

The Night Sneaks Up On You

Todd keeps the grass running down his lawn tall enough to hide incessant squirrels as they dash across the yard, and short enough that the tips he gives the neighborhood kids for mowing the lawn are worth it. When my mother and I first started visiting Todd, he would meet us by the wooden mailbox and stop every few seconds to snip an uneven blade. Nothing out of order was acceptable. Todd eyed the two of us up for many months before making the commitment of moving us into his prized possession: the house inherited after his mother's third heart attack in 2 years. Third time's a charm, as they say.

The blue boy holly shrub adjacent to the porch steps could sit on his neck instead of his head and nobody would notice behind his aloof charm, a gift from his (also) dead father. The first time we ate dinner with Todd he mentioned his father's withering away, relegated to the guest room, behind a closed door. I'd asked if he died in the home, earning a swift kick underneath the table from my mother. I imagined his father's corpse gripping his framed portrait hung over the piano, jerking his hollowed-out version of himself, his loafer-clad feet steadying above ground for a change. Todd's face contorted, mimicking the mannerism of a mime, words catching dust in his throat; Mother apologized profusely, using the drive home to admonish my behavior, saying I ruined her chance with Todd.

But then he invited us over again in three short days. And so, we went

The light grey concrete that makes up the house appears an impenetrable shadow against the deepening autumn clouds, heavy with swollen shards soon to break onto barely dried plants and driveways damp from the last storm. My mother had been carrying her umbrella even on sunny fall days, expecting the sky to change in an instant, a clap of thunder to wield even the least god-fearing man onto his knees in prayer. She speaks under her breath as we walk up the

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winding hill, our shadows jumping along the shuttered windows. Todd didn't wait at the mailbox anymore.

He greets us in the foyer, a sentiment my mother believed to be an invitation to consider this our home now too. I figure he's enough of walking up and down his driveway to meet a woman he was already married to. My mother made the mistake (according to her) of moving in with a man (my real father) before they were wed. I suppose she could've been onto something every time I didn't receive a birthday card from him for the past fifteen years.

Todd prepared dinner that night: roast chicken and potatoes, lit underneath the yellowy-lit fixture, a sharp contrast to the retro floral wallpaper my own grandmother would shudder at. He pattered about the table, aligning our utensils in a uniform fashion until he was satisfied. His walk, with his gait, that of a puppeteer, playing and pulling his marionette strings as a spider weaving its webs, distracts my gaze every time it catches it. He sits at the end of the table, helping himself a large serving of everything on the table.

"I think I'll head to the library after school tomorrow. I'm a week behind at this new school," I break the silence.

"How will you get home?"

"My bike?"

"Honey it gets dark early. I don't want you biking home so late."

"I'll be fine."

Todd interrupts with his gruff growl, "Listen to your mother. Don't stay out too late, the night sneaks up on you." I look into his eyes and find nothing to hold onto. They were empty.

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The guest room's stale air smothers me as I walk through the door. My mother walks past me with the rest of my clothes bundled up in a box.

"Is there really no other place I can sleep? No attic or pull-out couch anywhere?" I shiver through the words and wonder if a window is open somewhere.

"This is a perfectly good bedroom. If it was good enough for Todd's father, who was a banker, by the way, then it's good enough for you," She smiles and rubs my shoulders comfortingly. I know she means this as a positive thing, but it only allows me to picture him in here more, sitting at his desk, doing...well, whatever bankers do. "Oh, it just got chilly all of the sudden. Did you open a window?" I shake my head, and she pulls her sweater tighter.

My mother sighs, "Honey, I feel so lucky to have met a man like Todd, who is willing to become a husband and a stepdad all at once. I would like if you could embrace this magical time, if not for yourself, then for me. I have been unhappy for too long, and I'm tired." I lower myself, noticing every wrinkle line and crease in my mother's face and neck. She never looked her age to me until that moment.

"The room's perfect," I muster up a grin. She smiles and before she leaves I speak up, "And, I am happy for you, I really am."

Sleep sinks slowly into me, and I don't think it will come at all tonight. The sharp lemon fragrance attached to the aged furniture hardly covers the musty scent that adorned the old, worn pillowcases that sucked up the dust with every slowing breath. I try not to think these used to belong to an old dead man, nor that it would upset his spirit, surely still attached to the walls. As my tongue relaxes in my mouth and my toes stop fidgeting against the sheets, which my overgrown nails scratch against like that of a cat, another source of sound catches in my ears.

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Sitting up slowly, the springs beneath the mattress relaxed without my weight. I wince at the icy wood as I walk toward the noise. Louder and louder, it vibrates into my skin, seeping high-pitched hums into my bones and straightening the hair on my arms with the frequency of a twinkling music box.

