

A Kind of Death

My family always insisted we were cursed. Bullshit, I know. I mean, sure, every once in a while something gets knocked over, or you see a shape out of the corner of your eye, or you find something in a place that you definitely did not leave it. But that's all just regular forgetfulness and paranoia, right?

Anyway, it's one thing when this nonsense comes from parents and blood relatives. You know, oh there goes Uncle Jim ranting about the family ghost again. But when your own husband starts freaking out, you maybe start thinking about things differently.

We had only just moved to the area a few weeks before. He'd just gotten a new job. It was a lot of change. He was under a lot of stress. My mother always said change, of any kind, is a kind of death. You're grieving the loss of what was. Mourning the you you were. The you that might have been if things had gone a slightly different way. So you know, some negative emotions are to be expected, even when everything is going great. Even when the change is for the better.

But he was waking up shaking in the middle of the night, covered in sweat, and terrified. Something was wrong. I didn't know what to do. I tried to help him feel comfortable in any way I could -- making sure dinner was ready when he got home from work, the house was clean, his suits were pressed and organized in the closet -- making sure he didn't need to worry about anything. He didn't like getting home to an empty house, so I made sure I got the shopping done earlier. And once he was home, I couldn't go anywhere. Where was I going to go anyway? It's not like I knew anyone here. I wasn't even working yet. I had a good reference from back home--

"Sam!" She cut herself off mid-sentence. "You guys remember Sam? She was a percussionist with this group a few years ago. That was my reference. I owe her a lot!"

She looked around the table over her beer, at blank faces. "No one remembers Sam? But she's so cool!"

One of the faces spoke up. "Oh, you know what, I think I got this gig a few weeks before she left. She did seem really cool. Kinda showed me the ropes, and let me in on some of the director's quirks. Made sure I didn't embarrass myself."

"Yeah, sounds like Sam. Anyway, she--"

"Hold on, we were telling ghost stories here. So far you're just oversharing."

"Well, I have had a few of these," she lifted her glass, laughing, and took another drink, "so that might be a thing that happens. Anyway, you guys are the ones who wanted me to go." She leveled a wobbly finger at the guy across the table, spilling a bit of amber liquid onto the already sticky table. "So either you shut up and let the new girl tell her story, or you tell your own. Besides, it's all crucial to the narrative. Haven't you ever heard a good ghost story? You've got to build up to the spooky shit. So just calm down, and wait for it."

“Yeah man,” a brown haired woman sitting next to her chimed in, “shut up!” She met her eyes. “I want to hear her story.”

“Right. So Sam did me a solid and told the director about me...”

but I still had to audition. I was getting nervous about it. With all of the stress of the move, I hadn't even touched the cello in weeks, and I felt neglectful. But I was also excited. It was nice to have something to work toward.

We eventually fell into this routine. We'd get up -- or rather I'd get up. He wasn't sleeping well, remember -- and I'd make breakfast. He'd go to work, and I'd clean up. I'd spend an hour practicing the cello. (I used to like practicing before bed. I found it relaxing, but he didn't like hearing me practice. Said it kept him up.) And then I'd go do the shopping or the laundry. And I'd get started on dinner. Anyway, we kept this up for a while. I was doing everything I could to keep him relaxed, make sure he didn't have to worry about anything. But he was still so stressed all the time. It felt like I was walking on eggshells whenever he was around.

And it was weird stuff too. I mean, he never got violent with me or anything, but sometimes I'd hear him scream after a shower, and call me into the bathroom saying, “This isn't funny!” I'd go in and he'd be pointing at the steamed up mirror, furious. Apparently there were messages written in the condensation like “Leave this house,” or threats that he wouldn't even repeat to me.

I never saw anything in the mirror.

Sometimes I'd be in another room and suddenly hear a loud bang or crash. I'd come back and something would be on the floor-- a book, a lamp, once an entire end table was flipped-- and he'd be standing over it shaking, and he'd look at me, his face pale. Then he'd just leave. I guess he would go for a drive.

When that happened, he could be gone for a few minutes or a few hours. And later, if I tried to talk about it or ask what was wrong he'd change the subject or go silent. He'd come back with flowers or ice cream or something, by way of apology I suppose, but he would act like that was the entire reason he'd left in the first place. Like nothing was wrong.

