

## Sins from the past

A short story by AmandaK

Her shoulders hunched against the cold wind, Julie McGray scurried through the streets of the dark city. Half of the streetlights were broken, leaving deep shadows. "Damn!" Julie groused below her breath when she didn't see the muddy puddle and drenched her shoe. She hastened to the next pool of light and glanced down at her feet to survey the damage. A windblown newspaper whipped past her and in a flash she saw the headline. "Mayor Robbins to suffer from 'Rapture'?" the large print read.

Julie pulled her coat closer around her, holding it tight against her throat. The paper was probably correct. The mayor certainly had the right age.

She did not often walk the streets while it was dark. Nobody in his right mind did. Except that today, on a Friday no less, her supervisor had kept her in the office working late because her coworker called in sick. Having missed the last commuter subway, she was left with very little choice. She couldn't spare the money to call a taxi.

"Go'som change?"

A scruffy middle-aged man, his matted hair hanging to his shoulders, pushed a hand under her nose. His eyes had the empty look of a 'Rapture' victim.

Julie shook her head. "No, sorry," she mumbled.

His shoulders slumped a bit more and without pressing his point, the man hobbled away. Julie took a deep breath. At least he wasn't aggressive.

She hurried past the darkened storefronts. Her parents were waiting. Her mother would be anxious: she still had enough of her senses left to read and understand the clock. She would know Julie was late. As for her father, he was too far-gone to notice much of anything. She only hoped she was in time to keep him from making a mess.

Turning another corner, she reached the grubby brownstone building where she and her parents rented a small apartment. The rundown building and the broken streetlights clouded the past glory of this part of the city. At one time it had been a thriving neighborhood, with clean windows and flowerpots on every sill. Now the paint blistered from the doors. But to Julie it was home.

She nearly tripped over the abandoned tricycle of the child from the ground floor. She doubted if it would be there in the morning. She raced up the steps and worked the key into the lock, fingers shaking from the cold.

"Julie?" her mother called from the hall. "Is that you?" She shambled into view. Some people said she looked like an older version of her daughter, except for the silver streaks that ran through her dark brown hair. Her eyes glimmered with an anxiety that was only partly alleviated when she recognized Julie.

"Hello Mama," Julie said while taking off her coat and hanging it on its customary peg. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"I was worried," her mother lamented.

"Why don't you go sit in the living room and watch some I-cast, huh?" Julie suggested. "I'll see how Daddy is doing, then I'll start dinner."

Her mother's nose wrinkled. "Your father smells," she muttered and turned to shuffle back into the living room. A few seconds later Julie heard the sound of the I-cast view-screen crackling to life.

Her mother's words made her fear that she was too late and when she entered her father's room, the smell that assaulted her told her all she needed to know. Damn, Julie thought. Just what she needed after a hard day's work.

With a heavy sigh, she rolled up her sleeves and set to work. Like a rag doll, her father hung limp in her arms while she dragged down his soiled trousers, washed him and dressed him again in a clean pair of pants. His dull eyes kept staring unseeingly at the far wall, never wavering. At least his visions were gone, Julie thought gratefully. They had frightened him on more than one occasion.

When she was finished, she helped him sit back down in his favorite armchair and stroked his cheek with the back of her finger. "I'll give you a shave after dinner, Daddy," she said softly.

She remembered when she had been a child. He had been a big, strong man then and took her to the park on weekends, to feed the ducks. He'd tell her stories about the statues of the park, about how the stone figures danced or chased each other. Those stories had made her laugh; they had been so funny. Only in retrospect did Julie realize that, to her father, they hadn't been mere stories. He had truly believed the statues moved. Even in those days the havoc the drug had wreaked on his brain had been evident. If you knew what to look for.

Julie returned to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Her mother was watching some talk show or other on the screen and Julie listened to the discussion.

"But isn't it these people's own fault?" someone, presumably the host, asked. "I mean, it has been known for years that these drugs cause brain damage."

