

IDIOLOTRY #4



SILENCE IS NOT A OPTION

FROM THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT

WELCOME BACK PSYCHOS TO ANOTHER ISSUE OF EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL. THERE SEEMS TO EXIST A MIS-COMPREHENSION THAT WOMEN "DON'T DO HORROR" WHILE IT'S TRUE THAT THE GENRE HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN MORE MALE FOCUSED, I HAVE READ AND SEEN SOME SCARY SCARY STUFF BY SOME BRILLIANT WOMAN AUTHORS AND FILM MAKERS. SO THIS BEING MARCH WE DECIDED TO CELEBRATE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MONTH IN THE WAY WE FIGURED WAS MOST APPROPRIATE. WE REACHED OUT TO SOME OF THE HOTTEST FEMALE VOICES IN THE INDIE HORROR SCENE AND GAVE THEM CARTE BLANCHE. NO THEMES, NO WORD LIMITS, JUST SCARY AS HELL STORIES FROM STRONG WOMEN WRITERS. WE HOPE YOU ENJOY!

BETWEEN THE COVERS

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HANDBAG FOR THE RECENTLY DECEASED.....

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BIG WHEEL KEEP ON TURNING: A RUBBER REVIEW

.....ALYSSA MARTINEZ

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MEET KELSEY OWEN



“HELLO SPOOKSTERS MY NAME IS KELSEY A LIFE LONG HORROR ENTHUSIASTS. I WAS RAISED ON FREDDY KRUGER, JASON, AND KILLER KLOWNS FROM OUTER SPACE. NOW I SPEND MY SPARE TIME WORKING ON ART PROJECTS RANGING FROM WHIMSICAL TO CREEPY. “



Potato Eyes

Linda Bloodworth

Louis Mayfield sat very still; he took deep breaths and closed his eyes. He tried to block out the sounds of the restaurant around him on a busy Friday night. He could smell his untouched steak in front of him.

“You’re not eating, dear.”

He opened his eyes and rubbed his hands across his face.

“I just needed a minute.”

Alice had already made a dent in the spinach salad. She looked at him with her quizzical face, the one that made her look like a little girl, where she cocked her head to the side.

“What’s eating you?” she asked.

Louis leaned in and whispered. “The potato salad, it’s watching us.”

“What about the carrots? Are they doing anything?”

Louis pushed himself away from the table and started walking towards the exit. Outside, it was windy, and he shuddered slightly. The neon lights of a diner called to him in the dark. At the greasy spoon, no one questioned him. The waitress poured a coffee and gave him a laminated menu with barely a glance.

Thankful for the coffee, he huddled his hands around it for warmth. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see a patron at the bar moved his elbow slightly to correlate a metal napkin holder to point directly at him. He blinked and took a quick swallow of coffee before throwing down some change and leaving quickly.

Again on the street, he hailed a cab and told the driver his home address. As he was doing up his seat belt, he noticed a glint in the buckle of the back of the cab driver’s hat.

“That’s okay, um...I’ve changed my mind, and it’s a great day for a jog. Stop here, please.”

Not too far from his home Louis started to run, at first it was a brisk jog which turned into a full on race for time. Maybe he could outdo them; maybe he would be able to get there before the cameras showed up.

Key in the lock, Louis threw open the door as if to catch a nefarious character in the act. Instead, Alice looked up from her oversized chair, knitting that sweater she'd been working on forever.

“Louis, dear, what happened?”

A quick scan, Louis' eyes darted from the entryway to the living room, to the kitchen, and back again to Alice.

“Would you like some tea?”

Shoulders slumped, Louis all but collapsed on his own comfy chair.

“No, I'm fine, thank you.”

Alice hovered over him, planting a kiss on his forehead. She pushed his hair back from his face and smoothed it in place. Over her shoulder Louis noticed shiny camera reflections in the decorative plates, in the lampshade, in the television set.

As Alice straightened up and smiled her warmest smile, Louis noticed a red dot reflected back in her left eye.

“Come now, Louis. It's time for a nice long nap.”

The last thing Louis heard was a loud snap and all of his worries drifted off into the ether.



The Language of Hell

Elana Gomel

I read this sentence in George Steiner's essay and it stuck with me ever since. He described the magic spell that Hitler cast over his audiences. He wondered how that clownish Austrian with a thick accent mesmerized huge crowds and cowed kings and heads of state. Steiner analyzed his recorded speeches in detail, but could not pinpoint the secret. In desperation, he wrote Hitler spoke "the language of hell".

He thought it was a clever metaphor.

He was wrong.

#

Luna wandered into the kitchen, her eyes dreamy and her hair uncombed. I hissed at her that she would be late for the school bus and that I could not take her, not today. I had already been late to departmental meetings more times than I could count, and with my tenure at stake, I could not afford...I shut up. The pearls of EarPods gleamed in my daughter's black curls, and not a word I said was getting to her. I gave up and drove her to school.

Afterwards, I hurried to my university campus and naturally got stuck in traffic in the wasteland of strip malls. This gave me an unneeded opportunity to mull, once again, over the wrongs done to me, regurgitating the bitter dregs of my impending divorce. Wasn't it unfair how Max, ensconced in his new home with his newly pregnant girlfriend, always managed to wriggle out of his parental duties? I heard of husbands suing their wives for full custody, and while such battles seldom ended well, I had to admit I was jealous. Max, about to have his own biological baby, was quickly losing interest in the legal substitute. Even though it had been his initial idea to adopt...

I checked myself. What was I thinking? Luna was my daughter. So what if she came into my life as a six-year-old bundle of nightmares and insecurities with her big blue eyes and her mane of black hair? She was my own as much as would any baby cooked up in the magic oven of my womb—the oven that had resolutely refused to produce anything.

Upset and unsettled, I fiddled with my phone. Luna and I shared many interests (so much for DNA! I added as a rejoinder to the voice in my head that kept dredging up insulting remarks about adoption being second best). One of them was podcasts. While other girls her age hang out on TikTok or listen to pop music that

sounded to me like a bunch of angry cats, Luna's phone was filled with downloads of nature, social justice, and current events shows. Recently, though, ten-minute talks about body positivity and saving the elephants had been gradually edged out by true crime.

When I got a glimpse of her library, I was shocked to find titles like "Criminal Minds" and "Darkness in Small Town". I remonstrated but...Luna was sixteen, old enough to have her own taste in listening. I should thank my lucky stars that she had not gotten pregnant or run away.

I swiped aimlessly at the podcast app while sitting in yet another traffic jam. I was not in the mood for sob stories on the Women at the Crossroads podcast, which had often provided me with the sneaky consolation of *schadenfreude*. Instead, on a whim, I touched on a new podcast simply entitled True Justice. It started playing as my beat-up Toyota edged forward.

I reached the campus in twenty minutes, cut the engine, and sat in the car, listening. Somebody knocked on the window, and the permanently soured face of Prof. Merriwale, our department's chair, floated into view, his hand beckoning me to get out. Today was the day that would decide my future. Either I would join the hallowed ranks of tenured faculty, or I would be permanently exiled into the limbo of academic nomads, grabbing a temporary position here and there and teaching sulky undergrads the basics of world history instead of researching my own field of twentieth-century Germany. I knew Merriwale was not my greatest fan. And shrugging off his invitation to join him would not tip the scales in favor of a yes vote on my tenure application. But I could not move. I had to finish listening to the podcast.

When it was over, I went up to my office in a daze. I taught in a daze. And when Merriwale showed up to announce the results of the tenure vote, and told me, with insincere regret, that it went against me, I said nothing. I nodded numbly and sat at my desk, insulated from my own misfortune by the gravelly female voice echoing in my ears, as I was listening to the same episode of the True Justice podcast for the third time.

At the beginning, it had seemed to be just another true crime podcast: a story of violence, woven together from uncertain facts and artful omissions. But after several minutes of listening, I was swept along by its irresistible narrative momentum.

The murder discussed was not something I'd ever heard about, but apart from the iconic cases of Ted Bundy or JonBenét Ramsey, which everybody knows, I was not a true crime fan. Unlike my daughter, I was not deep down the rabbit hole of blood splattered mysteries. But there was something about the combination of the way the story was told and the two voices telling it that hooked me instantly.

The podcast settled in my brain like an invader; I could almost feel its tentacles spreading through memories, hopes, and desires, and pushing out everything else. The people involved became more real to me than my own family. Hell, they became more real than myself.

The story, told by two anonymous presenters, a female and a male, concerned a woman who killed her abusive husband. Unfortunately, cases like this are a dime a dozen. It took place in some small midwestern town with a forgettable name. There was no complicated investigation either: the woman was arrested two days after the murder and sentenced to twenty years. An ordinary sad tale. But the way it was told...

The voices wove a web around me, in which my mind was held as securely as the woman—her name was Nancy—was being held in jail. They painted such a vivid picture of her daily travails, of her gradual disillusionment with the man she had married, of her pathetic attempts to placate him, of her growing resentment, and most of all, her sense of being trapped. They described the murder itself as an act of heroic resistance. They went into unsparing details of her poisoning him with tranquilizers and trying to dispose of the body in a shallow grave. Normally, such descriptions would disgust or repel me. But there was something in their voices, their choice of words, their smooth interweaving of narrative strains, that kept me spellbound. I rooted for Nancy with my entire being. I wanted her husband dead as I had never wanted anybody dead. And when the court's decision was announced, I actually yelled something and pulled my headset off in indignation. Rashid, my office mate who had come in to commiserate over my failed tenure bid, looked at me in shock when I stormed past him. He probably attributed my behavior to the disappointment at the vote. But at this moment, I couldn't care less. My mind was filled with indignation and anger. I wished I could have killed Nancy's husband myself—he certainly deserved it!

It was this thought that brought me back to my senses. I was not a violent person. Max liked horror movies and first-person shooter video games. I despised both, and often told him he was a bad influence on Luna, which did not improve our marriage's chances of success. So how could I have been so bloodthirsty toward a man I did not know?

Of all people, I should know the answer to this question, I thought gloomily, trying to shake off the podcast's evil enchantment. I was a historian. I had this question addressed to me more times than I could count.

How could millions of Germans have killed perfect strangers they had never met or known anything about? Anything, besides the stories they were told.

Luna was not home when I came in. I went into my office and powered the computer. The draft of my monograph on the radio propaganda in the Third Reich

flashed on screen. This monograph was supposed to ensure my tenure and eventually make my reputation in the academic world of European history studies. Now it would probably never be finished. But at this point, I was not thinking about my career going down the drain. I was thinking about Nancy. And The True Justice podcast.

Ten minutes with Google, and I found out that the story told on the podcast was a lie. Or rather, it was partially true but only in the limited sense in which a story that forces messy reality into the Procrustean bed of a message can be true.