One night I heard him grumble about something, and check his phone. I turned to look. It was one in the morning. He got up, put his phone back on his nightstand, and walked groggily out of the room. I assumed he went to the bathroom, but he was gone for a while. I'd drifted back to sleep. Then I heard him scream. I got up and found him sitting in the hall outside the study breathing hard. He was leaning against the wall, and when I went up to him he jumped to his feet and almost fell over.

He seemed really shaken up, like something horrible had happened. He refused to come back to bed, but he also wouldn't tell me what was wrong. We started arguing again. I just got to

a point where I couldn't take no for an answer. I needed to know what was happening. He was heading for the door, but I grabbed his keys.

"You can't do this again!" I stood between him and the door. "Babe, I love you but something is wrong here. Please talk to me! Tell me what's goi--"

"You're haunted!" He shouted it, then immediately looked away. I dropped the keys at the outburst. "How do you not see this?" Still avoiding my gaze, he brushed passed me, picking up his keys on his way to the door. He reached for the handle but then stopped. "I woke up tonight because I heard the cello." He was just staring at the door. "I was still groggy. I got out of bed to tell you to stop. It was such a horrible noise, just this unending, screeching drone. But when I got to the study to tell you to stop," his hand clenched into a shaking fist, "it wasn't you-- no, it was you, but it wasn't. It looked like you, but lifeless. Covered in blood. And the way you looked at me--" He shook his head and opened the door, finally looking at me as he walked out. "There is a ghost in this house." As he closed the door, and his eyes met mine, I could see the fear in them. "I'm sorry." The door clicked shut.

I didn't know what to do. I was pacing around the kitchen. Then the living room. You know that feeling where you need to do something, but there's nothing to do, so you just walk pointlessly, back and forth? I felt so powerless.

I looked into the study, nervous at the thought of what might be there. Everything was normal. The cello case was open, but I could have easily forgotten to close it that morning. I closed the lid, clasped it shut. Nothing else was out of place. What was happening? Was he going crazy? Was I going crazy?

Eventually I said, "Fuck it," and opened up the case again. I didn't know what to expect. This was the subject of my husband's terrifying ghostly vision. But it was also an old friend. One I'd been neglecting for some time. I picked up the cello and sat down. The wood felt warm in my hands, like it was vibrating almost imperceptibly. I sat there for a bit, just feeling the instrument against me, and then put bow to string. I must have played for hours. I was lost in the music. Soaring on the notes. Everything melted away.

When I was done, I found my way back to bed and slept like a stone. When I woke up, he still wasn't back. But his phone was there, next to me on his pillow. There was a notification, a text message. It was from his secretary, and it was sent at two a.m.

I could read the first line or so from the notification on his lock-screen: "Are you coming or not? I'm wearin..." There was a picture attached, and I was so thankful I couldn't see it while his phone was still locked. I didn't know the code to get into his phone, but I didn't want or need to see more.

He finally came back later that day. Again, with flowers. Again, acting like nothing was wrong. I gave him his phone, (said it seemed like he missed some important messages,) and told him I was filing for divorce. He didn't put up much of a fight. That was almost worse. He moved out of the house over the next few days. As horrible as it felt, there was also such a feeling of relief, like some oppressive presence was gone. At least at first.

Of course, then I was alone. Alone in a house that he was convinced was haunted. I couldn't understand. Was that all part of the lie? But why? And if so, damn, was he a good actor. He seemed so genuinely terrified sometimes. I started noticing strange noises at night. Just the house settling, I thought. Houses... settle, right?

I was anxious now, too. I didn't know what to do with myself. I was still holding on to this routine I'd fallen into with him. But now he was gone. The routine started to unravel. The first thing to go was breakfast. I wasn't sleeping well, so I wasn't waking up at a reliable time. I'd rarely get out of bed before noon, and by that time I might as well have wasted the whole day. Of course, even when I was awake I was wasting the days away. Things were starting to get weird. I was so out of it all the time.

I would find myself wandering around the house in a daze. I'd walk into the kitchen and find all the doors and cabinets open. Or I'd find things in odd places. One night I almost tripped over my cello, which was sitting at the foot of my bed. I didn't remember moving it. I certainly hadn't played it recently. I wasn't even touching the cello anymore. I didn't have the routine. And sure, I could play in the evenings, but at the end of these endless days that seemed to blur into each other, I really just wanted to go to bed. I still had some time to polish things before the audition, but I wasn't sure I even wanted to go at this point.

