

Shelter

By Michelle Ruddle

Jim knew that his wife was cheating on him because she couldn't look him in the face. Her eyes, in fact, seemed to be fixed on the rear end of their neighbor, Andy, who was bending over to retrieve a bag of Tostitos from the bottom shelf. As Andy straightened up, Louise's eyes fell to the ground. Jim shot Andy a look of disgust, a look of how dare you fuck my wife and then never return my cordless drill, you piece of shit, but Andy was busy crunching into the chips and failed to notice.

Louise played absent-mindedly with the unraveling hem of her blue skirt, slowly tracing an uneven line back and forth across her knees.

Last summer, Jim had arrived home from work nearly every day to find Andy lounging in his back yard and talking to a glistening, bikini-clad Louise. Her giggle, the one that made Jim's penis feel like a kid again, would float around the side of the house as he trudged to the back yard, his weary feet suffocating inside of their work boots.

"Oh," she said with a sigh, "you're home."

Andy smiled and offered Jim a beer that he had taken from Jim's own refrigerator. Jim felt that he was being treated with decidedly less respect than he deserved and that his wife might possibly be a slut.

Images of Louise's tanned midsection and long legs stayed in Jim's mind as his wife continued to slide her fingernail over her knees, as though she were showing him the barriers to her body that now existed for him. Andy kept munching, sending little bits of chip shrapnel down to the red shirt that covered his slightly protruding stomach. Jim felt a newly familiar pressure throbbing at the back of his skull. A sudden staleness of the air was becoming more and more common as the days passed, like a room filled with day-old cigar smoke or coal-mining dust. He sat close enough to both Andy and Louise that he could reach out and touch them, maybe slap Louise's hand or smack the bag of Tostitos out of Andy's strong grip, but he didn't.

Louise interrupted Andy's crunching with the only thing she could think to say. "At least it was on a Saturday," she said quite pertly, "so the children were home and not trapped in the school."

Andy nodded and crunched in return and Jim said nothing. He made a mental note, counting this as the seventh time she had made the same comment in the two days since Saturday.

“Lord knows what could have happened.” Louise returned her attention to smoothing her skirt. Silence rushed back into the room, no noise except for the deafening sound of Andy crunching crunching crunching. Jim’s annoyance was climbing steadily towards its limit. He felt a slight tic pulling at the corner of his right eye.

“How long do you suppose we’ll be in here, then?” Andy asked. He was staring at some spot high on the ash gray walls, and not at Louise or Jim. Neither answered. Jim felt the room shrink another few inches.

“I wish we had some better lighting in here,” Louise said thoughtfully, surveying the dim overheads, “I could catch up on all of my reading.”

Jim snorted, knowing very well that she hadn’t read a book since Shakespeare for Dummies, which was used for the adult Shakespeare class she had been taking a few years ago. She never finished the book or the class, or “Romeo and Juliet,” her first assignment.

“Idiots. You two belong together,” Jim mumbled, forgetting how close they all were. Louise shot him a look of anger, annoyance, and perhaps, he thought, fear. He was about to accuse the two of them, lady sunbather and her dim lover, and maybe declare a citizen’s divorce, but his two children came screaming into the room just then and interrupted the proceedings.

Eleven-year-old Justin and eight-year-old Lizzie had been bouncing off the walls of the small rooms for two days. Jim wondered how they could have missed Justin’s Ritalin pills while they were frantically grabbing all the possessions they could carry as they fled from the house. He felt sorry for his quiet, introspective daughter, who now had bruises up and down her arms and legs and dark circles under her little eyes. Jim let Justin be, partly because he was frightened of him, and partly because he thought Justin acting like a maniac made things seem more normal.

Justin ran to the high racks containing food, climbed up like a monkey to the top shelf, and grabbed a bag full of Hershey’s chocolates. Louise and Jim looked at each other with alarm, sharing the horror of a child that only parents could understand.

“Hey, there, sport,” Andy said, grabbing a wriggling Justin by the collar, “We need to conserve food, and I don’t think you’re supposed to be eating –”

Justin sent him howling with a swift, hard kick to the groin.

