

SILENCE MY DEMONS

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1985

Cheltenham

AN ECHOING THUD prompted Derek to jolt upright like a plank.

Trying to find his way through the muggy confusion of his mind, he warily turned his gaze from side to side. Sweat dripped down his forehead and he became suddenly aware that his t-shirt was sticking to his chest, such was the magnitude of his fierce perspiration.

His senses came to, returning with an initial blur before fading to clarity.

He was in his bed. With Tania. It was dark.

He glanced at the alarm clock.

3.00 a.m.

This time again?

It seemed like it was this time of night that he always woke up. Often by some kind of thud, shaking or scream that he couldn't quite make out. He was usually in the midst of a heavy sleep, so could never be quite sure of what he had heard, but he was always enough to wake him up.

And it was always at this time. 3.00 a.m. Which was getting stranger and stranger.

He brushed a moist hand down Tania's hair. There was no

perspiration dripping off her, it was only him. Her neat brunette hair draped seductively over her perfect body. Deep breaths brushed from her beautiful lips against his arm, her chest rising and sinking rhythmically like waves of the ocean.

So why am I awake?

He rubbed his eyes as he huffed in frustration.

THUD!

Derek's eyes widened in alarm. This time he knew he had heard something. A very clear noise coming from downstairs.

Was it an intruder?

If it was, did he really have the guts to find out?

He stayed completely still, listening intently. Searching for sounds that may confirm or suggest what it was.

An eerie silence followed.

Nothing but an empty house and the murmur of Tania's dreams.

Derek turned, placing his feet slowly and carefully on the carpet. It was ridiculous to be cautious about placing his feet on the floor, but he was; he half-expected something to reach a hand out from beneath the sofa and grab his ankle. There were so many shadows in the room, so little illumination from the moonlight through a small gap in the curtains, leaving a great many hiding places.

But hiding places for what?

Derek would know if there was somebody else in that room with them.

I'm being ridiculous.

He edged closer to the bedroom door, wafting his t-shirt to cool his sweaty chest. He creaked open the door and peered back and forth down the hallway. Though he confirmed there was nothing there, he couldn't be entirely sure; there was too much darkness, too many places for someone to jump out at him.

Glancing over his shoulder at Tania still fast asleep, he edged out of the room and to the stairs. He took each step with an intrigued wariness, listening carefully, constantly peering at every corner and every shadow.

As he reached the bottom step, he turned to his right.

The kitchen door was wide open.

Derek always shut every door before he slept. He routinely ensured there was no open entrance anywhere in the house. It bugged him so much, he wouldn't be able to sleep without checking.

Unless he had forgotten this one.

He must have forgotten it.

It was the only explanation.

After all, he did it so automatically, he never quite registered doing it, so he couldn't be sure.

Still, the open door to a room of shadows sent chills up and down his body; how could he have forgotten it when he was so scrupulously anal about closing it? There had been a definite noise, but now there was nothing. No sign of life or movement, no rustling, no movement, no flicker of lights. Nothing.

Willing himself to stop being such a child – *I'm a twenty-five-year-old working man with a fiancé for Christ sake!* – he entered the kitchen and looked around.

There was something out of place. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but...

Then he saw it.

Every draw in the kitchen. Open.

Nothing had been removed. None of the insides of the draws had been altered; every spoon, fork and knife remained in the correct draw, as did every notepad and every utensil. Exactly as he left it.

Except the draws were open.

Had he done this? Before he came to bed, maybe? Or Tania? Maybe she was sleepwalking?

Which was silly; Tania hadn't sleepwalked for as long as he'd known her, and they had been together since they were sixteen.

So how were they all open?

Assuring himself that there must be a reasonable explanation, something that sheds no doubt over how this happened, he shut each draw and looked around the room once more.

Nothing else was out of place. There was no explanation to the thud.

It could have been anything.

A bird flying against the window, maybe – it had happened before. Water through the pipes. Something hitting the front door from the wind outside.

Except the night seemed so calm and tranquil...

Pausing for one last moment before returning to bed, he contemplated the room. Something was off. This room compared to the rest of the house was... Cold. There was a feeling of ice in the air. It was making him shiver, causing his dry perspiration to stick to him like glue.

It was late. He had work in the morning.

Enough of this.

Dismissing his preposterous thoughts, he marched out the room, up the stairs, and back into bed.

Eventually, he went back to sleep, thinking nothing more of it.

IT HAD BEEN an arduous few months. If Derek was honest with himself, this wasn't the career he envisaged when completing his degree in Psychology the previous summer. Working in a mental health facility was closely related, yes, and he had originally been delighted for the opportunity; but he found himself using his education less and less, instead favouring his ability to help pin people against walls and strap them down.

This day had been no exception.

By the time lunch break had come, every muscle in his body ached and agonised. He had arrived in at 8.30 a.m. – efficiently on time as he always was. He'd had to fill in paperwork for a session with a patient the previous day, but was distracted within minutes of sitting down by screams and shouting from the corridor.

He had rushed out to find a patient with extreme schizophrenia having another episode. Someone had looked at him in a way that he thought meant they wanted to kill his mother, and as a result, around five or six of them were having to try and pin him against the wall whilst they waited for the nurse to get the sedative ready. He was a big guy, too; bulky arms and

heavy legs, and it took every piece of strength they had to restrain this guy, despite being so heavily outnumbered.

As the nurse approached with the shot, ready to stick the needle in the man that had accused her of being a Satanist and killing children. He had been promptly sedated after that.

Derek had only just left the room after an hour's commotion to hear more commotion from the living area. A heavily overweight patient had acquired a pair of scissors and was charging at a thin, scrawny lad, screaming that, "time travelling monkeys were coming to get me."

By the time it reached 2.00 p.m., Derek had been far overdue his lunch hour. With his paperwork finally done, and his bruises from holding back two bulky blokes attended to by the on-call nurse, he finally found his way to the kitchen.

He could barely hold his tray steady under the weight of his shaking arms, his coffee and ham sandwich gently rattling under the strain of his aching muscles.

But he was pleasantly surprised to see his favourite patient sat in the lunch hall, nursing a glass of orange juice.

Will was a good man and always appeared resolutely calm, despite the stories Derek heard from other members of staff. They all recalled stories of Will's deep-seated psychosis manifesting itself in screams and fits, with shouts of demonic possession and that they don't know what they are on about.

Derek had never seen that side of Will. He was a slim, scruffy man in his mid-thirties, ten years Derek's senior, always smiling and always friendly. Derek had shared many lunches with Will, engaging in anything from conversations about life to who had won at the football the previous afternoon.

"Hello, Derek," Will greeted as Derek took a seat opposite. "Ham sandwich today?"

"Always," Derek confirmed, grinning at the ongoing joke

that this was all Will ever saw him eat. “How are you feeling today?”

Will didn't answer quickly. He looked around, deeply contemplating the question, as if his answer wasn't the typical small talk Derek was used to.

“I don't know, man,” Will finally answered, dropping his head, and loosely fiddling with the straw the rested in his drink.

“What's the matter?” Derek inquired, taking a large bite of his sandwich.

“I'm just, I don't know... fed up of being here, you know?”

“I bet.”

“I shouldn't even be here. I don't need this place.”

“As much as I like you, Will, I'm not so sure I agree with that.”

Will shook his head, keeping his eyes down on his drink. He sipped the remainder of his juice and pushed the glass to the side.

“I'm fed up,” Will continued, this time looking Derek in the eyes. “I need a church, not a hospital. I can't sleep at night, it just keeps getting me.”

“What keeps getting you?”