My closet door ajar, I push onto it gently, the creaks harmonizing the smooth soprano voice swimming against the walls. A heaviness trickles up my torso, wrapping itself around my racing heart. The pulsing of blood and swarming of thoughts swells up my veins and leaves my head afloat above my body. Closer, I tiptoe, my internal drum beating along with the subtle song, of which I could not tell was really being sung. Behind my hanging clothes, an outline of a small door juts out between my fingers, brushing lightly against the painted and plastered-over doorway, as if it had never existed.

Pressing against the door, my ear catches the final notes of a familiar tune. My lips come together to hum along, my brain unsure of where I'd heard it before. Forgetting myself and what was happening, my eyes shut and continue fluttering behind drooping lids, suffering in their wake.

An abrupt silence fills the room. The last note from between my lips gets stuck in my throat, and all that was heard was a distant humming of the heater. My eyes open, no longer adjusted to the dark closet. Once again, I run my fingers along the crease of the door, my mind considering that I was still dreaming, and the voice was another part of my imagination. What sounds like a nail taps the other side of the wall and I nearly fall onto my side. A sweeping air like a powerful wave strikes my body and my head hits the floor.

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A single beam of light washes over my eyes, they flutter open to a muffled voice. The closet surrounding me flushes my mind with memories of the previous night. I sit upright and bring my hand along the sides, seeing more effort to hide the cracks and creases in the makeshift wall with the daylight. My nails cut through the chipping paint of the sealed-off door, and my curiosity grows further at the purpose of such a holed-off room.

A voice trickles closer and closer, the sunlight hazy in my filmy eyes. And then the door swings open, and I feel my heart being pulled from my chest. A shrill shriek vibrates in my throat and escapes my mouth in a hushed yelp.

“What on earth are you doing in the closet?” I stand up quickly, ignoring my heaving chest. “I thought we talked about giving this room a chance. Now you’re sleeping in the dusty old closet?”

“No, it’s not like that,” I protest.

“Is this about the room, or about getting back at me, or Todd?” Before I can pipe in another voice enters the room.

“Sandy? What are you two up to?” Todd looks back and forth from me to my mother.

“We were just figuring out what kind of uh, sh-shelves would be good. You know, for my clothes,” I lie.

“Well, let me know I know a guy down the road that could help me install whatever you two decide,” He smiles and pats my mother on the back before leaving.

“That’s the truth, mother, I was just seeing how I could fit all my stuff in here. That’s all.” She squints her eyes at me but gives a quick nod and puts the subject to rest.

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The singing persists every night for the next few days. It becomes harder to hobble out of bed, a bed I had yet to sleep in and walk into the closet. The siren scaling the walls remains a mystery. From the dead man's desk, I retrieve a letter opener and bring it back to the sealed door. Scraping along the natural crease, I begin cutting through the painted wood. The more I scrape, the louder the voice gets. As if it's in competition with the ripping of wooden planks. The wall is thick, my hand going back and forth begins to ache.

I picture a young girl, with wavy hair, grown down to her waist like mine, listening to the noisy work. I wonder if she closed her eyes when she sang, or if she thought it to be futile in such pitch blackness. I want to reach within the boarded-up room, to stroke the hair of the girl, with nothing to comfort her but the songs and her captivating voice. The sharp edge cracks into the hinge and swings back the door slightly.

A new, different, kind of darkness fills my eyes. A black night in the country, starless as that of a city. A blackness to swallow one whole, to make them forget there was ever light to begin with. The singing stops.

"Hello?" A raspy whisper leaves my lips.

Nothing.

I move my face closer to the hole, my hand enters the space, and feels a thick layer of brick between the door and the empty room.

"Your singing is beautiful."

A low pulsating noise circles the cornerless room, tremors swarm against my skin, pulling the hairs straight.

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“What’s going on here?” My head whips around to reveal Todd standing against the moonlight. The night turns his face into an impenetrable shadow.

“I-I thought I heard something, a noise. In the closet.”

“What kind of noise?”

“Singing. It’s happening now. Don’t you hear it?”

He pauses. His face is a static television screen, my eyes cannot penetrate beyond the dark sheet of night to capture any thoughts that could be gathered from his eyes, or mouth or anything to clue me into what he would utter next.

“You’re hearing things. There is no singing. I don’t think your mother would appreciate you making things up. I’m sure she raised you better than that.”

“But, I’m telling the truth. I hear it every night, a voice, coming from the close-”

“Is this something I need to share with your mother? That you’re imagining voices and using them to excuse your destruction of a wall in my home,” For the first time, he raised his eyebrow ever so slightly, something I had yet to see in our time together.

“Don’t tell her, please,” I look down at my hands, suddenly feeling foolish.

That night, I don’t bother to lay in bed and feign sleep. I feel her calling out to me. It’s like I levitate to the closet, to the hole I carved to be closer to her. I am met with a singular eye in the center of the hole, and then in her delicate vibrato, she sings.