“You can’t have all the food, you fat ass. It’s ours anyway.” Justin retrieved the bag of Tostitos that had fallen to the floor as Andy doubled over, and ran off towards the back room. Jim smiled slightly at the sight of Andy grabbing his crotch and crying in pain. His smile faded as Louise hurried to his side, oh dear-ing and oh my-ing and everything.

“Why don’t you rub it for him, you bitch.” Jim mumbled bitterly, forgetting again how small the room was. Louise was busy helping Andy to his feet and Andy was busy fretting about his balls, so neither paid attention to Jim. Louise walked Andy into the even smaller adjacent

room, which they had dubbed the kitchen. Jim couldn't help noticing how naturally Andy's oafy arm fell over her shoulder, not just lying over it, but cupping slightly at the end.

He became aware of Lizzie standing quietly at his side, and looking at him with her big brown eyes. He pulled her up onto his lap and she nestled her head into his sweater-clad chest.

"Why do people fight, Daddy?" her voice was soft and smooth, refreshing to Jim after the brainless squawking of Louise, the crunching and howling of Andy, and the eternal screaming of Justin.

"I'm not sure, honey. Sometimes, when both people think they're right and neither one will budge, they end up fighting for what they believe is right." Jim cleared his throat. A spreading sense of uneasiness worked through his body.

"But why can't they just talk it out? Why do they have to kill each other with bombs and guns and tanks?" Lizzie's little arms wrapped tightly around Jim. "Why would someone I've never met want to kill me and my family and my neighbor?"

"I don't know."

Jim vaguely remembered being a kid and hating when his parents answered questions with 'I don't know,' but he had no other response to explain to his young daughter the questions that so many people were asking themselves.

"What happens if we go outside of here?"

Jim had been avoiding Lizzie for two days just to escape answering this question.

"You'll get very, very sick. That's why we need to stay inside and just enjoy our time together until someone comes and tells us its okay to leave." Jim felt like his throat might close up, too clogged with musty air to talk or breathe.

Jim was glad to see Justin tearing back into the room, because it caused Lizzie to be quiet and not ask the inevitable next question. There was a ring of chocolate around Justin's mouth, and his hair stuck out at different spots around his head. He had somehow ripped his shirt on the way from one room to another, and had on only one sock. He breathed heavily, an eerily sadistic smile on his face.

"Come in here and apologize to Mr. Andy right now," Louise yelled from the kitchen. Jim snarled, imagining what had been going in there while he was discussing their possibly imminent deaths with their eight-year-old daughter.

"I'll apologize to his nuts," Justin yelled and laughed hysterically. His mother appeared at the doorway, her hands on her hips. Justin turned to Jim, who was gently trying to detach Lizzie. She had flattened herself against him when Justin and the whirlwind behind came into the room.

“Dad, that guy’s a fat tub of lard and he’s eaten almost our whole year’s supply of food. I’d lick my own crack before I say I’m sorry to him.”

Jim shrugged in unspoken agreement and Justin took off again towards the back room. A loud crash sounded in the short hallway, followed by more hysterical laughter.

“Real nice, Jim. Thanks for your help parenting. It’s not bad enough we’re stuck in here, but you go mute on me and expect me to take care of everything.”

Louise’s eyes flashed with anger and were met with Jim’s angry smirk. Andy had hobbled to the doorframe, a pack of Handi-Snacks in his hand. Lizzie silently climbed down from Jim’s lap and removed herself from the line of fire.

Jim didn’t respond, just stared at Louise until her eyes broke and turned back to the floor. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. He looked from her to Andy and back again.

Before Jim could launch into the tirade of hoping to hell that Andy wasn’t getting regular blow jobs when Jim hadn’t gotten one in over two years, not even on his fortieth birthday, a siren started up outside.

The thought of and killing Andy immediately disappeared from Jim’s mind as he tried to discern what kind of alarm this was. Years of warring and attacks and various security alerts had produced a nation-wide series of sirens that were supposed to identify the severity of a situation and were broadcast on the nearly infallible back-up system of the emergency radio. These radios could connect to the emergency sirens if nothing else and every house had at least two of them. Last Saturday, when Jim heard the repeated one prolonged wail followed by two short honking noises, he had known they needed to get to their rancher-style emergency bomb/biohazard/biological warfare shelter and quick. It was the alarm for a chemical attack, the warning to get your ass into safety or die quickly. For most of Saturday, Jim had entertained the idea that the alarm was just a drill, but by this morning, with no confirmation over the emergency radio and the incessant alarms, he started having some serious doubts.

