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To Hold and Horrify

By Dee Richards

For my daughter

## INTRODUCTION I

*“And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must, each of us, recognize our responsibility to seek those words out. To read them, and share them, and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.”*

- Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals*

I don't remember how he trained me; it was so subtle over many weeks, months. Was it the first time I recall "letting go" something that he had done, which felt so completely *wrong*? I don't know. It could have even started well before my awareness had time to catch up. Exes, friends, society, my mother, my father, from the moment I was born, was I trained? I do recall the times which I had said something I knew I shouldn't have; the characteristics of his rage had become familiar very quickly. I easily remember not objecting when I wanted to. I know that the build-up to a punch, kick, push, or slap is so much worse than the pain they illicit.

He trained me to anticipate anger, even while new angers were being built. He told me what abuse was and what it was not; it wasn't abuse when he threatened but never laid a hand on me. It wasn't abuse when he pushed me down but never slapped me. It wasn't abuse when he kicked me if it didn't leave marks. What about when it did? No, because he apologized. Nothing was abuse unless he said it was, not even murder. I had no idea what qualified as abuse. When one is living within abuse, it is nearly impossible to think that one is abused. The abuser “has a temper” or the relationship is “passionate,” *not* abusive, no matter how miserable, isolated, and afraid you may feel.

His training worked. By the point I might have become aware of it, I already knew not believe my own feelings, thoughts, or responses. Sadly, society has often reinforced his version

of reality. Society asks what I did to provoke him. They say I'm "blowing things out of proportion." He tells me it's all in my head, and that I deserved it. Everywhere I could turn said to me that our "domestic dispute" was a private affair. A dispute is how to load the dishwasher, where to eat dinner, and other pedantic memes of married life. It is not kicking me in my ribs while I sob, simply because I yelled in frustration when he was over an hour late picking me up, refusing to say why. A dispute is not hiding the car keys so that I was physically unable to leave him. It is not a knife on my wrist, or an arm around my throat. These are not "disputes."

His training worked so well that even now as I write this, I wonder if my experiences can ever be considered "real" domestic violence because he got away with it. I never drew up a case against him. I broke the restraining order to see him – are my experiences even real? There are court records which show that I went to jail on misdemeanor criminal threat after a fight. It is true, I yanked down that knife from the magnetic strip. It is true that I said if he didn't stop attacking me, that I would stab him. That is believable, I'd bet. No questions there. If I amend these statements with context – that I went to jail to protect him, a two-strike felon, from going to prison because he would lose his job and I'd be homeless (or so he reminded me) – do you believe me still? Or is that which was proven in a court of law, that I threatened to harm him (no matter the context), all that matters? I could say: "Why in the world would I lie about that?" I have heard the answer across social media, the news, and primetime TV. The answer I've heard is that I *want* to discredit an innocent man. An innocent two-strike felon who, I later found out, was a convicted child molester. An innocent man who, provably, has been arrested two times beside me for domestic assault – who was acquitted. An innocent, hard-working man who, two months after I moved out, told me that he was teaching his new girlfriend's children some "discipline." I spent the next 15 years undoing the pain he caused in just two. I am still trying to

shake the jolt of fear that I feel when a man yells. But sure, I like to make stuff up to ruin innocent men. The matter of belief is never linked to what can actually be proven.

The pictures of the bruises up and down my body taken by the court examiner were never used by my court-appointed male attorney who said that a criminal jury trial would keep me in jail for up to two years while we fought. However, a plea bargain on misdemeanor charges of criminal threat amounted to time served, immediate release, and a cash payment. My abuser had said that since I didn't have a criminal record, as he did (of which he was always falsely accused, he assured me), I would be out by the next morning. So, I did lie. I told them I attacked him, unprovoked. I waited patiently to be released for 24 hours. Once reality set in, I told them an unbelievable story about years of abuse that I sought help for at a hospital and from friends and family. We know what the family said, the hospital said that because I fought back sometimes that *I* needed to go to anger management. My anger was never allowed.

The day that he cut my wrist with a dull knife before punching my face, kicking me with both feet in the ribs, legs, and breasts, he had pushed in the car's electric lighter when I finally got out of the car and begged him to stop hurting me. Is his cruelty unbelievable, or is it just so horrific that it is easier to turn away? Is it easier to believe that I am making all this up than to accept that when I called his parole officer for help, she sent a patrol car to arrest *me*? Why would they arrest me if I wasn't guilty? After all, I did pull down the knife that he took from my hand, and slashed my wrist with. I *did* try to steal his car to get away from him hurting me. I *did* get mad when he left me somewhere alone, without money for an hour to "teach me patience." Accordingly, in every occasion, I deserved what he did. His reactions were justified actions to our "dispute." I know that he trained me. He trained you, too.



## **PART I**

### **The Unbelievably Horrific, Scary Movies, and the Uncanny**

*“Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle, and looking is a bad thing for two reasons:  
First, looking is the opposite of knowing. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting.”*

- Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*

Why is it that when a story is told of immense tragedy, like violence, sorrow, and murder, it has to be fiction? You read it and think: This is not real, this is a story; no one can possibly be this horrible. In non-fiction, the idea is that, despite knowing it to be conceptually “real,” it is so far removed from our own reality as to be unrecognizable. Our beautifully complex minds are designed to protect us. "No one can be this evil," our minds say, and we are reassured. Children shot to death, women begging for help to those who refuse to listen, bruises we see and do nothing about – all of it is not *really* real. Qualifying their unreality is a matter of merely not witnessing it, because someone has told us that it wasn't our problem. Horror stories shock and appall, but as you climb under a blanket to comfort yourself, you know it isn't real. The fact that you've never experienced it, or known anyone who has, is your only protection and understanding between reality and fantasy. Actually, chances are, you do (or did) know someone who has experienced domestic terrorism – a phrase now replacing the old, familiar phrase, “domestic violence” to better encompass the scope of many kinds of coercive control within the domestic sphere.

The term “domestic violence” is impactful for its cultural understanding, but truly abandons a great number of victims who strain further still to be believed. Domestic terrorism incorporates many forms of interpersonal violence and coercive control, including physical violence, sexual violence, verbal/emotional abuse, mental/psychological abuse, financial/economic abuse, and/or cultural and identity abuse in the domestic sphere. If domestic terrorism sounds like a threat to national safety, it is. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), more than 10 million people experience intimate partner violence every year in the United States alone (one every 20 minutes).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, those

statistics rely solely upon filed reports of intimate partner violence, and discount many forms of non-violent coercive control. Reporting standards are also heavily skewed based on socio-economic status, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation of the persons involved. Recent studies suggest an increase in reported offenses of intimate partner violence since 2016, and a sharper incline during and immediately following COVID-19 lockdown protocols.<sup>2</sup>

One would expect that any natural disaster, climate catastrophe, or international war that harmed more than 10 million Americans a year and rising would be countered by some of the nation's greatest minds and talents. However, the social narrative surrounding instances of domestic terrorism is not only taboo, but, in many cases, entirely dismissive. As previously stated, what we, as a culture, have come to understand about domestic abuse mainly focuses on the narrative that it is a private affair. Statistics from NCADV state: "1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience severe intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner contact sexual violence, and/or intimate partner stalking with impacts such as injury, fearfulness, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of victim services, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, etc." Put another way, an absolutely staggering 25% of all the women you have ever met has been a victim of violent crime or coercive control within their lifetime. Additionally, "1 in 15 children are exposed to intimate partner violence each year, and 90% of these children are eyewitnesses to this violence." This means that for an average United States classroom of 24 students, one or two have been eyewitnesses to a violent crime. An online resource for domestic violence victims, [domesticshelters.org](http://domesticshelters.org), places the incidence of domestic violence against transgender and gender non-conforming individuals to as much as 1 in 2.<sup>3</sup> Can it really be considered a private affair when between 15-50% of all people you have ever known are affected by it? Are you starting to believe it?

If I told you that I was brutally attacked by my husband, I would imagine you might say the same which I've heard by those who've believed me in the past: "I'm so sorry that happened to you." Thank you, I am too. However, for those who are not personally affected by it, the conversation ends there. We begin teaching our kids to say sorry at an early age, but as soon as they are capable of understanding it, they realize that saying "I'm sorry" is only the first step to creating change, not the entire process. Others think: "If my friends or family were being abused, they would tell me." In fact, oftentimes, mental conditioning and safety concerns prevent a victim from being able to ask for help; there are more than a startling number of cases where getting help made matters worse. If pity is the first step, then waiting for someone to seek you out is not even on the map. The images of pity and helplessness in the face of this preventable tragedy is what has been peddled through domestic terrorism narrative to ease your conscience. Interpersonal violence is hard to accept, I understand that. It drives one to look away. However, there is a way that we accept violence every day, in a way that is not only socially enjoyable, but highly profitable: Horror media.

If I asked you to imagine a dark figure backing a crying young woman into a corner and raising a knife, the chill of excitement as Michael Myers claims his next victim might flash in your mind. Unfortunately, this is not fiction; this is my life. When I set out to write about domestic violence, I did not know what I wanted to say about it. "It's a big problem," has been said for decades, if not centuries, often to no avail. The one thought that kept creeping in was that you can't describe domestic terrorism without horror, because the experience itself *is* horrific. This led me to wonder why the dominant narrative of domestic terrorism leans on the pitiable, not the actionable. Although many know the imagery of the abject, battered woman, very little research currently exists that blatantly examines the formation of this symbolic and

pitiful creature in the modern imagination. As such, I had to dig deep into my understanding of imagery, allegory, and literary devices to pick apart the history of this narrative “strand by bloody, self-referenced strand<sup>4</sup>.”

Since my goal was to prove what I knew to be true – that domestic terrorism *is* horror – I began scanning titles across the horror streaming platform *Shudder*, in order to develop a common language of themes in classic and modern horror film. Combing through the A-Z feature of *Shudder*’s film collection, I noticed several common classifications of what is considered horrifying to the viewing public. Among these common themes were included: home invasion, unfamiliar locations, darkness, mental invasion, stripping of identity or autonomy, transformations, the horrific double, and/or bodily invasion.

In the theme of home (or locale) invasion, I include invasion by a supernatural entity (*Paranormal Activity*, 2007; *Poltergeist*, 1982), invasion by extraterrestrial entity or entities (*The 4th Kind*, 2009; *Nope*, 2022), invasion by strangers with ill-intent (*The Strangers*, 2008; *The Purge*, 2013), and invasion by someone familiar acting in unfamiliar ways (*The Amityville Horror*, 2005; *The Shining*, 1980). I define this topic as one where the central character is being victimized by someone who does not live with them, or has not revealed themselves as dangerous at the time in which they took up residence with them. In the theme of unfamiliar locations, I include topics such as: moving to a new home (*Paranormal Activity*, 2007; *The Haunting in Connecticut*, 2009), moving into a temporary home (*The Shining*, 1980; *The Woman in Black*, 2012; *Crimson Peak*, 2015) or staying in a rental home/hotel (*1408*, 2007; *Barbarian*, 2022). Most of the time, this trope is more of a stepping stone to a larger story, but that does not mean that it cannot be the story in and of itself. The very act of moving (if only temporarily) can be life-changing. As John Cusack's character says in *1408*, "Hotel rooms are a naturally creepy

place... How many people have slept in that bed before you? How many of them were sick? How many of them lost their minds? How many of them died?"<sup>5</sup>

The theme of “darkness” is simply intrinsic to horror media, dating from even the earliest gothic novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole. Physical darkness can be, at times, the horror itself, such as in *Blair Witch* (1999) or *Chernobyl Diaries* (2010). However, hematic darkness touches upon the basest fears of humanity and in so doing, it creates the one element that is universally experienced: a fear the unseen or unrelatable. Unlike serving as a backboard for a further horror, however, darkness and the unperceived lie in the heart of existential terror. An unseen alien, as those perceived without much visual guiding in *The 4th Kind*, is menacing. Meanwhile, a familiar alien, such as *E.T.* (1982) is heart-warming. For the characters of each of these films, their homes and lives are altered in measurable ways, but one is considered fun and adventurous, while the other is threatening. The key difference between these extraterrestrials lies in their unfamiliarity – a darkness which is not physical, but emotional or mental.

