I miss seeing my beautiful daughter-in-law," Betty bemoaned, but she never once blamed John or this predicament. "I know young people are busy but I miss our little chats and I miss seeing my grandsons."

Betty had convinced herself that the reason Pete rarely came home these days was because he was too busy playing maître-de in his father-in-law's restaurant. John had eaten at that restaurant once, before Pete's wife stopped visiting with the kids, and had found the food too oily.

It had to be Pete's wife. It was her fault that they never saw the children and it was her fault that he was laying on the dusty linoleum floor. John was grateful that when he had the living room re-floored, he had insisted on placing a layer of foam underneath the flooring. Betty had said she would mop the floors when she got home. She was always cleaning up after other people. When the kids were still living at home, she used to mop the floors of all the rooms every day, although recently she had dropped back to twice a week, since they rarely received guests these days.

It must have been the ungrateful daughter-in-law, who had seemed so agreeable to begin with and even attended all the Doe family dinners. Of course, it was plausible that the man who had attacked John, was one of the men who had assaulted poor Mrs Kratz from down the road earlier on in the year. Betty had said Mrs Kratz had woken up in the middle of the night to find burglars rummaging through her underwear drawer. This was a little different though. The man had known his name and even though he had avoided eye contact, he was not afraid to show his face. The men who attacked Mrs Kratz only did so because they were afraid of being caught. But surely Pete would not have allowed his wife to order this. No matter what had happened, John was Pete's father and the grandfather of his boys. Pete would have to forgive his father one day. After all, Daisy had forgiven him.

Sweet Daisy. It would be her thirty-fourth birthday in a few days' time. He thought he had lost her when she left home on her sixteenth birthday, but a few years ago he and Betty had received an invitation in the mail to her daughter Toni's fifth birthday party. He had known that Daisy had given birth to a little girl, but never thought that he would have the opportunity to see her, let alone develop a relationship with her. If Daisy could forgive him, then no one else had cause to hold a grudge against him.

John recalled meeting little Toni for the first time and how careful he had been not to stand too close to her. He had also been very careful not to

hug Daisy too tightly. If people had not been looking, he would have avoided it all together, but there was the expectation that fathers embrace their daughters when they meet. Daisy had grown into a rotund woman with wide hips, much like Betty and his own mother who was also called Daisy. Motherhood had made Daisy look less afraid of the world. He had decided not to make physical contact with either Daisy or Toni at the birthday party, still Betty insisted that Toni sit on his lap and Daisy put her arms around her father for their long-awaited family portrait. Pete had been there too, holding his sister's hand.

"I prayed that this day would come," Betty had said, her bright blue eyes brimming with tears. "God always answers my prayers." Then she lost Pete.

How could Pete have married such a woman? The women in the family had always been gentle, sweet natured and softly spoken ladies. Betty never had a bad word to say about anyone, not even the woman who had denied her access to her grandchildren. She went about cooking and caring for everyone regardless. How could Pete have chosen a woman who was so unlike his own mother? John's mother had also been a kind woman who never spoke harshly to anyone. How he wished to be soothed in her arms now.

"If I treat them with kindness, there is no way they can cut us out of their lives," Betty would often say of Pete and that woman.

Every Saturday morning, Betty would go to the city and buy a gift for Pete and his family with money from John's hard earned but now dwindling superannuation fund. Every Monday she would head off to the post office to post the parcel, even though Pete lived five minutes away. She'd do this today after the shopping.

"I got his wife a little doily," she said before leaving, "I hope she'll like it. I don't know if she would appreciate it. People in her culture seem to ask for money at every birthday, wedding and even at *funerals*." Today, like every other Monday, she had asked John to sign the little card accompanying the parcel. John always refused.

"Little Jarvis likes frogs," she said as she wrote in a card of a little

green frog sitting on a lily pad. “At least he did the last time I saw him. I wonder if he still does?”

Betty had bought unique gift-wrap for each member of Pete’s family.

“I know they like red. Funny. Pete never liked red when he was a child. Blue was his favorite color.”

Betty’s messages were always the same.

We hope to be part of your life again...Our home is always your home...We miss you so much...Tell your mummy and daddy that we miss seeing you...Although we never see you, we still love you lots and lots....Pretend this little frog is Pop, jumping from leaf to leaf to visit you...One day we hope to be part of your lives again.

Whilst Betty rummaged and shuffled around the kitchen, John would retreat into his study. He found it very difficult watching his wife go to such lengths to connect with that woman who would not give them the time of day.

“I love you,” Betty would reassure him when she knew that he felt guilty for putting her in this situation, “God loves you. God has forgiven you.” John longed for Betty to kiss him gently on the nose, the way his mother used to. “You are also a victim here,” Betty would remind him.

Where was Pete’s wife compassion? Who was she to deny an old man from seeing his own grandchildren? Without him, she would not have her handsome husband and her beautiful children. John knew how much the other grandparents doted upon his grandchildren, and they owed it all to him.