Nancy did kill her husband. At her trial, she did claim domestic abuse as a mitigating factor. But there was no proof that abuse had ever occurred. Their friends and family denied the allegation. There had never been any 911 calls or hospital visits. The prosecution argued that the motive for murder was life insurance. The jury sentenced her for a second-degree murder, showing more mercy than the prosecution was ready to give. A sordid domestic entanglement, totally devoid of the dark magic that the podcasters' voices wove around it. I looked at Nancy's picture online: a dull, heavy face, dead eyes. And yet half an hour ago I had been ready to dedicate my life to fighting for this woman, burning with indignation at the supposed miscarriage of justice, contemplating hunger strikes, marches on the Department of Justice, even—I shuddered. Yes, the thought of terrorism crossed my mind, painted with the scarlet glory of martyrdom.

Shivering, I hugged myself, trying to come to terms with what had just happened to me. How could I have been whipped into an unthinking frenzy by a random tale told by anonymous speakers? Could Nancy have been an abuse victim? Possibly, though unlikely. Was there a miscarriage of justice? Not really. Had I been on that jury, I would have ruled as they did. But that was my rational mind speaking, capable of distinguishing story from reality, fact from emotion. And as long as I had been listening to the True Justice podcast, that mind had been disabled.

A door slammed downstairs as Luna walked in. I hurried into the kitchen, realizing that I would have to tell her about the failure of my tenure bid. Both our futures would be drastically affected. We would have to move and downsize. Max was paying child support, but it would discontinue in two years, and how would I be able to afford college tuition?

Luna was rooting in the fridge, as always wrapped up in the voices and stories coming through her EarPods. I had to shake her shoulder to make her pay attention but there must have been something in my face that made her pull them out without much complaint. We sat at the table, and I told her what had happened.

I expected anger and indignation—of course, she would think it was my fault—but instead her face broke into one of her rare smiles that made up for all the

temper tantrums in the world.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” she said, patting my hand. “We don’t need your stuffy university job. I can make more money in a month than you have made in a year.”

“What?!” I fairly jumped. “What are you talking about? Don’t even think about it!”

I was not sure what I meant by “it”, but vague images of drug trafficking and porn videos floated through my head. Luna obviously realized the unspoken accusation, but instead of being outraged, she smiled benevolently.

“Nothing illegal, Mom,” she said. “Podcasting. Do you know how much money popular podcasters make? Once we reach four hundred million listeners, we are on top.”

“Who are ‘we’?”

“True Justice.”

#

She explained, while I listened in stunned disbelief. Apparently, the anonymous podcasters of True Justice had announced a sort of competition among their rapidly growing audience. They suggested a case and asked those who were interested to make a recording of themselves telling the story of this case “in accordance with the True Justice guidelines”. The idea was reckless, I thought, because tens of thousands would jump at this opportunity. And apparently tens of thousands did. I did not know how they went through all the tapes but somehow, they did. The single winner was chosen.

My daughter.

Beaming with pride, Luna told me about the case. A young man killed his father in a drunken rage. The man was convicted and sent to jail.

“Seems pretty straightforward to me,” I said.

“Nothing is until you tell the story.”

“How did you tell the story?” I asked.

“Charlie was adopted,” she said as if it was self-explanatory.

“So?”

“He had been traumatized. Ripped away from his real parents. His father was a tyrant. He deserved it.”

I stared at my daughter’s beautiful face, feeling slow chills travel down my spine. Was it a warning? Did Luna actually believe that by adopting a foster-care child we had done her some irreparable damage? Did she hate me for taking her away from her “real parents”?

“Can I listen to the recording?” I asked.

“Sure.” She fiddled with her phone and thrust it at me with a sunny smile. Before exiting a room, she gave me a hug.

#

I was at Max’s door at midnight.

It was raining heavily, and I was glad of it. Driving down the narrow lane that led to his new home, I threw something heavy and gleaming into the dense foliage by the side of the road. The rain would wash away my fingerprints. Had I been thinking clearly, I would have wiped the knife. But had I been thinking clearly, I would not have taken it in the first place.

It took Max a long time to answer the door, but I was prepared to wait as long as it took. He finally showed up wearing a silky t-shirt I had bought for him a couple of Christmases ago.

“Irene?” he sputtered. “What the hell?”

“We need to talk,” I marched into his kitchen, noting subliminally that it was decorated in lime green—the color I hated but his girlfriend apparently loved. The last dying gasp of the hatred that had driven me to his doorstep stirred inside me, but I crushed it, as I would crush a venomous spider.

“What about?”

“Our daughter.”

He sighed and made me a cup of tea as he used to do. In the upper bedroom, his girlfriend—I forced myself to think of her by her name, Sandy—slept with her unborn baby.

I told Max what had happened, and he listened without interruption. I remem-

bered that it was this capacity of giving you his undivided attention that was one of the things I had loved about him. I had to cling to memories like these.

“After I listened to her recording,” I said, “I came here. I came to kill you, Max. You and Sandy.”

“What?” he scooted away from me. I lifted my empty hands.

“I don’t have a gun, you know. But I took a kitchen knife. I was ready. I knew with absolute certainty that the grave injustice you had inflicted on me had to be punished. I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew that by killing you I would avenge all the women deserted and mistreated by their partners. I knew I was a heroine and a martyr. And all this knowledge was dripped into my brain, word by word, sound by sound, by our daughter’s voice.”

I expected Max to snort in disbelief, tell me I was crazy, try to throw me out. I had the recording copied to my phone, and I was prepared to let him listen to it, even though I was afraid of what it might do to him. But he said nothing for a long time. Then he spoke.

“I know of True Justice,” he said. “Everybody at work is raving about it. And I listened to a couple of episodes. Eventually, I could not take it anymore. I erased everything”

“Did it influence you?” I asked.

He smiled crookedly.

“Let’s just say, Irene, that had I been listening to it before you came, I would not be making tea for you. Unless it was spiked with rat poison.”

“This podcast...it makes you feel...victimized. It makes you feel self-righteous. And it makes violence appear noble and appealing.”

“You always had a way with words, Irene. Yes, it is exactly what it does.”

“And it’s not just the words, the story. I mean, the story is important but there are slanted narratives all over the place. Every politician does their bid. It’s the voices. These two presenters...nobody knows who they are. I tried to find out, but there is nothing except a lot of wild conjectures. But when they speak, you have to listen. It’s compulsive. Like an enchantment. Like the Pied Piper. Like...Hitler.”

Max had always been indifferent to my academic pursuits. World War 2 was as remote and uninteresting to him as the Trojan War. I expected him to scoff. But he

was silent.

“Yes, maybe something like this,” he finally said.

“But why Luna?” I cried.

Max sighed.

“Just before we separated,” he said, “I met Luna’s biological mother.”

“What?” I jerked, overturning my teacup. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to upset you. You were always...protective. No, that’s not the right word. You thought I did not think of Luna as my daughter. But I did. I do. I just wanted to know more about her ancestry. You would accuse me of rejecting her if you knew.”

I was silent because he was right.

“They told us she was an addict who signed away her parental rights,” he continued. “When I met her, she had gotten herself clean, had a new family. But she did not want to know anything about Luna at first. Then she started asking questions, but it was like...she pitied me.”

“Pitied you?”

“Yes. I pressed her to tell me who Luna’s father was, and finally she relented.”

“I’m surprised she knew,” I muttered unkindly.

“Oh, she did know all right, but of course, I did not believe her.”

“Why ‘of course?’”

“Would you believe it if somebody told you their child was fathered by a voice?”

#

As I drove back through the wet night, shivering despite the heat being on full blast, I went back through the story Max told me. It was just that, a story. Handed down from a woman I had never met to the man who was no longer my husband. Why should I trust it?

Why do we trust any stories?

Luna's mother, whose name was Maggie, told Max she had run away from home at fifteen and fell in with a bad crowd. Somehow, she ended up in a sort of commune, which was probably better than the alternatives. There were drugs but no violence, and the older man who ran the place took a liking to Maggie and protected her. He was gay, she said, and had no sexual interest in her. At the time when Luna was conceived, she was adamant she had no boyfriend. But she did take drugs, and when stoned, she listened to old vinyl records that the commune leader collected. There were jazz recordings with names Maggie had never heard; names like Count Basie and Glen Miller. There were operas sung in languages she did not know. And one night, she chanced upon a record with an unreadable label, and heard a man's hoarse voice shout words she did not understand. She listened, spellbound, to a long and incomprehensible speech, as that hoarse voice ranted, and cajoled, and threatened, and seduced; the Pied Piper whose language was his dark magic. She spent the whole night listening to a long-dead German voice, not understanding a word but kept spellbound by the dark power pouring off that scratchy record.

Two weeks later, she found out she was pregnant.

"Do you think...?" I asked Max.

He shrugged.

"She does not speak German, and who knows what was in that collection? But you would know better than I do about recordings like these..."

I did know. They existed, of course. Recordings of the speeches that spelled death to millions and turned ordinary Germans into self-righteous killers. You could find these recordings online. I had listened to them for my academic work. But I was insulated from the language of Hell by my academic training, my knowledge of history, and my rational mind. But what happens when your rational mind is lulled to sleep?

Sleep of reason breeds monsters...

Hitler had no biological children. His words were his progeny. The words that he channeled from the hungry powers that lurked in the darkness of his pagan beliefs.

And a word can be made flesh.

I pulled into the driveway and sat with my forehead on the steering wheel. The house was dark. Luna would be asleep by now.

Max and I had agreed he would come over tomorrow. We would talk to Lune, explain to her why podcasting was not a career she should aim for. Especially podcasting for an outfit like True Justice that made violence sound pure and appealing. If worse came to worst, we could legally stop the podcast from employing her. She was underage. And in two years, when she is eighteen...maybe she will come to her senses.

And maybe the power she had inherited from across generations would come into its full poisonous bloom.

I realized I was bone tired. Exiting the car, I made it through the side door into the kitchen.

And stopped.

The butcher knife block showed a gap where I had taken a knife out before driving to Max. But now the gap was bigger. Two knives were missing.

I heard a slight noise upstairs. The door to Luna's room snicking open. My daughter's footsteps. The sound of her breathing.

The sound of her voice.



Handbag for the Recently Deceased

Shannon Denaux

“What are you doing?”

Edward jumped, dropping Anna’s purse. Its contents spilled, and he watched as a lone lipstick rolled across the floor to rest against her bare foot. She was wearing nothing but a towel and dripping water on the carpet. He moved quickly to gather the various items, scraps of paper, cigarette butts, and cracked makeup containers, but she was faster and jerked the heavy bag from the floor, unceremoniously stuffing everything back inside.

“I was looking for nail clippers,” he said.