Mental invasion and the stripping of identity and/or autonomy is particularly horrific for members within individualistic societies. With unlimited access to another’s emotional center of understanding and perception, even the most distressing or bizarre things can become familiar, and the most intimate become threatening. To be ejected from the distinct familiarity of your own mind, body, or autonomy is at the heart of what Sigmund Freud calls “*unheimlich*,” or “the uncanny.”<sup>6</sup> Films such as the off-the-beaten-path semi-horror, *Being John Malkovich* (1999), directly explores if one can truly overtake another's consciousness as their own. However, in films such as: *The Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Dark City* (1998), or *Cabin in the Woods* (2011), characters thoughts, desires, and even personal identities are artificially manipulated so that the

unfamiliar and terrifying becomes acceptable. The stripping of identity and/or autonomy experiences an unbalanced relationship with mind invasion. While one can lose their identity or autonomy without their mind becoming invaded (entirely), one whose mind has been invaded cannot fully maintain an identity or autonomous nature. By the very experience of mind invasion, you have been stripped of autonomy, having had your freedom of choice within your own mind already removed. The stripping of autonomy can look like forced imprisonment (*Saw*, 2004; *Cube*, 1997) or the limitations of movement within a specified sphere (*The Truman Show*, 1998; *Dark City*, 1998). The stripping of one's identity has far darker connotations, and signifies a larger difficulty beyond the limited area of one's movements. Psychological horrors, such as *Annihilation* (2018) or *Identity* (2003) utilize ambiguity to emphasize the loss of autonomy not only within the characters, but also for the viewer; even as you watch the film you sometimes can't trust your own understanding of what you're seeing, and thus, passing on the uncanny experience.

In Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," Freud continues the psychological exploration of the uncanny started by Ernst Jentsch's *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906). Freud expands on Jentsch's understanding of the uncanny, stating in the introductory paragraphs of his text that "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." This means that the most horrifying elements of the uncanny effect derive from the alteration of awareness. Films such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Poltergeist* (1982) demonstrate the tenuous nature of the familiar becoming, suddenly, unfamiliar. In the case of these movies, the home turns from a place of harmony and comfort to one of terror and dread. Freud points out in "The Uncanny" that "The German word, *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to the home'; and we

are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar." Freud draws upon Grimm's Dictionary which extends the definition beyond what is familiar to include "that which is concealed and kept out of sight." In following Freud's argument, he states that *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are indivisibly linked, and that *unheimlich* "is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*." In this view of the definition of *unheimlich*, one can easily deduce the uncanny nature of domestic abuse as something that is indivisible from the home and, typically, concealed.

In Carmen Maria Machado's horror-adjacent memoir, *In the Dream House*, she states: "A house is never apolitical. It is conceived, constructed, occupied, and policed by people with power, needs, and fears."<sup>7</sup> She defines the home as not only a construct of complex systems of intersecting ideas of authority, but also a sphere of privacy in which to reinforce these oppressions in microcosm. Machado draws necessary connections between gothic fiction and the experience of domestic partner terrorism in the chapter "Dream House as American Gothic." Machado states that "A narrative needs two things to be a gothic romance. The first, 'woman plus habitation'... The second necessary element: 'marrying a stranger.'" One of the most enduring figures of gothic horror is the trope of the character "Bluebeard." Bluebeard spawns from a French folktale, which was first adapted into literary fairy tale in 1697 by Charles Perrault. The tale of Bluebeard features both a woman plus habitation, and that habitation complicated by her marriage to a storied stranger. Machado says of her own experiences with her same-sex, abusive partner, "She was a stranger because something essential was shielded, released in tiny bursts until it became a flood – a flood of what I realized I did not know." This is precisely the plot of all Bluebeard cycle tales, where a, largely unnamed, woman is wooed by a

stranger, only to discover the viciousness Bluebeard has concealed until the literal or metaphorical blood flows.

The Guillermo del Toro 2015 horror film, *Crimson Peak*, is a more modern adaptation of the Bluebeard cycle. The plot features a crumbling home to which the female lead, Edith Cushing, (played by Mia Wasikowska), is brought by her charismatic, yet secretive spouse, Sir Thomas Sharpe (played by Tom Hiddleston). There, it is revealed that a deeply disturbing incestual relationship between Thomas Sharpe and his sister, Lady Lucille Sharpe (played by Jessica Chastain), has led to a series of murders of Thomas' former wives. In the film, Thomas marries moneyed women, then turns a blind eye to his sister's obvious murder of them in order to gain the woman's fortune and continue their love, far from the public eye. While the plot of *Crimson Peak* diverges from the Bluebeard cycle with introducing a sister, and complicates the image of Bluebeard from his earlier leanings of mostly brutal criminal, it still has the elements Machado defines as gothic romance: a woman cohabitating with a stranger.

Gothic fiction (also called gothic horror), historically, features motifs classified by fear within the home, and a looming threat of some horrifying, supernatural, and/or violent event unfolding. Using this model of gothic fiction, Machado likens her partner to a Bluebeard-like figure, and frames their relationship in the chapter as gothic fiction. For Machado, the elements of cohabitation and the threat of violence in the domestic sphere are what make her tale a "gothic romance," even when imparting her own experiences of domestic abuse. This focus on the home reflects the Freud's assertion that *unheimlich* and *Heimlich* are inevitably linked as being both *of the home*, and separate from the comfort "home" promises. Placing a character into an unfamiliar location which they must call home, such as Bluebeard's castle or Machado's "Dream House," is uncanny and is in direct relation to the horror themes I defined earlier, one of which being

“unfamiliar locations.” Machado touches upon this relationship between the uncanny experience of gothic cohabitation and domestic violence in the chapter titled “Dream House as World-Building.”<sup>7</sup> Machado writes: “a common feature of domestic abuse is ‘dislocation.’ That is to say, the victim has just moved somewhere new... or has been otherwise uprooted from her support network, her friends or family, her ability to communicate.” This can be seen in Bluebeard stories, as most feature a disconnection from systems of support as a means of trapping the female victims to their ultimate demise<sup>8</sup>. In my own experiences, I was in a somewhat familiar setting with someone who, similar to Machado’s description, was revealed to be a stranger through their increasingly violent actions.<sup>9</sup> I was often forced away from any system of support which might contradict his instruction of me. Machado describes why this is important to maintaining the abusive relationship: “[The victim] is made vulnerable by her circumstance, her isolation. Her only ally is her abuser, which is to say she has no ally at all.”

Isolation is not only used as a theme in horror media, it is also, as Machado suggests, necessary to maintaining the imbalance of power the abused experiences with their abuser. In Kyrie McCauley’s novel, *If These Wings Could Fly*, the main character, Leighton Barnes, struggles with the isolation she feels as the daughter of an abuser.<sup>10</sup> Leighton and her sisters, Campbell and Juniper, have learned to fear their father, Jesse, when he gets angry which, over the course of the book, becomes increasingly frequent. In their small town of Auburn, Pennsylvania, Jesse is a sort of local legend from his days as a high school football player. However, his career aspirations in the sport are cut short when a permanent injury prevents him from pursuing this dream. Instead, he marries Leighton’s mother, and has three children, forcing him to unsuccessfully take over his father’s construction business. His disappointment at these events is evident throughout Leighton’s narration, and this disappointment turns to anger and

threats of violence. Sadly for Leighton and her sisters, his status in the local view as a high school hero overshadows her experiences with his rage and, it seems to Leighton, those who may help often turn a blind eye to his abuses. Isolation, in this sense, is reinforced by a silent majority to whom the family should be able to turn for help. This blinded isolation is echoed in the magical realism of their house, which appears to fix itself whenever her father destroys something in his anger. The house which reproduces a tableau for abuse is uncanny. It both contains and imprisons the family, while reinforcing plausible deniability in public view and thus, serves only the abuser. The abuser's first line of defense is always: "Who's going to believe you, anyway?" Which, in this novel, is frequently proven to be the case for Leighton, her mother, and sisters.

Another way of reinforcing isolation is through a form of emotional abuse called "gaslighting," after a 1938 stage play, *Gas Light*, which features this form of coercive control. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, gaslighting is "an extremely effective form of emotional abuse that causes a victim to question their own feelings, instincts, and sanity. As a result, the abusive partner has a lot of power."<sup>11</sup> This sort of coercive control reflects the horror theme of "mind invasion," as detailed above as ejection from the familiarity of your own mind, body, or autonomy, and extends the isolation a victim feels to within their own psyche. The experience of gaslighting is perfectly captured within a horror short story published nearly 50 years before the play, *Gas Light*, was first performed – the story is "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

The story is written in epistolary form, is told from the perspective of "Jane," a self-described "ordinary" person, who goes to a hereditary estate for the summer with her "practical" physician husband, John. It is quickly revealed that Jane believes herself to be ill, but her

husband does not believe that she is. His claims about her condition are described by her husband as a “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency” following the birth of their child.<sup>12</sup> These claims are corroborated by Jane’s brother, another noted physician, and she is commanded to rest at a distance from others, despite her own wish to be social. While taking up temporary residence in the unfamiliar location, Jane describes the activities she engages in, as prescribed by her husband. He places her in the largest, airiest room in the home, a one-time nursery, where she is confronted with what she describes as “a smoldering, unclean yellow” the likes of which she had never seen a “worse paper in my life.” Although her husband is often gone, Jane punctuates his appearances by statements of disbelief in her growing distress at the room’s hideous wallpaper, and his making fun of her discomfort. Though she expresses her discomfort, John says: “You know the place is doing you good,” despite her own account that it is extremely disturbing.

Instead of continuing her displeasure at it, as the story unfolds, Jane instead grows a horrible fascination with it, bolstered by her husband’s frequent imprisoning of her within the room. With every fear of the wallpaper’s grotesque pattern she expresses, her husband dismisses her perceptions, and feeds her his own: that the room is best for her. Jane begins to hallucinate a woman trapped behind the patterns of the wallpaper, reflecting her own feelings of captivity, all the while being told by John that she is improving “despite” the wallpaper, but she confesses to the reader “it was *because* of the wallpaper” that she was doing better. All the while, her mental state deteriorates, and she becomes a shut-in to the room, even to the point of convincing herself that she *is* the woman behind the wallpaper. In truly horrific fashion, she becomes the horror John had painted her to be, thus completing the process of mental invasion. His reality has become hers – even to his detriment.

