

My Brother's House

by Mark Cecil Stevens

The last time my old lady threw me out, I decided to go and stay with my brother. I thought, "That's the last place I'll be welcome," and I knew that was true. The drive was calming, which was good, because Steven wouldn't have even let me in if I were this drunk and angry as well.

He sat me down at the kitchen table and fished around in the cupboard for a couple of heavy-bottomed glasses. He poured some scotch in each and handed me one. I almost asked for ice, but I saw that he was pouring the good stuff. For a minute I felt like the prodigal son.

"Well she's got guts," he said. "I wish I had as much guts as that." He jerked his head toward the kitchen door.

"Don't throw a good thing out," I advised, but I knew that he didn't want advice from me on this subject.

"You wouldn't know a good thing if it bit you on the dick," he laughed and I didn't reply. I shook my glass, but that didn't distract—no ice.

Steven sucked at his drink, breathing the last drops in. I guessed that one did that with expensive scotch. I wasn't sure. I took a measured sip.

Bobbi poked her head in the door. She almost dropped the laundry basket that she hauled. "Jesus, I didn't know you were here."

"Yeah, he's going to stay the night. That's okay with you, right? I mean, it's not the first time." Steven looked at me when he spoke. I kept my damned mouth shut.

She wouldn't catch my eye. She walked back out to fold the laundry.

"Look at that, she's doing laundry. At this hour. Wonder what she's feeling guilty about. Don't you?" He picked up his empty glass like he was going to toast, but I knew he was inviting me to another.

"Sure," I said, assenting to both drink and question.

The second drink was silent. I didn't offer any explanation and he didn't ask. After he tipped his glass up, he stood. "I gotta work tomorrow. Better hit the sack." He moved his arms in a pantomime stretch, but didn't yawn.

"G'night, bro." I lifted my glass in salute. The scotch was starting to wake my good feeling.

I sat in the kitchen alone for a respectable minute before she came in. She had a stack of dishcloths that she tucked into a drawer. "Mind if I join you?" There was singing in her tone.

"So," I said, but I couldn't finish the thought.

"So," She answered. She poured herself a wine in a water glass. She took the seat next to me, between where Steven and I had been sitting.

I tipped my glass up and eased the last of the scotch down. I looked at her through the bottom of the highball glass. It spread her out, like I thought that she might look in ten, twenty years.

"Do you have any sheets?" She sipped her wine but looked up at me from the glass. Her eyes looked wide and wet.

"I'll be alright." I started to get up.

"Stay for another," she said. She went to the cabinet and pulled out Steven's scotch. The cork squeaked when she twisted it out. She gave me three fingers.

I took a drink and looked her over. She was almost as pretty as she was before, but the smoking had formed lines around her mouth and her eyes looked puffy. I wondered if she had been crying when I came over; if I had been too drunk to notice earlier.

"I've missed having you around." She smiled and showed how the wine had stained her teeth ruddy. I let that slide. I slugged down half the scotch.

"The couch is in the basement." Her voice sounded coy. That made me feel happier than I had all day.

"Well, I'd better hit it then," I said, and up-ended my drink. I stumbled off down the stairs without looking back.