Will peered deeply into Derek's eyes, hesitating, pausing for thought. Derek knew this was Will not wanting to sound crazy in front of the only member of staff who actually listened to him. He knew Will didn't want to abuse that and push him too far.

“All night, I hear it rattling. Then I wake up sweating, and I can hear it inside my head.”

“Hear what inside your head, Will?”

Will bit his lip, peering and peering into Derek's eyes, sizing him up, considering whether to be blunt.

“The demon.”

Derek scoffed, then instantly regretted it. As soon as Derek had trivialised Will's admission, it sent Will back into an isolated wreck.

"Sorry, Will," Derek spoke regrettably, putting his sandwich down and turning all his attention to his friend and patient.

"No, you're not sorry."

"Look, Will, I just – I'm confused. You're the most down to earth person in this place. Surely you know these things aren't real? That they are inside your head?"

"Derek–"

"If you'd just admit it, you'd be out here in an instant. Why can't you do that?"

Will paused. A moment of silence. Watching Derek, watching his eyes, taking his time to consider his thoughts.

"It's a nice sentiment, and I do like you Derek. But you don't understand."

"Just trust me–"

"Trust you? How are you supposed to trust someone who thinks you're crazy?"

Derek didn't move, didn't answer, didn't speak. It was a valid point. Maybe this wasn't the opportune time.

"Tell me about your son, how's he doing?" Derek asked, changing the conversation.

Will immediately lit up, talking about how his son was now six with a birthday coming up.

They didn't mention Will's psychosis for the remainder of their lunch.

EXHAUSTED AND BEDRAGGLED, Derek practically slumped through the door. He instantly dropped his bags and sat on the stairs to remove his shoes. Why they insisted on him wearing proper shoes to a job where you spend most of your time wrestling patients, Derek did not know; his feet were immensely sore.

He could hear harmonious music floating down the stairs. A classical piece, possibly Tchaikovsky. This could mean only one thing.

Tania was in her painting room.

Normally she despised such music, favouring something with a bit more of a beat; but she could not listen to music with lyrics when she worked as they served as too much of a distraction, so she would play one of her vinyl records of the great classical composers. Derek could always be sure she was painting when he heard such tunes trickle along the air.

Despite such a hard day, the music put a smile on his face as he slowly meandered up the stairs. The thought of the woman he loved pursuing her passion made him happy – it was as it should be. She knew what she wanted to do, and was

in the remarkable position where she could make a living out of it.

In a way, Derek envied that. He had no real idea what he wanted to do with his life, which puzzled and perturbed him. But Tania did and there was no envy there; only joy that she was happy.

He paused in the doorway of her room, remaining unnoticed, watching her with a satisfied smile. She was always so engrossed in the image she was creating that Derek could watch her for hours and still go unnoticed. Her arms moved the paint brush with such elegant strokes, occasionally pausing so her blue eyes could survey what she had done. She was working on a landscape painting, of a sun setting on the horizon over a green hill. The painting was stunning – almost as much as she was.

Without saying a word, Derek stepped forward and kissed her neck. His lips traced the outline of her shoulder and her collarbone, his hands removing the paint brush from her hand, placing it carefully on her palette and tucking his arms around her waist.

She turned and her lips met his, engaging in a strong, passionate kiss. Within seconds, Derek's hands had slid under her top and slipped it away, just as she did with his. Her hands were on his belt, tearing it open, her lips not disengaging from his. His hands undid her skirt which gracefully glided to the floor, his hands traipsing up and down her smooth skin, breathing in her scent, feeling the excited goose pimples of her skin under the touch of his sensitive fingers.

He threw her to the floor and ran his lips down the length of her body, pausing at the most intimate places. As he went down on her he felt her pulsate and scream.

His eyes met hers as he entered her, kissing her, feeling her

close, pressing his naked body against hers and savouring the feel of her warm breasts pressed against his chest.

Once they had finished, he lay naked beside her, her body curled into his embrace.

He kissed her back of her neck, making her body convulse and her legs shake.

“Hey,” he whispered.

“Hey to you, too,” she replied.

“Good day?”

“The best.”

They lay for another hour, just feeling each other’s body close to theirs, pressed up against each other with nowhere to go and not a care in the world.

THE CORRIDOR SEEMED LONGER and more entwining than normal. A dark mess of a passageway, with twists and turns, that there wouldn't normally be. Derek just accepted it. Down every twist and turn, every corner, a foreboding sense of doom echoed in a low-pitch murmur, the source of which Derek couldn't quite reach.

But he had to keep going.

I must keep going.

Around another corner and he saw something in the distance, at the end of the long hallway, the landing of his house that seemed so small last time he had walked through it.

It was a person. A child. A boy. Curled up in a ball. Whimpering. Naked. Huddled up in a blubbering mess.

"Are you okay?" Derek asked, but his voice got lost in a croaky mess and he found his throat hurting under the strain.

He edged forward, warily reaching his arm toward the blubbering child. However closer he got he ended up further and further away.

“Can you hear me?” he tried again, his voice coming out in a desperate wheeze.

Using the wall to drag himself forward, he veered along the floor at a slight angle. He persevered, willing himself closer. Something inside of him burnt with a desire to know what was wrong with this child.

Finally, he found himself gaining on the pale, weeping boy. The corridor narrowed, looming over him, the walls closing in until he had barely any room to move.

He halted, a few yards away from the child, reaching his arm out.

“Hello?” he asked.

The child stopped crying.

It remained still, shivering with a quiet intensity. The helpless crying changed to deep, bruised breaths, exuding a sinister grumble, an ominous rasp.

Derek’s body jolted in fear, rooted to the spot, unable to move.

The child’s head slowly twisted. The back of its greasy black hair rose with an eerily slow pace. As its face contorted to the side, the rough skin of its cheek revealed itself, a dented crinkle of darkly pale flesh. Its eyes revealed themselves next, its pupils a full black.

Derek tried to run. Tried to turn, tried to move, but his feet failed him, his body failed him. Nothing would budge. He was paralysed, a plank of weight going down his body, his ankles like heavy weights.

The child had now turned fully, facing Derek. Its body was a pale mess, sickening scars running down its back. They were old scars that hadn’t healed properly; a light grey mess of lines running up and down its skin. Its lips were cracked, its eyes were black, its features a deeply engrained darkness.

Derek screamed, but nothing came out. His mouth was bound shut.

His eyes flung open.

He was in bed. Sweating, shaking vividly, frantically immobile. The corridor had gone and his room had returned, but he was still unable to move.

A great weight plunged down upon his chest. His arms were pinned to the mattress, like something heavy was pushing down on him.

Within the darkness, he could make out something above him. The faint outline of a seething malevolence, a menacing figure.

He willed himself to move. But it was as if someone, or something, was pressing down on him, pushing him, removing his ability to shift, or even shake.

His mouth opened in an urgent wail. Tania lay beside him, completely unaware, pleasantly asleep.

He screamed again.

The child.

Was that what was on top of him?

He closed his eyes, scrunching them tight, not allowing himself to look.

His mouth opened in a sickening roar, a horrible, disgusting shriek that made it feel like razorblades were sticking into his throat.

When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor. On his knees. Panting. Tania was beside him, a hand on his back, his clothes drenched with sweat.

The first thing he did was shake his arms, move his body, showing himself that he was no longer paralysed.

He looked around himself. The room was there. Tania was there. He was safe.

No child.

Nothing untoward.

His arms flung around Tania. He knew he was making her sticky with the perspiration seeping from his pores, but he did not care.

He did not care.