“In the bathroom, in the medicine cabinet.”

“Right,” he replied, walking into the open door. Steam filled the small room, distorting the reflection in the mirror. He could see her behind him, digging through the massive handbag, making adjustments in placement to all that it held.

“That thing weighs a ton. What do you keep in there anyway? Bricks?”

“My whole life.”

“Yeah, well, you should get something smaller. It’s full of trash and junk. It takes you five minutes to find your wallet.”

“Does not.”

“Seriously. I’ll get you something nice. Just tell me what kind you want.” Edward had been living with Anna for two weeks, something he’d longed for in the six months they’d been dating. He’d stayed over plenty of times and loved nothing more than falling asleep pressed against her and waking by her side. They’d taken a week’s vacation to move his things and get adjusted to their life together. Those first days had been wonderful. They’d spent time watching movies, cooking together, and making love. She cleaned out one of the closets and half the dresser for his clothes. They reorganized the apartment, moving pictures and furniture to accommodate his additions. Her glass figurines shared a shelf with his action figures. Their mismatched dishes somehow created a full set. His posters magically fit into the blank spaces on the walls. All the gaps in their lives were filled by the other. Truly, they were meant to be together.

Then came the second week.

Vacation time spent, they'd gone back to work. The first thing he noticed was that Anna was something of a slob. She didn't clean the dishes until she needed them again; she threw her clothes in the hamper but left her underwear on the bathroom floor. She dropped wet towels on the back of the couch or the end of the bed. While Edward didn't consider himself a neat freak, he was still bothered by her apparent disregard for any kind of order.

'I'm clean, just a little cluttered,' she'd said when confronted. He couldn't exactly argue with this. She did, after all, keep up with the dusting and vacuuming. She spent her days off gathering, discarding clothing and doing laundry. She even did the dishes if he asked. 'It's an adjustment for her too,' he reminded himself. It had been her apartment for years. He was sure there were plenty of things that he was doing to bug her as well. By the end of the week, though, he wasn't so sure. She was happy and content, by all appearances. Then he opened her purse.

It was huge, almost more of a tote bag. If it had ever been in fashion, he couldn't imagine when. The color and texture seemed to have once been a camel suede, but it was much darkened and rubbed smooth in places, from years of hard use. He'd noticed it before of course, but it wasn't until moving in with Anna that he'd had a chance to really focus on it. There it sat, on the kitchen table where she left it, night after night. He saw it every evening when they sat to eat. He saw it every morning when he left for work. It awaited his arrival home every afternoon, Anna always getting there 20 minutes before him.

She was taking her usual post work shower when he got home. With all the various cosmetics she carried, he was sure he'd find some nail clippers. What he found instead was her only sore spot.

"I don't need a new purse. This one is fine. Please don't spend money on something stupid. It's like going out and buying new shoes when your old ones are still good," Anna said, dropping her wet towel on the couch. He loved her practicality; it one of the first things he'd appreciated about her. Now he appreciated her body. Crossing the room, he drew her into his arms and promptly forgot about the whole thing.

#

"Your phone is ringing," Edward yelled loudly, attempting to override the ambient noise of the shower and the barrier of the door. He didn't hear any reply. Anna had been looking for a new job, one that would better suit her interests. Since Edward had moved in, he'd taken over half the bills and they found themselves with a slight surplus of funds. He supported her choice. She didn't enjoy waiting tables, and he didn't like the way she smelled when she came home. The phone was still ringing and he could see the light from the top of her bag. He wouldn't have to dig

to answer it. No invasion of privacy for him.

“What are you doing?” she asked, again dripping water on the carpet.

“Your phone is ringing,” Edward repeated, gesturing into the noisy, vibrating handbag.

“Okay. I’ll get it,” she said. She left footprints as she walked across the room. The phone stopped ringing. “Nevermind. They’ll leave a message if it’s important.” She stared at him for a moment then dropped her gaze to his hand, the one still holding the ragged strap. “Don’t go into my bag. You don’t have to answer my phone. That’s why we have voicemail.”

“What’s the big deal? I wouldn’t care if you looked in my wallet,” he said, immediately regretting the lie. He didn’t know how she would take the ancient list of phone numbers he kept, just in case, the one that included the names of several ex-girlfriends, and the lone condom that had resided there for years and was so far past expired that he only kept it out of habit.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she sighed. “It’s just a pet peeve. I don’t like anyone going into my bag. I’m sure there are little things that irritate you. This is what bothers me.” Edward felt a little vindicated, glad to have finally rattled her the way she did him. He looked past her to the trail of water and she followed his gaze.

“That?” she laughed. “Okay, let’s make a deal. I’ll dry off in the bathroom and you don’t go digging through my stuff. Sound good?”

Edward laughed with her. He reached out and held her in his arms and let her wet hair drip all over his shirt. For once, he didn’t mind.

#

“Happy Anniversary!” Edward declared as Anna walked through the door. Her retail job meant more nights and an erratic schedule with little room for change, but he’d stayed up to welcome her home on this special day. She smiled and kissed him hello, dropping her bag on the table. He had dressed it especially for the occasion, with fresh roses and candlesticks, wine in a secondhand decanter. He’d even used his grandmother’s china and the crystal goblets she kept locked away in the chest that held her most valuable possessions. The whole table shuddered under the weight of her handbag and he cringed a little before picking it up and dropping it into an unused chair.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Maintaining the mood,” he said, a little too sharply. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that this night was supposed to be special. He smiled at her and poured the wine, hoping to take the edge off the encounter. She stood very still for

a moment, studying his face. Then she smiled and took her glass and they spent a lovely evening together.

Later, after dinner and dessert and perhaps a few too many glasses of wine, he found himself on his knees, asking for her hand in marriage.

“Yes!” she cried, falling to the floor to take him in her arms. “Yes, yes, yes!” In all the excitement, he forgot about the gift he’d hidden in the closet two months prior. When he remembered, she was already asleep in his arms and he decided to wait. After all, a new purse was nothing compared to a diamond ring.

#

The condom broke. The next two months were nerve wracking. They tried to continue life as before, tried to downplay the stress, the fear, the shadow of unwanted responsibility. When her period came, they were both relieved. They laughed a little easier, made love with more abandon, freed from the torment of an uncertain future. When Edward came home and found her crying in the bathroom, his eyes rested on the stick. The blue lines foretold hard times ahead, the tarot showing Death on the first card.

“It’ll be okay,” he said, though he didn’t believe it himself. “We’ll get through this. Together.” She nodded and held him tight, and he felt her tears soaking through his shirt. He didn’t mind.

#

“I’m home,” he called. Her bag lay on the table in its usual place, and he was once again irritated by its ratty presence. She did not answer. He heard the shower running through the closed bathroom door and went to start dinner. Cooking done, he sat at the table, the distressed suede bag his only companion.

“Dinner’s ready,” he said loudly. He considered a beer, then thought better of it. He didn’t want to have that argument again. After a few minutes, he rose.

“Hey, is there even any hot water left? What are you doing?” he asked, opening the door. Mist dampened his face as he entered. Her body lay in silhouette behind the sheer plastic curtain. Her hair fell limply from the back of the tub, dripping water on the tile.

“Anna?” He pulled back the curtain. Red water swirled down the drain. He stood, hypnotized, for a long time by the mix of fluids, a tiny whirlpool that was faded from crimson to pink. “Anna?” he whispered. Then he screamed. He knelt down and held her, the cold shower drenching him. Tears stained his cheeks while her blood stained his shirt.

#

The funeral was lovely; he supposed. He lost count of all the people who offered condolences. He heard little and felt too much. They were supposed to be married in this church; he thought once, then buried the thought before it could cut too deep. She did not wear her wedding dress; though she had selected one, she hadn't purchased it yet. She had wanted to wait until after. She wanted to be sure it would fit. She had been a very practical girl, in some things.

Her mother had chosen something. It was as good as anything else; he supposed. It wasn't as though she needed it, where she was going. It was white and had long sleeves, to cover the damage she'd done. If he tilted his head and squinted, he could almost imagine it was her wedding gown. Someone told her she looked beautiful. He thought she looked like shit.

#

Home, alone. He slept on the couch because the bed smelled too much like her. The couch did too, but it didn't carry as many memories with the scent. He stopped bathing; he couldn't stand to look at the tub. Someone had scrubbed it clean. He wondered who had taken care of the grisly task. Then he drank some more.

Days went by. He could tell from the constantly playing television that he did not watch. He turned it off once, to go to sleep, but the room was too quiet without it. So he left it on. Laugh tracks permeated his drunken dreams. It was a disturbing overture to the nightmares that plagued him, finding her again and again and again, like a sitcom in syndication. A flooded coffin, white satin stained red, while the studio audience applauds.

#

He cleaned out her dresser. He packed her glass figurines into boxes, to give to her mother and sister. He bought new towels and sheets. He kept her pillow. He moved some of his clothing to her recently vacated closet, to fill the emptiness. He found the box containing her gift, a large slouchy hobo bag that the lady at the store had sworn was the perfect thing. He didn't cry. He raged. Throwing the package across the room, he screamed and swore and hated her, hated what she did, what she done to herself, to him, to the child that should have been.

When he was done, he lay on the bed and fell asleep. For a brief moment, he heard her breathing on the other side.

#

Edward was losing his mind. That was the only explanation. He followed the damp footprints back and forth, pacing the path from the bathroom to the kitchen to the living room. They ended next to the sofa. He felt the cushions. They were dry. He checked the towels. They, too, were dry. His own hair and pants were damp, from sweat he figured by the odor. He knelt down and sniffed the carpet. Beneath the layers of dust and dirt, he caught a whiff of Anna. It was her body wash. He dropped into the recliner and lay back. Empty bottles and cans rolled from underneath.

“I’ve been drinking too much,” he said aloud. A man on the TV was interviewing troubled teens. He turned it off. The apartment was silent for the first time in days.

He sat for a long time and tried not to think. When that didn’t work, he opened a beer. The silence was overwhelming. He could smell himself, booze sweat and B.O. His mouth tasted sour. He finished his beer and then another. When he was pleasantly buzzed, he went to take a shower.

#

She didn’t leave a note. This troubled him at the oddest times. He would be going about his day in what had become a normal manner, getting up, going to work, coming home. He cooked his dinner in the microwave and ate standing in front of the stove. He drank in the recliner, until he could bear to enter the bathroom and shower, until he could go to sleep. He would be watching a movie and or shopping for groceries when the thought would arise. He hadn’t found one while removing her things. He hadn’t received one in the mail after the fact. He checked his email and half expected to find a letter, timed to arrive at a later date. Sometimes he sent her messages via social media. He never got a response.

#

Months passed. Edward started to rebuild his life. He went out more. He focused on work. He stopped drinking as much. He turned off the TV.