Sleep sweet my darling

The night sneaks up on you

The eye blinks.

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I return to my body and slink backward, against the closet door. My hand turns the knob and- nothing. It doesn't budge. How could the door have locked on its own? I try again. And again. Had I even shut the door when I came in here? I can't recall closing it behind me, nor someone closing it afterward. And then a few more times, twisting and jerking the useless knob. My energy exerted, I step back from the door, searching for light to come from the outside. For the first time, silence succumbs to the room, the closet, my mind. No, not a blankness inside my head. Nothing like that. A stillness, perhaps, sunken and hollowed out between fractured skulls.

"Hello? Please talk to me, please. I'm trapped in here too. Please." Whatever was in there, a ghost or living girl was dead regardless of whether or not they were breathing. She was once living, a real girl, stuck in this wall. How could she breathe, how could she be? Was it Todd who trapped her here? His father lived in this room for a long time. He could've had a little girl in here and Todd wouldn't have known.

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Todd said that. Is he the night? Has he locked me in here like I'm his new doll to keep in his house? A doll to play with. To keep as his own. The darkness snuck up on her, the voice in the walls, and it has its claws in me now. I open my mouth to scream, but I stop myself, unsure of who would hear me, and if it were Todd, would he rather let me stay in here? That would let him be with my mother, alone. He chose to be with her, not me, anyway. Had he planned all along to get rid of me? Maybe make a new, perfect family with my mother, without me.

He, his father, both of them perhaps, trapped a girl in the walls. Could she be the daughter of his ex-wife? What if he married my mother just to take me, hold me hostage for his own sick need for control? The blades of grass, the position of the utensils, the scraping of paint from wooden panels, and girls in the wall.

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I feel around the floor, my hands pressed against the rough surface until they find what I was hoping I left inside: the letter opener. What did she sing again? *Sleep sweet, my darling.* Were those her words or his? With the sharp edge, I began carving them into the painted wood, now revealing the true uneven shades of brown. I traced the indentations with my hand, unable to see the letters in such darkness.

A shuffling from the other side of the wall catches my ear. I move my palms along the wall, trying to find the source of the sound. And then a whirring of a drill. I darted to the hole I created and stuck my hand inside, reaching for the empty space where she resides, only for my fist to be met with another wall. I punched my hand into the slab a few times but it didn't budge. The drilling halts. I sat back, feeling the air slowly being sucked from the room, and my lungs.

"Help," I croak. A little louder, "Help." I turn and bang the door with the sides of my fists. Louder now, "Please help me! I'm trapped."

I fall forward suddenly, my eyes shut quickly at the light stinging them. When I blink them open I forget about the pain in my corneas and feel my stomach churn.

Todd stares straight down at me. He offers me nothing, once more, a wide range of white frost atop frozen hills. I cannot tell if he is here to rescue me or to push me back inside and drill the door shut. I study his face, the lines, and folds of his aging skin. In them, I see his father, pictured above the piano, watching over the home, his spirit roaming the walls.

"Emma, she's in here," He calls out, his eyes never leaving mine. A scutter of footsteps traveled closer until the door swung open further and my mother appeared. She pulled me into her arms and breathed a prayer into my hair.

"We were so worried honey. Were you in here the entire time?" She finally let me go and I let a breath in.

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“I went inside because I heard a noise. And it was locked when I tried to leave,” I look over to Todd, “Someone locked me inside.”

“Who would do that?” I say nothing but my eyes remain firm on Todd.

“The door only locks from the inside,” Todd mutters finally.

“What— no! I tried opening it, it was locked, or stuck, maybe. I swear,” I look back and forth between them.

“Honey, Todd told me about you, hearing things. Are you sure you didn’t just lock it yourself, or maybe it wasn’t really lock—,”

I began laughing. Guttural laughter burst from within me until my stomach hurt.

“Come downstairs, I can make you something. You must be starving,” Todd says.

“I’m not hungry.” The phone rings and my Mother goes to answer it.

He takes a step closer, “You’ve been in there for a long while. You’ve had time to think, I’m sure.” He narrows his eyes, and with his strings, he pulls on his puppet, says, “You will come downstairs and eat with us, like a family.”

I walk in front of him, expecting a foot to kick me down the rest of the stairs. Before I turn towards the dining room, my eye catches Todd’s boots sitting beside the side door. His prized leather boots, sitting, filthy with dirt and mud. I pause. His hands press down onto my shoulder.

“Another storm’s rolling in. It’s best to stay indoors tonight,” He whispers into my ear.

And like the day turning into night, I enter another time and space, joining Mother and Todd at the dining table. I make sure Todd takes his piece of meat into his mouth before I dare place a fork to my lips.

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