

The Canvas

It was not the first time she had heard the mysterious pounding coming from the other side of the wall, and it was not going to be the last.

It happened every time nobody else was around to hear it. There were times when it was very quiet, barely audible, and others when the faint thud swelled into a crescendo of fierce pummels that lasted up to sunrise. She wondered how come Caden never heard it. *She* heard it, even when she lay upstairs in bed, massaging her temples trying to barricade the repetitious cadence.

The question soon developed from *what is it?* to *what could it be?* and that almost made it worse. The sporadic pulses were no longer the problem, but the images of their origins were. She had told Caden, she had told her parents, she had told the landowner, even her doctor, and they all agreed it was just stress.

But she knew it was not.

“Last night I heard the sounds of machinery,” she swirled the coffee and then picked up the spoon like it was dirty underwear. Jayla observed her reflection with strange disgust and then dropped the spoon so that her husband was forced to pay attention.

Caden stared at the cutlery with little surprise. They had been through this haggardly routine before. His eyelids drooped and he felt the inclined weight of his head as the effects of insomnia kicked in. He snapped out of it with a quick shake and picked up the spoon. “Machinery?”

“Like clockwork. Or a factory. Except it sounded more like some sort of lumber yard or slaughter house. Lots of grinding metal.” She looked up with an emotionless stare. Every morning, her voice became more monotone and her emotions less readable. There was nothing Caden could do or say that would be different from what he had suggested before. His responses had become automated and with each one he could feel Jayla’s desperation hitting back like a brick to the skull. Her eyes had become those of a beggar, asking him to believe her.

Of course she attended therapy. The psychiatrists diagnosed her with anxiety and told her acute stress was most likely the cause.

So down rained the pills and up poured the bills.

He found himself scrutinizing the expenses in an almost delirious way. Jayla opted for different physiologists, who opted for different treatments, and each prescription came with a price and a side effect.

“How are we on Aripiprazole?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you *don't know*? You've been taking them, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, don't you look at the bottle every day?”

“Yes, but I don't count every pill.”

“For the love of Christ, Jay, *you're* the one that should be keeping track of them!”

He pounded the counter and grabbed a chunk of his own hair, pulling at it gently as he paced towards the living room. Jayla stared at the floor. She wasn't startled by him; nowadays nothing scared her. When Caden returned he went straight to the cupboard and checked the medicine cabinet. He scribbled something down and then finished his coffee in one go. “I'll go to the pharmacy after work today. So I'll get home at around four, because I have to work extra hours.”

She looked up at him with some sign of interest. “Why are you working extra hours?”

“Because the medication isn't going to pay itself.”

Caden looked at her for a second but was relieved that they didn't lock eyes. If he had to stare into that abyss one more time, he was bound to let all his anger out in ways nobody should. He kissed her on the forehead, disgusted by the thought of touching her lips, and then walked out.

The house was empty and quiet except for the sound of the grandfather clock. Jayla stared at the dust particles dancing in the sun's rays. The wind made the big willow's branches scratch against the outside wall like a pleading vagrant. It was just another ordinary Friday of an ordinary November day. And for the following five hours, everything would remain ordinary.

The ordinary cleaning of the plates and the ordinary washing of the clothes.

The ordinary vacuuming of the house followed by the ordinary mopping of the floors.

The ordinary dusting and sweeping and organising—

But then something not so ordinary happened.

You see, the interesting thing about life is not that we are scared of what we don't know, but that we don't really know *what* we're scared of. When we are kids we are told to fear the bogeyman, and when we grow up they train us to dread the local murderer. They give us the material and tell us what to do with it, and we may not know what we are dealing with, but we know we should be scared of it.

But when we are given a fresh page, a blank canvas where our imagination can lay down absolutely everything it ever concocted about fear, *that's* when it gets interesting,

because we just don't know what to do, we don't know what to be afraid of, and to compensate we keep on imagining more.

At exactly 1:47pm, Jayla heard three soft poundings against the underside of the floor on the far end of the room.

Took.

Took.

Took.

She held her breath and curled her hands against the broom. Without being aware of it she had positioned herself on tiptoe, almost as if to minimise the amount of herself that came in contact with the floor underneath which the sound emerged. For a while there was only silence. She took a deep breath and slowly lowered herself back to the ground. Just as she did, she heard the sounds again, this time much closer.

Martens. If it's not rats then it must be martens.

Jayla turned the broom around and pounded against the floor with equal force. Immediately after there was another sound to the right, by the wall, then to far left corner of the room, and then three quick ones right behind her. She went into frenzy and began to pound all around the living room as if the chamber was a giant rug she was trying to dust. It was so strange for her to have all this energy after so many weeks of near-catatonia. She began to scream, to hit every inch, every nail, every open space. Then she turned to the walls and went for the paintings. The broom went straight through the canvas and made a small crack in the wall, but she barely noticed.

She knocked over the flower vases and into the glass table. The picture frames became golf balls and the shattering of crystal seemed to give her the incentive to smash everything that was not stable. By the time she was done her chest was heaving. She looked at herself in one slide of broken mirror and saw the face and wild eyes of an exited child at Christmas morning. The broom slipped out of her sweaty, blistered hands and she straightened herself up sluggishly. As her breath slowed down, she began to regain focus. She turned around and evaluated the extent of her damage. The couple's savings were going to be wounded with reparation cost bullets and emotional stability shrapnel, but she felt better.

She. Felt. Better.

"Now I just have to clean it up," she said as an unhinged smile assembled itself across her lips. "Now I get to clean it *all* up!"