“It’s okay, Derek, you just had a bad dream,” she reassured him. “It’s okay.”

His body shook. His legs ached. His muscles were sore.

But he was back. He was fine.

It was a nightmare.

Just a nightmare.

DEREK SAT THE KITCHEN TABLE, a half-empty coffee before him, and a book from the library led open.

He had resorted to what he always did in a crisis – going to the library to seek information. Tania often joked about how he finds a solution for everything in a book. That the world could be about to end, and he would likely search in ‘A’ for ‘apocalypse’ in the encyclopaedia.

This book had been particularly reassuring and had shown him that what he had experienced the previous night was a normal sensation for someone to have.

Sleep Paralysis: What it is and How to Face it.

Derek hadn’t known much about sleep paralysis before picking up this book. During his degree, he had looked at the psychology of tiredness and written an essay on what delays the response of the human brain, and that’s where he had vaguely remembered this from. But he had never actually considered this specific aspect of sleep with much thought.

DURING AN EPISODE OF SLEEP PARALYSIS, you may find it difficult to

breathe, as if your chest is being crushed or constricted. Some can't move their eyes, and some people have a sensation that there is something in the room with them, maybe even having a hallucination. This is perfectly normal, although it can be unsettling to experience.

THE EXPERIENCE HAD BEEN FAR MORE than unsettling.

It had been bloody horrific, he thought to himself, mulling over the understatement of the century.

But still, it was good to know there was a rational explanation. Derek was a rational person and always looked at things scientifically, wanting to consider every angle and gather evidence that either proved or disproved his assumptions. This was a decent explanation and one that he was satisfied with.

A vivid nightmare and an episode of sleep paralysis. Disturbing and upsetting as an experience, yes, but apparently normal.

Satisfied that he had understood what had happened, he decided he would take a coffee up to Tania who was working hard on her latest painting. He didn't disturb her when she was in her art room much, knowing she needed concentration; this was her job, and Derek respected that (the previous evening being an exception, of course). He still thought she could do with a coffee just the same.

Once the kettle had boiled and he'd refilled his own cup, he took one of Tania's cups and mixed together her drink. He put it on a tray with a few biscuits and made his way upstairs.

As he approached the room, he smiled at the sounds of Pier Gynt. Derek had always appreciated his music as a piece of artistry, music that conjures up clear images with instant clarity.

“Bought you a coffee,” he announced, placing the tray on a side table.

“Thank you,” Tania replied appreciatively.

Derek turned to look over her shoulder at her work-in-progress.

He froze.

His whole body shook, his lip quivered, his knees wobbled.

The black eyes. The cracked lip. The faded skin, the sickening scars, and the greasy black hair.

Her painting.

It was the child from his nightmare.

Not just a slight likeness or imitation – it was the child. Exactly. Down to every detail.

“What’s the matter?” Tania asked, seeing his eyes widen in terror.

She looked from him to the painting and back, confused, worried that he didn’t like it.

He was stumped. Speechless. Not a clue what to say.

“Derek, what’s going on? You’re freaking me out.”

“Tania,” he began, not removing his stricken, terrified eyes from the painting. “Where the hell did you—”

He couldn’t finish the sentence. He was too mortified to think of the right words.

“Don’t you like it? I mean, I know it’s a little creepy, but still...”

“Tania, where did you get this image from? What are you drawing?”

Tania looked at her image once more, then back at Derek.

“I don’t know,” she answered, shrugging. “It just kind of came to me. I had this idea this morning for this kid, and I decided it would make a fun painting.”

Derek couldn’t believe it.

It had to be a coincidence.

It had to be.

But what book would there be in the library about the scientific research and reasoning to coincidence?

It was too much.

Something was happening and Derek could not understand what it was.

ANOTHER RESTLESS NIGHT, another exhausted stare at the ceiling.

Derek had grown accustomed to writing off a night's sleep and this was no exception. He just lay there, waiting for the noises to start, waiting for something to happen.

But nothing did.

He was fearful of falling asleep, fearing the face of that child returning to his mind like a cinema screen projecting his deepest fears.

As it was, his mind eventually found itself shut down and, after fretting and worrying, he felt himself drifting off. The last glance at the clock showed him that it had gone eleven, and he was submerged into the world of dreams once more.

He had no recognisable dream, nor any memorable nightmare. He was subdued into a peaceful tranquillity, a restful unconscious he had been striving for over the last few days.

It was abruptly ended as his eyes shot open.

The room coated in darkness. Tania's chest rising gently up and down in a deep sleep beside him. No noise. No move-

ment. No nightmares. Just a sudden alertness and state of awake that had him suddenly aware of everything.

He turned to the clock.

3.00 a.m.

This bloody time again...

Yet again he had woken up at this time as if there was something significant about this hour, something that made it special. He wished for an explanation, some rational hypothesis or deduction that would placate his mind.

Then it came. An ever so slight sound faintly rustling against the walls.

A distant scratching. Distant, yet unnervingly close. Like a rat, or a captive prisoner scraping at their prison door.

He listened carefully. Tried to deduce where the sound was coming from.

To his left. Above him. To his right. It was moving.

In a sudden burst, it became as loud as a stereo turned up at full volume. Something behind the wall, clawing at it with full force, claws digging in and running along its surface.

Above him.

More scratching.

Below.

Everywhere.

It was a surround sound storm of noise. Never in unison, always from a different part of the room.

He turned his head. Tania was peacefully unaware, submerged in her sleep.

Should he wake her?

No. I'd sound crazy.

It's the kind of thing that one of his patients would claim to hear.

With creeping intensity, the scratching built in a crescendo then stopped.

Ceased.

Nothing.

Silence echoed, darkness loomed, and an unsettling omen of absence filled his ears.

Then another sound. This time more consistent, more long-lasting. From outside the bedroom. Running water. A faint stream that didn't stop.

Derek stood, his bare feet sinking into the rough carpet. He paused as if waiting for something to grab him from underneath the bed.

But nothing did.

He stood, edged toward the door, and opened it.

The running water grew clearer. From down the corridor in the bathroom.

He lunged his body forward, willing himself to the bathroom, marching until he reached the doorway.

There, he found the source of the sound. A tap running, sending an innocent stream of water into the sink below.

Derek stepped forward and switched the tap off.

He looked around. Everything was in place. The towels draped over the side of the bath, their toothbrushes in the toothbrush holder, his comb on the side of the sink. It was perfectly tidy, left in the immaculate condition Derek had left it in before bed.

Who had left the tap running?

Or *what* had left the tap running?

Get a bloody grip.

Enough.

He was being stupid and he knew it. He needed to grow up, get a hold of himself, and stop letting his mind run astray to wild, ridiculous conclusions.

Shaking himself out of it, he strode along the corridor and returned to the bedroom.

He recoiled in horror.

Tania was missing.

His body froze with terror.

Had someone taken her? Had something gotten a hold of her? Had she been distracted by the noise?

A multitude of extreme scenarios ran through his head, none of them good. Every possible solution, every violent outcome, every—

“Hey, Derek.”

Derek practically jumped out of his skin. His breath caught in his throat as he instantly turned to find Tania leisurely walking back into the bedroom.

He let his breath out, calming himself, allowing himself to relax in the knowledge that she was safe.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, slightly bemused by his bizarre reaction.

“Where have you been?” Derek demanded between pants of breath.

“I went to the toilet, why?”

Derek shook his head. “No reason.”

They returned to bed and Derek lay on his side, holding Tania close in his arms. After a few minutes, he felt her breathing heavily once more.

