

## *The Knock*

by Leah Mueller

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I slumped beside my kitchen window, smoking a bowl as I stared at the heavy, sodden clouds. My husband, Scott, and I lived in an old hunting shack with our toddler son, Noam. The cramped dwelling sat behind two converging highways that led to Tacoma, Port Orchard, and Bremerton. Cold wind whistled continuously through the cracked floorboards. An ancient woodstove served as our only source of heat. The grimy windows offered a peekaboo view of Puget Sound, so I spent a lot of time gazing at the waves. I couldn't afford any other sort of entertainment.

Suddenly, a loud, decisive knock jarred my reverie. It reverberated through my bones like the crack of a shotgun. Without thinking, I sprang from my chair and opened the door. A uniformed policeman stood on the threshold, fidgeting nervously. As he flashed his badge, he looked strangely apologetic. "I'm sorry to tell you this," the cop said. "Your brother Danny is dead."

The walls began to spin, yet I managed to remain on my feet. My mouth opened, and a low, calf-like wail rose from my lungs. It echoed across the room, then subsided. "How did it happen?" I whimpered.

"Can I come inside?" the cop asked gently. I nodded and held the door open. Deliberately ignoring the marijuana paraphernalia on my table, he launched into an explanation. "Danny was robbed and killed early this morning. According to neighbors, he came home with another guy around 3 a.m., after a party in the building next door. There was loud scuffling, and somebody called the police, but no one showed up. We're still trying to figure out why. A neighbor stopped by later and saw your brother on the floor. He'd been stabbed a number of times."

My head felt heavy, like I'd just emerged after spending time underwater. The policeman's low voice emanated from a vast distance. It seemed to take forever to reach my ears. Perhaps he was a courier, delivering a telegram meant for somebody else. "Do you know who did it?" I finally asked.

He nodded briskly. "We've taken a suspect into custody. As soon as we have more details, we'll get in touch with you with his name. You'll be hearing from us again within a few hours."

"What will happen to the suspect if he's found guilty?" I whispered.

"He'll get a lot of years in prison," the officer replied. "Maybe even the death penalty." His face lit up with a benign, almost saintly glow, and he clasped his gloved hands under his groin. "It's up to the courts to decide."

I'd always opposed the death penalty. Executing murderers was the height of hypocrisy. Now, however, the electric chair seemed like an excellent idea. In fact, I wanted to kill the bastard myself, preferably with my bare hands. Danny was schizophrenic and had been a victim his whole life. He'd recently received his first SSI check, including several months' back pay. That probably had something to do with his death. "Why would the guy rob Danny?" I demanded. "My brother didn't own a goddamn thing."

The cop's expression changed to anger. "The suspect stole his stereo and VCR," he said. "And some canned goods."

I hadn't seen Danny since he got his check. He'd gone to an endless stream of drug-fueled parties on his block. My last phone message from him, three days earlier, had detailed the horrors of a sudden infestation of head lice. Danny wanted a ride to the doctor for a Kwell prescription. I'd felt guilty for not answering.

Apparently, Danny also found the time to purchase a stereo and VCR, hit up the food bank, and somehow cart everything back to his tiny apartment. Somebody had killed my brother for these paltry, cheap items—including food that was freely given away, only two blocks from his building.

As the officer's words penetrated my fog, anger began to bubble inside me. I sat down abruptly in my chair. "He deserves a harsh

punishment,” I said. “I can’t believe anybody would do something so terrible to Danny. And for nothing.”

The cop moved towards the door, opened it resolutely, and hovered in the threshold. “We’ll be in touch with you soon,” he promised. “Are there other relatives you want us to contact? You’re the only one listed in this area.”

My mother and two remaining siblings lived in Mexico. They hadn’t spoken to Danny or me for almost two years. “I’ll call them myself,” I promised. “Thanks for everything.” The cop descended the porch steps, wandered across the uneven driveway towards his waiting squad car. As he fired up the engine, he glanced briefly at my house and shook his head. After a moment, he put the vehicle in drive and rolled slowly down the gravel towards the main road.

My son’s voice drifted down from the overhead sleeping loft. “Mommy? Where are you?” Noam had just awakened, and his voice was both groggy and plaintive.

“Hold on a minute, Noam.” I tried to maintain a well-modulated tone but could hear my barely restrained hysteria. “I’m just finishing a couple of chores down here. I’ll be right up.” As I stood in the center of the kitchen floor, I struggled hard to keep my breathing under control. After a minute, I carefully ascended the stairs, placing one foot in front of the other with extreme concentration. Any misstep could cause me to collapse entirely, and I would be no use to my son whatsoever.

“Who was downstairs?” Noam demanded. “I heard a man’s voice.” Noam’s face wore a petulant expression. He was irritated by the idea of a strange visitor, someone who had failed to identify himself to the family. My husband was still on his way home from his part-time, nonunion longshoreman job. Noam never slept well when Scott wasn’t around, since he never completely trusted in his father’s return. Scott would be gone by the end of the year, living under a different roof, and Noam somehow knew it.

“Just a neighbor,” I replied. “He’s gone now.”

Mollified, Noam snuggled underneath the covers, looked up at me with adoration. One tiny foot protruded from the edge of a blanket. I squeezed it gently, and he laughed. “I’ll lie down with you until you go back to sleep,” I promised.

Noam pressed his warm body against mine and closed his eyes. After a few minutes, I rolled away, gazed at him from the edge of the bed. His chest rose and fell as he lay face-up on the cheap dime-store pillow, arms spread-eagled in surrender. I marveled at his vulnerable little body, its ability to relax during incomprehensible horror.

No matter what I did to protect Noam from harm, he would never be safe. In a few years, my son would need to learn how to navigate the world alone. I'd promised to shield him for as long as possible but had nothing else to offer. My own survival was difficult enough.

Somehow, during the next couple of days, I would summon the words to tell Noam his uncle was dead. He had been fascinated by Danny. Most likely, Noam realized that Danny had never advanced beyond his own childhood, though he possessed an adult's body. Noam especially loved my brother's omnipresent skateboard and referred to it as "Danny's truck." I wondered what would happen to the skateboard now.

My mother was sound asleep somewhere in Mexico, oblivious to the fate of her second-born child. She wouldn't be surprised to hear the news. Polly had pushed Danny away for as long as I could remember, sending him to foster homes and correctional institutions, because the shame of having given birth to him was more than she could bear. Still, she couldn't evade responsibility for Danny's existence forever. A report of his abrupt departure would cut through my mother's narcissism, and that would serve her right.

The suspect, too, was somebody's son. He had been an infant, a child, and finally an enraged young man with a knife in his hand. It was a bad night for mothers everywhere. I lay down on the mattress again, stared at the ceiling. Scott would be home in a few minutes, and I would have to tell him the news. Meanwhile, nothing mattered except Noam and me. As the wind blew through the floorboards, I held my son's hand, refusing to cry.