

Chatter

by John Riley

The night before his mother's teeth began chattering. The clicking started slowly and built intensity until it became too rapid to sustain a rhythm, collapsed, and started again.

His sister said, "I can't take it," and left the bedroom. She came back minutes later, sat down in the kitchen chair by the door, and said, "I really can't take it."

The noise reminded him of the office of typewriters in the movie "The Apartment." Before they watched the movie his mother had made popcorn. He watched her shake the pan as she poured the corn into the smoking oil. Settling down in front of the television she said, "Billy Wilder made this one. He had to escape the Nazis."

During the night he listened to her teeth chatter and drifted in and out of a dream he forgot when he woke up. The tiny bedroom was stifling. Near sunrise the hospice nurse called and he told her it wouldn't be much longer.

A few minutes later the chattering stopped and his mother was staring at him. For a moment he thought she was dead.

"You're back, you bastard," she said. Her voice was weak and clear.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"God deserted me the day I married you," she said.

It was the first time she'd spoken in days and she thought he was someone else. He started to say, "I'm not him. I'm not my father."

"I wanted to see you," he said instead.

“Leave,” she said. “Please leave now.” In a moment her eyes closed and the chattering started again.

His sister was crying in the doorway. “Why?” she asked. “He's been dead years and she hated him even longer.”

“It's fine.”

“It's not fair for you.”

“There's nothing she can do about it.”

“You do look like him. She always said so. I'm going to take a drive. I have to get out.”

After his sister left their mother opened her eyes again.

“There's nothing here for you,” she said.

He tried to remember stories she'd told him about meeting his father, but there were none.

“I remember the day we met,” he said. “It was bright and beautiful.”

“It was raining. I flagged down your cab.”

“You looked miserable standing in the rain.”

“You charged me full fare.”

Then she said, “I wanted you to look at me.”

Her son said what he thought she wanted to hear. “I'm sorry about everything.”

“No you're not.”

This time when her eyelids closed there was a thin white line along the bottom and the chattering was soft and erratic. In the night it stopped and didn't start again.

“Do you think she really saw him,” his sister asked, while they waited for the men from the funeral home.

“I guess.”

“How does that make you feel?”

They stood on the front porch under the yellow bug light. Everything was a million miles away.