He stayed awake until his alarm went at 6.00 a.m., alert to every movement and every sound.

DEREK FELT FLUSTERED for the entire morning. Anytime he was called upon to help pin a patient down, he found his muscles limp and his eyes glazing over.

Everything they said. Cries of, "I can hear the sounds," "they are coming to get me," "the scratching won't stop" – were these ramblings of a mad mind? Of paranoid delusions?

Or of genuine experiences?

It terrified him how familiar these words were.

Derek insisted to himself that he was not mad. He did not belong in the same place as these deranged minds.

But, if he was to speak aloud what had been happening to him over the last few days, he knew he'd sound as crazy as his patients did.

As Derek approached the lunch hall, he acknowledged Will with a nod of his head. It was good that Will was there, his favourite patient; seeing someone shut away in an institute with such a calm temperament was reassuring. It showed that, should Derek end up there, it wasn't guaranteed that he would go completely insane.

Stop thinking like this. I'm not crazy!

Yet, as Derek collect his ham sandwich, just like he did every other day, he could feel Will's eyes on him. Fixed with an intent stare, like there was something new, something Will could see that Derek couldn't; like when you get something stuck in your teeth or a stain on your t-shirt and walk around unaware.

Derek placed his sandwich down and sat opposite Will, ignoring the wide gazing eyes, hoping to engage in their standard lunch time chit chat about politics and women.

But Derek couldn't help but be distracted by the odd way Will was fixating on him.

"So, did you catch the news last night?" Derek began, endeavouring to ignore Will's strange stares. "Looks like Thatcher's going to get in again."

Will didn't say a word. Just stared. His eyes not blinking, not deterring, intently focused.

"For Christ sake man," Derek exclaimed, throwing his sandwich down. "I've had a really shit morning Will, what is going on? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It's latched onto you," Will gasped. "I can see it. It's got you too, and if you're not careful, it's going to put you where I am."

"If this is how you're going to be..." Derek shook his head, raising himself from his seat. This was the last thing he needed; another spewing of nonsensical ramblings from a mad man.

"Tell me, Derek," Will persisted, "do you hear scratching at night?"

Derek froze, hovering above his chair. His whole body held in position, caught in purgatory with his thoughts.

He did not want to engage in this nonsense, he did not want to entertain it, but such an astute observation shook him.

He wanted answers, and maybe this was where he could get them.

He sat down.

"I take that as a yes," Will observed, not with any arrogance or triumph, but in shock that Derek did, in fact, recognise the stated symptom.

"What's your point?" Derek asked bluntly, unhappy at engaging in this conversation, hesitant to endure it but compelled by his need to know.

"Do you wake up in the middle of the night, unable to move? Like there's something weighing on your chest?"

"It's called sleep paralysis," Derek insisted.

"Do you see something at the same time, like a child?"

"Hallucinations are common in sleep paralysis."

"Does it always happen at 3.00 a.m.?"

Derek went to speak, only to find an inarticulate sound creeping out.

"It's the witching hour," Will continued. "It's the hour that demons are at their most powerful. That's why it's always at three in the morning. That's why it's when all the hauntings start."

"I don't know what to say."

"Still think I'm crazy?"

Yes! was the honest answer. But then again, no, at the same time.

It was too familiar.

"So, what's happening?" Derek finally engaged, finally opening himself up to the possibility that something paranormally untoward could be attacking him.

"It's latched onto you." Will's bloodshot eyes widened even further. "I can see it. It latched onto you like it did with me."

"And what does it want?"

“Your life. It will take everything from you: your job, your sanity. Tania.”

Derek immediately stood.

“You do not bring her into this,” he growled through gritted teeth. He walked away, then paused, stumped, turning back.

“I never told you Tania’s name,” he acknowledged.

“You didn’t need to, *it* did. And you need to trust me, before it not only takes over your life but goes ahead and snatches that life right away from you.”

Will lifted his hand out and made a snatching motion as if grabbing something invisible in the air. He opened his palms and watched the invisible air fade away.

“But then again, what do I know? I’m crazy.”

Derek shook his head, stormed away, refusing to listen to anymore.

He thought with a rational mind. He lined up the possibilities and scientifically evaluated, looking to disprove each one.

That’s how science worked. You did all could to disprove a theory before you entertained it.

So that’s what he would do.

It was time to try and disprove the paranormal.

This was going to require another afternoon in the library.

AFTER WHAT FELT like the millionth time of saying please, Derek knew he was starting to wear Tania down. Yes, it was a ridiculous request, and if she suggested it to him he'd find preposterous. But it was something he wanted to rule out, and he couldn't do it alone.

"Where did you even get this idea from?" she asked, her arms folded, standing in the kitchen with a raised eyebrow.

Derek slammed a large, dusty book on the table.

"I got this from the library," he revealed. "This has told me what to do. Now I just need someone with me."

She wandered sceptically to the book. Derek watched apprehension fill her face as she read the cover: *Conducting a Séance in the 20th Century*.

"You're going crazy," she muttered, opening the book, and rifling through the pages.

"I'm being scientific," Derek insisted. "Things keep happening, and I've looked at the rational explanations. Now I just want to rule out the... irrational."

"I'm glad you have used that word. Irrational."

"I know how this must sound."

“Then you know how I must be feeling.”

Derek sighed, clasping his hands, trying to think of how else to persuade her. He put his hands on her folded arms, looking deep into her eyes.

“Please, Tania,” he softly requested. “Just do this for me. You know I’d do it for you.”

With a huff of exasperation, Tania shook her head and uttered a reluctant confirmation.

“Fine!”

That evening, Derek sat opposite Tania, the book open in front of him. Four candles stood on the tablecloth with steady, calm flames, providing a mild amber glow; the only light in the room. The curtains shut, blocking out the faint moonlight, and the room felt steady and calm. Besides the candles was a pendulum, sitting steadily, the ball fixed and stationary.

Derek joined hands with a reluctant Tania, looked down at his book, reading instructions as to what to do next.

“It says the first thing we need to do is create a spirit-friendly atmosphere,” he acknowledged, looking to Tania. “We need to be welcoming to any spirits. Are you welcoming?”

Tania raised a defiant eyebrow.

“Come on Tania, we need to give this every chance to work.”

“Fine,” she replied, emphasising the n. “I’m welcoming spirits. Please, come to our house. Make yourself a sandwich, if you like.”

“Tania!”

“Alright! I am welcoming. Please spirits, join us if you can.”

Nodding with renewed approval, Derek turned to his book.

“It says the circle needs to be made of positive energy from the sitters. Sitters are people who aren’t actively calling on the

spirits, so that would be you. Anyone who gets nervous or is afraid of spirits may disrupt the circle.”

Tania nodded, trying to feign interest.

“Any spirits who are here tonight,” Derek continued. “Please know you are welcome in our house. Please enter our home and join us.”

Derek kept his head down to avoid eye contact with Tania. As he spoke it he felt ridiculous; and he dreaded to think what his down-to-earth fiancé was making of his departure from his normal sensible, balanced personality.

“Spirits, we gather here tonight in hope that you will receive us with a sign of your presence. Please feel welcome in our circle and join us when you’re ready.”

Derek waited. Listened, watched, anticipated something. Some sign, some movement. Anything to show that he wasn’t going crazy.

He looked to Tania. Her face was no longer irritable, but sympathetic. As if she felt sorry for Derek, who had been driven to such a ludicrous task. Like she felt bad that Derek had chosen to make himself look such a fool.

Still, the book had said to be patient. To give it time. To give the spirit every chance of engaging.

So that’s what he did.