John begins by causing Jane to question her own feelings of illness, and frequently calling her frequent sense of isolation as “silly.” In turn, she intuits threats, real or perceived, in the room which he has, overwhelmingly, imprisoned her. John discounts her perceptions once again, only furthering her distrust of her own judgment. Jane, finally, descends into madness, as she clearly has no ability to discern her own truth from his coercive control. This isolation spawning from coercive control, leading to complete loss of the self is an experience that Rachel Louise Snyder describes in her non-fiction work, “No Visible Bruises: What We Don’t Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us.” “The loss of liberty that eventually, and inevitably, leads to a loss of self.”<sup>12</sup> Despite Gilman’s short story being published nearly a half-century before the play which inspired the term “gaslighting” was released, Jane has been fully overtaken by another’s view of reality, thus driving her to insanity, exactly in the way that Snyder describes. This horror theme is not only the most absolute in terms of transformation, but also the most dismal and alienating.

Mental training through coercive control can exist not only in marriage, as in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” but can also be seen in the horror film *Midsommar* (2019). Main character, Dani, is slowly indoctrinated by a cult through emotional manipulation, threats of violence, and forced drugging. At the conclusion of the film, Dani is shown, at first, in a state of panicked horror and revulsion at the sight of her boyfriend’s mutilated body being burned alive in one of the cult’s horrific rituals. However, as the cult surrounds her, reinforcing their manipulations, Dani smiles, showing her complete “loss of self” to her manipulators. This is what Snyder describes as the inevitable conclusion to gaslighting and coercive control. The moment where Dani accepts the cult’s version of reality is not only entirely distressing to an individual who values their singularity, but it is also incredibly sad as a viewer of this control played out. Still,

the viewer can simply turn away from this scene, and remind themselves that it is not real. Unfortunately, it is real and largely unattended in domestic violence discourse. The current models for dealing with domestic terrorism place far greater priority upon occasions of repeated physical assault within heteronormative couples than other forms of abuse and coercive control. The effect is compounded for marginalized identities, including: racial minorities, gender or sexual minorities, and/or system-impacted individuals.

Coercive control can exist in all arrangements of interpersonal relationships, but is, most often, only considered valid when proven physical assault has been repeatedly committed within a traditional, heteronormative marriage or intimate relationship. This provides even further leeway for an abuser to exercise power within the relationship, which directly reflects the imbalanced power dynamics of one's culture. Machado points out that "queer abuse feels like – is – homophobia, the same way that abuse in heterosexual relationships feels like – is – sexism... [Abusers] can get away with it because you exist in some cultural margin, some societal periphery." In *If These Wings Could Fly*, Leighton struggles against her father's emotional abuse and coercive control, but feels powerless to stop it. The abuser's narrative of "who's going to believe you, anyway?" permeates popular media and current events. "Whenever these things (domestic terrorism) come up on the news, the almost immediate reaction is to downplay the situation. To find the inconsistencies. To wonder how men will be impacted if we just all start believing women when they've been hurt or afraid." This line showcases the cultural sexism that reinforces domestic terrorism, and leaves victims isolated. In participating in this cultural sexism, you are complicit in the damage that is continuing to affect millions. By your inaction, you are reinforcing this standard.

**Survival, the Final Girl, and the “Inherited Curse”**

“Writing about our trauma *must change something*, right?”<sup>13</sup>

– Jonathan Alexander

I am no longer in a physically abusive relationship. I have not been hit, pushed, or even screamed at by my partner of nearing 14 years. Am I a survivor? Yes and no. Yes, it is true that I no longer experience the physical pain that I once equated to love – “To a victim of coercive control, a threat might be misinterpreted as love, especially in the early stages of a relationship, or when one is feeling especially vulnerable.”<sup>14</sup> No, because the act will live within me, forever. “Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.”<sup>15</sup> The ending and closure that could have happened might have landed one of two ways: justice or death. Without either, what happens?

Morgan Podraza, a doctoral candidate at Ohio State University handles the subject of what happens when trauma is unresolved in her essay, “Forty years later: Laurie Strode and the survival of the Final Girl.”<sup>16</sup> In this essay, Podraza writes: “The Final Girl trope is well established in horror... however, the life and experiences of the Final Girl beyond the violent events that initially defined her have largely remained unexplored,” shining light on the devastating lack of attention given to survivors (real or imagined) beyond their own “violent events.” The term “Final Girl” was coined by Carol J. Clover in her 1992 book, “Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film.”<sup>17</sup> Clover defines the Final girl as a solitary survivor of a group (typically youths), who, at the film’s denouement, is either sufficiently masculinized toward saving herself in battle with the attacker, or saved by an outsider. Clover concludes that her survival is largely based on her privilege of either sexual purity or moral superiority. However, the image of the Final Girl in horror films has become far more complicated in the interceding years. “The Final Girls, for [Clover], are masculine projections,

meant to signify masochistic impulses,” says Sarah Trecansky.<sup>18</sup> Clover equates the embraced violence and loss of sexualization displayed by a Final Girl as subverting their femininity. However, to equate the survival of the Final Girl to masochistic masculinization is, truly, a disservice to survivors and problematizes the tired quandary of the overused question posed to victims: “why didn’t you fight back?”

The trope of the Final Girl has been interpreted, classically, as subjugation of the female, being that they endure suffering, both mental and emotional, throughout the course of a horror film, which is viewed as pleasurable. Trecansky says: “Female viewership of slashers is therefore considered problematic – Isabel Cristina Pinedo, in her discussion<sup>18</sup> of female horror film viewing, details how... a female horror viewer is a ‘sex traitor’ blindly perpetuating oppressive norms, or else misunderstanding what she is seeing. The only ‘proper’ response to these films for a feminist is condemnation and avoidance.” Pinedo’s viewpoints on feminine viewership have been frequently shared by many who study horror film from a feminist perspective, despite the genre being extremely popular with the female viewing public. Trecansky argues this idea in viewing 1980’s slasher films, such as the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* franchise, the *Hellraiser* franchise, and the *Halloween* franchise, as ones which “go surprisingly out of their way to present images of women and youth that subvert mainstream expectations.” Trecansky argues that “Unlike the 1970s slasher heroines, who usually survived seemingly at random, based on their ability to scream, run, and avoid the pursuing monster, the... Final Girl [of 1980’s slasher film] is notable for its unflinching determination and strength.” Trecansky points out in her article that not all horror films take on this view of women, and that, in fact, slasher films of the 1990’s trended toward a feminized, helpless victim who is eventually saved by an outsider. In such examples, horror films do very little to express experiences of

determination in the face of violence. However, whether self-determined or rescued, the Final Girl represents elevation from violence, and an end to the suffering... right?

Podraza writes: "Rather than focusing on her position at the end of the film, it is necessary to not only investigate the life of the Final Girl following the traumatic event... to consider her potential futures." Much of domestic violence narrative, when not ending in death, is played out as a triumph, much like the Final Girl trope. The horror ends, and the survivor is stronger than before. In a 2014 study<sup>19</sup> titled "Eating Disorders, Trauma, PTSD, and Psychosocial Resources," researchers Sefik Tagay, Ellen Schlottbohm, Mae Lynn Reyes-Rodriguez, Nevena Repic, and Wolfgang Senf sought the frequency of potentially traumatic events in the lives of 107 female patients. The study notes that 95.1% of the women suffering from either anorexia nervosa, an eating aversion disorder, or bulimia nervosa, a binge-eating disorder, had between one and eleven potentially traumatic events in their lives." The abuses listed in this study included: childhood sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, and/or teasing and bullying. This research concludes: "interpersonal traumatization in [eating disorder] patients was strongly associated with increased post-traumatic stress symptoms. The present findings support the concept that individuals who develop ED after (multiple) traumatization are likely to have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology." The study's authors state that there is minimal data to determine precise causation of traumatic events to eating disorders, but there is a very strong correlation. As a survivor with PTSD and an eating disorder, I see these findings as extremely provocative. "PTSD prevalence in ED patients is about 24.3%, confirming the comorbidity between both disorders." The Final Girl's story doesn't simply end after the horror has subsided; if only the survivor could expel the demon<sup>20</sup> so easily!

"It is necessary to address the ways in which the Final Girl remains connected to the monstrous threat as a result of the traumatic experience of their confrontation," Podraza says in her article, which is guided toward examining the emotional impact of the horrific experience. Podraza looks to the character Laurie Strode (played by the incomparable Jamie Lee Curtis) of the *Halloween* franchise; "Emphasizing the continued life of Laurie Strode rather than her status as 'the one who did not die' fosters new possibilities for how the Final Girl trope is discussed and calls attention to the ways that the trope is tied to the lived experiences of trauma survivors as well as the longer history of feminist struggles to recognize and fight against gendered violence." Freud explains in "The uncanny" that the "factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable." Podraza points out: "Repetition is at the heart of trauma theories," and that "the original trauma that Laurie experienced in 1978 (when the first film of the *Halloween* franchise takes place) remains unhealed, and further, the continued struggle between these characters visually (throughout the franchise) enacts the repetitive experience that often plagues victims of trauma." The repetition which Podraza and Freud refers to are, as Maggie Nelson puts it, "the organism's attempt to master the surplus anxiety that the original incursion produced. Of course, these attempts typically fail, often to catastrophic effect. In which case, art can be seen as a relatively innocuous arena in which to showcase the failure."<sup>21</sup>

In the 2018 installment of the *Halloween* franchise, also titled *Halloween*, Laurie Strode has lived with the trauma of her repeated encounters with the franchise's fantastical villain, Michael Meyers, for more than 40 years. Echoing the insular experience of trauma, Podraza points out that in the opening scene, Laurie lives in a secluded cabin in the woods surrounded by

visual representations of “the reinforcements and barriers that she has constructed around herself in order to ‘insult herself from further harm.’” This demonstrated hyper-vigilance is one of the commonly understood symptoms of PTSD – “Isolation paired with her extensive surveillance of the spaces around her echoes the watchfulness that was previously an asset to the Final Girl.” However, for Laurie, these extreme efforts at protection alienate her daughter, Karen (played by Judy Greer), and granddaughter, Allyson (played by Andi Matichak). Karen was removed from Laurie’s care at age 12, and they remain out of touch, while Allyson seeks to maintain a relationship with her grandmother, Laurie. Podraza says of the strain between Karen and Laurie is one that “points back to the ways that trauma has twisted the virtues of the Final Girl’s advanced maturity and motherliness” to what is called by Karen in the movie as “psychotic” and “paranoid” delusions. Karen’s insistent belief that her mother was wrong to suspect danger leads to her inevitable demise at the hands of Michael Meyers, constituting a “catastrophic failure” on Laurie’s part in isolating herself in order to manage the anxiety the trauma produced.

Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky’s book, “The Marked Body: Domestic Violence in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Literature” investigates domestic violence narrative from some of the Victorian Era’s most notable authors. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, and Wilkie Collins all fall under their critical gaze in the course of the text, showcasing the prevalence of these narratives as far back as nearly 200 years. In Chapter 6, “‘Will She End Like Me?’ *Violence and the Uncanny in Wilkie Collins’s Man and Wife*,” sub-heading “The Maternal Inheritance” describes the opening scene of *Man and Wife* as pure tragedy: “The mother’s life has been destroyed by the (thoroughly legal) abuses to which her husband has subjected her; her dying words manifest her terror that her daughter may be subject to her own fate: ‘She is Anne Silvester – as I was. Will she end like me?’”<sup>22</sup> *Halloween* (2018) perfectly visualizes what is

known as “inter-generational trauma.” While this term can be applied to historical or systemic traumas, such as The Holocaust, racism, slavery, and/or war, it can also be applied to severe trauma within families, such as abuse. An article released for Duke University’s Office of Institutional Equity defines inter-generational trauma as “the transmission (or sending down to younger generations) of the oppressive or traumatic effects of a historical event.”<sup>23</sup> This transmission can be as indirect as detachment, either from the parent to the child, or the child to the parent, or as complex and disruptive as abuse and violence enacted due to a parent’s unresolved trauma. When Lawson and Shakinovsky write of the “Maternal Inheritance,” they are writing of inter-generational trauma.

The experience of inter-generational trauma fits directly into the previously mentioned idea of repetition in trauma, as discussed by Freud, Podraza, and Nelson. Of the works they review, Lawson and Shakinovsky note that “domestic violence is figured as an inherited curse or affect passed down through the maternal line.” In *If These Wings Could Fly*, Leighton Barnes, while at a female neighbor’s house, thinks of all the “women let down by other women; women who are told their obedience is more important than their voice. Not by their husbands, but by their mothers, their friends. Women willing to watch each other get hurt for the sake of image and tradition.” If there is an inter-generational trauma inherited among women only, Leighton nails it perfectly in calling it silence. Lawson and Shakinovsky state that the women in their texts are all “haunted by an intersubjective and intergenerational process that consists of the untold and unacknowledged secrets of their families and culture, secrets that are powerfully related to the maternal inheritance.” This “haunting” described is best defined by Freud’s statement: “It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone

repression and then emerged from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfills this condition.” Domestic violence fulfills this condition.

Trecansky notes in her article that the films of 1980’s slasher horrors are filled with “teenagers who are constantly presented as abused or ignored” by “parents who are alcoholics or simply uncaring.” A child born of this type of parent comes to understand that “the very possibility of compassionate adulthood is a lie, merely a ruse that reveals the monster within.” The behaviors of a monstrous, abusive parent refracts their own inherited trauma, and is eternally perpetuated by the child, who, in turn, becomes the monster. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Final Girl to “learn to rebel against these patriarchal figures” while simultaneously “recognizing the lack of boundary” between themselves and their monstrous parental figure. Once this has been achieved, the Final Girl can “drive the narrative forward... be the authors of their own fates.”

I never saw my dad hit my mom, though she told me that it had happened. I also never saw her dad attack her, but she told me that he had. I did see my dad severely beat my brother; I did see that my mom knew, and did nothing about it. I never think of my first abuser as the first man who hit me, I always think of my mother. She never did more (physically) than slap me once or twice. The ways in which she buried the emotional abuse within me is a staggering – so much so that it feels like a part of my very DNA, inherited. If you spoke with my mom today, she would tell you that I am over-reacting. Maybe you might believe her, because she is extremely convincing. She told me, from day one, exactly what I was worth, and I believed it. She was there, asking me what I did to deserve his violence, or telling me if I just looked better or was easier to love, I wouldn’t be treated so poorly. She needed everyone, especially me, to carry her pain. She is here, laced throughout my stories; the secret behind every word. But, no,

this book isn't for her. She would call me a liar anyway, maybe tell you how I have twisted things that she said or did. Who would believe me, anyway? No one ever believed me before, either. All things considered, I'm not even sure who trained me to disbelieve myself first, the ubiquitous "him," or my mother? Or does it go even farther back than that? Does trauma, like silence, fill every available space until what should have been familiar and safe becomes horrific? Or can I change it? Can you?

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## **Resources**

While I have stated that resources aren’t nearly as comprehensive as they need to be, I still feel that it is worth mentioning that these resources are vital to ending domestic terrorism. Education is the key to stopping it. Below is a list of personally researched programs that serve a variety of communities and experiences. Still, I know that outreach can be not only a terrifying prospect, but also a dangerous one. Having been through this experience, I know that police and social workers can, sometimes, make matters much worse – especially for undocumented immigrants. The National Immigrant Women’s Advocacy Project and LIFT Justice for All programs can help navigate you safely to getting help, no matter your legal status. For those who do not wish to involve police, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, or TheHotline.org, can support you in a number of ways, including personal safety planning that does not require police intervention.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline, has the most comprehensive range of support to those who are experiencing abuse of many varieties. Despite its name, it serves people who are experiencing physical violence, sexual violence, verbal/emotional abuse, mental/psychological abuse, financial/economic abuse, and/or cultural and identity abuse. Their website is confidential with an easy exit button in red on the right-hand side of the page. Additionally, the site will not log in your browser history, no matter how many times you visit. They have live chat, if you cannot access a phone or want to keep it as confidential as possible. Also, they have help in over 140 languages, including ASL services. Their resources and courses of action vary entirely upon your situation and security. Help is also available through this site and phone number for abusers who wish to stop. The phone number is 1-800-799-7233 or 800 799 SAFE. Here are some more resources that provide help, with the community served listed above for quick reference:

### **The National Sexual Assault Hotline**

- 800-656-HOPE (4673) or [rainn.org](http://rainn.org) – Spanish option available
- In partnership with [1in6.org](http://1in6.org), RAINN also serves male-identifying people who are victims of sexual abuse or assault

**PART II**

## **INTRODUCTION**

While many of the settings and characters within the forthcoming autofiction tales are fictitious, or fictionalized illustrations of true people, the events and words are direct recreations of circumstances which I have lived. I do this not to discount the lived experiences of victims, but to explore the boundaries of what is creatively possible within the truth – to make the *experience* front and center, not the issue of believability. For so long I was kept silent by my abuser, my social circle, my parents, and society at large. My silence has not protected me, it has only ever served my abusers. What is deemed factual – or what is assumed fabricated – is intimately entwined within the systems of oppression. Discrediting the oppressed is always an oppressor’s first line of defense. I encourage you to find the truth within my words for yourself.

## **Inherited**

When the blue plus sign appeared on the pregnancy test, he said to me: "Let's be a family." Two weeks earlier, on my twentieth birthday, he said I could order anything I wanted at our favorite sit-down Mexican restaurant, Mas Por Favor. Halfway through my shrimp fajitas, the odor of them hit, and I spent the rest of my birthday dinner in the bathroom. He didn't suggest the pregnancy test, that was my mom. But when it was positive, his fiercely blue eyes sparkled. "I want a son," he said.

We were married three months later, beside San Diego Bay. I half expected the clouds to stay as an incessant, cool wind blew over the water, but they parted to reveal a biting sun. My sleeveless dress, which smelled of cigarettes, was made by his mother. He wore a baggy, rented tuxedo and his smile could have broken waves if it were any wider. Although the handful of people in attendance already knew I was pregnant, my extended belly really sealed the sensation of a shotgun wedding. My dad had said I shouldn't throw my life away, but I was determined to follow my own path – a path of love.

Twenty miles away, in the church I was baptized in, he danced eagerly throughout our reception. Our sweetheart table was framed with a huge white, black and blue balloon arch. I had morning sickness continually since my birthday dinner. I ate very little of our buffet-style dinner served in aluminum trays by old women I barely knew, who were just happy to be invited. It was my mom, dad, and brother with a couple of layover friends from high school filled a long table to

the right. His mom, dad, sister, and brother with a friend I had never met sat to the left. In front of everyone I had ever known in my short life, he sang me some of his favorite song by Alice in Chains. "I give this part of me for you," he sang with overwhelming feeling. I'd never even heard the song, but I smiled at his brief serenade, the first time anyone had sang to me.

As the sun set orange through the huge floor to ceiling windows of the old hall, we cut a cake that my dad had bought. I was never a fan of cake, so I gave my dad leave to buy anything he wanted. There was a plastic man and wife on top of two tiers of white, frilly buttercream and a black, piped "Congratulations." He picked cut a slice, and offered it to me. I tenuously moved for a bite, and he pressed the back of my head into the plate, covering my face. Everyone laughed, and a few cheered. It was a funny moment, I think. I'm not really sure, I never liked cake. We danced as nighttime fell and the older folks left. We were the only ones left: Mr. and Mrs. Nieludski.

My husband worked late hours as a bartender, and I had always been a bit of a night owl. It came as no surprise that the first time I felt the baby kick, it was after midnight. The fluttering movement was strange, yet familiar; so much like a gas bubble moving through my stomach with a mind of its own. Every night, the baby would writhe within me as I laid awake in bed. Only after my husband came home and said goodnight to the little one would I finally get rest. As soon as I woke, morning sickness hurtled me to the bathroom. A toothbrush waited at the side of the sink for me, and I noted for the first time how the strangest things become normal. Throwing up intermittently until noon every day for six months became my new, unpleasant normal.

Every night, I cradled my growing belly as I stared out my eastern-facing window, watching the moon creep lazily across the sky. I was alone in a room that my husband and I had

shared in my dad's house. Propped up with far too many old pillows, dipping in and out of sleep I watched the night. I felt a sharp pain in my hip, and grumbled at the baby. Another shooting ache twisted within me, this time in my back. I looked at the clock and was momentarily relieved that it was almost time for my husband to come home. The exhaustion within me was overjoyed that the baby would soon calm down – then another jolt in my hip. Was there something wrong with my baby? Why did it hurt so bad? Then, I heard Mr. Nieludski close the front door. He was never quiet, even though it was 2:47 am and my dad slept in the room closest to the door. In the darkness, I heard his footsteps. Another pain. His footfalls sounded strange, different. The baby shimmered across my taut belly. If I hadn't known better, his familiar step now sounded slowed, dragging, like a zombie. Surely, it was my imagination crying out for rest. Scraping across the hardwood floor, toward my door, he moved and my panic grew. The baby did somersaults inside of me. The doorknob turned, and his face was dark except for the smile that cut through the night. I closed my eyes, and the baby jabbed into my rib. A small scream escaped, and I was terrified that he had heard it. "You okay, babe?" He said; I looked at him, and the fear ebbed. The baby rested.

A few days later, I was sitting awkwardly on an examination table in a fabric gown that tied in the back. Most of my prenatal visits I did alone and was often reminded that for the back ties of the examination gown to be closed, you needed company. My back was completely exposed to the frigidity of the exam room, to my embarrassment. We had decided to wait until birth to find out the baby's sex. He wanted to name our child after his grandfather, Theodore, and I wanted to name it after my childhood best friend, Elizabeth. We had taken to calling it "Teddy Bear", since we didn't know which name it would carry.

"Did you know you can diet when you're pregnant?" The male obstetrician said.

"Well, no," I shifted.

"As long as you stay within appropriate limits and eat a range of foods, you can still lose weight."

"To be honest, I haven't been able to eat much since I got pregnant. Teddy Bear only seems to agree with French fries," I laughed.

"I would really prefer you to try and stay healthy for the sake of your baby. Are you sleeping well?"

"Teddy Bear tends to be really active at night, so I do have trouble some-"

"If you eat healthier, you might sleep better, too," he interrupted, eyes fixed to a computer screen. "Do you exercise at all?"

"Um, a little," I whispered, a little ashamed at remembering the many hours I spent watching daytime TV or playing video games.

"Okay, I want you to walk for at least twenty minutes every day and cut down on the fats." He got up, moving quickly to the door.