"Well, yes and know," one of the guests replied. "Of course, at first we didn't know. By the time we did find out, it was too late for many people. I always compare it to smoking. For decades we have known that smoking causes lung cancer. Yet, people still smoke and nobody has been refused treatment because of it. Why should it be different for 'Rapture' patients?"

"Because you can cure cancer!" an excited voice from the audience yelled. "You can transplant new lungs or zap a tumor. You can't cure brain damage. Besides, cancer patients usually aren't dangerous. I say we lock all the stupid junkies up and throw away the key."

Julie strode into the living room to download another show for her mother to watch. She had heard enough. It always came down to the same thing: it was their own fault, why would society as a whole have to suffer the price?

Ten years ago, when the first cases made the headlines, no one expected it to turn into a major problem. The drug victims were admitted in mental institutions, either private or state funded, and that was that. But then the number of cases increased rapidly; the beds filled up and the burden on the public funds became too heavy. The victims were denied further treatment or care. The hospitals turned them away and when their families, their children, turned them out, they were left to wander the streets.

Julie stroked her mother's hair. She'd die before she let that happen to her parents. Her mother looked up; there were tears in her eyes. Julie's heart ached.

"I'm sorry, Julie," her mother whispered. "We didn't know..."

Julie pulled her close for a hug. "It's okay, Mama. I know. You're still my mother and Daddy's still my father. I won't let anything happen to you."

How could she blame them? When her parents were teenagers, very little was known about the long-term effects of the party drug dubbed 'Rapture' for the kick it provided. It had been very popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century. With the careless abandon of youth, her father and mother had taken the chemical synaptic enhancers that provided so much fun. And so had every other teenager of their time.

"I have to go to work again tomorrow, Mama. Will you and Daddy be okay without me?"

Her mother's face fell but she nodded bravely. "Of course, Julie." Her brow creased. "It's not Monday, is it?"

"No Mama," Julie assured her. "It's Friday today. But April – you remember April, don't you – is sick and we're running behind. We can certainly use the money. I promise I won't be gone all day."

"Okay," her mother said and turned back to watching the screen, distress forgotten already.

Julie wove her way through the Saturday afternoon shopping crowds. In a few hours daylight would be gone and the streets would be empty again. For now though, the streets were packed with families collecting their weekly groceries.

The air was still chilly but at least the rains had stopped. Julie lifted her face to catch a ray of sunlight that penetrated the shadows cast by the high buildings around her.

She turned the corner to enter her street and stopped dead in her tracks. Red and blue lights were flashing, several police cars and ambulances were parked at odd angles across the pavement. She gauged the distance. The thick of the crowd stood just in front of her building and people were pointing up at a broken window on the fourth floor. Her parents!

Julie ran as fast as her high office shoes would allow her and pushed her way through the crowds, mindless of the people she bumped into or the curses directed at her. She clamped her hand around the arm of a policewoman standing at the barrier that kept the spectators at a distance. "What happened?" Julie gasped, a little out of breath from the run. "I live here. My parents, are they okay?"

"Are you Julie McGray?"

"Yes," Julie nodded.

The woman signaled to a man dressed in plain clothes. As he approached, she helped Julie past the barrier. "Sir. This is Julie McGray."

"What happened? Are my parents okay?"

"Ms. McGray, my name is Detective Aimes," the man said. He kept his voice low and took her elbow to lead her away from the curious ears and eyes of the gaping onlookers.

"I'm sorry, Ms. McGray. Your parents are dead. Your father overdosed on his sleeping tablets. We suspect your mother gave them to him. And then she fell, or more likely she jumped, through the window up there." He pointed to the broken window, shards of glass glittering in the sunlight on the sill.

"Why?" Julie whispered. "Why would she do that?" Her knees went weak and she blinked dizzily. Aimes helped her to a nearby ambulance and made her sit down. "They suffered from 'Rapture' but..."

"I think this is the explanation you are looking for," Aimes interrupted gently, handing her a folded piece of paper, crinkled at the corners.

With trembling fingers, Julie unfolded it. In her mother's spidery writing, full of spelling errors, she read. "Julie, your young. We can't maik you sufer for our sins any longer. We love you. Mama and Dad."

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