“Spirits, we ask you again, please show us a sign that you are here. Please join us at the table when you are ready.”

Nothing.

Trying not to feel embarrassed, he closed his eyes and sighed. Maybe this was as stupid idea as Tania had insisted.

“Look, Derek maybe—” Tania began.

Then she was interrupted.

A sudden draught brushed against the back of Derek’s ankles, and Tania’s abrupt pause in conversing indicated that

she had felt it too. Her eyes widened, her face full of confused panic.

“What was that?” Tania asked. “Did you leave a window open?”

Derek looked around himself. Every curtain was shut, the front door locked; there was no way wind could get in.

Though it still proved nothing. This wasn't compelling evidence; brushes of wind occur all the time in rooms where there appears to no source.

“Did you do that?” Tania asked, looking at Derek through squinted eyes.

“I didn't, I swear,” Derek answered.

Before Tania could argue, the flames of the candles flickered and danced with a brief flourish.

Tania looked at Derek as if prompting an explanation, asking him to explain how he had done this.

But he hadn't done any of it.

The pendulum.

A slight movement of the ball sent shivers up Derek's arms.

Then it was still.

Then it moved again, this time a bigger movement. The ball swung all the way to the top, then continued swinging back and forth. There was no way wind could be causing this. It was too big a movement, to precise a direction; it was as if someone was tapping it and making it swing.

“Derek, how are you doing this?”

Derek shushed her and continued.

“Spirit, please tell us what it is you want.”

The pendulum swung harder, faster, getting more aggressive.

“Derek, you're really starting to freak me out.”

“Spirit, please tell us how we can help you. Why is it you are haunting us?”

With a sudden gust, a violent gale, the pendulum surged forward and flew off the table, collapsing to the floor.

Tania’s eyes shot wide open, turning to Derek with terrified alarm.

“I’m not finding this funny!”

Then her eyes focused on something over Derek’s shoulder. She froze, completely still, her face turning pale, consumed by mortified dread. She had seen something. Whatever it was, it had chilled her to the bones, causing her to look terrified in a way Derek had never seen.

Without another moment’s hesitation, she left her seat and stormed up the stairs, running as fast as she could.

Derek blew out the candles, switched on the light, and looked behind himself.

Nothing.

He followed her upstairs, ending up outside a bathroom door that slammed and locked before he could enter it.

“Tania, what did you see?”

“Fuck off, Derek!”

“Tania?”

“That was not funny! However you did that, it was not funny!”

Derek backed away.

She had seen something. Something he hadn’t seen.

Something had been there.

And if it was enough to get this extreme reaction from her, it must have been bad.

DEREK'S HEAD WAS A MESS.

He entered the lunch hall feeling flurried and bedraggled. The events of the previous night still echoed heavily in his memory, troubling him with incessant curiosity.

Was it real? Was there some explanation?

Surely, there must be.

After all, we are all limited by the knowledge that we have. We make assumptions based on what we know, without ever fully realising how little we know.

People once assumed the earth was flat with the knowledge they had.

People once assumed witches were real. Psychics were real. All with the knowledge we had until people started debunking them and presenting more knowledge.

So maybe there was a more rational explanation, one that's just out of grasp, one that he can't quite comprehend yet.

Or maybe the supernatural was at work, and that was the knowledge just out of his grasp. The acquisition of such evidence was compelling, and it may be the knowledge the whole world was missing.

That the paranormal was real.

Derek sat opposite Will, aware that Will's eyes were wide open and fixed upon him with a startling intensity once more. Derek tried to ignore it, eating his ham sandwich, wishing Will's voyeuristic eyes away.

"What did you do?" gulped Will.

"What?" Derek grunted.

"It's winning," Will declared. "It's winning and you're letting it. Something happened. You did something. What was it?"

Derek contemplated whether to engage or not. On one trail of thought, he was curious as to what Will had to say, and was actually starting to entertain the thought that he could be right. On the other side, did Derek really want to know the answer?

"You need to listen to me Derek, you are in great danger."

Derek dropped his sandwich with an irritable hump, leaning his head on one hand and running the other through his hair.

"I miss the days we could just sit and have general conversation, Will."

"It's grown stronger Derek. It's all over you. It's feeding on you, and it's doing it quickly. Something must have helped it do this."

Thinking about whether or not to say it, Derek finally gave in.

"I had a séance."

Will leant forward, a wash of disbelief wiping over his face, incredulously shaking his head.

"With a psychic?" Will prompted. "Did you have someone there who knew what they were doing?"

"No, I just did it with me and Tania."

“You *absolute fool!*” Will spat with a venom Derek hadn’t seen before.

“What?”

“You have no idea what you have done!”

“What have I done?”

“This thing has been knocking on the door, it has been trying to get in, and the only resistance you could have offered was to keep that door shut. Now you have offered it a way in. With an untrained person doing a *séance*, you have opened the door, and practically thrown away the key.”

Derek leant forward, unsettled by what he was being told.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, Derek, that you have given this thing access to your life, and now... now there is no way to lock that thing back out again.”

Will’s words hung in the air like a poisonous gas. Derek allowed them to sink over him, to wash through his body like an illness. He was viciously unsettled.

He finally believed in what he was being told.

And, in a sudden moment of realisation, he was very, very frightened.

THE LOOK of horror on Tania's face as she arrived home said it all.

Derek could see it in her eyes, in her warped expression. He didn't need to be a mind reader. She thought that he had gone insane.

But she just didn't understand.

Her jaw dropped as she scanned her eyes over the various books open on the kitchen table. Multiple references to the occult, protections from spirits, fighting demons. They were ramblings of mad men as far as she was concerned.

But Derek had seen what this thing had done.

"The light of God surrounds us," he kept muttering to himself as he scurried around the house. "The love of God enfolds us. The power of God protects us."

Having been a militant atheist only a few days ago, he understood Tania's trepidation.

In every room of the house was a handful of sage burning gently on an ashtray, the green of the leaves fading to blackened crumbs, sending a small waft of smoke into the air. Next

to the sage was a light brown stick of Tibetan incense burning, combined with the smell of the sage.

Derek ran around each room, flicking water from a small flask engrained with the cross. Holy water, blessed by the local priest, unleashed as speckled droplets upon the furniture and the windows.

“What the hell is going on?” Tania exclaimed.

The phone rang.

“One minute, honey,” Derek requested, rushing to the ringing phone. “Hello? ... Yeah, it’s Will Thompson, at the Gloucester Mental Health facility ... yes, a day release ... no, I want him on a day release ... yes, it will be safe! I know this man, it will be bloody safe! ... Because I said so, that’s why! ... Yes, thank you, this weekend would be perfect ... Thank you, goodbye.”

He put the phone down and rushed to Tania. He was a mess: pale face, scruffy hair, bloodshot eyes. He had worked himself up into a state and it duly concerned her.

“I know this looks crazy, but honestly, you just need to trust me,” he insisted.

“Who was on the phone, Derek?”

“Oh, that was work. I’ve signed one of my patients off for a day release, to come here and help me.”

“You are getting a psychiatric patient to come here?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s totally safe. I have lunch with him, and he’s been explaining to me how ghosts and demons work.”

Tania’s jaw remained dropped open. Her wide eyes of surprise now turned to squinting eyes of confusion. A look of utter mortification wiped across her face.

“And the stuff that’s burning?”

“Oh, that’s safe, that’s Tibetan incense. It’s meant to ward off evil spirits.” He pointed to the flask in his hand. “And this is

holy water, I got the priest at the church down the road to bless it this morning.”

“Derek, you are scaring me.”