He needed to clean.

He dusted the furniture and removed the dishes from the dishwasher. He wiped the grime from the inside of the microwave. He bleached the counters and soaked the coffee pot. He dusted the blinds. He changed the air filter. He found the vacuum and began the arduous task of moving the furniture to get all the dirt out of the carpet.

He was moving the kitchen table when he saw the bag. Anna’s purse was in one of the chairs. He picked it up and lay it on the table. It was darker and dirtier

than he remembered.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked himself, hearing her voice in his head. The bag was closed. He lifted it, feeling its heft, hearing the clatter of its contents. He wanted to open it, to search through the one thing that she’d held private. He wanted answers to all the questions he hadn’t the courage to ask aloud. He wanted to know why the woman he loved had killed herself and any chance of a future they had. He told himself that it didn’t matter, that it wouldn’t change anything, that he’d started to live again. The truth was that he couldn’t stand the thing. The leather was soft and smooth, too much like her skin. It repulsed him. He threw it in the dumpster out back. He saw it open in flight, and the last piece of her fell into the trash.

#

Edward woke. The streetlight cast its sickly light through the blinds. The shower was running. He couldn’t be hearing what he thought he heard. He stared out the window, looking for signs of rain. He strained to hear the neighboring apartments, listening for a leaky pipe. His heart raced, the pulsing sound in his ears nearly drowning out the subtle sound.

‘Who’s there?’ he croaked. His voice sounded distant, still thick with sleep. The bed was cold, and he shivered. He thought of his childhood fears of the dark, of the monster hiding under the bed, waiting for a stray hand or foot to wander from the safety of the blankets, ripe for attack. He sat suddenly and turned on the bedside lamp. He was alone.

The bathroom was silent.

‘Still losing my mind,’ he said. The words were too loud in the early morning quiet. Even the traffic had stopped for the night. He got out of bed to get a drink, something to help him sleep. He turned on the lights as he went, still a little spooked in spite of himself. His bare feet squished on the carpet as he left the bedroom.

Anna was standing in the living room. Her white dress was soaked. Her wet hair stuck to her face. He saw the water that dripped from her pooling on the floor. She smiled at him and beckoned him closer.

‘It’s a dream,’ he said, ‘another nightmare.’ He rubbed his eyes and looked again. She was still there and moving closer. Her bare feet left imprints in the carpet. The stench of earth and rot preceded her, but as she got closer, he could also smell the scent that was her, soap and skin and the sweet perfume she always sprayed in her hair. Her clothing stuck to her skin. He could see the flesh underneath, the stitches and scars left by the undertaker.

‘It’s okay,’ she said in a watery voice. She looked pale and sickly in the arti-

ficial light, but she was still beautiful, still his Anna. She was a few steps away and reached out to him. “I’m so sorry. I thought I wanted this, I thought I had to get away. I was wrong, I want us to start over, to try again.”

“What are you saying? Anna, you’re dead.”

Anna smiled.

“I know,” she said, “and I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. I made a mistake, but it’s okay. My life was never this body. I never really lost it. I can get it back. My whole life, it’s in my purse.”

Edward was silent. Anna looked so happy. Her dress was falling off, the back having been cut before burial. It hit the floor with a wet thud. She was wearing nothing underneath. He focused on the ruin of her arms and saw the blood that ran down her thighs. She followed his eyes and the trail of red.

“I can’t make up for that. I know I can’t. But if you can forgive me, and give me a chance, I know we can be happy together.” She held out her hand, showing the engagement ring he’d saved so long to get. “Remember this? You said you wanted to spend your life with me. You can. I just have to get my bag.”

“I threw it away,” Edward said. He looked away. He couldn’t bear to see her hurt anymore. He felt ashamed. He had thrown away her life.

Anna was quiet. She looked around the room as though for the last time.

“You didn’t open it?”

“No.”

“Why not?” she asked, quiet as a breath. Edward thought of all the reasons, all the pain he’d felt, but he loved her and he couldn’t give her an answer that wouldn’t cause her more grief. So he said nothing.

When he looked up, Anna was gone. The only trace of her presence was the water on the floor. He lay in the puddle that had been his love. It soaked through his shirt.

He didn’t mind.



I

Wasn't

Always

THE
Bad
guy

House of the Dead

Jennifer McCollom

The house didn't look haunted on the outside.

It was clearly a very old house. That much Liam knew. One of those three-story, Victorian mansions that sported several windows, a tower with a cone-like roof, and tons of nooks and crannies. Not that Liam knew what exactly "nooks and crannies" were, but he was sure the place had a lot of them.

It didn't look that creepy, though. It wasn't dark or imposing. It didn't have that forbidden and abandoned ascetic that an average Google search of haunted houses generated. There was no paint peeling off the walls, no grimy windows, no general sense that the house was like a sentient gargoyle that watched your every movement. Maybe if you were scared of big houses, or just thought that all old buildings were kind of eerie, then it might seem a bit freaky. Otherwise, it was simply another Victorian house situated on a leafy, residential street filled with other Victorian houses.

The inside was a completely different story. Inside, a dark past hid in the shadows, not so it could jump out and attack you, but because it was also afraid of something in the house. Afraid of the ghosts that haunted the hallways. Afraid of the oppressive presence of death and decay that had seeped into the walls and choked out the light.

But, Liam and Diego had known none of this when they were looking for a house to rent. All they knew was that they had a modest monthly budget and that Diego, an architecture Ph.D. student, loved historic houses. Liam felt rather ambivalent toward the idea of living in a building that was over a hundred years old, but Diego was his boyfriend, and, like most good significant others, he wanted to make Diego happy. Plus, he honestly didn't care where they lived, as long as it had indoor plumbing and a quiet space for him to read and drink coffee in.

So, they had gone in search of an old house that fit within their means. Diego had a decently sized graduate assistant stipend and Liam worked full time at a rather well-paying coffee shop, so their means weren't poverty-level low, but he'd still only expected a few fixer-uppers to be available to them. He'd never imagined that they'd end up in a nice, mansion-sized house on Ashwood Street.

In retrospect, the fact that it was a five-bedroom, two-bathroom, historic home in good condition with such a low rent probably should have given Liam and Diego a clue that something was wrong with it. Diego had found the house on a local realtor's site one evening and had practically launched the laptop into Liam's

face while the two of them were sitting on the couch together.

After a short discussion, Liam agreed to a tour, and before he knew it, they were signing a lease. They moved their meager amount of stuff in and started buying some more furniture to fill the place up with. After all, their last dwelling had been a studio apartment, and they now had a dozen empty rooms that they had to furnish.

The first week in the house was fine. It was a nice neighborhood, and they even became friends with one of their neighbors, a professor who owned the house next door. Her husband was off doing fieldwork somewhere, and she seemed kind of lonely in her big house, so Liam and Diego would invite her over for dinner practically every night, although “dinner” was usually just pizza. The three of them exchanged phone numbers as well, both for socialization reasons and in case of an emergency. The rest of Liam and Diego’s time was spent settling in. They were too busy moving stuff in and going to work to notice anything strange.

It wasn’t until the second week that Liam started hearing the noises. And... seeing things.

The only room in the house that creeped Liam out during the tour was the basement. This was understandable, though. It was a dark, windowless room with only a small, antique lightbulb on the ceiling to illuminate it; one of those old light fixtures where you had to walk into the middle of the room and pull on a cord to turn it on. It didn’t bother him at the time, though. All unfinished basements were creepy places. It was an unwritten rule. Besides, it wasn’t like he was going to have to sleep in it or anything. There wasn’t anything in the basement except concrete floors, brick walls, and the light bulb. He had no reason to go in there, so he didn’t.

He did still have to walk past the door to the basement, since it was in the kitchen, but he had no problem with that. It was the room that was creepy-looking, not the door. After living in the house for over a week, though, he started to hear a small, hushed sound on the other side of the door, a sound that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He figured that it was just mice skittering around on the stairs, or the usual creaks and groans of an old house. He’d grown up in a farmhouse built during the 1950s, so he was used to the sounds of wood frames contracting and wind rattling through air vents.

However, one night, the noises took shape and grew into something sinister.

He’d been laying there beside Diego, listening to the soft whir of the ceiling fan and trying to get to sleep. This wasn’t unusual. He’d always been a night owl, tossing and turning in bed while Diego, on the other hand, tended to pass out the second his head hit the pillow. It gave him a nice moment to himself where he could

think about things and listen to the quiet noises of the house or Diego breathing softly beside him.

That was when he heard it. A voice. A disjointed, monotone hum coming through the wall. At first, he thought it was just another, albeit new, weird house noise. Well, that's what he wanted to believe, anyway. But, as he laid there, eyes closed, ears straining to listen, a cold sweat slowly creeping across his skin, he couldn't deny that he was hearing a human voice. It was so low, so flat and lifeless that he couldn't tell if the speaker was male or female, young or old. There was definitely a speaker, though, and they were standing right on the other side of the wall behind his head, saying the same thing over and over again.

“They're dead,” the voice said. “They're all dead.”

A million thoughts ran through Liam's mind. Should he wake up Diego? Had someone just broken into their house? If it was a burglar, why were they saying that someone was dead? Who was dead? Was someone else with them? He became so absorbed in his thoughts that it took him a moment to realize the voice had stopped. Were they gone? Should he get up to check?

Before he could open his eyes and sit up, though, a gloved hand brushed up against his face and the monotone voice whispered, “Are you dead yet?”

Liam flinched and let out a sharp gasp as he opened his eyes.

The room was dark, but, with the light of the street lamps outside, he could make out the shadowy figure of a woman standing over him. “Figure” was the only way to describe it. She was covered head to toe in black, from her high-collared dress to her thick, lacy mourning veil. Her face and hands were completely hidden. No sign that there was a human underneath it all. She might as well have been a walking, black shroud.

“What the—” Liam began to say, but the woman immediately placed her gloved hand over his mouth. He wanted to pull her hand away, but, for some reason, he couldn't move. All he could do was let out a muffled cry, hoping to get Diego's attention.

“Shhhhh,” the woman said, and she held one finger in front of the veil. “You don't want to wake Diego up, do you?”

Liam desperately wanted to wake Diego up, but there was nothing he could do.

Then, the woman looked up, as if she'd heard something coming from the hallway. She released her hold on Liam and quickly, without making any sounds,

walked across the room and disappeared through the open doorway. Once she was gone, Liam suddenly came out of his frozen state. He sat up in bed and stared at the doorway for a while, unsure of what to do. Should he go after her? How had she known Diego's name?

