

Rusty Fears 5 - Inheritance

Content Warnings:

- Parental Death
- Grief & loss
- Mould & rot
- Body horror
- Fire & immolation
- Explicit language
- Discussions of: hoarding & compulsive behaviour, family conflict & divorce, insomnia & nightmares
- Mentions of: food, sleepwalking, funerals, arthritis
- SFX: low continuous drone, high pitched tones

[Show Theme – Intro]

Inheritance by Matrim Tait, read by Francesca Reneé Reid

Mum died in April.

I got the house, along with the responsibility of cleaning it out. I'd like to think it was because I was the most organised, but there really was no-one else.

Jason hadn't visited in years, though he and his girlfriend were always invited to Sunday lunch.

My childhood home was a fairly large four-bed in the country; kitchen, lounge, conservatory extension, several bathrooms, master bed, my room, my brother's, and a spare bedroom that had seen frequent use before dad moved out for good. We also had quite a bit of attic and basement space. Well, space on the floor plan, at least - space in the *abstract*. My mother could have

generously been called a hoarder, so the house was in a sorry state. Less so in the areas where she entertained her only visitor, but no room was left untouched. I had plans to throw most of the junk out and then gut the property, renovating it and selling the place on.

I settled on starting with the kitchen, the logic being that I would need a safe place to cook meals while clearing the mess. I had not realised quite how bad things had become for Mum near the end, as I despaired over the rusted, grotty utensils and lack of cleaning products. It took the entire day to make a significant dent in the room, and merely thinking about the bathroom drained me of my remaining energy.

I slept in my old room. The single bed was a step down from my usual but it was nice, in a way, to be back there. The old boy-band posters, stuffed toys and knick-knacks added a welcome touch of familiarity to the whole dreadful situation. I had expected to lie there sleeplessly despite my exhaustion, but I found my eyelids drooping early as the first day came to a close.

The second night was less restful. Glass shattering woke me from my sleep. I swear I heard my father's voice for a moment, as impossible as that was, but I rushed downstairs to see. There was nothing amiss, though. All was as I left it the previous evening.

I started noticing the damp around a week into the clearing. Behind a box of old letters, a dark patch caught my eye. Rising from the skirting board crept tendrils of subtle discoloration followed by spots of black mould. I assumed at first that it was because of lack of ventilation, caused by the truly daunting

amount of stuff crammed in every corner. I put it out of my mind - that was a problem for later, once the rooms were empty and I was ready to start repairing and decorating.

Jason's room was easy to fix up - a quick phone call confirmed my suspicions that he had no intentions to come back to help me with it and that he considered it all trash. "Bag it, burn it, sell it. I don't care." "Even the photographs?" "Especially the photographs." So, in the skip it all went. My room was more of an undertaking. I paused on each forgotten relic of my childhood, drinking in the memories, loathe to part with any of those treasures left abandoned for decades. I created such a mess while sorting that I slept in my mother's room. I never quite managed to move back out; her bed was so much bigger and more comfortable than mine.

I did notice, however, that the mould problem was inching its way onto the upper floor, spreading beneath the rugs and crawling over the windowsills. This was after the problem spots on the ground floor had expanded upwards and outwards more rapidly than I'd ever seen damp travel - in a few short weeks every wall was coated with it, silhouettes of sinuous reaching arms, grasping upwards. My thoughts drifted beneath. The problem must have come from below, from something wrong with the basement, and I was honestly afraid to look for a long time.

Around a month later, I started walking at night. In the liminal space between consciousness and dreaming, I travelled through the house, treading the well worn pathways between the stacks of saved items, documents; the evidence of our lifetimes. I turned left into my old bedroom, and saw myself, several

decades younger, lying on the bed. I was smiling at the book I was reading, my old music player pumping tinny music into my headphones. Distantly, I heard Jason fighting with my parents downstairs, unable to pick out words but the emotions too raw to be mistaken for anything pleasant. I watched the younger me absently turn up the volume. By the time I ventured down the fighting had stopped, the house empty once more. I came back to alertness staring at the festering basement door. I had no idea how long I had been standing there, but when I looked down at my filthy, frozen feet my toenails were black.

The next day I bit the bullet. Coated in mildew and warping in its frame, it took effort to force the basement door open and as soon as I did, I had to cover my nose against the choking air. I tried the light, fingers brushing over furry growth on the switch, but nothing happened upon flicking it. The bulb must have blown a while ago. I retrieved a torch and shone it down, descending the stairs. My slippers became saturated with *something* wet almost instantly; bile climbed my throat at the squelching between my toes. The torch beam weakly illuminated a dark liquid on the floor of the basement, contained by crumbling bricks, with a thick black fungus blanketing those. The damage was more than extensive - it was all-encompassing. I backed away from the subterranean swamp my basement had become. The torchlight made the liquid seem to writhe and dance, and the illusion unsettled me.