Derek took a moment to think, understanding his fiancé, placing the flask on the side and rushing toward her, placing his hands on her arms.

“I know how this looks.”

“Do you? Because you freaked me out with whatever it was you did last night, and now this—”

“It wasn’t me last night. It was the evil entity in the house. I’ve been reading up about it all today.”

Tania bit her lip, shaking her head, tears making her eyes quiver. Derek went to touch her, reassure her, but she flinched away from him, stepping back, folding her arms around herself.

“You are really freaking me out, Derek.”

“Look, I know how this looks.”

“You obviously don’t! I mean, this is really crazy. I need you to stop it, now.”

“But Tania, I can’t stop it.”

“I can’t be here with it.”

Derek’s eyes met hers and, in that moment, he saw her heart break, saw it shatter as she realised Derek was no willing to give this up for her.

“Honestly, you need to trust me,” he tried, willing her to understand this was something that he needed to do. “I’m doing this for a reason.”

Tania shook her head. Derek went to touch her again, but she backed up against the front door.

With a final tearful glance, she opened the door and marched out of it. Derek ran after her, turning her around.

“Don’t touch me, Derek!”

“Tania, please don’t go.”

“I can’t. You’re becoming a mad man!” She shook her head, fumbling her car keys in her hand, looking over her shoulder at the vehicle that could carry her away from this mess. “I need some space. I’ll call you.”

“Tania, please—”

“Derek, don’t.”

She turned and charged away. Derek watched, rooted to the spot as she drove away from him and their life.

It would be fine, he told himself.

I’ll get rid of this thing and she’ll come back. No more nightmares. We’ll be happy.

He just had to do this first.

IT HAD BEEN sixteen hours since Derek had spent more than a brief toilet visit away from the phone.

It had been thirty hours since he had last left the house.

The reason he knew this was because he counted the hours as he sat there, in the armchair, monotonously replaying the previous day's events. His body odour wafted up to his nose every time he shifted position, and his clothes were stained with crisp crumbs and cake residue.

The television was on, but on a very low volume, for fear that he might miss the phone ringing; despite being sat directly beside it.

He mulled over the options he had in terms of his bodily hygiene. Yes, he could run upstairs and change within five minutes.

But what if those five minutes were the five minutes Tania chose to call and he missed it because he couldn't hear the phone from upstairs?

The phone was ridiculously loud. He and Tania had been constantly moaning about its high shrill, and planning to buy

a new phone; a task they never seemed to have gotten around to.

But what if the phone broke and couldn't ring very loud?
It couldn't be risked.

So he remained curled up on the chair, a whiskery beard growing atop his greasy skin, and an odour ruminating from his armpits that he chose to ignore.

Two days. That was how long he had until Will was on day release and they could sort this problem out.

What if she didn't call within those two days?

What if she chose to call whilst they were in the midst of cleansing the house?

It was a risk.

But this was for her. For her protection as well as his. To make their home safe again.

So, he waited.

Watching the phone as he sat still, unmoved, untouched, atop the window sill.

He found his tired eyes closing, finding warmth in finally being shut. His mind started to drift, a cloak of sleep began to descend – then, in a sudden shake of his head, he brought himself out of it.

No.

He did not want to be asleep if Tania called.

Knock knock.

Two heavy resounding knocks boomed on the front door.

Derek leapt off his chair.

Maybe Tania wasn't going to call after all. Maybe she was going to come back. This could be her returning home. Resuming their life.

They had been together since they were sixteen, how could she bear such a long time apart? It was the longest they had spent in a separate location for years.

Within seconds, he was at the front door, unlocking it, unfastening the/ latch, flinging it open to bestow his grateful eyes upon the beautiful face of – nothing.

A cool evening draft was the only thing greeting Derek.

Before his mind could dwell on such a disappointment, the phone shrieked. Its piercing ring prompted him to shut the door and practically dive back into the living room.

He grabbed the phone and shoved it against his ear.

“Tania?” he desperately answered.

Silence.

“Tania, is that you?”

Nothing. Just the silence of another line.

Then breathing.

Deep, heavy, sinister breathing.

“Tania?” he asked again, less excited, but warier.

Laughing.

Slow, croaky, malevolent chuckles resounded faintly over the end of the phone.

“Who is this?”

Then the phone went dead.

Then he knew.

He knew what it was.

This thing is fucking with me.

Making him think there was something there. That Tania was at the door, that she was calling him.

This thing knew what to prey on, and it was doing it.

Or was he going crazy? Was Tania right, and he should be locked up with his patients?

Derek collapsed to his knees.

He was breaking down. He didn't know what to think anymore.

Am I doing the right thing?

Should I beg Tania's forgiveness?

Should I commit myself to the psychiatric unit?

He would never do that. He saw what life was like in there. He saw what happened to moderately insane people – they were made more insane by the environment.

He wept, crying like a pathetic child into his hands.

He wished Tania was there to place a loving arm around him. The feel of her arms was such a comfort, such a warm place of love. He longed for it.

Then he stopped.

No!

This is what it would want.

This thing he had let into his house would want him to succumb to suffering. To weep. To cry.

He couldn't let it win.

Even though he made a resolute promise to himself that it wouldn't – he knew, deep down, it already had.

DEREK WAS WOKEN late morning by the harsh noise of the phone ringing.

His eyes fluttered open and he struggled to take in where he was; laid on the sofa, fully clothed, with a small blanket draped loosely over himself. But as soon as it registered that the sound that had awoken him was the phone, he leapt off the sofa, fell over the blanket, and grasped the receiver.

“Hello?” he answered pleadingly.

There was a moment of silence.

If this is another stupid phone call, I swear to God...

“Derek?” came Tania’s weak voice down the line.

“Oh, my God, Tania. How are you, I mean, are you okay? Is everything all right?”

Derek became flustered, a clogged-up mind unable to decipher what to say or what to do.

“I’m okay.”

Derek went to speak, only to find he had nothing to say. He reached for words that he couldn’t grasp. For the first time since they met, they shared an awkward silence, both unsure what to say.

“So... what have you been doing?” Derek asked, then mentally scolded himself. What has she been doing? What a ridiculous question to ask.

“I’ve been... thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“Derek,” she began, a resounding sigh hitting Derek’s ear. “I think we should meet.”

“Okay,” Derek responded enthusiastically.

“I’ve been staying with my sister. Maybe you could come meet me here? Around three?”

“Yeah, sounds great.”

“Okay,” she paused as if she was wanting to say something else. But she didn’t. “I’ll see you then, Derek.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Placing the phone down, Derek filled with joy. Optimistic excitement, a grin spread from cheek to cheek, overcome with pleasure. Finally, after waiting for so long, days and days by the phone, now he was going to meet her.

Then it occurred to him.

What if she was meeting with him to break up with him?

What if it wasn’t a happy reconciliation, but a heart-wrenching departure?

Derek tried to think, tried to deduce – what was she like on the phone?

He couldn’t be sure. She seemed quiet and distant, but he was just so excited he hadn’t really picked up on her tone.

He made a decisive plan. He would leave now, get some flowers, and meet her at two, an hour early. He would surprise her, a romantic gesture to show how much she meant to him.

He showered, combed his hair, had a shave, and made himself presentable. With a generous dose of deodorant and a gentle tap of aftershave, he looked himself in the mirror and

felt a lot better. He had been grubby and grimy that last few days, and it was good to finally feel clean again.

He strode out of the house and into the street, marvelling at the warm sun overhead. Ignoring his car and deciding to enjoy the sunshine instead, he set off on the half-hour walk to Tania's sister's house.

