

Coming Home  
by Madeleine Dougeherty

Charles was reluctant to come home. He never liked flying, and always got first class seats. Because of the desperate, almost-too-late call from his mother's sister, he had to choke through five hours of stale coach air. Coming home was not a comfortable thing. Walking through the house he had grown up in just made him have to stop his legs from taking him out to the bus stop and miles away. They itched to run and not stop like they had when he was 15.

There was the sickly-yellow couch covered in that shrink-wrap that always stuck to his legs in summer. There was the horseshoe over the backdoor, still with the ding in it from when he had thrown it into the living room wall. The resulting gouge had been repaired long ago with wood putty, but the spot of discolored paint was still visible behind the picture of grandma. Cross-stitched platitudes hung in the every room. Charles stood in his bedroom door for a few seconds before remembering that he did not care. Everything he needed, and wanted, was either in his bag downstairs or at his place in New York. He spent many minutes gazing at the family photographs hanging in the upstairs hallway. Pictures of his mother as a young girl, a few with Charles and her in the first years of his life, and many more group photos that included his extended family. His father was only in the ones where everyone was there, except for his professional military photo. In that one, William looked firm and proper, respectable, but it was a lie. It was a pretty lie for everyone to believe, to fall in love with, to aspire to be, to be proud of. A lie that covered up all the bruises, cuts, and eventual broken bones. Charles remembered the day he left. William had seen him as he was walking home from the bar. The smell of his whiskey breath and unbrushed teeth was putrid as he laughed in his son's face.

“Good luck to you, Willie, m’boy. You’re strong, like me. You’re mother never understood that. She could never have held a gun and killed someone, not like me. Your brother couldn’t have either. You could, though. You would kill me right now if I gave you the chance. Too bad you can’t. Too bad for your poor mother. She’s losing her white knight of a son.” His parting words echoed against the stars. “Good night and good luck, William Charles.”

There was a crunch that awoke Charles from his hurting feet, tired legs, pounding heart, and clenched fists. He carefully pulled his hand away from the broken glass covering William’s picture. He picked the glass out of his hand and let it drop to the floor.

“William Charles Ryan, as I live and breathe. My, you have grown. And learned to dress yourself, I see,” a middle-aged woman said as she walked up the stairs. She touched his shoulder and rubbed the fabric as she remarked on the fine quality.

“Hello, Aunt Marie,” Charles said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Why, I remember having to take you apart like a spring chicken. Everything had to be taken off. And you would wiggle and run away. It was so cute, you running around bare-bottomed. At least until your father would...well, never mind that. What have you been doing with yourself all these years?” She wrapped her arm around his and guided him back downstairs. The wake would be held tomorrow, but already casseroles, lasagnas, and cold cut platters were piling up in the kitchen.

Aunt Marie chattered on about how he hadn’t been to his father’s funeral, but it was so right that he come home for his mother’s. She sat him down in the kitchen and fixed him a plate as she continued on. All he could do was stare at the back door, wishing to be far away.