After a particularly long day of nothing, I decided to mope about in a slightly more relaxing way. I took a long steamy bubble bath. After a good soak I glanced up at the mirror and nearly jumped out of the water. Clearly on the mirror the words "Leave this house," were scrawled in the mist. I rose to my feet, staring in disbelief at the message. But as I rose I discovered more. Just below the first malevolent line there was another, hidden by my perspective below the counter. "Go do something fun."

I didn't know how to feel about that. The message didn't seem quite as intimidating anymore, but it was still disturbing. Did he still have a key to the house? Was this some kind of joke? I grabbed the towel to dry off, but when I looked back the message was gone. Was my mind playing tricks on me?

I decided to take its advice. After calling a locksmith. The next day, with new locks and armed with a new key, I went out. I explored the city. I went to a museum. I had a good time. It was the best day I'd had in a long time. Since before I'd moved here, probably. If I'm being honest, since before I'd gotten married.

I returned home that night more than a little trepidatious to see what was waiting for me. As I opened the door and looked inside I imagined the worst. But I found nothing. Everything was normal. Cozy even. There was a different energy to the place. Not isolation and paranoia, but contentment. I thought about breaking out the cello again, but it was a long day, and I was exhausted. I collapsed into bed and fell asleep before I was even under the covers.

I had strange dreams that night, but all I remember is the music. The most beautiful string quartet was playing. I was calm, and I was free, and I could hear the piece with such clarity it was like my head was inside the cello. And suddenly the cello was the only sound. And I was

awake. I could hear a cello being played. I sat up, not knowing what to do. Who could possibly be in the house? I just changed the locks. And why would anyone break into my house to play the cello?

The strange thing about all these questions was that, yes, they seemed important, and yes, I was concerned about the answers, but also it was very hard to think about anything other than the music itself. This wasn't the shrill droning my husband had described. Oddly enough, I think the word I would use is "haunting," but in such a beautiful way. It was haunting, not because it was creepy or unpleasant, but because it was a melody that stayed with you. It sat in your heart and made itself comfortable. I was drawn to it. Something about the melody, lyrical and lilting, but also somehow liminal, like it didn't quite belong here, pulled me closer to it. Made me want to be a part of it.

I slowly got out of bed, and grabbed the heaviest thing I could find, a lamp. I unplugged it from the wall and held it up ready to swing. I walked down the hall, and stopped just outside the door to the study. I pushed the door open a crack and peaked in. It was me. Or it wasn't me, but it was. Like, I was there in the study, playing the cello. But I was also watching me. And the me that was playing was only partially there, like a sheer curtain with a light shining through it. And as I watched and slowly dropped the improvised weapon I was holding, the ghostly me stopped playing and held up her bow, offering it to me.

As I took it from her, she dissolved and drifted away on some faint wind I couldn't feel. I sat down and began to play. I've never played better than that night. I want to say that I was in total command of my instrument. But no, we were more like partners. We played together, sometimes I led, but sometimes I would go where it took me. Let it surprise me. We were dancing through the melodies as if chasing each other through the trees, basking in the chords like they were sunshine. It was spectacular, and such an amazing feeling. And I've never been sure that it wasn't a dream. But I started practicing again the next day. Really practicing, not just rote memorization and running through scales. I could feel the music. I was connected to it in a way I hadn't been for a long time. And when the day came, I made it through the audition in one piece.

"Anyway, that's how a ghost destroyed my marriage and helped me land a gig in this orchestra with all of you assholes. Cheers!" She finished her story as the group around her broke into laughter, and downed their drinks. "I have no idea why I told you guys any of that," she said and gestured to her empty glass. "This is some pretty good stuff, huh?"

The guy across the table finished his drink before saying, "There's no way any of that was true."

"What are you talking about? We just came from rehearsal. Obviously I got the gig."

"No but the ghost stuff. That was... inventive."

“Hey man, you guys are the ones who wanted a ghost story. I’m just saying, I’ve been through a lot of change recently.” She smiled and waved at a passing waiter and pointed at her empty glass. “And like I said, any change, even for the better, is a kind of death.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means I’m drunk. And it’s someone else’s turn. You!” She pointed at the woman next to her, and narrowed her eyes at her conspiratorially. “What’s your story!?”