On the way, he stopped by the florist and chose the brightest, biggest set of roses they had, paying whatever extortionate amount they chose to charge.

Eventually, he found himself at Tania's sister's street. He stopped at the turning, peering down the road. The house was half-way down the street, but he wasn't ready yet. He was going to hang back, decide on what he would say.

What am I going to say?

He felt foolish that he hadn't thought of this up until this point.

He ran through a few scenarios, dismissing each one in turn.

"Hey, Tania, how are you doing? Got you some flowers!"

"Hey, how's it going, was just walking by..."

"Tania, babe, my darling."

He shook his head to himself. He had never called her "babe" in his life. It would sound bizarre coming from his well-spoken voice.

Then the door opened.

Watching from afar, his belly buzzed with anticipation, and he smiled broadly at the sight of Tania leaving the house. She looked beautiful, her hair neatly combed, a long flowing dress, and a smile on her face that would brighten up even the most cynical man's day.

She looked brilliant. This did not look like a breaking up dress. This looked like a getting dressed up for a reunion dress.

Then, within seconds of his smile meeting his lips, it faded.

Holding her hand and following behind her was a man. Slicked back hair, leather jacket, award-winning-smile.

She turned, smiled sweetly in that way she only ever did for him and embraced this man. Her lips sunk into his as they engaged in a deep, passionate kiss.

The flowers dropped to the floor.

Derek's heart beat faster, faster, faster.

He wanted to march over there and punch this guy in the face.

But he knew it would be pointless.

His feet didn't move. They were rooted to the spot like they were filled with lead. He willed his tears away, dreading that they might see him. He would not let them see him cry.

He needed to be a man.

He needed to turn and leave.

Once he had willed his heavy legs to move, he trudged home, passing the supermarket for a bottle of whisky on the way.

TRYING TO FOCUS ON DRIVING, Derek ignored the stares of Will in the passenger seat next to him. You'd have thought he'd have been ecstatic to be on day release away from that hell-hole; but no, Will just continued to stare.

In all honesty, Derek was getting used to it.

"You're staring again, Will," Derek pointed out as he pulled up on his drive. "Is it because you see it all over me?"

"No," Will answered. "It's because you look like shit."

Derek had to laugh. He did look, and feel, like shit. The last few days had gone by without any further contact from Tania. Derek had found his new best friend in a whisky bottle, and he had gone through that whisky bottle rapidly. His head still pounded and he was struggling to eat anything such was the queasiness in his stomach.

"Thanks for that," Derek said with a small smile, the first he'd had in days. He stepped out of the car and led Will into his house.

As if some gigantic, invisible force had just rushed through on a tidal wave and hit him in the back, Will fell to his knees, coughing.

“Will?” Derek prompted.

“Jesus, Derek,” Will choked, shaking his head. “What have you done?”

Will looked up, peering over the ceiling, gazing around himself, into every room and every spot.

“It’s infested itself here,” Will rambled. “It’s on the walls, it’s on the floor, it’s in the air.”

“Maybe I should just find another place to love?” Derek suggested, unsure as to why he was only thinking of this now.

“No. That would be no good. This thing has got you now, it would just follow and infest whatever home you moved into. We need to fight this thing.”

Will put a handout and Derek helped him to his feet.

“You think it will work?”

Will looked Derek in the eyes, and the weakened glance told Derek everything he needed to know about his chances.

“First thing we need to do is get rid of any objects that invoke bad vibes. Entities like this feed off negative energy, and we need everything that makes you feel bad gone.”

Without thinking, Derek’s eyes floated to a picture of him and Tania hung on the wall. It was a holiday and they were atop a hill, looking over a view.

He couldn’t get rid of it. He couldn’t. What if she came back?

Who cares if she comes back!

“Derek, can you do that?”

His eyes remained on the photo as he forced a feeble nod of confirmation.

“Yes. I guess so.”

Grabbing a black bag from beneath the kitchen sink, he rushed to every room in the house, removing all the remnants of Tania. Pictures, clothes, memories. From her discarded

socks left under the bed to her toothbrush that lay affectionately against his.

It was painful, it was gut-wrenching even, but he knew he needed to do this.

When he returned downstairs, he found Will gone, and the door open.

Shit.

He panicked.

Will had run off.

How could he be so stupid?

Derek ran out the house, skidding to a halt, desperately searching around himself.

Then, peering to his left, he found Will walking around the side of the house toward him, pouring some kind of white powder from his hand.

Derek felt a pang of guilt for fearing the worse. In that moment, he decided to trust Will unequivocally.

“What’s that?” Derek inquired.

“Sea salt. It acts as a purifier, to cleanse the energy around the house.”

Will stopped as the salt met another patch of salt. Derek saw that this salt had been spread right around the house and into the back garden in a full circle.

Will looked at Derek as he beat his hands together to remove the remaining salt from his palms, and Derek wondered how he could ever have done this without him.

“What next?” Derek asked.

“Next, we go inside, and we confront this spirit and drive it away.”

“Okay.”

“Derek, before we go in, I must ask you something.”

“What?”

Will placed a strong, supportive hand on Derek's shoulders, and focussed him dead in the eyes.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, of course."

"No, Derek, I want you to really think about this. Do you trust me? Because what's going to happen in there may be far more extreme than a few things you've seen so far. If there is even an ounce of doubt in your body, you need to be rid of it. If you go against me once you will let this thing live. I need to know you will trust in everything I do and obey every single instruction."

Taking a moment to consume every word, to contemplate every angle and to confirm his trust in his mind, Derek confidently nodded.

"Yes," he assured Will. "I do."

"Good." Will smiled. "Then let's begin."

“WHAT AM I supposed to do with this?” Derek asked, perplexed at the tiny bell Will was handing to him.

“The bell is an unwanted sound to the dead, it breaks up negative energy,” Will told him, emptying multiple items onto the floor of the living room. Derek could see a crucifix and some rosary beads. “I need you to go to every corner of the house and ring this bell.”

Nodding bewilderedly, Derek took the bell and walked to the corner of the living room. He felt stupid doing this and tried to remember why he was doing it; but of all the things he thought they’d be doing to confront this thing, ringing a tiny little bell seemed preposterously impertinent.

Fearing what this entity had done to him so far, he dutifully followed instructions, glad no one was around to see him ring a bizarrely small bell in random parts of the house. Looking to see if Will was looking, having a good laugh at his expense, Derek saw that he was still rummaging through his bag.

So Derek rang the bell.

He waited as if something was going to happen. Derek

wasn't entirely sure what; it just felt like an anti-climax when he rang this thing and nothing happened.

He took the bell to the kitchen, stood in the corner by the oven, and gently rang it once more.

Following this, he moved to the study and stood in the corner between the windowsill and the bookcase.

Ring-ring.

Shaking his head, though not entirely sure what at, he returned to the living room and went to the opposite corner than before.

Ring-ring.

After standing by the television, ringing the bell astutely, he placed it on the window sill and walked towards Will.

"Was that really meant to—"

Ring-ring.

Derek froze.

He glanced at his hands as if expecting to see the bell there, and that he hadn't really put it down on the windowsill.

But he had.

Will stopped moving, staring avidly past Derek's shoulder in the direction of the bill.

"Did you hear that?" Derek gasped, not quite sure why he was whispering.

Ring-ring.

It happened again.

Will's eyes widened, his body stiffening, his back rigid like a plank.

Derek went to turn over his shoulder to look.

"Don't move!" Will promptly instructed.

Derek didn't move.