He grabbed his phone off of his nightstand, turned the flashlight on, pulled the blankets back, and slowly, so as not to wake Diego yet, crept into the doorway. He shined the light down both ends of the hallway, half expecting to see the woman in black standing only two feet away from him. There was no one there, though. No sounds, no open doors, nothing. He stood in the darkness, training the light on the wall across from their room, and listened intently, but all he could hear was the downstairs clock ticking. Surely, if the woman was still in the house, she'd be making some noise. Wouldn't she?

He quickly closed the bedroom door and locked it, then stood there, hand on the doorknob, as he tried to wrap his mind around what had just happened. A shiver went up his spine, and he vaguely realized that he was cold. The wooden floor was freezing beneath his bare feet, so he got back into bed and sat there, staring warily at the doorway.

"Diego," he whispered, looking down at Diego's sleeping form.

Diego didn't even stir, blissfully unaware that a creeper in old-fashioned mourning clothes had been, and might still be, wandering about their house.

"Diego..."

Nothing.

"Diego!" Liam cried, shaking Diego by the shoulder.

Diego let out a loud snort as his eyes shot open. "What? Huh?"

He sat up with a groan.

"Liam? What's...?" His expression immediately shifted into one of concern. He must have seen the terrified one on Liam's own face. "What's wrong?"

Liam let out a shaky breath and told Diego everything. Diego sat up and listened, at first with concern, then surprise, and, finally, a look of sympathy.

"I don't know if she's still in the house," Liam said once he was finished. "I looked around in the hallway for a little bit, but she wasn't there. I don't... I don't know what she was."

“You said you couldn’t move while she was in here?”

“Yeah. Well, at first I could, but I couldn’t after she put her hand on my mouth. It wasn’t like I was numb or anything. I just couldn’t move.”

Diego’s brow furrowed. “That she touched you is odd, but…” He gazed up into Liam’s eyes. “I think you just had sleep paralysis.”

Liam blinked. “You mean… You think it was a nightmare?”

“In a way. You were dreaming, but you were also awake, and your body was asleep, so you couldn’t move. I don’t know. I’d be better at explaining it if I hadn’t just woken up.”

“But I didn’t go to sleep. I was just laying here, trying to go to sleep.”

“I think you just didn’t realize you’d already gone to sleep.”

“I—I don’t know…”

Diego wrapped his arms around Liam and kissed him on the forehead. “You’re okay. I’m here. It was just sleep paralysis. Shadowy figures, being unable to move, those are all signs of sleep paralysis.”

Liam leaned into Diego, starting to slowly calm down, but something still nagged at the back of his brain. Something wasn’t right about Diego’s theory, even though it sounded entirely logical.

But…” Liam said, shaking his head. “But, I’ve never had it before. Why would I have it now?”

“Stress of moving into a new house? Being in a new place? I’ve been feeling disoriented too. I keep waking up wondering where I am. But, we’ll both get used to it. You just had a nightmare, but you’re safe. You’re okay.”

“But… But it was so real.”

He hated himself for saying something so cliché, but it was true. His dreams were never that vivid and clear. And, he was certain that he hadn’t fallen asleep. Whatever was going on, he’d been awake for it.

He really didn’t want to think about it now, though. All he wanted to do was fall asleep with Diego’s arm around him. He wanted to forget about the woman in black and her eerie, lifeless voice.

Liam got barely any sleep that night. He spent most of it lying tensed up in the darkness, waiting for something else irrational and surreal to emerge from the shadows. Whenever he did manage to doze off, his dreams were dark, fragmented, and uneasy. Diego, on the other hand, immediately fell back asleep, although, thankfully, he didn't let go of Liam, allowing Liam enough comfort to eventually drift off.

By morning, Liam was feeling better. Perhaps it was just the illusion of safety; the idea that nightmares and spooky shadows are somehow defeated by daylight. Or, maybe it was simply that, in the light of the sun, all imaginings that seemed so real in the dark were now revealed to be ridiculous, like the shadow of a chair that, only a few hours before, had clearly been a monster ready to eat everyone. Liam even found himself laughing about it all when he later told Diego at breakfast about how freaked out he had been.

Diego, for his part, didn't laugh, but expressed concern and sympathy that Liam had been so terrified while he'd been sleeping. Liam reassured him that everything was okay, and, with that, the two men finished eating and went off to their separate jobs. As the workday went on, though, and Liam served latte after latte from his place behind the cash register, he started thinking about the woman in black again. He conceded that she had just been a product of his imagination, a shadow conjured by his scared brain while his body was paralyzed with sleep. Still... there was something about her, something about the things she'd said, that kept invading his thoughts. It made him shudder, even in the safety of the coffee shop.

After work, he tried to push all thoughts of the eerie night before out of his mind. He succeeded, for the most part. All he did that evening was watch TV while Diego sat at his desk, hunkered down over a pile of architectural sketches that he was grading. Nothing weird happened, even after the sun went down, and Liam had soon all but forgotten to be nervous. Diego went to bed early, and, after watching a couple more episodes of some adult animated show, Liam turned off the TV and went up upstairs as well. He'd expected to toss and turn for a while, especially after what had happened last night, but he ended up being too exhausted for that. Instead, he was lulled to sleep by the sound of Diego lightly snoring beside him.

It wasn't a nice sleep, though. His dreams were bizarre and frightening; filled with ashen, unfamiliar faces, unsettlingly sad music, white hands reaching out to him from impossible places, and a sense of being utterly overwhelmed and lost. He finally woke up in a cold sweat, gasping for air and digging his fingernails into the mattress. His memories of the dreams quickly faded away, even as he reeled from the panic they had caused. He sat up, wiping the sweat from his forehead and taking a few gulps of air, willing himself to calm down. It was at this time that he realized Diego wasn't lying next to him anymore. In fact, Diego wasn't in the room at all.

“Diego?” Liam called out hoarsely.

Nothing answered back. Silence and half-darkness, dimly illuminated by the streetlights outside, was all that he was met with. The bedroom door was wide open, which wasn't how Liam had left it when he'd gone to bed. Maybe Diego had gone to the bathroom or something? He waited for a few minutes, then got up, and peeked out into the hallway. The bathroom door didn't have a light shining out from under it. The entire hallway was pitch black. Liam flipped on a light switch near the bedroom door, turning on the ceiling light that hung over the middle of the hallway. Of course, Diego was still nowhere within sight.

Liam glanced back over at the bed and noticed that Diego's phone was missing from the nightstand. Unsure of what else to do, he grabbed his own phone as well, slipped it into the pocket of his pajama pants, and walked slowly out into the hallway, glancing into rooms as he headed for the stairs.

“Diego?” he called out tentatively, like any good, stereotypical character in a horror movie.

For some reason, everything felt sort of surreal, like walking through a dream. Or, better yet, the beginnings of a nightmare. The ceiling light was much too weak and dim, as if it came from a nearly burnt-out candle instead of a fluorescent light bulb. The shadows that inevitably gathered in the little corners of the hallway were too dark, too widespread.

“Diego? Where are you?”

Liam knew he was awake, though. He had that sense of hyperawareness, of vivid dread, that one only got when they were fully conscious.

“Diego?”

He reached the bottom of the stairs and rounded the corner through the foyer, intending to walk through the big, arched doorway and into the living room, but froze. The lights in there were just as pale and unnaturally soft as the ones in the hallway, but he could clearly see everything. All of their furniture was crammed up against the walls as if someone had shoved it out of the way. In the middle of the room was a semi-circle of flickering wax candles set in tall, wrought iron candleholders, and in the center of that was a six-foot-long, black coffin lying on a table.

Liam stared at it, mouth hanging slightly open for several minutes while his brain tried to register what he was looking at. The sound of his pounding heart suddenly made him realize just how quiet the house was. All he could hear was his own heartbeat and shallow breathing as he gazed at the coffin.

“What the hell?” he managed to breathe out.

Then, almost automatically, he took a step forward, slowly walking into the room and toward the coffin. He vaguely remembered a story, one he’d heard when he was a little kid, about how Abraham Lincoln had dreamed that he’d seen his own body in a coffin in the White House right before his assassination. Fear, even stronger than before, clenched Liam’s stomach. What was in the coffin? Was it him? What if it wasn’t him? What if there wasn’t even anyone in there? And why was there a freaking coffin in his sitting room?

He stopped before it and looked down. The lid was closed. Half of him knew, even through the haze of shock and bewilderment and unease swirling around in his mind, that it would be disrespectful to the dead to lift up the lid and look inside. The other half of him was too frightened to even touch the thing. Despite this, he grasped the lid with his fingertips and began to lift it up.

But what if it wasn’t his face or a stranger’s face that he saw in there? What if it was Diego’s?

Liam’s throat tightened, and something cold filled his chest. The very thought caused him to breathe in a shuddering gasp. He stopped, only for a second, then continued opening the coffin.

Finally, the lid was up high enough that he was able to throw it back. There was, in fact, a body in there. It was an older man with a gray mustache and a starched collar. The suit that he wore was the kind of somber, finely tailored one that someone would have worn the early 1900s. He had the pallid, wax-like face of all newly deceased corpses.

Liam felt an odd mixture of relief and further anxiety rush through him.

So... it wasn’t a premonition. But, there was dead body, here, in his living room. What should he’d do? How did it get here?

All of these thoughts went through his head in the space of a second as he stared down at the body in frozen horror. The small flames on the surrounding candles continued to flicker, threatening to be extinguished by a non-existent wind. Liam let out another shaky breath, his hand trembling as it held the coffin lid open.

Then, because the lighting and the random coffin weren’t creepy enough, the corpse’s eyelids shot open, revealing the palest, glassiest eyes that Liam had ever seen. And they were staring blankly up at him.

He screamed and leaped backward, letting the lid slam back down over the

coffin and the unsettling undead thing that it contained. For some reason, he didn't run, but simply stood there, hyperventilating.

"What are you doing here?" a woman's voice, scratchy and ancient, whispered in his ear.

He whirled around, wide-eyed and whimpering. There was, of course, no one there. In fact, everything was dark now, the only illumination coming from the bluish light that emanated from the municipal street lights outside. There was no more weird, dusky, candle-like light. He turned back around to face the coffin. It was no longer there. It, the candles, and, presumably, the body were all gone. All of the furniture was still shoved up against the walls, though.

"Liam!" a wonderfully familiar voice called out. It was Diego. His voice was coming from somewhere in the direction of the kitchen, although it sounded muffled.

Liam, unable to find his own voice yet, staggered over into the kitchen. But, when he got in there, it was empty.

"Diego?" he said, his voice quavering.

"Down here," Diego's voice said from behind the basement door. He sounded a little freaked out too. "The door's locked or stuck or something. I can't get out."

"Hold on."