"Uh... Is the baby okay?" I blinked.

"Yeah, she sounds very healthy," he said, leaving the room. *She*, I repeated in my mind.

I decided not to tell my husband of the doctor's slip. I still called her Teddy Bear because I knew he had wanted a son and I didn't want to cause him stress. At seven months, I finally got a welcome break from the morning sickness. Although, I kept my toothbrush at the side of the sink, just in case. The thrill of this brief reprieve was quickly hampered by dizzy spells and extreme fatigue. I remembered what the doctor had said about exercise, but whenever I tried, I would lose steam too quickly. My husband said that I had to push myself, and I tried, but when he left for the day, I would plop down in front of the TV.

Lounging across an orange velour couch, with reruns of America's Funniest Home Videos laughing in the background, I napped. At first, it was a short nap right after my husband left. Then, it started happening before he left, as well. My husband would spread that toothy grin and say: "Who's the sleepyhead today?" or "Getting a few more than forty winks, huh?" As the weeks rolled forward, the naps grew longer and he grew impatient with my resting. He assigned me chores that would keep me awake, and told me: "a little coffee won't hurt Teddy Bear." At nights, I couldn't keep my eyes open, but Teddy Bear pressed on every organ and tested the boundaries of my womb. The pain seemed strangely far off as I drifted in and out of sleep. My husband came home, and in my half-conscious state, it felt like it took him an eternity to get from the front door into bed beside me. I heard the scraping drag as he approached every night, and my nightmares of a monster drawing toward my door plagued me. The monster had my husband's eyes, a baby's body, and huge teeth, dripping blood. But when I shook off the dream, it was just Mr. Nieludski climbing into bed.

"Why are you never awake when I get home anymore? You know that it means a lot to me." He spoke.

"I'm sorry, honey, just the baby is taking a lot out of me," I responded.

In the darkness, I could see his eyes narrowed into blades of silver-blue. He said: "It's not Teddy's fault that you're lazy," and my mind froze. Sure, he had said things before that could, by some, been seen as horrible if you didn't understand his sense of humor. He always laughed when he said them, so I knew he didn't mean it. This time, however, he did not laugh. I waited for it, but it didn't come. He put his hand on my stomach and I flinched. "Are you serious right now?" he said. He slammed the bedroom door, then the front door, and I tried to wait for him until I was dragged down, into sleep.

He returned that morning with a single red rose and the smile that I had fallen in love with. He said: "I'm sorry that I've been a little rude lately. It's work, you know." I said I understood, and I tried to. After that, I took care not to fall asleep when he was home, even though I was exhausted. I set alarms for just before he came home, and even pressed myself to sleep lightly. Every night, Teddy Bear would do her backflips and I would lay in unnatural forms to try to ignore them until he came home. The second he left, I would pass out until after midnight, when the internal dance began again. Another strange, new normal.

My pregnancy was tracked at 32 weeks when my morning sickness came back with a vengeance. I was dizzy, exhausted, and throwing up every few hours throughout the day. After then sun went down, and my husband was on his way to work, I tried to sleep. Nightmares were printed on the backs of my eyelids, just waiting for me like a paused movie. In the nightmares, I was being chased by a wolf, a bear, or the like. Ripping claws, mouths full of razors, always towering over me, always faster than me. In all situations, I had lost my daughter, and was trying to find her as I ran. Then I woke up, ran to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and returned to bed to star out the window until he came back.

Teddy Bear kicked, turned, twisted, pinched, and tortured me from the inside. I didn't cry. It became normal. I would hear my husband's footsteps from the door to the bathroom, from the bathroom to our room, from the bedroom door to bed. I didn't look to see if it were him or a nightmare monster having escaped my dreams. I didn't want to see the teeth or ravenous eyes. He would just climb into bed and say "thanks for staying up for me", and I would rest assured that I was safe. Teddy Bear stilled as the snores began beside me. Then, all would go dark.

In my 34th week, I went to the bathroom to throw up in the morning, as per usual, but it didn't come. My husband was still asleep as I sat on the floor, waiting. My ass started to go

numb from the cold tiles, then got up. It was weird not to feel bad. I ate breakfast and felt fine. I stayed awake all day, helped my husband get ready for work, and nothing happened. I didn't even take my evening nightmare-filled nap after he left. I just sat in peace as I watched the sunset. I daydreamed of holding my baby in my arms as she slept the day away, singing to her while she smiled a big, toothless grin, and kissing her soft head, knowing she was safe with me. A tranquility I hadn't known in a very long time settled into me just as the sun faded into the ocean, far from my sight. As the first stars blinked into view, my water broke.

My dad drove me to the hospital while I screamed and writhed in the passenger seat. He mumbled something about ambulances being too expensive and how I would be fine. He told me to relax and take deep breaths, but the searing pain in my pelvis had no intention of fulfilling his demands. The nurses met me at the door, and rushed me into a room. Within minutes, I was hooked up to monitors with an IV extending from my vein. They calmed me with what they called a "safe pain relief option," and I finally calmed. My husband arrived just as all was quiet.

"My son's coming!" He announced, proudly.

"Not yet," said a nurse. He glowered at her.

"What do you mean?" He snorted.

"Well, your wife's water broke too early. The baby may not be safe, so we need to keep her under surveillance for as long as we can *without* delivering the baby."

"If that's the case, I need to get back to work," he said. He smiled at her, but it was the smile I had seen in my nightmares: full of malice, without a ripple of understanding or kindness. I wondered how many times he had smiled at me like that, but I had mistaken it for love. After he left, the nurses told me to rest, and for the first time in months, I did.

I woke to the morning sun blazing through the hospital window. I was alone. A male nurse swept in and said: "Your husband came by this morning, but decided to go home to sleep."

"How's my baby?" I yawned.

"I'll have to get the doctor for you," he said, pushing a button on a monitor. "He will be in at about nine."

"But she's okay?" I pressed. He pushed a different button, and a loud, fast whooshing.

"That's the baby's heartbeat," he smiled. I listened for a moment before he turned it back off. "We're monitoring it at the nurses' station at the end of the hall, so don't worry." He left without another word.

My obstetrician came by, explaining what I had heard last night, that the baby needed to stay in for as long as possible to grow. He left before I could ask questions. My husband came, and asked me what the doctor said, and I repeated what he already knew.

"So, we're supposed to just sit here and *wait*?" He paced.

"We want Teddy Bear to be safe, right?" I said.

"I can't take too much time off work or they'll fire me."

"Don't worry, you can go to work. If anything changes, I'll call you."

"It might take some time for me to get back here, so don't be all *pissed off* if I'm late."

"It's fine, I understand," I said softly.

"And at least I know what you're up to," he grumbled.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, I'm gone six nights a week, and when I've come home every night the last month or so, I see you wide awake like you had just gotten home." His voice towered over me.

"I'm eight and a half months pregnant, where would I go?" I hated that I said that even while it was coming out of my mouth. He froze at the foot of my bed, and his eyes thinned. His lips parted slightly, and I could see sharp teeth beneath them. I gasped, and he turned his face away, swiftly covering his mouth. "I just meant that I've been at home, resting, taking care of Teddy Bear."

"Fine," he said, then turned back toward me, lips tight.

"Oh, she's gonna be so beautiful, you know," I said, smiling, trying to break the tension. Instead, he looked more severe than ever, and lunged at the bed. Reflexively, I covered my head and said: "Stop! What did I do?"

"You knew it was a girl?" He growled. I couldn't see the dripping fangs that I knew were inches from my ear. A panicked cry leapt out of me.

"Is everything okay?" A lady's voice chimed. I peeked up and saw the head nurse standing authoritatively in the doorway. Mr. Nieludski pushed past her.

"Yeah, I'm okay." My voice shook.

"Your heartrate is heightened. If you need any help, please don't hesitate to call." She left, and I waited for my husband to return. Mercifully, he did not.

For ten days, the strange world of monitors, whooshing heartbeats, The Price is Right, and Jell-O became normal. My husband stayed less than an hour each day, and barely spoke when he came. He told me that he was "getting the house ready for the baby", but seeing as were to all share a single bedroom, I wasn't sure what he meant. Still, I felt better without him than I had when he was there. I slept peacefully, and Teddy Bear was calm. On his day off, he slept in a reclining chair beside me, and I startled awake many times, swearing I could feel his eyes on me. In the darkness, I watched his mouth.

In the last hours of July, the doctors told me that it was time to get the baby out. We had made it to thirty-six weeks, and there was a much higher percent chance of her being healthy at this stage. I was excited to meet my little girl, but terrified of the delivery. They induced my delayed labor. As the tension and pressure in my core built, my mind's boundaries between wakefulness and dreaming blurred. My husband arrived just as I finished getting an epidural. He brought a huge bouquet of flowers, and I hazily smiled at the flowers. He leaned to me, whispering: "I'm so sorry that I lost my temper the other day. It won't happen again, it's just the stress has been getting to me, you know?" I said I understood, but mostly to get him away from me.

Half an hour later, his mother came and sat in a chair, with a direct view of the birthing canal. Her cigarette stink filled the room as she praised her son for his accomplishment of her new grandchild. My legs splayed open and half-conscious, people asked me questions and shoved monitors into and around me. They said things confusing to someone who was one day shy of twenty-and-a-half. "Blood pressure elevated", "increase Pitocin to two milliunits", and "we're at five centimeters now" flowed in and out of my consciousness. I felt no pain, no indication of my baby, just my abdomen spasming without sensation. My husband and his mother talked, but I have no idea what they said.

Next thing I remember is him squeezing my hand beside my face, repeating "You're doing great", over and over, like a chant. Four people gathered, staring at my exposed genitals, and I felt embarrassed.

"I don't want to do this," I cried.

"You're doing great," the doctor and nurses all chanted, as well.

"No, I don't want to do this!" But my body pushed without me asking it to.

"You're doing great," my husband's mother chanted beyond view.

*Please stop* my mind said, but my mouth just screamed in agony. Then, all at once, I knew she was out, and I felt such a profound relief and emptiness at the same time. My mind cleared a bit, and I wondered why she wasn't crying.

"It's a girl!" The doctor announced, like I didn't know. I needed to know immediately why she wasn't crying. My useless mouth just said: "Where is she?"

The nurse nearest said: "She's just getting cleaned up, don't worry." But I just asked again and again.

"Something's wrong, we need to get her to the NICU immediately! Get everyone out of here!" The doctor said. I started to cry. I hadn't even seen her, and now she might die. My husband was gone, the nurses were rushing around, and I was so tired that I fought to keep my eyes open.

In the corner of the room, I saw a small, clear plastic cradle, surrounded by nurses scrambling.

"Please," I begged. "Please let me see her before she goes." As they rushed the cradle out of the room, the nurses parted for a split second. Screams erupted from me, laden with sick. There in the plexiglass cradle was a purple and red mound with fully-formed, glinting, white teeth... Smiling.

## **A Succession of Ghosts**

Beyond the dead grass and the warped chain link fence, was the bay window. As a kid, I pushed my small bed horizontally across the window, so that I had a little hidden alcove just for me.

"It's a great house!" He exclaimed, clapping me on the shoulder. A shiver ran through my body at his touch. "I really appreciate your mom giving it to us instead of selling."