But Will kept staring over Derek's shoulder, his eyes not faltering for even a second.

“What is it?” Derek asked, his face breaking, his whole body shuddering.

Ring-ring-ring-ring-ring-ring-ring-ring.

The ringing grew more frequent, more violent, more aggressively turmoiled – then stopped.

Nothing.

Eerie silence.

Then Derek felt a rancid, brief burst of breath brush against his neck.

Will held his hand out, trying to steady Derek’s nerves, trying to caution him.

“Do – not – move,” Will calmly instructed, though the look on his face showed a whole different display of emotions.

“What is it, Will?”

“It’s here. Just don’t move.”

Another breath blew against Derek’s bare neck, making each and every hair stand on end. It came with a bullish snort and a sour stink.

He longed to see what it was, to just turn his head, to glance upon the face of whatever thing was behind him.

But he daren’t.

Instead, he focused on Will, every muscle in his body constricted, stiffened still, made completely inflexible.

“What do we do now?” Derek asked, hearing a wavering quiver in his voice.

“We confront it. We find out what it wants.” Will turned his gaze past Derek, looking at whatever it was over his shoulder. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Derek heard nothing, but Will seemed to be listening to something intently.

Then Derek, listening extremely carefully, heard a vague whisper he couldn’t make out.

“You are dead, my friend,” Will continued. “You need to move on. You do not belong here.”

A hushed utterance continued, growing with aggression.

“No, you cannot have him. He does not belong to you.”

Derek’s thoughts went into overdrive.

Cannot have who? Me?!

“You need to leave. You are dead!”

Derek flew onto his stomach as if two heavy, enormous hands had punched into his lower back.

He covered his head with his hands as a snarling roar bombarded their ears.

“I am not dead!”

“DEAR GOD, JESUS CHRIST, HOLY GHOST,” Will shouted, grasping his rosary beads in an outstretched hand. “I believe and trust in your holy bible, and I need your holy powers by my side.”

Derek rolled onto his back, bestowing his eyes on the entity before him.

It was nothing like he had ever seen before.

Translucent, yet solidly contorted. Its fanged face was surrounded by horns curled and mounted upon its distorted head. The chest of a man, but the legs of an animal; a ram, or a bull, something with huge hooves and a long, sinister tail. Its growling countenance twisted into a terrifying mess, its power and determination clear to see.

“I believe and trust the truth that you have the power and authority in Heaven and earth, so I come to you, holy father, and ask you to free us from this lover of evil!”

Derek scrambled backwards, scuttling behind Will like a beetle running from a predator.

He doubted his eyes, doubted his senses. How could such a thing exist? He had spent his whole life denying such things,

refusing to accept that talk of such monsters was anything but the ramblings of a crazy person.

Now was he one of those crazy people?

Part of a mass hallucination?

No.

He knew what he saw. He knew what he smelt, had felt against his neck, the foul stench he had tasted on the tip of his tongue.

It was here.

And it was powerful.

“Derek, grab the crucifix!”

Fumbling through the items on the floor, Derek found the crucifix amongst the mess and held it out to Will.

“No, Derek, you need to take it.”

“What?” Derek exclaimed. How was he supposed to fight this thing?

“I need your help.”

“How am I supposed to help?”

“Because, Derek,” Will began, momentarily turning to Derek and beseeching him with his eyes. “We need to call on the heavens to defeat this thing, to rid it from your home, but I can’t do it myself – I need your help.”

“I can’t, I don’t know how!”

“Just hold the crucifix out, and *believe*.”

Will turned back to the monstrosity and curled his face up into a snarl.

“I come to you Lord, asking you to cleanse this place, for it to become new, for it to remove this filth!”

Derek gazed at the item in his hand.

Always a sceptic, always in defiance.

And now this was the only thing that could save him.

“Derek, I need you!” Will prompted without turning from

the creature. "In the name and power of the authority of Jesus Christ!"

Derek gawked at the entity. At the physical transformation of the thing that had been plaguing his home.

The thing that tried to take his life from him.

The thing that was not going to win.

Sure, it looked scary.

Sure, it was the unknown.

Sure, it had driven Tania away from him.

But fuck it.

It's not taking anything else from me.

Derek stood, holding the cross out, clutching it tightly in his hands, glaring at the hazy creature with narrowed, resolute eyes.

This thing would not do any more damage to him.

He would not let it.

"I denounce and reject any sinful items, any things broadcast, and sinful or evil people who have dwelled here."

Derek repeated every word Will said in his thoughts, soaking them up, devouring them. He screamed them in his mind, launching them forward, aiming them at the thing before him.

It grew smaller.

It grew weaker.

And all of this finished with one final thought.

I believe.

"I denounce and reject any satanic claim upon this place!"

"I denounce and reject any satanic claim upon this place," Derek repeated, Will smiling gratefully.

"Holy God, I trust you to do your work, by your power I command any false angel to be rebuked."

"I command any false angel to be rebuked!"

"I renounce and reject, in your name Lord, *do your work!*"

“Do your work!”

With a piercing scream, a high-pitched wail of discontentment, the entity scrunched up into a little ball, firing blinding light, then shattered into a million flickers.

And it was gone.

The room was calm.

Derek fell to his knees, panting, in disbelief.

He felt a reassuring hand on his back.

“You did well,” Will told him. “Now you can go back to your life.”

But he couldn't. Derek could never go back to his life.

Not after what he'd seen.

His life was completely changed.

And it could never be the same again.

DEREK PATTED the spoon gently against his cup of tea and placed it on the saucer beside it.

But he did not pick it up.

Instead, he stared at it, watching it as the boiled water steadied.

Then he took a sip.

“I’m sorry for leaving,” Tania spoke solemnly, her cup of tea remaining untouched.

Derek looked around at the scurrying of people in the coffee shop. All of them unknowing. Blissfully unaware of the truth of this life.

He said nothing.

“Everything I was going through, it’s over, I promise.”

Yet it seemed so insincere. Because she wasn’t telling the truth.

Should he say it? Should he tell her he knew?

Did it matter?

He had longed for this moment. Dreamt about it. More recently, he had even prayed for it.

And now it was here it just felt so... incomplete.

“I did some things in the last few weeks, out of heartbreak, because I thought I should. And if you want me to be honest, I can be, I just...”

He knew exactly what she was talking about.

He didn't want her to be honest.

He didn't need that. Though the fact that she was willing, to be honest, made him tempted. Made him entertain the idea.

Could he get past it?

Would it be something he could overcome?

“And now all this hocus pocus nonsense is done, I want to come home.”

Derek's eyes dropped.

Hocus pocus nonsense?

No.

This couldn't work.

He put his jacket back on and stood.

“Where are you going?” she asked, her eyes breaking.

Those eyes.

Those eyes were so hard to walk away from.

But he had to.

I have to.

His life had a completely new direction now.

“Goodbye, Tania.”

He left without looking back.

1987

Two years later

DEREK WAS DRESSED IMMACULATELY. A tie, top button done up, smart blazer.

He was overdressed compared to other students, yes. But he felt that one should always be properly dressed, whatever the occasion.

University.

A master's degree, leading to a PhD.

As he approached the lecture theatre another student smiled at him.

"Hello," said the young man with a startlingly posh accent. "I'm Clark."

"I'm Derek. What are you studying?"

"Psychology, specialising in behavioural science."

Derek nodded, impressed.

"And what about you?" Clark asked.

A smirk spread across Derek's face, as he waited for the inevitable sceptical reaction.

I suppose I'll have to get used to it.

"The same," he began. "Specialising in the psychology of hauntings and demonology."

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