Liam flipped on the light switch and went to investigate the basement door. It was locked from the outside. He unlocked the handle, and the door flew open, nearly hitting him in the nose. Diego stumbled through the doorway, clearly shaken, and slammed the door behind him, making sure to lock it back again. Neither one of them said anything for the longest time. Diego closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, and rested his head on the doorframe. Liam just stared, unsure what to say to his boyfriend, visions of reanimated corpses still fresh in his mind.

"Thanks," Diego said, opening his eyes. He gazed over at Liam. "It... was creepy down there." His eyes widened. "Liam? What's wrong? What happened?"

He cupped Liam's cheek with one hand.

Liam swallowed hard. "I... I don't know. I just saw something really... really weird in the sitting room. And, I was looking for you, but I couldn't find you, and there was a... there was a coffin. In the sitting room. And, there was a body in the coffin."

Diego's hand dropped. His face grew pale.

“What? There's a dead body in our house?!”

“No. He's not there anymore. It disappeared. The coffin, the body, the weird light, everything. Then I heard you saying my name, so I came in here. But...” Liam's word came out more forcefully as he locked eyes with Diego. A sudden fear that he wouldn't be believed gripped him. “But it was there! I touched the coffin. I could feel the wood it was made from. I lifted the lid and saw the body. And, then a woman whispered something in my ear and it was all gone.”

“What woman? Did you see her?”

“No. I was looking at the body, and its eyes opened, and then I heard the woman. But, when I turned around, she wasn't there.”

“Wait. You saw a coffin suddenly appear, so you looked inside it, and the dead body opened its eyes.”

“Uh-huh.”

Diego stared at him in horror. They both stood there, silently, for several minutes. Then, Diego grabbed him by the arm and steered him in the direction of the kitchen table.

“I think we both need to sit down,” was all he said.

So, they both sat down. Diego immediately grabbed hold of Liam's hand and squeezed it.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Liam nodded. “Yeah. I'm just gonna have nightmares for the rest of the week. But, are you okay? Why were in the basement? What happened down there? You look pretty freaked out, too.”

“I woke up because I heard noises downstairs. It sounded like someone was walking around. So, I brought this with me and went to check it out.”

He held up a little flashlight, like the ones that go on keychains.

Liam gaped at him. “Diego, it could have been a robber down here. Why didn't you wake me up? What if it was someone with a knife or a gun? All you had to defend yourself with was the world's tiniest flashlight!”

“Says the guy who saw a strange coffin pop up in his house and decided to take a look inside it.”

“I was looking for you.”

“And you thought I was in the coffin?!”

Liam glared at Diego and considered just getting up and going back upstairs. Diego let out a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just kind of creeped out right now.”

The anger instantly melted. “What happened, Diego?”

“Well, when I got down here, I could still hear someone walking around, but they were now in the basement. So, I went down there. But, the second I got on the stairs the door slammed shut behind me. I tried to open it again, but it wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard I pulled on the doorknob. I guess it was locked. It’s really dark and freaking cold down there, and I did not want to have to spend the rest of the night on the basement steps. Then... I... I started hearing voices. Coming from the dark. They were... whispering things”

“What were they saying?”

“They said my name.”

“That could have been me. I was calling your name when I was looking for you.”

“No, it didn’t sound like it was coming from upstairs. It sounded like someone was standing at the bottom of the stairs, whispering to me, trying to get me to come down. I tried shining a light down the stairs, but this flashlight is crap at actually being a flashlight. I couldn’t see a thing. I started pounding on the door and yelling for you, but the voices only got closer. They started saying other stuff, too. I couldn’t make it all out, but it sounded like they were saying, ‘stay with us,’ and something about being lonely. All the while, they were getting closer and closer. It was like they were walking up the stairs towards me, but I couldn’t hear any footsteps. Then, they suddenly stopped, and you opened the door.”

A long pause settled over the two men after Diego finished his story. Liam chewed on his lower lip, thinking.

“What are we going to do?” he finally asked.

Diego opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, a low groan came wafting through the ceiling towards them. A mournful, despairing groan that filled Liam with pity as much as it did with terror. It was quickly joined by another, higher-pitched groan, similar in sadness, then a third. By the fourth groan, Liam could feel Diego's fingers grasping for his own. He took Diego's hand in his and squeezed. He glanced up, his eyes surely mirroring the look of bewildered fear in Diego's eyes. Suddenly, the groans dissipated, the temperature dropped, and a quiet, eerie laugh floated on the air before leaving the two of them alone in the silence.

Neither of them got anymore sleep that night. After waiting several minutes for more strange events to befall them and being met with nothing, they both, as if in a daze, moved into the living room and rearranged the furniture that had been moved by... something. They spent the rest of the night sitting on the couch and watching TV, too scared to go back upstairs. Neither one said the word "haunted." In fact, they barely spoke at all. But, it was there, an unspoken acknowledgement that what they had just experienced was something real and otherworldly. They didn't leave, but neither did they confront it. Instead, they sat there, waiting for something terrifying to happen again. But, everything was fine. Neither of them heard anymore odd sounds or saw strange figures.

Once morning came around, they finally talked about it. Diego brought up the question of whether they should move out, or even just stay with a friend. Neither one actually wanted to leave, though. They'd already paid a deposit, the rent was cheap, and they had started to invest in the place. Besides, the ghosts, if that was what they were, never actually did anything besides scare them. So, they went on like nothing had happened. And, for a while, nothing did. The next night, despite how tense the two men were, was completely uneventful. So was the night after that. A week went by. Eventually, they started to relax, coming to believe that, for some unknown reason, the house was no longer haunted.

Of course, they were soon proved wrong. There was no way they couldn't have been. The house wouldn't have allowed it.

The ghosts decided to return on one of the coldest nights of the year. The air outside was so chilly that it felt as if it was eating its way into your bones, and all things weather related warned of a slight possibility for snowfall later that evening. Liam, never a fan of winter and feeling that this weather was much too cold for late fall, cranked up all the heaters and burrowed into the blankets, effectively cocooning himself. He fell asleep feeling blissfully warm and comfortable, with Diego, as usual, snoring away beside him. This was why he was so disoriented when he woke up to the sensation of icy air on his skin. For a moment, he thought he was outside, lying in the snow. It took him a while to realize he was still in bed, under the covers, and that someone was shaking his arm.

“Liam,” Diego whispered urgently into his ear. “Liam!”

With a groan, Liam shifted his body around to face Diego and opened his eyes.

“What—” he began to ask but stopped when he saw that Diego wasn’t even looking at him. Diego was lying there with his head turned toward the door and his hand gripping Liam’s arm tightly, as if he were afraid that something was going to tear one of them away. A dim, patchy light from the street lamps outside lit up only half of his face, but the half that was visible looked more fearful than Liam had ever known him to be. Liam followed his boyfriend’s horrified gaze, his eyes widening when he saw that a face was peering around the open doorway to look at them. Not just any face, either. It was the woman in black.

Her veil was thrown back over her hat, revealing her face. She was extremely pale, like the dead body in the coffin had been, with large eyes and bloodless lips that were pulled back into something resembling a smile. She didn’t seem happy, though. More... contemplative, and maybe amused, too. Like she knew a really dark secret and was debating whether or not she should tell anyone.

She was definitely the woman in black. Liam could see the top of her ebony dress, and felt a shiver run down his spine as she spoke in the same lifeless voice that had terrified him before.

“You’re still alive?” she said, her expression not changing one iota. With that, she turned and disappeared behind the wall, although Liam could still hear her heels clicking down the hallway.

To Liam’s surprise, a sense of frustration grew inside him and overcame his fear. Seeing things that weren’t there, waking up to horrifying sights, the fact that they were terrifying Diego as well as himself, all of it came to a head. This was supposed to be their house. They had signed the lease and everything.

“That’s it,” he said, throwing his blankets off to the side. He jumped out of bed and hurried towards the door. As he did so, he barely registered the fact that the cold air was fading away from the bedroom but getting stronger in the hallway, as if it were following the woman in black.

“Where are you going?” Diego said, his voice trembling. He threw off his blankets as well.

“I’ve had enough of this.” He made sure to speak loud enough for the woman in black to hear him, too. Liam didn’t look back to see if Diego was following him, but he soon heard Diego’s bare footsteps close behind. The two of them walked

out into the hallway, just in time to see the woman in black strolling leisurely down the staircase, as if there weren't a couple of scared, tired young men chasing after her. She suddenly stopped, her gloved fingers barely touching the railing, and turned back to look at Liam and Diego. The veil was covering her face again, so Liam couldn't tell what her expression was, but, for some reason, Liam got the impression that she was staring expectantly, like she was trying to get them to hurry up. Then, she turned back around and descended into the living room. Liam and Diego gave chase once more.

Thankfully, there was no coffin in the living room this time. However, the woman in black didn't appear to be down there either. Just bookcases, the TV, a coffee table, a few chairs, and the couch.

"Liam," Diego said, laying his hand on Liam's shoulder. "I think she wanted us to follow her. We should go back upstairs. Or, better yet, leave."

Liam opened his mouth, intending on agreeing with Diego, when he noticed that some tiles in the far side of the kitchen were lit up. There was a light coming from under the basement door. Neither of them had turned on the basement light since the landlord gave them a tour of the house.

"Why is that light on?" Diego said, following Liam's gaze.

Liam didn't answer. He wasn't sure how to answer. He started creeping towards the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Diego said, grabbing hold of Liam's arm.

"We need to see what's inside the basement," he replied, staring off into the kitchen. "I need to see what's down there."

"Liam! Don't. Its ghosts, okay!? Its ghosts! I didn't want to believe it, but they are. There's something really wrong down there, and it wants us to follow it. Why are you following it!?"

Liam glanced back at Diego and shook his head.

"I don't know." He really didn't. Something was drawing him towards the basement, something stronger than anger or the final straw. "I just know that I need to go down there. It doesn't... I don't think it wants to hurt us, though. I think... she wants to show us something. There's something we need to see. I can go down by myself, though. You stay up here."

Diego stared at Liam for a moment, hesitating, then grabbed his hand.

“Nope,” he said. “This is both our house. We’re doing this together, even if it’s extremely stupid.”

Liam smiled slightly, then led Diego into the kitchen and swung open the basement door. He’d half expected to see the woman in black waiting for them on the top step, staring creepily at them, but there was no one there. All he could see were the wooden stairs and a sliver of the basement floor. Diego, without warning, slipped his hand out of Liam’s and walked down the stairs, but froze halfway through.

“Uh...” he breathed. “L—Liam? Liam, come look at this.”

Liam walked slowly down, taking one step at a time, unsure if the icy feeling creeping over his skin was fear or the actual temperature of the basement. He stopped alongside Diego and promptly let out a choked gasp once he saw what was down there.

