Filtered light drifts in through the cracked glass, and slides across the hall of cigarette butts and dirtied clothes. The scene is a far cry from the laughter and bounding games of chasey that once brought the walls alive and would soak young giggling faces in golden beams of light. As I grind open the door to my dusty room, I feel the clammy space of the hall constrict me into a pit of remorse and regret. When did I let my life get like this? Most would say it was when they left me but I knew better. I know it began well before. Back when I began my caustic ritual. The night I finally let the smoke envelop me. The floor writhes beneath me to escape the heft of my burdened feet. Leaving its moving touch, I rest a shoulder on the wall only to be repelled by a stench that lingers in the place of crisp air. Green and grey paints mottle together in a sickly hue reinforcing the barrier to the outside world that I erected when he left.

Forcing my legs into submission I drag my heavy mass through the flickering light, scattering butts with each torturous step. It’s like the house itself doesn’t want me to leave. It wants to keep me here, in the pit of addiction. Me its corrupted companion, and it, my willing jailer. Clutching the rail to the stairs, my wrinkled hand tenses white against the solid surface of the wood. Each step down sends tingling shocks throughout my body, numbing the soles of my feet and rattling my weary bones. The bottom of the stairs finally meets my foot, which stops in its tracks and waits until the rest of my body has caught up before it continues its ambling movement towards my chair of relief. Next to my chair the black cat licks at its paws; the litter it lives in dirtied and brown. I could not remember the last time I cleaned it. The mound did not empty itself as I had wanted, but built up and now threatened to overflow.

Landing heavily in the padded embrace of the cushions, I fumble for the glass tube from the drawer beside the chair. With a contented sigh I lift the mouthpiece to my lips, sprinkling the powdery rocks into the wire mesh. The action perfected over countless nights of practice; nights lost in a mist of regret and isolation. The lighter in my hand, I flick the flint, flashing a flame to life. The red peaks dance in the cracked smile of my eyes as the rocks heat and curl into smoke, swirling and
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A Shadowy Past

twisting itself into haunting yellowed patterns. The ghost trapped in the tube begs me to let it out. It has its way. I always let it. Inhaling, the creature scratches its scribed track to the depths of my lungs. My relieved mouth glides from the glass, watching it grin back at me as I drop it again onto the undulating bench. With a final exhale I release the slithering silvery phantom gently out into the open air. I feel the neon rush plough its way through the guilt piled at the back of my mind and push me into the safe place that has become my hell. Twirling about itself, the smoke drifts through the air sending flickering shadows jolting erratically around the room. I slide down past the torture, and into the nothingness I have grown to love. I am merely a spectator in a room that adjusts itself to the slow, yet erratic beats of my heart. And that’s when it comes. That noise. The incessant tapping that, no matter how muted my conscious thoughts are, still swoops up from deep inside and pecks apart the strands of my frayed mind. Memories drag themselves from their shallow resting place and are thrust before my flecked vision, all the while the tapping continues. Snippets of the past reel through a burning projector that rewinds me to a time when I was still his ‘daddy’. Laughter and wrestling cascade around me. But each memory ends the same; splinters chipping away until the memory lies on the floor in a powdered pile of whitened crystal.

The insistent tapping grows in my mind. It begins to leak from the confines of my head and into the frantically subdued lounge. This time something is different it isn’t the same. The noise is outside of my head. It’s the door. But why? Could it be? Could Dylan be here? The knock now punches a gap in the fog entrenched in my ears and brings my body to life. Unfolding out of my chair, I scrape my bare feet across the shaggy carpet that bridges the gap between myself and the entrance. Time stretches away from me while my feet pull my numbed frame to the door. I’m coming Dylan. I yank the door, allowing a widening path of sunrays to blaze into the hollowness of my retreat and shatter the spell of the darkness. In the bright afternoon sun a silhouette stands tall against the golden horizon. His hair snaking out behind him to frame his head in a dark halo. The eyes, sunk into their sockets, pierce through my body and into my very being. An icy hand grazes the
side of my heart. I feel the chill leech the remaining warmth from me in that gaze. Staring into his face I see what I have been to my child. I am a chain to his ankle, anchoring him to the ground so that I am not left to be alone.

“You need help dad.” His voice stammers at the sight of me. A twinkle of a tear pools in the corner of his darkened eyes.

“No... son... I’m fine.” I croak while I reach toward his hand. “Really. Just..... just come inside.” He lifts his arm up to my hand and as our fingers meet, he begins to disintegrate and flake into floating specks that drift to the ground. My eyes glue to the deforming spirals. The dank grey wisps mount into fragmented shards of rock. I look away from what I have done. Then, as I turn back, he is gone. The empty porch the only thing left to hear my unvoiced words. I scramble back into the gloomy clutches of my house, closing the past behind me. As the door shuts, the last rays of light are drowned from the floor, and with them, any hope of escaping my shadowy self. The pipe grins from the bench.