"Yeah, I guess," I said as I pulled the dolly on through the broken front gate. "It just reminds me of my childhood."

A warped, wooden playhouse sat to the left of the walkway which my fiancé was carefully maneuvering over with the moving dolly. As a kid, I hated that playhouse – it was old even then, and, I decided, filled with spiders. My friends and I played near it, but only the brave or stupid would go inside. Suddenly, he yelled "Fuck!" In slow motion, I watched him fall into the dead grass by the dried out old tree to the right of the walkway. Boxes toppled off the dolly, but he rolled quickly away to avoid them. Once I could move again, I ran over to him.

"Are you okay, hun?" I offered him a hand.

"Yeah, I'm great. I just threw myself down for fun," he wise-cracked. I gave him a look, and he chuckled as he got himself up, brushing off his blue jeans.

Later, after we had returned the moving truck, we slumped in well-loved camp chairs facing a cold fireplace. We ate a veggie pizza straight out of the box, as one does when they move.

"Which room should we take?" He asked between frantic, hungry gulps of barely chewed food.

"I would love to take my old room," I said.

"Yeah, but it's smaller," he said.

“True, but I love that stupid bay window.”

“But your mom’s old room is huge, with its own bathroom.”

“Yeah,” I said, setting the crust of the pizza into the box. Something about being in my mom’s old bedroom, the taboo of it, really bugged me.

“How about we take your mom’s bedroom for our main space, but I’ll put my futon in your old room in case you get nostalgia and want to sleep in there?” He smiled.

“Sure,” I said, too tired to continue the conversation. He was right, anyway; it was a much bigger room.

After dinner, we showered in tandem with the one shared towel we could find and travel-size toiletries. A flopped down mattress in the center of my mom’s old bedroom was the last of our energy. As I drifted off, his fingers loosely tangled with mine. I imagined the pinks and golds of the sunset over the bay before giving way to blues, purples, and then, finally a hazy darkness without stars. Now far from the weirdly familiar light pollution of downtown San Diego, I knew that over the dead grass yard there would be an open sky filled with stars. I resolved to look at them... Tomorrow.

I’m dreaming. In my dream, the moldy wood of the playhouse surrounds me. There are two splintered wooden windows with shutters frozen in motion by rusted joints on each side of me. Spiderwebs droop near my face, and I am afraid. Not of the spiders, but of what is outside. In front of me, a tiny, wooden door lies slightly ajar. I want to pull it closed, but it has no lock anyway. If I can stay quiet, I’ll be safe; the silence beyond the playhouse is far more dangerous. My eyes are fixed to the moonlight passing through the cracked door. I cannot move. Then, there’s a knock.

My eyes shot open. I groped in the darkness of the floor beside me for my phone. It read 2:47 am, a time that I had come to know in my thirties as the “your bladder isn’t what it used to be” time. The bathroom door creaked, and I sucked air in through my teeth, hoping I hadn't woken up my fiancé. His snores reassured me. I tried to make a mental note: “WD-40, bathroom door.” However, in the darkness, I drifted in and out of those fantastical thoughts that remind one to return to dreams as soon as possible. Without really noticing, I was back in bed, dozing off again. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I heard glass shattering somewhere. My tired mind said: “Need WD-40 for that, too.”

Unpacking over the next few days was fairly easy, since my fiancé and I had barely enough items to fill two studio apartments, not a three-bedroom, two-bath home with a half-acre of land between the front yard and the back plot. Two mismatched loveseats were dwarfed in the sprawling living room, punctuated by his well-loved, but entirely exhausted, recliner. I really didn’t want that eyesore, but he insisted. Until he proposed, every piece of furniture I owned was out of necessity, not luxury. A huge picture window in the dining room, adjacent to the living room, made our small, cheap wooden table and white plastic chairs feel ridiculous. My mind tried to remember all the things which needed replacing, but lost track pretty quickly.

My mother had never been one for kindness, nor sentiment, so it had struck me as slightly odd when she told me that she was signing the house over to me. I had fully expected her to sell the house, as she had with all of the furniture she didn’t want to take to her new single-bedroom apartment in a senior living space. She didn’t seem to care that we might need furniture for the huge home. Besides the dining room’s picture window, and my favorite old bay window, there was very little natural light in the house. It was all saved for these two spaces. Even my mother’s bedroom had only two small crank-open windows overlooking the back lot.

My apartment downtown, before he had proposed and my mom offered us the house, had many windows. They overlooked the San Diego port, with its towering cruise liners and aircraft carriers easing between tiny ferries to and from Coronado. It was bustling and noisy, but I loved it. The port wasn't the flashy beaches printed on tourist pamphlets in the lobbies of hotels in Old Town or Mission Valley. The port was alive, breathing. Between January and the first days of April, the waterways belonged to San Diegans. In late winter and early spring, the weather would alternate, without warning, between cold and gray and death heat. I knew this because I was a third-generation San Diegan.

I had been a copy editor for a marketing firm for many years before the economic downturn culled many staff. I had been suddenly forced into figuring out life again, but with no real prospects. While one might think that my mom offered us the house because of our impending financial hardship at my job loss, I knew better. My mom had always been difficult, our relationship always a little strained. At age 5, she had taken me with her as she left my father for a much younger lover. She told me that I tried to sleepwalk back to his house a few times from the first one-bedroom apartment we shared. My bed was a pull-out mattress of a couch in the living room. During the day, I had no bedroom, since my mom and her boyfriend took the only one. My mom ran a daycare from our house with my dad, so we would go back there every day to run it. All of my toys were daycare toys. Nothing was my own.

I hung art in the hallway leading to my old bedroom. The two additional rooms of the house were separated from my mom's master bedroom by the living room, dining room, and kitchen. When I was young, it almost felt like my mom and I lived in different houses, since the rooms were so far apart. When I would sleepwalk in the house, I would always go to the living room and sleep on the dusty brown velour sectional that was closest to her room. But still, I

loved that bay window. When she bought the house, she wanted to make the room into the children's play room since it was so much brighter than the small, one-windowed room beside it. But I was always obstinate, and wouldn't give it up. She reminded me of this often.

Back in her old bedroom, I put the bed frame back together, then sat heavily upon the sheetless mattress. I had worked creatively, trying to spread out our items across the house to fill the space. I had set up a small desk in the old childcare playroom, at the complete opposite corner from the bedroom. I wanted to get to job-hunting again, but told myself that I needed to get the house in order before starting. Before the next weekend after moving day, I was basically done setting everything up. Still, I found myself unwilling to do the job hunt. My cell phone rang, startling me in the silent house.

"Hey mom," I said, trying not to sound scared by the sudden noise.

"So, how is it?" She barked at me; I pulled the phone away from my ear a bit. In my heightened state, I had forgotten, briefly, how loud she was.

"Empty," I said.

"Well, I needed money for the new place, didn't I?" She had a way of intuiting insults where there were none. "It's great here, darling. So beautiful! What an upgrade from that creaky old dustpan."

"Great." I rolled my eyes.

"I'll come by sometime in the next week or two, help you get settled in."

"I've already unpacked."

"Oh, okay," she huffed.

"But you can come over..."

“I’ve gotta get going, Sarah’s here to drive me to bible study,” my mom always cut me off whenever she felt the conversation was over.

“Okay, mom. Talk to you...” *click*. “Later.”

I sat on the futon pressed against the wall, looking out the bay window at the crappy, old playhouse. I felt a chill thinking about the spiders inside. I remembered my dream and wondered what could have possibly been so bad that the creepy, little house felt *safer*. In the hallway beyond the door, I heard glass break. My fiancé was at work, so I knew I was alone in the house.

“Well, that’s not creepy at all,” I said to no one.

In the hallway, I saw that one of the pictures I’d hung had fallen. Shards of glass littered the walkway, and I tried hard to avoid them with my unshod feet. When I returned with the broom and dustpan, I couldn’t find any glass, after all. The picture had slid down the wall and landed without breaking. I looked everywhere for the glass, but it stood in the frame, completely undisturbed. After resettling the broom and dustpan in the kitchen cabinet, I decided I would put on the TV. The house was just too damn quiet.

A knock on the door, and I awoke on the futon across from the bay window. The view of the playhouse surprised me. We had gone to bed together that night, hadn’t we? My phone wasn’t nearby, so I had no idea what time it was. Had I sleepwalked again? My mind wouldn’t accept it; I hadn’t sleepwalked since I was 12. My body was stiff as I moved through the silent, nighttime house back to the bedroom. To my left, the dining room’s picture window showed stars and a tiny sliver of moon. To my right, I could see the brown velour sectional, with a man sleeping on it. I blinked, and it was gone: back to the blue loveseat that my fiancé had brought from his apartment, no man upon it. A little freaked out, I moved quickly to the bedroom and the familiar snores of my fiancé.

The next morning marked the end of our first week actually living together.

“Why don’t we get outta here today?” I said, trying to play off my discomfort in the big house. He huffed.

“The move cost a lot. Things are pretty tight right now,” he said, taking a long drink of coffee afterward.

“I know, but we could just go to the port and walk around,” I offered.

“That’s a lot of gas and the parking sucks. Plus, it’s cloudy today.” It was.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“But hey, why don’t we just invite a couple of people over for a little housewarming?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, not entirely enthused about staying in.

“I’ll get Shaz and Cath,” he said, with growing excitement in his voice.

“Okay,” I said, hesitant. Shaz and Cath were the couple that were always fighting about something. Shaz had been his college girlfriend, before realizing she was gay. They stayed friends, but I never really felt like Shaz took a liking to me.

“Why don’t you invite Barb and Jeff?” He offered.

“Yeah, okay.” Barb and I had been best friends as children. She and her sister had been in the daycare my mom ran, and we became best friends out of proximity. She’d moved to Arizona right before my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, and fell out of touch for a long while before reconnecting in our late teens. She was five months and nineteen days younger than me, and always liked to say it. When she moved back to San Diego, sometime in our twenties, we lived together briefly before realizing what a terrible idea it is to live with friends. She and Jeff met a couple of years after that, moved to Temecula and had a kid. We didn’t get together often, but when we did, the time apart didn’t seem to matter so much.

That night, Shaz, Jeff and my fiancé were standing on the front patio, drinking bottles of Sculpin while Barb and I sat in the living room. Cath sat glued to her phone at the small dining table. Barb's kiddo, Quinn, was sleeping on the futon in the bay window room, having run himself exhausted in the huge front yard earlier.

"What are you going to do with that gross, old playhouse?" She asked.

"Burn it down?" I snickered.

"Great idea out here in fire county," she chuckled. "That thing was creepy when we were kids. I'm surprised your mom never got rid of it."

"That constitutes *work*," I said, laughing.

"Good point," she laughed. Suddenly, a small person was standing beside us, and I jumped a bit at Quinn's unexpected appearance.

"What's wrong, buddy?" She said in a motherly sing-song voice.

"Someone was knocking," he said, seeming very babyish in that moment, despite being nearly ten years old. Barb and I looked out onto the patio to see Jeff and my fiancé stomping their feet while Shaz beatboxed outside. Barb rolled her eyes.

"Well, since he's up, we might as well get going," she said, drawing Quinn close to her.

"You're driving, right?" I looked at Jeff, cracking the night with laughter as they congratulated each other on the best song ever made.

"Of course," she said.