Five wooden tables, about the size and shape of a deck chair, were spread out across the room. Each table had small holes in its surface and a large block of ice underneath it. However, the most noticeable thing about each table was what lay on top of it. Human bodies. Five, to be exact, all covered over with white shrouds. It was hard to tell what each one was, but Liam could see that they ranged in shape from adults to a child.

“What...?” Diego said hoarsely. “What are...? What are they doing here?”

Liam just shook his head, his mouth hanging half-open. He couldn’t bring himself to say anything. He blinked, and by the time he opened his eyes again the woman in black was standing at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for them. Her veil was still covering her face, but Liam sensed that she was distressed. She stepped down onto the basement floor, and one by one, lifted each shroud.

Each body was different. Three were middle-aged men, one was a young woman, and the last one was a little boy, no more than five-years-old. They all had different hair and skin colors. The only things they all had in common, other than being dead, were the old-fashioned, off-white nightgowns each one wore. All were as waxen and statue-like as the body Liam had seen in the coffin only a few days before, with their eyes closed and their arms hanging limply by their sides.

“All dead,” the woman in black said from beneath her veil, her voice somehow simultaneously monotone and full of sorrow. “They’re all dead. So am I. But, you’re still alive.” She took one step back onto the staircase and stared up at the two young men. “Why? Why are you still alive? Why are you not dead? Why will you not join us yet?”

As she said the word “yet,” every single one of the corpses opened their eyes and fixed their glassy, seemingly unseeing gaze on Liam and Diego. Though none of them opened their mouths, several whispers rose into the air, urgently crying out, “Liam! Diego! Come!”

“Screw what she wants to show us!” Liam breathed, grabbing a petrified Diego by the hand and yanking him up the stairs. His feet stumbled a couple of times, but he never looked back, and he never let go of Diego, not until they slammed open the front door and ran out into the cold, snow-covered street.

Eventually, once it felt as if their feet were about to freeze off of their ankles, they went back inside, but only to change into warmer clothes and grab some essentials. They spent the rest of the night on a friend’s futon, giving a vague statement of “unsafe living conditions” as their reason. The next morning, the two of them called the landlord and offered to give up their security deposit and pay a fine in exchange for canceling their lease. The landlord didn’t appear to be surprised by their request, although was a little miffed about having to redo all the paperwork. He let them go, though, and after a weeklong extension to get all of their stuff out, Liam and Diego found another apartment just a few blocks away. It was cheaper, and much smaller, than the house, and was situated in a slightly noisy neighborhood, but they didn’t care.

While Diego did stare wistfully at the exterior of the house from time to time, and occasionally mumbled something about how nice it would have been if it wasn’t so messed up, he never backed down from the decision to move. In fact, he barely even went inside after the night in the basement. If he did go in, it was just to pack or to grab a piece of furniture sitting only a few feet beyond the threshold. Otherwise, he let the movers take care of everything.

Liam’s only regret was leaving behind their kindly neighbor. He was going to miss having dinner with her and hearing her travel stories. They still had each other’s phone numbers, but he knew that they wouldn’t call each other.

On the last day of the move, Liam threw on his coat, walked over to her house, and knocked on the door to say goodbye. She hugged him after she answered the door and invited him inside. After settling down in the living room, Liam explained how the house had some “unsafe living conditions,” that they were moving to be “closer to campus,” and all of that crap.

“Well,” his neighbor said, after repeatedly informing him that she was going to miss the two of them, “that’s good that you’re going somewhere a little safer. These old houses can have all sorts of hidden dangers, like lead paint and such. I just hope that you’re not leaving because...” She faltered, as if she’d said more than she’d meant to and now couldn’t go back on it. “Well, because of the stories.”

Liam's head shot up. "Stories? What stories?"

"You know, old houses and all that. I've lived in this house for four years and have seen four renters go through there. Most of them were kind of strange, though. Party kids that picked the wrong neighborhood. I figured that they always left because it was too boring around here, but then, after the last group left, I started hearing weird stories. I didn't tell you two because they were ridiculous, of course. Ghost stories, that kind of thing. But, you might have heard them somewhere else, and I hoped you weren't moving because of that. Like I said, I've lived in this neighborhood for four years and haven't had any 'supernatural encounters.' Only odd house noises here and there, or loud college kids throwing parties. I don't mean you, though! You and Diego have been good neighbors. Very quiet. I'm going to miss having you here."

"It's okay. And, uh, we hadn't heard any stories. I guess that's why the house was so cheap."

"Oh, that's probably because of the problems that you two found. I swear, the man who owns that place must not take care of it. He just lets it rot and is upset that no one wants to rent it. Of course, he probably has to lower the price because of its history, too."

"History? What history? Did something bad happen there? Like, a murder or something?"

"Oh, no! Nothing like that! Not that I know of, anyway. The history is pretty boring, really. Just a mansion built in the 19th century by some university bigwig who then sold it. No, the reason the price is lowered is because it was a funeral home for about a hundred years. From the time its first owner sold it until fairly recently. Some older people in town still think of it as a funeral home. There are no dead people in it now, of course, but the fact that there were a bunch there at one point can understandably creep some people out. I—Are you alright, Liam? You just look really pale. Oh, I didn't want to upset you by telling you that! Do you need me to get you some water?"

THE FINAL GIRL

Dawn Judge

I learned everything from you. How to hunt. How to fight. How to survive. You really shouldn't be shocked by how good I am at it; I did learn from the Master.

You really thought you wouldn't get caught, didn't you? Not by the cops. And certainly not by me. Your last victim, the one you left for dead in the middle of a deserted highway. Like human roadkill, twitching involuntarily with its last, dying breath. Except I wouldn't die. I wouldn't give you that satisfaction. No matter what you put me through, no matter how many limbs you broke, how many fingers you severed.

I wish I could say you stopped killing because I put up such a good fight. That I hurt you as badly as you hurt me. But we both know the real reason you stopped is because how close you came to getting caught. They say that, that's the only reason I survived, that you were interrupted before you could hit your full flow, as it were. But that's bullshit and we both know it. The real reason I survived is because I wouldn't give up. Not until I could face you. Not until I could make you suffer the way I did at your hands.

And now here we are.

Bet you thought I would give up looking for you after a few months. Certainly after a few years. And definitely after a good few decades. But I've always been a stubborn bitch, and I've only gotten worse as the years have gone on. And my rage has only gotten deeper. And hotter.

It's not just for me, this burning anger. You took the life of my best friend that night, too. It tears me up inside how much she gets forgotten about when the press picks apart at my story. Because she was just another victim. Number twelve, If I remember right. I would have been thirteen. Unlucky for some. Certainly unlucky for you. But she was my sister, the girl I had grown up with. That taught me how to put on eyeliner for my first ever date. That hugged me close when that same boy broke my heart. Who should have been there when I graduated university, standing side by side with me with that big goofy grin on her face she always had. You took that away from me you bastard. And for that, you're gonna pay.

There's absolutely no point in struggling you know. I used the same rig you did with me. Yeah, you may be bigger than me, but you're still not getting out. I've made sure of that. And no one is looking for you. Not like they were with me. You got too good at blending in, didn't you? Not making connections with anyone, keeping a low profile. Yeah, it kept the cops off your back, but it also worked extremely well

in my favour. God, how I love to watch you bleed. Blood splashes making all those pretty little patterns in the sawdust. It just makes my heart go all gooey. Should I take the gag out? Hear you call me all the obscenities your tired little brain can possibly think of? Will they be as bad as the things you called me when we first met, I wonder? When you were having your depraved way with me.

Looking at you now, at how pathetic you are, makes me wonder how you ever managed to capture me in the first place. Did I look as weak as this to you, is that why you thought I would make the perfect victim? There certainly seemed to be no rhyme or reason why you chose any of the girls you did, it's why they've never caught you. It was only sheer dumb luck that I was even found; that someone had decided to camp in those particular woods and had heard my screams, had gone to investigate. You had never had to deal with an intruder on your plans before and so had panicked and dumped me on the first bit of busy road you could get to. Probably thinking I would get runover, and no one would ever think I was one of your victims. You hadn't been able to finish all your handiwork, and were nothing if not a perfectionist when it came to your art. But, unfortunately for you, I was found and dragged to safety. And now here we are.

Do you know what my life has been like since that night? A living, fucking, hell. I haven't slept a wink in the thirty-plus years since it happened; I keep having nightmares. Replaying that night over and over again, how you took me, what I could have done differently, could I have saved myself? It's a question I keep finding myself asking. It's not like I didn't follow all the safety protocols a girl gives herself, like I didn't know all the tricks. Never stay out too late at night, always make sure your phone has plenty of charge in case you need to call someone. Stay with your friends. And yet you still managed to get me. It's almost like none of that matters, really. Bad things happen to good people all the time, isn't that right? And sometimes, just sometimes mind, if someone is very, very determined, bad things can happen to very bad people. People like you.

It must have driven you crazy. Seeing all the press switch their attention from you to me. It must be one of the reasons you do what you do, come on, you can admit that to me. Watching the cops scabble around, getting no closer to catching you, all the while you're hiding in plain sight from them. I mean, who would have ever suspected the father of one of the victims was the actual killer. And you played the part of the grieving father so well. I wonder, did you kill your own daughter to throw the cops off the scent, or were you past the point of caring who your victims were at that stage? And, I hate to admit; it was a smart move on your part, announcing you had to leave the family home, there were too many painful memories for you there. And no, you couldn't say where you were moving to. It had to be a fresh start for you. That must have been a luxury for you, getting to rebuild your life, create a brand new one somewhere else, where no-one knew your painful history. Not a luxury I was ever given. You are really not gonna talk to me, are you? C'mon, you