And as she did, the time passed and her mind began to lose colour. All the silhouettes and drawings and sketches her imagination had painted began to fade away.

By sunset, it was void.

A blank canvas.

Seeing that Caden would not be arriving until the early hours of the morning, she decided to treat herself to a cup of mulled wine and a feast of leftover Halloween treats. She settled down, turned off the lights and began the movie. And then, three minutes in, the picture began to falter. Thirty seconds later, it turned static.

She became aware of the thunder and heavy winds. The willow's branch was threatening to rip the side of the house. Just as she got up the lights flickered. She was quick enough to run for the flashlight and cell phone just as they went off.

"Caden?"

"I'm in a meeting. What is it?"

"The lights went off..."

"Jay, please tell me your call is a little more imperative than an electrical shutdown. Try the switches, but it's probably just the storm. Light a bunch of candles. Watch a movie on the laptop. But please don't call again. This is important. I might get a promotion."

"Cade—"

But he had already hung up. Jayla went to get the candles but she could only find one half used one and three small tea candles. She grabbed another flashlight and lit them all at once. For a moment she was encircled by a warm, reassuring glow.

But time often goes much quicker when we least want it to.

It was less than an hour before the two of the tea candles were betrayed by their own wax.

Somewhere out there, thunder howled.

And somewhere in *here*, something pounded.

"Caden?"

"Jay, what *now*?"

"Caden, *they started again.*"

"They *who*?"

"Caden, the *sounds*, the sounds started again."

Silence.

"I saw three Ablify pills when I looked. Take one."

"I think I'm running out of candl—"

“There’s more in the basement—

“I can’t go down there—”

“Don’t leave the house either, the storm is making a mess, it’s too dangerous. Please don’t call again unless it’s an accident.”

“Wait no no *no please don’t hang up no C—*”

She examined her light source. There was no way she would go down to the basement; but there was no way she would remain inside the house in pitch darkness. Her knees began to feel like jelly and then last of the tea candles burned away.

The clock struck eleven. Caden wouldn’t be coming home for another five hours. The big candle would not last until then, and something inside her told that unless she remained by the light, neither would she.

The basement smelled like stale humidity and heavy dust. She covered her nose with her shirt and placed a chair by the door to hold it open. She walked down, each step cautiously calculated, the flashlight changing direction every which where. To fill the silence, she began to sing softly. As she reached the bottom she felt the temperature drop slightly. The drawer with the candles was to her ri—

“*Ow! Shit!*” she tripped over a package and sent a bunch of small objects, including one of her sandals, across the floor. A music box began to play *The Carnival of Venice*. “*Shit! Goddamit!*” Jayla massaged her foot and felt liquid on her fingertips. It was the box containing the Christmas decorations, and she had stepped on one of the baubles. Small pieces of the ornament were still impaled inside her skin. She limped towards the nearest wall and let her foot rest in mid-air.

Dah dum, dan dan, dum dada...

Her head felt like a cauldron filled with lava and the song was just making her migraine worse. She’d have to disinfect her bleeding foot as soon as possible because God knows the last time somebody cleaned anything down here. Her arms felt weak and an incredible sense of nausea overcame her. Jayla lowered herself to the floor and leaned her head against the wall. As the music played on the darkness around her seemed to be filled with a heavy mantle of stupor. The pain made its way from her foot up her leg and spread out as if the veins were the main conductors. A million tiny daggers slashed at her nerve cells. Trying not to think too much about it, she closed her eyes and curled herself into a little ball.

She couldn’t tell how much time had passed when she was woken up by a loud pounding.

“Hello?!” Without waiting for a response she searched for the pocket flashlight and limped towards the stairs.

But they weren’t there.

She turned in a full circle but there was no sign of them. She felt for her phone but it must have fallen out when she tripped.

Jayla looked at the floor and realised she was standing in some sort of puddle. Upon closer inspection, the puddle covered the entirety of the basement. She shifted a bit and felt the liquid was too thick to be water.

Also, water wasn't usually maroon.

Somewhere in the corner, the music box began to play again as five very faint lights emerged scattered in front of her. And the pounding commenced again. One for every light. Jayla felt her throat close and her knees buckle underneath her. Tears build in her eyes but not a single sound left her lips. The lights, tiny blinding dots, moved towards her and so did the pounding. She crawled back, her hands coated in the thick blood that carpeted the floor. Her back hit the wall and her body began to shake uncontrollably.

The pounding got closer, and closer, and closer...

Five faces, epitomes of her imagination's talent, emerged from the darkness and their hands reached out to her. They smelled like rotten meat, like corpses whose coffins had been opened a day too soon. They clutched her shoulders and began to pull her back.

She closed her eyes and then began to claw at the wall. Her jaw unhinged from its slumber and she let out a sharp, piercing scream. No words, just force. Without being aware of it, the clawing turned into small hammerings and before she knew it, she was pounding in unison with the others. The faces smiled, nodded, and they let her go. When her throat turned into razors and her fists became masses of bruises and bloodied tissue, Jayla stopped and turned around in defeat. Her eyes stung and her mouth was dry and coarse.

She felt the putrefying hands slither up to her throat again and the sting of their rotten nails.

So she began to pound.

Now she knew why she had heard the noises of machinery. Now she knew why the floor was red. Now she knew that if you didn't keep the rhythm going, they didn't keep *you*.

And if she didn't pound, she'd become one of *them*. And after her somebody else would move into the house, somebody else who would eventually be forced to pound, and when they stopped, *she* would be the rotting corpse pulling *them* back.

And so she continued to pound.

Not because she was scared of what she knew, but because she knew *what* she was scared of.