As per usual, Shaz and Cath had left quickly, bordering on a fight. My fiancé was drunk and handsy. However, being in my mom's room just felt weird and wrong to have sex in. Maybe that would change in time, but not right away.

"Go to bed," I said.

“C’mon, babe,” his eyes drew together in a mock “sad puppy” face.

“I just need some time,” I said.

“Like a few minutes?” He laughed.

“Try a few days or weeks.” He did not like that.

“Fine,” he tucked himself into bed, fully clothed. It was only minutes before he was sawing logs. A little put off from the night, I decided to go to the bay window room and surf social media until I fell asleep.

I turned off my phone screen, and as my sleepy thoughts built into reality, I heard a soft knock on the door. My eyes shot open, but it was closed and locked. I didn't hear it again, so I told myself it was my imagination. But still, I swear I could hear a glass breaking again.

The next morning, my fiancé was slumped in his recliner, snoring, despite having fallen asleep in bed. I accepted that the knock I'd heard was probably him, and when I didn't answer, he probably had moved to the chair and passed out. I was reminded of my dad, who I stayed with on the weekends, always asleep in his old recliner, some black and white western playing with the sound down on the TV. It wasn't a fond memory exactly, but familiar. He awoke to the smell of brewing coffee, always. He liked two tablespoons of full-fat milk, and one spoonful of sugar. He grogged into the kitchen.

“Thanks, babe,” he said.

“How are you feeling?”

“Eh,” he grunted.

“Can we go out for breakfast?” I was eager to get out of the house. After a few moments of hungover consideration, he said: “yeah sure, I need a breakfast burrito.”

“Thank you!” I threw my arms around him, but he reminded me that I was being too loud.

“Where are my shoes, hun?” He said.

“I think you left them in the bay window room yesterday. I tripped over them when I got up.”

“Another night in there, huh? I’m starting to think you don’t really like me,” he joked.

“Not when you’re trying to slur seduce me,” I joked back.

“I wasn’t *that* drunk,” he said.

“Oh, okay,” I chuckled, tensely. Then moved to get my shoes from the living room.

“FUCK! Ow! FUCK!” I heard him screaming across the house. “WHAT THE FUCK?!”

I ran to him.

“What’s wrong?” I looked at him cradling his foot, leaning against the wall.

“There’s freaking glass everywhere!” He moaned. He was right, the picture that had fallen the other day was on the floor, with glass splattered across the floor, just as I thought I saw it then.

“I’ll... get the broom...” I stuttered in disbelief.

“And some Band-Aids, maybe?” He yelled.

“Yeah, of course.”

My mom came to the house unannounced on Tuesday morning, just as my fiancé was leaving for work.

“Thanks so much for the house,” he said, smiling.

“No problem, sweetie. I want you to be comfortable,” she said in a way that felt gross.

Sometimes, I got the distinct impression that she was hitting on him.

“Mom, is this house haunted?” I asked her after he’d left for the day.

“Are you serious?” She laughed at me.

“Well, just some weird stuff has been happening since we got here,” I told her.

“Like what?”

“Like pictures falling off the walls, weird knocking.”

“You were always such an imaginative child,” she said, patting my leg.

“I’m serious, mom. I had...”

“Did I tell you about that lady I met at church who is a *medium*?!”

“Uh, no,” I said. It was no use in wrestling back the conversation from her.

“Yeah, she told me that her dead husband sends her messages from the beyond! Isn’t that wild? I wish I could do that. There’s a few people who I’d love to talk to again.”

“Like whom?”

“Do you remember Bob?”

“Not really,” I was getting a stomach ache from drinking too much coffee.

“Well, I’m not surprised you don’t, you were only twelve when we broke up,” she sighed.

“Yeah, I remember that,” I said, gathering my coffee cup with my mom’s to take to the sink.

“He was a carpenter, just like Jesus,” she yelled from the dining room.

“Okay,” I said, loudly.

“He wanted to build you a new playhouse because you were always so scared of that one in the yard!”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“I just miss him sometimes, you know?” The mug slipped from my hands in the sink, and shattered in the basin.

I decided to go to bed early that night, and my fiancé stayed up, playing video games on Xbox. I waited for a while, but my bed, a mess of pillows and a crumpled duvet, was a disheveled temptress. I stretched out over it, letting its comfort envelop me. My dream thoughts began, again, inside the playhouse. The misshapen walls, the drooping spiderwebs attaching themselves to my shoulders, I stayed very still. Then, I was instead running toward it at night, the stars and moon illuminating my way across the dead grass. If I could just reach the playhouse, I would be safe. Then there was a soft knock on the door, and a man said: "Are you awake?" I gasped and shot up in bed. The hallway beyond my bedroom door was empty, and Luke's ripping snore from the living room echoed in the darkness.

Sleep became more difficult as the week wore on. There were phantom knocks and ghostly glass shattering, but I was determined to ignore them. When I told my fiancé about them, he said that I was just freaking myself out because it was so quiet so far outside of the city proper. It was true, I'd become accustomed to all sorts of noise downtown: The highway, the port, even airplanes taking off and cruise ships blares. Here, I could hear a car rolling lazily along the sun-baked, broken asphalt. More than once, I awoke to find myself in the bay window room, with no recollection of going there. No one slept for long in the bedroom, I realized, since my fiancé fell asleep in his recliner every night. And every morning, just before I woke up, I would hear someone ask: “Are you awake?”

My mom came to the house again the following weekend, bringing a lamp she had bought for me at a yard sale.

“I talked them down to \$5!” She was immensely proud, despite the lamp looking like the same one I had bought a couple years back at IKEA for twenty bucks. I had thrown that one away because the allure of a cheap lamp quickly faded once I got home and realized the light it issued was only good for the small corner of a room.

“Thanks, mom,” I said, stuffing it into a closet. “Remember last week we were talking about Bob, right?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“I don’t remember what he looked like,” I said.

“He had red hair and a mustache,” she said, seeming less comfortable with the topic than she had last week.

“I sort of remember that,” I said, also feeling a little stressed.

“He was a good guy under it all,” she said.

“What do you mean, under it all?”

“Well, he was very troubled. He drank. Sometimes, he would do things when he was blacked out, you know?”

“Like what?” I leaned toward her.

“Umm... Well. All you need to know was that he was very troubled. He was very drunk the night he...” My mom was hardly ever at a loss for words, so this reluctance was disturbing.

“Yeah,” I pressed on.

“The night he hung himself,” she said finally.

“Oh crap! I didn’t remember that!” I said.

“Yeah, we were having troubles for a bit, so he’d moved out for while. He lost his job.”

“Wait... He didn’t do it *here* did he?” I panicked.

“No, of course not,” she shook her head at me. “Anyway, enough of that!” She moved swiftly to the kitchen and started washing the dishes in the sink, leaving me with more questions.

I decided not to tell my fiancé of Bob. He had enough on his mind to not be worried about some fake haunting I was hyping myself up about. But, that night, I heard the knock again; I heard a man’s voice asking: “Are you awake?” This time, when I glanced fearfully at the door to assure myself it was still locked, it wasn’t. Instead, a man’s head was peeked inside, a mop of red hair and mustache terrifying me. My fiancé ran in as I screamed.

“What? What is it?” He looked around in the darkness.

“I saw a man!” I screamed.

“There’s no one here but us,” he said.

“He was *right there!*” I pointed to the doorway of the bay window room, where he stood.

“It’s just me, sweetie,” he said.

“He was there.”

I had so much trouble sleeping that I dreaded night after that encounter. The knocking, the face, the question; they always awaited me. My mind played tricks on me during the day, and at night, if I did sleep, I was always running at the playhouse. My mom wouldn’t answer my calls or texts, and wouldn’t tell me why. My fiancé grew weary of my nightly screaming. It put pressure on our relationship, compounded by my abject refusal of sex. As the weeks wore on, he grew more and more impatient with me. It was a side of him that I hadn’t known before the proposal. However, when I questioned him if we shouldn’t rethink our living situation, he stormed off and spent the night at Shaz and Cath’s.

Barb and I couldn't talk much, because Quinn had fallen ill and she was a mess. I was alone in the house, isolated from the world and my friends, being tormented every night by the ghost that only knew three goddamned words: "Are you awake?"

A few weeks in to this tortured existence, my fiancé and Shaz had gone out for drinks together. I waited up, but as the hours passed, I grew increasingly angry. When he stumbled in at 2:47 am, I was furious.

"What the fuck?!" I yelled.

"We were having fun!" He screamed.

"This is *ridiculous*! You can't just disappear all night! I thought you might be hurt or maybe..." I stopped myself.

"Maybe *what*?" His eyes sharpened.

"I dunno," I was losing my resolve. "Maybe you and Shaz..."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me! SHE IS A LESBIAN!"

"But you've slept together before."

"Like a thousand years ago!"

"Not *that* long ago," I mumbled. He rushed up to me, frightening me.

"What did you just say? Speak up!" I drew my shoulders in.

"I just need you to tell me when you're going to be out late," I squeaked.

"Are you my fucking jailer, now?" He was not backing down.

"No," I said, softly.

"I've never seen you this jealous before, and it's really very ugly." A tear dripped from my eye.

"I didn't mean it like..."

“Yeah, RIGHT!” He roared in my face before pacing quickly away, looking out the picture window. When he turned, his hair had changed to red, and a mustache had appeared. The nightmares were following me into the real world now, I thought. I burst out in sobs, and he stomped off into the bedroom and slammed the door.

I stared out the picture window at the back yard for many moments, sobbing.

I called my mom the next day twenty times in a row until she answered.

“What?” She said, annoyed.

“I need to know,” I said. “Did Bob ever hit you?”

“Why would you ask that?” She seemed disgusted.

“Did he?”

“Well, I told you that he sometimes would get a little out of control,” she said.

“That’s not really an answer, Mom.”

“Yes, okay?! He did!”

“Did he... hit *me*?”

“Never,” she said, but that didn’t feel totally right.

“I sort of remember him hurting me,” I said. She hung up.

That night, I might have been awake or asleep, I don’t even know, the face appeared in my doorway. It seemed so kind and gentle, but menacing all at the same time.

“Are you awake?” It asked. I said nothing, and tried to pretend to be asleep. But I could feel it moving closer to me.

“Are you awake?” It said, louder.

“Yes,” I whispered, in a child’s voice.

“Oh, good!” He said, and sat on my bed. He smelled funny, like rubbing alcohol.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m okay, Dolly, but I’m a little sad.”

“Why?” I asked, simply.

“I’m lonely,” he said with mock sad puppy eyes. “Your mom is asleep and I have no one to watch a movie with.” It didn’t feel right, but I cared about him.

“I can watch a movie with you for a little while, I guess.”

“That would be so great, Dolly.” He grabbed my little hand, and led me to the living room. He laid down on the dusty, brown sectional, and laid a blanket beside him. He patted for me to hop in beside him. He turned on the movie, but I was too tired to keep my eyes open. When I opened them, there were naked people on the screen.

“I don’t like this movie,” I said.

“It’s just an adult movie,” he said, putting his hand on my stomach.

“I want to go back to bed,” I said.

“Just close your eyes here,” he said heavily, as something firm pressed into my thigh. I felt very sad.

“Okay,” I said, and tried to will myself to sleep. He moved beside me, wiggling.

“I really love you,” he whispered into my ear. But I was asleep, or trying really hard to be. Then, I heard my mom cough in her bedroom.