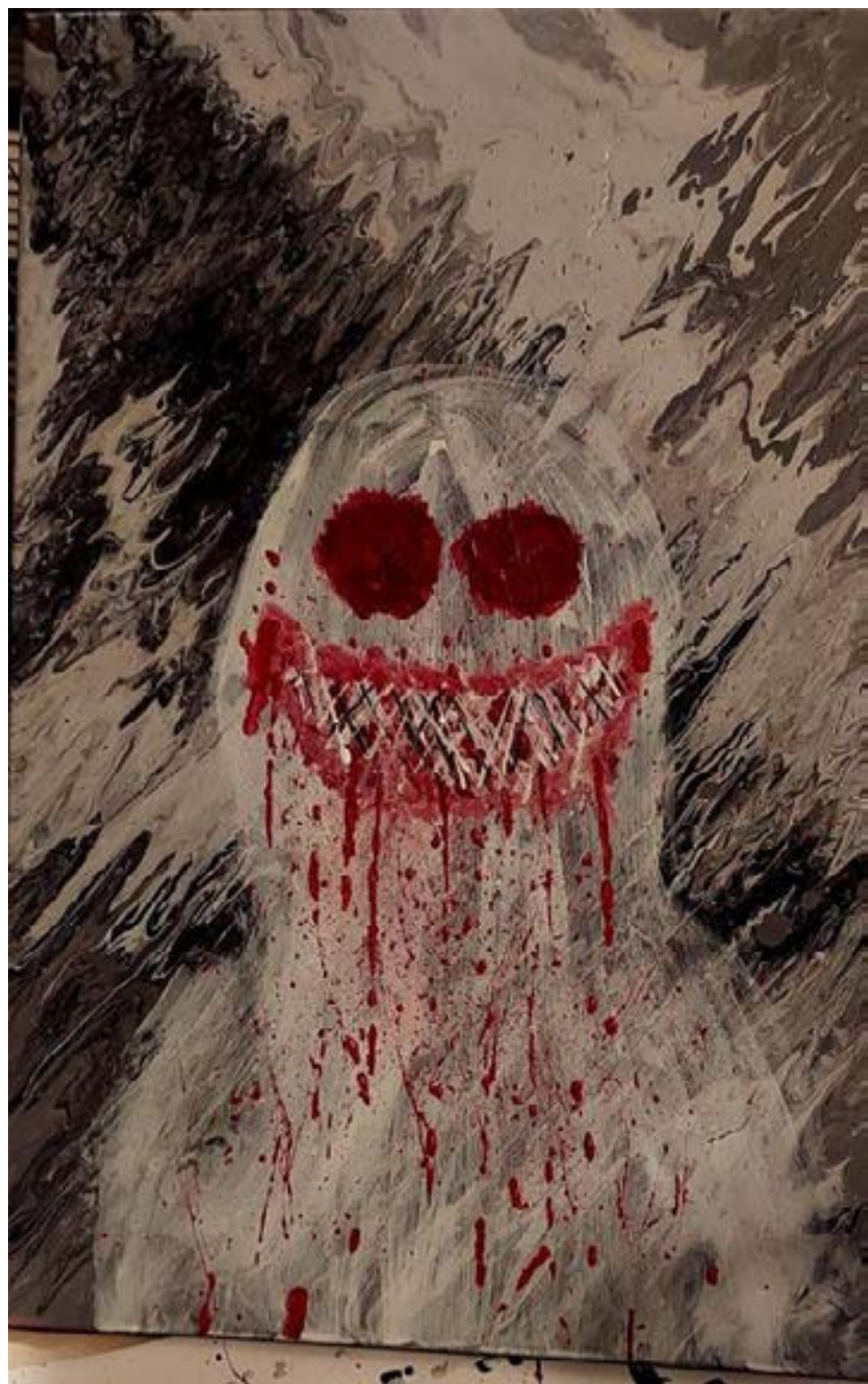
must know you're not getting out of this alive, might as well unburden yourself to me. I'll hear your confession. Ah well, if you're not gonna talk, then I might as well unburden myself to you. After all, you're the only one who really understands what I went through that night.

The Final Girl, that's what they named me. The press, all those shitty gossip blogs on the Net. Like I was some dumb fuck character from those shitty late night horror flicks. They probably thought they were being ironic or something. You know how many parts I turned down in those films? It must be in the fucking hundreds. Trying to cash in on my name, so their film would have an actual real life Final Girl in them. Fuck. Them. They wouldn't have the first fucking clue what it's actually like to live through something like that, to try to rebuild the life you had after surviving a real life horror film. The media hounding your every fucking move. The relationships I managed to build up, that I had to watch crumble in front of me. The whole world watching the Final Girl desperately trying to make some kind of normal life for herself. Until I finally gave up, finally realised that I was going to be anything but normal. There was never going to be enough therapy, enough crystals, enough of any kind of healing process either self-prescribed or not that was ever gonna truly mend me. I had to learn to lean into my cracked psyche, make it a full part of me. There's an ancient Japanese practise called kintsugi, meaning 'to join with gold'. It's where they mend broken pottery with gold, to make something beautiful out of something broken. I chose to mend my broken pieces with blood. The blood of all your victims. The blood of your daughter. The blood of Stella, my beautiful bestie, who I should have been growing old disgracefully with. I chose to mend myself with my blood, my blood you shed that night. And now, for the final fix, I'm mending me with your blood.

You think you were the only one who could learn to hide themselves away from the world? God, but you're an arrogant fuck, aren't you? As I said before, I learned from The Master. Can I just say, while I've got you here, that I always thought that was a truly dumb name for a serial killer. I mean, you were an English Lit teacher, for Christ's sake, you really couldn't come up with anything better than that? Oh, oh no, you're not bleeding out on me just yet. I mean, I've left you with a lot more fingers than you left me with that night. And you've still got both of your legs. You should really count yourself lucky, you know. And I haven't even started on your eyes yet. It really isn't like the horror films when that happens, when the killer goes for the eyes. Well, it wasn't when you did it. It was more like bursting the centre of a fried egg. Should I do that to you, an eye for an eye as it were? Could I become like you? Ah, there's the real danger, that I go too far here, cross that forbidden boundary. Then who would be the real bad guy? But would rotting away in some jail be a suitable punishment for you, I mean, it's not as if you have many years left in you anyway. Decisions, decisions. What is a girl to do, huh? I could just leave you here, hanging from the ceiling like a slaughtered cow in an abattoir. But I know how resourceful you can be. And I really can't be bothered with another

cat-and-mouse game. I mean, it was fun at first, making you think you had the upper hand, pretending that I didn't know you were hunting me again, just to get you here. I was to be your final swan song, wasn't I? Before you finally left this mortal coil. You knew you didn't have much time left, so you had to tidy up your last loose end. Ah, well. Karma's a bitch.

You know what? I'm done with this. I'm done with defining myself with you, being defined by you. By what you did to me. And I'm sure as hell not gonna turn into you. No, no more torture, I'm not like you. You started out messy, that's for sure, but, oomph! There we go. One swift slice of the throat and it's done. No, I'm going to be much, much cleaner for my next kills. When I hunt the rest of you down. You know, it was one of the dumber things you did, starting that little WhatsApp group with the rest of your sick fuck friends. God knows how you found each other but then again, the 'Net can be a cursed place. What it can also be good for is helping to track the rest of you, find you. Make you the hunted, instead of the hunters. No other girl is gonna go through what I did, not on my watch, not while there's still breath in my body. I'm gonna be the last Final Girl.

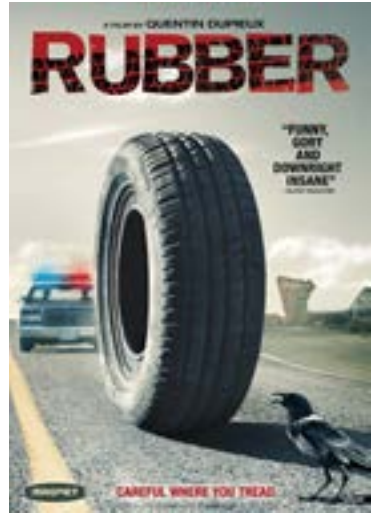


BIG WHEEL KEEP ON TURNING: A RUBBER REVIEW.

BY ALYSSA MARTINEZ



VS



It's rare that I reach this level of “what the fuck did I just watch”, but what else would you expect from a movie that starts off with a fourth wall break?

Written and directed by French filmmaker Quentin Dupieux, the plot seems simple enough. As a group of spectators look on, a discarded car tire becomes sentient, discovers he has telekinetic powers, and embarks on a rampage of death and destruction.

In the opening moments of the film, a car drives through the desert toward some folding chairs. After deliberately mowing down every last chair, the car comes to a stop, the trunk pops open, and a police officer, Lieutenant Chad, climbs out. Chad promptly stares into the camera and informs the audience that sometimes things in movies happen for no reason, and that the movie we're about to watch has no purpose. You son of a bitch, I'm in.

What follows is an hour and twenty minutes of horror comedy delight. The tire, who we learn in the closing credits is named Robert, first tests out his powers by blowing up a few bottles, a rabbit, and a crow before moving on to human heads. Lots and lots of human heads. Who cares that the practical effects are cheesy and the head exploding becomes predictable after the first kill? By fifteen **minutes in**, I

found myself rooting inexplicably for the tire. And why not? And as the movie progresses, we see that he has dreams, and memories. He likes watching NASCAR. If nothing else, Dupieux does a decent job humanizing the tire, which is key because otherwise, why do we care?

Adding to the nonsense is the audience within an audience watching the “movie” in real time from an observation point a safe distance away from the action. Something is definitely off with these folks, because they’re out in the middle of nowhere with no supplies and no shelter, and the expectation that they’ll stick around and watch as long as the movie plays out. After leaving them overnight with no food, one of Lieutenant Chad’s minions brings them a turkey, which they tear into like a horde of zombies on a pile of fresh brains. All except one gentleman, who would rather continue watching Robert than join his companions in the feeding frenzy. Good thing, too, since a few minutes later everyone who ate the turkey dies a horrible, agonizing death. Seriously, what the hell is going on here?

Let’s get back to the tire. Is he the hero or the villain? Does it really matter? And why does Robert kill, exactly? Is it revenge on the people he perceives as having wronged him (or all tires, as in the case of the group of men burning the random piles of tires in the middle of the desert)? Is it some prime directive from a higher authority of tires that we would have learned about in Rubber 2? Or is it simply because he can? Is the answer really...no reason?

I tried to set aside the absurdity and find some redeeming quality or recurring theme. At one point we learn that Lieutenant Chad poisoned the spectators in the hope that it would end the movie and thus stop the carnage. And that if the movie ends they, the actors, cease to exist. If one smoked enough weed to wax philosophical, one could argue that this is a statement about the entertainment industry in general: that movies, shows, celebrities only exist or matter as long as they have an audience. In reality I’m probably reading too much into it. It’s an homage to the nonsensical. If there’s an underlying message here, it’s that anything can happen in movies, without any sort of logic or explanation, because there is no reason other than the deranged whim of the filmmaker.

Or Dupieux could just be a really weird dude.

Bottom line, this was a terrible movie. So why did I love it? No reason.

WELL FOLKS THAT WRAPS US UP FOR ANOTHER MONTH HERE AT
EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL. I WANT TO THANK ALL OF THE AMAZINGLY
TALANTED WOMEN WHO GAVE THEIR TIME AND WORK TO MAKE
THIS ISSUE HAPPEN. FOR ME IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT THE TALE, AND
THESE WOMEN HAVE PROVED THEY CAN CERTAINLY SCARE WITH
THE BEST OF THEM.

WE'LL SEE YOU NEXT MONTH WHEN WE SHINE A LIGHT ON THE UNIQUE
TERRORS THAT LURK IN ALABAMA. HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE.

CHRISTOPHER PELTON

PURVEYOR OF NIGHTMARES AND NOSTALGIA

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