The contractor spent little time on his assessment of the situation; said the foundations were “fucked”, asked me how I let it get this bad. He recommended a course of action I could not reasonably afford, not with the funeral costs, but I made the arrangements regardless. This was my childhood home. I could not let it fall into ruin.

Mum's clothes were the next task on the list. I remembered them hanging from her slight frame - wrapping around her middle as she held herself against the chill that perpetually bothered her - but looking at them now, they seemed far too small. Most of them were too rotted to salvage, but a few of the nicer items I thought could be given away to charity, or perhaps kept. I washed them several times, but the musty smell lingered. I decided to keep them in suitcases for the moment, until I found a better laundry detergent. There were a few items that might have suited me, and it would have been nice to keep something of hers for myself in that way.

The odd dreams persisted. Sometimes I walked through memories, but more often I was disturbed by a single sound or voice. The occasional sob. Dad liked to whisper into my ear at night. "Leave," he urged. "Get out!" But I would not give up the comfort of the double bed. I was *tired*. I deserved it. Each morning, I found more detritus. It seemed to be multiplying overnight, erasing the hard work of the previous day.

I am not sure when I stopped cleaning and when I started just staying in the house. At some point, while perusing old telephone bills and mouldering books, I realised that Mum's collection was terribly important. It was her work, her life. The photographs were my favourite - so many memories that I had not retained came flooding back. There were a variety of photos; some Polaroid, some holiday snaps from disposable cameras, some printed digital photos arranged in albums. There were some framed pictures and many more loose ones, roughly organised by date from the time my parents got married, to when my brother and I were born, and through our childhood years. The

timeline became sparse as we approached adulthood. My hands hovered over our faces in a shot from one of our earlier holidays abroad, tracing the air just above them in a ghostly caress. We looked so *happy* here, my brother and I in matching pink outfits, embraced by our parents. I was careful not to touch the paper directly; my fingers had started leaving black streaks on everything they brushed.

I took to sitting in Mum's old spot on the worn couch, staring out at the mounds of clutter, surveying what was bequeathed to me and remembering better times. More than once I fell asleep there, dressed in the same clothes I had been wearing for... for however long. One of those nights, I woke myself with a hacking cough. I shuffled over to the bathroom, groaning at the creak of my knees. As I cleaned myself up in the bathroom and drank water from the tap, I caught a look at my hands - the backs of them were paper thin, dark blue veins bulging, covered with a smattering of liver spots. These were the hands of an elderly woman. I knew then that I would never leave this house, that I did not want to. This was my home.

The power went out in September. I had been looking through the holiday photos again and resented being plunged into darkness. The torch had died a while ago, and I'd discovered the box of collected batteries were all dead too, so I reached for the box of candles by the stack of faded newspapers. The cold and damp were affecting my joints more than usual and my numb fingers fumbled with the lighter. The click of the switch accompanied the tumble into the pile of photographs at my knees. I watched the images crackle and curl at the edges, transfixed by the flame, by the warping smiles within. The baby photo of me and Jason was consumed, the cheap, heart-shaped 'sister' frame

providing ample kindling. The fire consumed the books, the boxes of financial records, the curtains. I was dimly aware of the flames licking around my kneeling form, of the stifling, dry heat. I pushed myself to my feet, stumbling to the doorway.

After two or three steps I crumpled to the hardwood floor - what was once hardwood floor, and now were planks of mould. I stared down at my feet, confused at the crumbling, black mess they had become; flakes of skin and rot sloughing off in chunks; the stumps unable to bear my weight, the blight spreading further up my limb. Dark lines traced up my calves in an imitation of blood poisoning, but I knew it was something much worse. There was no pain, but as I touched what had once been flesh, my fingertips began to erode.

I looked back to the ashes of the photographs, watching absently as the rest of the room burned. The fire had spread to other rooms too - I heard the crash of crockery in the kitchen, the sizzling of ingredients boiling in their containers. I laid down, staring at the swirling smoke coalescing at the ceiling. My nose wrinkled at a scent vaguely remembered from an old birthday party of mine, when I leant too far forward while blowing out my birthday candles. I smiled, remembering Mum giving me a horrible haircut after that. There was a photograph of it, in fact. She was right, I shouldn't have been so careless.

My last thoughts before the fire engulfed all were of my brother, and what he told me on the phone last time I called.

Some things just aren't worth saving.