Other than the fact that Andy was screwing his wife, Jim hated him because he couldn’t do anything on his own. That’s why he was here, taking up space and air, eating their food, and getting sucked off by Jim’s wife in their kitchen. The double-reinforced, specially designed doors of Jim’s chemical warfare bunker had almost been sealed when Andy came running across the yard, panicked and sweating profusely, with no possessions except his Dale Earnhardt Commemorative beer stein and his muddy Nikes in hand. Louise had placed her hand on Jim’s arm, begging him to have some compassion and open his their door to a neighbor.

“Even if that neighbor’s a schmuck who can’t even follow simple government mandates telling you to build a shelter for your own survival?” Jim had asked as Andy oafed into their new home, wheezing and panting. He had never even said thank you.

Now the siren continued: one short wail, a honk, and two drumbeats.

“Shit,” Jim whispered. “It’s the ‘Air Not Safe’ siren. This must be for real.” Again the room got smaller. The shelter had a specially designed air filter system that recycled the air and kept it pumping throughout the rooms, creating an endless supply of air that was uncontaminated, but stale. His head started pounding; his lungs were desperate for fresh air.

There was a death-like stillness in the room, now made smaller because they had all gathered there when the siren started. Even Justin, with fists full of chocolate, stood quietly behind Jim.

Jim walked to the single window in the shelter, a small square with triple-reinforced, specially designed panes of glass. None of them had yet thought to pull back the dark red curtain to look outside. Jim slowly pushed the curtain to the side, expecting to see the ground littered with shriveled up trees, dead cats, and maybe spontaneous fires.

“What is it? What’s out there?” Louise asked. The window was only big enough for one person to see out of and she was clawing at Jim’s arm for a peek. He shook her off.

“Nothing. Nothing’s going on. Everything is fine.” He stepped away and bright light flooded through the glass. They all squinted or threw up a hand to shield their eyes. The inside of the shelter looked even darker, dirty and grey now.

But Jim was right, though, there was nothing going on outside. The trees were still green and tall, some of them blooming with early dogwood flowers. Their branches swayed slightly in what must have been a breeze.

Little Lizzie was actually the first to notice the only difference in the scene from the window and the world they had been used to. She pointed to a dog lying in the grass and began to cry.

“Woah, old Pesky’s not looking too lively,” Andy said, shoving a handful of olives in his mouth. Pesky, a French poodle who belonged to the people across the street. Lizzie wailed, big teardrops falling on her cheeks.

Jim put an arm around his daughter and closed the curtain. The room looked better without so much light, anyway.

“Nice going, dipshit,” he said to Andy. Louise glared at him and grabbed Lizzie by the hand. The siren shut off finally, having run its standard five-minute course. It would be repeated in another ten minutes.

Jim sat back down in his chair. Louise settled Lizzie in the back room with some story about doggy heaven and God’s divine plan for pooches. She returned and sat down, her knees almost touching Jim’s. Andy stood without expression, turning to the food rack.

“Fat fucking bastard,” Jim muttered, and Louise looked at him with a tight face. Jim leaned towards her, dramatically wiped his mouth with his hand, and gave her the finger. Her

cheeks turned red and her gaze returned to its favorite place, her lap. She started fidgeting with the hem of her skirt again.

“So how long do you all think we’ll be in this dump?” Andy asked, still searching the food rack. There was no answer.

“I just thank God,” Louise said, running her finger across her the crooked hem above her knees, “that it was a Saturday.”

Andy nodded in agreement, and smiled as he pulled a box of Kandy Kakes from somewhere in the depths of the food rack.

Jim glared at both of them. Musty air hung on his nostrils. The grey of the walls seemed to fall everywhere around him.

“I just thank God,” Louise repeated absent-mindedly. The room got smaller and a violent tic pulled at the corner of Jim’s right eye.