“Mom’s awake! You can hang out with her now! I’ll go get her!” I ran into my mom’s bedroom, and she was annoyed that I was there. I started crying.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“Bob is making me watch a movie I don’t like,” I told her.

“What do you mean?” She moved to the living room, and I heard them screaming. He told her some things I didn’t understand. I heard him hit her. She told him to come outside with her. A few moments later, she was running into her bedroom.

“Play hide-and-seek with me, Dolly! You go hide!” She said, frantically. She guided me in the darkness through the living room, toward my room.

“What the FUCK?!” Bob roared, now in the back lot. “OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR, YOU BITCH!” I cried and cried.

“Go hide, Dolly. Go to the playhouse,” she whispered urgently. Then, the picture window shattered all around us, spraying glass across the floor. “Go hide,” she sobbed. “Go hide.”

## Dagaz

I sit alone in the dark, silent room. My center feels like a black hole, threatening to swallow me. I have been hungry so long, but I just can't eat. There's a spring from the old mattress on the floor sticking into my thigh, but it barely registers any more. My mind is a battleground, and my body is no longer my own. I feel a lump rising in my throat, a black tar bitterness.

"No one is coming to help you," he laughs in my own voice. *They are not*, I think.

I can feel him pulsing beneath my skin, crushing my shoulders inward.

"You are all alone," he says. *Yes*, I think.

My eyes search the darkness for any detail that I might have missed. The windows are boarded, allowing only a little of the street lamp's sickness-colored light to spill onto the floor, littered with torn clothing and garbage. I look to the door – it's closed. I draw my eyes quickly away.

"There is no way out," he reminds. *I know*.

Somewhere deep within me, I am gathering what is left of my soul's energy. I feel him controlling my hands to slap myself, his laughter rising from my own abdomen. I am in an immovable chair stuck behind my own eyes, as he puppets my body into grotesque forms and abhorrent behaviors. The pain in my distant body is too familiar now; I can ignore it. He scratches at my flesh, and peels off the crusted scabs that tried so desperately to heal. He is screaming from my lungs, but my awareness remains unaltered. I am in here – I exist without him.

"You are helpless to fight me," he stops his assault upon my body, suddenly aware of my building will to rid myself of him. *All is not lost if I have will to fight you*.

"You fool!" My hand slaps my face under his control. He thinks this will work, as it has since this began. I remember the first time he took over – I was in the park where I had met my ex. I felt his words rising within me: "What I love about you is your innocence." These words were my ex's, but they were coming from a foreign voice within my own head now. I shrugged it off at the time, but he showed up again and again. He always knew exactly what to say.

"This will never work, you aren't strong enough," he laughed now. I try to remain unaffected by his words, firm in my conviction that if I could just summon all of my power I could exorcise him from me. I didn't need a priest chanting old prayers at me: I am powerful. *I am magick*. The power rose within me, and my body fell slack onto the mattress. The battle was on, inside my mind. He and I in an endless darkness, with only a small, silver light pouring from my self-projection: my mind's conception of myself.

*This will never work*; he repeated in my mind. His heels clicked on the floor-like darkness as he paced, staring me in the eye. *Look at you, you can't even stand up. You are weak.*

Summoning a surge of power, I said through my own lips: "You caused me strife, and endless pain; I now reflect it back again! From thy darkness, I bid thee return; in eternal fire burn! Return my power unto me; as I will it, so mote it be!"

"It's gonna take a lot more than that old wives' magick, darling." His voice overtook my mouth once again.

Inside me: *You caused me strife, and endless pain; I now reflect it back again! From thy darkness, I bid return; in eternal fire burn! Return my power unto me; as I will it, so mote it be!*

He laughed and black bile poured from my lips in a screaming torrent. He flung my body into the wall, then slammed my head on the floorboards.

“As you can see, I am in control. I’ll kill you before I let you get away from me!” He said.

Silver light rose again in the darkness arena of my mind. My ex had said that, too. I was strong enough to leave him – why can’t I get this demon out of me now? I must try again.

*You caused me strife, and endless pain; I now reflect it back again! From thy darkness, I bid return; in eternal fire burn! Return my power unto me; as I will it, so mote it be!*

After the incident in the park, I heard his voice more often. He told me that I was special. He told me that no one could ever love me like he did. He said I looked so beautiful when I wore makeup, and bought me some. He said that he liked his burritos with more cheese. He said he was unhappy I didn’t wait up for him. He said he didn’t want me hanging out with my best friend. He said I was a lazy bitch. Then, I began to hurt.

“Yes, you remember,” he said. *You caused me strife, and endless pain –*

“Blah, blah, blah. I’ve heard it all before. Now sit down!” My body sits rigidly upright on the mattress again, hands folded in my lap, while a small river of blood weaves its way down my face. He had moved through me like a virus, slowly replacing every happiness with anger and cruelty. I began alienating friends, overeating, undereating, crying for hours, and praying for a way out of his grasp. It was his words through my lips when I realized that I was beyond help. I had pushed away every attempt at deliverance because whenever I thought I should reach out, he punished me worse. I would throw up from overeating, or lay helplessly immobile for days on end. He didn’t let me shower. He didn’t let me read. I just sat, alone and afraid of his reprisals. Every inch of doubt or anger that I’d gained from my life was turned to a poison that he could use to force me forever back into my helpless corner. I watched him destroy my body from behind glassy eyes. *No more*, I said within.

“Try me,” he growled.

I screamed into the darkness of our battleground: *You caused me strife, and endless pain; I now reflect it back again! From thy darkness, I bid return; in eternal fire burn! Return my power unto me; as I will it, so mote it be!*

His essence shuddered, and I became aware that I’d regained brief control over my body again. In the air above my head, I drew Thurisaz-Uruz, the rune of defense.

"I am strong!" I screamed in my own voice. His voice was now only within. In the blood from my forehead, I drew Perthro.

"To return to myself!" I screamed, and his presence recoiled from the battlefield.

*Witch! How dare you try to defeat me!* His voice hissed within me. *Where was your power when I found you?*

“I had forgotten that I had any,” I said.

Suddenly, a slap across my face again, and I was no longer in control. "YOU DON'T!" he roared.

*I have a name. It is not your name; it is my own.*

"Your name is whore of Babylon, and you belong to me!" he commanded.

*No! My name is...*

"Useless! Idiot! Waste of time! THE GIRL NO ONE WANTS!" His voice booming from me, echoing against the walls of the enclosed room. His overpowering laughter shrunk me again to my helpless corner.

"ONLY I WANT YOU! I WILL NEVER LEAVE!"

*My... Name....*

"I am the only one who has ever loved you! My love may hurt, but I want you! You, a cast-off! Stop fighting me!" He laughed.

*No.*

His laughter shook the walls of the room, and pieces of loose plaster fell to the ground. He was too powerful, and I knew he would never leave, no matter what I did. Forever he would stalk me, and he always knew where I hid. I couldn't be free of him, so why even try?

"You were always alone! No one wanted you. Why else would you have invited me?" His voice was now oil, moving across the battleground, smoothing me into the final corner of my awareness.

*I didn't invite you, I whispered.*

"Yes, you did, dear. You begged to be loved. You were desperate to find it. You needed me to love you. How pathetic."

*You're right, I wept.*

"Now we're together forever," he hissed, moving my body snake-like toward the padlocked door that I'd prayed he hadn't noticed. Of course, he had noticed; he knows everything that I know. He is the part of me that will destroy me.

"Let's get out of here, little one. Tell me the combination."

*...Forty-two...*

"Yes," he turned the dial.

The last fragments of my tired soul sizzled and popped, fighting for their moments, raging against their own defeat. Pictures flashed within me: every time I'd disappointed someone, each unkind word I had ever said, and the endless, harrowing cycles of depression and abuses. He had been right. I needed love, but never had it. His love was better than no love.

“What’s the next number?” He grunted to illustrate his frustration.

*Seven.*

“Good girl,” his voice had completely overtaken my own.

*You were right...*

"What, my little scab?" He moved the dial.

*I did invite you. I kept all my loneliness inside, all of my sorrow.*

“What’s the final number?” He hissed.

*I needed your love... Because I couldn't love myself.*

“What’s the final number, idiot?!” His spiritual manifestation upon the battleground of my mind was enormous, sharp, and frightening.

*I believed it.*

"You're an idiot. I'll find that number in your mind!" He charged at me in the darkness.

*I BELIEVED it. I believed...*

“That I am unlovable,” I said in my own voice.

Within myself, I stood. Stepping out of my dark corner, a white light exploded from me in all directions. With my body back in my own control, I twisted the lock closed again, and ran from the door.

“It isn’t even true. It’s just what he told me,” I said. “To control me.”

*You idiot! You piece of shit! You are worthless! You disappoint everyone! You're so fat and lazy, you can't even take care of yourself! You'll be nothing without me.*

My fingers moved faster than possible, carving sigils into the air. Inside me, I saw his bulk shrinking.

"My name is..." I paused, and smiled. "My name is the dawn. I am the woman of strength, and I banish you, unclean spirit! Leave my body and free my mind!"

He writhed and bucked on the floor of my battleground, now illuminated by my bright spirit. My physical body rose from the floor, weak, but in my own command.

"This is my sigil! Heed it!" I cried as a symbol of light rushed from me, striking him. I felt the tentacles of him loosening in from each part of my mind, feeding off my own self-doubt. They whirled about, trying to find a hold.

"I am forgiven! You can no longer keep me prisoner!"

*You are pathetic. You are selfish.*

"My name is the dawn! I am the woman of strength, and I banish you, unclean spirit! Leave my body and free my mind!"

*You cannot banish me!*

"This is my sigil!" I roared, fingers flitting through the air, blasting his manifestation again and again.

*Your sigil means nothing. He shrank.*

I smiled between cracked, swollen lips; I said: "But yours does, doesn't it?"

*You... Know my sigil?* His tentacles drew into him.

"I've known you, just as you've known me. Yes, I know you."

*You can't be rid of me!*

"Maybe not forever, but if I can name you, you are in my control." I laughed, as my soul burst through to overtake my body once more. I was in agonizing pain, but it was good to feel it again. I bent to the dirty floor, and traced his sigil into it, calling out his name. It echoed through the darkness of the room like a hammer on ice, breaking its hold on my sorrow.

“You are now in my control. You cannot overtake me.”

*I'm still here – I will always be here.*

In my mind's battleground, I drew Algiz. A cage appeared, ensnaring him within it. He howled as his presence shrank and faded into the light of me.

I walked to the door, removed the padlock easily, and entered the world once more.

## **Conclusion**

Writing this has brought me no healing. My mom is still alive at the time of this writing; as are men who have killed a lover; as are the men who hit me, pushed me, kicked me, choked me, frightened me, or reinforced untrue messages about my worth. Writing has, at times, brought back the pain of the decades I've survived. But, honestly, I never intended it to heal me. This has in no way been an attempt at overcoming my trauma, for it will be with me until its conclusion; whether that be justice or death. Somehow I feel death will find me first. It is, however, an attempt to make you, the reader, do more than look, more than pity, more than what you have or haven't done before. My goal in this is to encourage you to no longer be complicit. And, perhaps, to alleviate my own complicity as the one who survived. You've read my stories, you can choose what to believe, as you have. Where is the truth? Does it even matter?

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