John managed to lift his right hand to his lips. Heavy bloodstained tears fell to the floor. *Betty will have to mop up this mess after I’m gone.* It was not her fault and it wasn’t his fault. He punched his fist into the tiles and felt nothing.

Pete’s wife had seen what was on his computer and no doubt Pete had filled her in on the past. In a way, it was John’s own fault for entrusting her with his computer, but everyone in his family used to call on her when they had problems with their computers because she was Asian. He thought he had covered his tracks by telling her that Dennis sometimes used the

computer on weekends to surf for websites that were blocked on his home computer. Everyone knew what Dennis was like. Yet Pete's wife had guessed from the beginning it was him. In their only confrontation and conversation since the discovery, she said that she had found the images when she was browsing through his temporary download files.

"I was just curious," he had explained to her when she confronted him.

"There's no need for you to be curious," she had said, "you've been there."

"I was just looking," he said, but she wouldn't listen.

He had expected her to call the police, but she didn't. Pete must have told her not to. He remembered what it was to be compassionate.

Not that the police could have done very much. He had asked an officer, in his capacity as a Neighborhood Watch volunteer, whether they arrested many people for viewing child pornography on the internet.

"We can't arrest everyone who watches porn," the police had said. "We don't have resources to get every pervert in the community. We don't know every website that's out there. We don't know if they're using real children or just adults pretending to be children."

Betty had pointed out to Pete's wife that her children were boys and that John would never do anything to boys. What had happened in the past had already been dealt with, yet the wife kept saying, "You need to get help. You both need serious help. I can't let you near my children until you do."

John's mind was floating above the pain now. It was something he had taught himself to do when he was a young child. The trick was to imagine yourself on the ceiling looking down at yourself, as if you were someone else. It was one of the only things that his own father had taught him, and he had taught this to his own children. You need to be above it all. He knew that he had been a much better father than his own father had been. No matter his faults, his sins and what had happened between him and Daisy, he had been the perfect father to his sons. He had loved them, never said a harsh word to them and given them the best chance at life. He had sent them to the best schools in the area and never made them lift a

finger at home. If Pete was too stubborn to see this, then he would have to live with the guilt of never having made peace with his father. People today were too earnest, they didn't understand that there were no absolutes in life and that evil surfaced in the best of human kind, sooner or later. That did not mean that people were beyond redemption.

The clock struck twelve. Betty was not due back for another half hour. He was not sure what the assailant had hit him with, or how deep the wound was. It was best not to think about it and imagine instead that his head was immersed in a pool of warm water: a second baptism. God was looking down upon him.

Betty would be fine if he died. She had the cat, her friends, the church and some of her children. Little Jarvis and his brother Joshua would be allowed to visit her. He could see the life they would have without him; adults would speak freely with each other, as the children gathered around the Christmas tree. Betty would be at the shops many weeks before, buying thoughtful gifts for everyone. In this house, new memories would replace old ones. John would leave his children all his savings, even Pete. John would forgive his own father when he met him, wherever that was. He was sure they would end up in the same place, as he had done no worse than his own father. John was a strong man; however, he would not hold on. It would be better for everyone that way. He thought about his mother, her green blue eyes. Maybe he wouldn't see her again, but maybe he would, and perhaps up there, he could begin again. He would have the courage to stand up to his own father. He would also be kinder to Daisy. As he thought about Daisy, he remembered watching the fuzzy video clip of an elderly man moving in and out of a young girl who was dressed in a white shirt and blue tartan skirt. He tried to stop recalling this image, but he simply couldn't. As he replayed the image repeatedly in his mind, he thought about the times he and Daisy had spent together when she a young girl and wondered if he would be able to spend time with little Toni in the same way. He wanted to push these images and thoughts out of his mind, but he could not because even now, it made him feel alive.

The clock struck one. A car pulled up into the driveway, the door

opened and then the familiar shuffle down the asphalt driveway.

Betty.

Sweet Betty.

He breathed heavily and closed his eyes.

“Oh, my goodness. Who would do such a thing?” Betty gasped.

She dropped her shopping bags and ran to him.

“Why can’t they just let us old folks live our lives out in peace? Some people just refuse to leave the past in the past, where it should be. Interfering busy bodies,” she muttered as she felt for a pulse around his neck. “Don’t worry about a thing. Everything will be okay. I’m home now.”

He half opened his eyes and saw her reach for the mobile phone.

“Hurry. There’s been a violent break and entry at my house. Someone’s attacked my husband. He’s losing a lot of blood.”

She told the police their address, rang off and then calmly ran over to the unused fireplace, grabbed the poker and shattered the living room window.

“You’ll be okay,” she repeated, “I will take care of everything. Don’t worry about the mess you’ve made.”

John knew that everything would wash out in the end.

EJ SUN is an award-winning writer and former teacher based in Western Australia. Their work has featured in various journals and anthologies, and they have published poetry and experimental fiction under the moniker “Emily Sun”. <https://campsite.bio/i.am.emily.sun> Insta: @i.am.emily.sun

