

WITHOUT WITNESS

I quietly close the book in my hands and wonder if I've actually become invisible. "I'm still here, you know," I call into the darkness, testing whether my voice has vanished like the rest of me. "Yoo-hoo. I'm right here, reading a book." I wave my hand in front of the cat. She sniffs, licks my skin. Okay, the cat can see me. Invisibility must be very much like death, for what is life if not the ability to be seen, tasted, felt, and heard?

To my right something grunts in the blackened room. Paul. "Going to bed," he says.

"Did it even occur to you that I'm sitting here too?"

"You want me to turn the light back on, is that it?"

"For starters, yes. Unless I'm asleep or dead, I'd appreciate you not turning off the lights when I'm still in the room. Still using them."

The light comes on and I have an epiphany. Maybe the reason he's not asked for a divorce is because he's that good at pretending I'm not here. I read another chapter or two, until I think he's had time to slip into a light, bourbon-induced coma, and then I go crawl in, hugging the bed's edge like a stripper pole.

The next morning I pad into the living room, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Paul is on his hands and knees in the living room, the furniture moved to accommodate a slick blue tarpaulin spread out on the floor. Pinched between his fingers is a sailor's needle and thread. The material pops like a kernel of corn as he jabs the over-sized needle into it and pulls it through the other side.

"Whatcha you doing?" I ask.

There comes no answer so I clear my throat and ask again. "What's all this?"

"A tarpaulin."

"I can see it's a tarp, I mean what are you doing with it?"

"A project." He sounds irritated that I'm here, badgering him. I wait for more explanation. When none comes I leave the room, thinking I don't really give a shit what he's doing with a twenty foot tarp in the house at six in the morning. He could be sewing body bags to cart away a basement full of corpses he's been hoarding—it won't get so much as a second glance from me.

The nutty aroma of hazelnut coffee fills the kitchen. I pour a cup, and feed the cat, the lizard, and the fish before settling in front of the computer to work on my novel. I'm at the tail end of a fantasy thriller. My fingers hammer away at the keyboard trying to keep up with the narrator in my head as she brings me closer to the climax, one gruesome murder at a time. The heroine is closing in on the killer, a seven foot Sasquatch with psychic intuition who predicts her every move, when suddenly my screen goes blank.

"No!" I shout at the computer. "Not now!" I'd been writing feverishly for over two hours. I scramble out of the den, panicked. The crackly blue plastic is now draped over the couch. A pole of some kind, possibly a broomstick, props it up in the middle. I wonder how the broom is

staying upright, but I'd rather have my tongue nailed to a tree than let Paul see I'm curious about his 'project'.

I flip the ceiling fan switch. Nothing happens. "I think we lost electricity."

"I shut it off," he says, not looking up from the canvas teepee.

"You what?" Heat rises all the way to my forehead and I can just feel the steam escaping through my ears like the vent on a pressure cooker. "You knew I was in the office, writing. All that work is probably lost now."

He tugs on the seam he's sewn. There's a sock on his left hand. I look down. One foot is bare. Nope. Not asking. I don't want to know about the sock or the tarp or the broom. I do, however, want to know about the electricity.

"Why on earth did you turn it off?"

"So I wouldn't get electrocuted?" He says it like a question, as though the answer so obvious only a fool would ask.

"Now if you'll quit nagging me I can finish what I'm doing and get the juice back on."

"Why didn't you at least warn me you were doing it so I could've shut down the computer and saved my work? You don't live alone in this house you know."

"I didn't think—dear."

Oh, my blood's boiling. He said dear in that sarcastic way that makes it sound like I'm a nag.

"Soon as you're done bitching about it, I'll finish and turn it back on." He straightens and pulls the sock off his hand. His flat, lifeless eyes meet mine for the first time in...I don't know how long. "So, you done?"

Done? Oh I'm done all right. I'm so done. I've been done for years. I spin around and leave the room in a huff.

That night we go to bed like any other night, no words, no eye contact, no touch. He brushes his teeth at his sink, I at mine. He skims past me in the narrow doorway, managing, like a ghost, not to touch me. He turns his back to the east. I turn mine to the west. We fall asleep.

"Paul, did you hear that? Paul?"

He groans.

I sit up. "I heard something. Sounds like someone's outside." I nudge him from sleep.

"Paul?"

He rolls onto his stomach. "Go back to sleep."

"Paul, wake up. Someone's here." I squint at the blurry red numbers on the headboard clock: 4:07. My mind runs down the list of possibilities. Anyone with an emergency would surely call if they had a problem. I pick up the phone on the nightstand to check. The dial tone sings in my ear. Whoever it is knocks again. I shake Paul's shoulder. "Are you going to see who it is?"

"Nobody I know would come knocking at four in the morning," he groans.

It sounds like an accusation. Like that's all my friends and family members do. Like they show up once or twice a week in the middle of the night to play Gin Rummy. We've been married ten years and I can count on my hands the times anyone 'I know' has ever knocked on our door at four in the morning, and I'd still have enough fingers left over to play the flute. I suppose he's so perfect and civilized that his people would have the decency to only have emergencies at a convenient hour.

"It's probably Clayton." he says, giving the accusation a face.

“Clayton has never once come here in the middle of the night,” I say. Clayton’s my nephew. Going to school here. Lives in a back room at the church while he’s working on his Missions degree at Trinity College—even though we have two, count them, two empty bedrooms. Not the type to be out gallivanting around at four a.m. Besides, he rarely comes over when he knows Paul’s home. Same with my sisters. And I guess my friends for that matter. Paul kind of has a way of making people feel unwelcome.

The sound of the door knob being jostled fires up my adrenaline. “At least go with me,” I plead.

He doesn't respond.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” I throw the covers off and go to investigate. This isn’t the first time he’s been idle in time of crisis. Years ago, in college, there came a knock at the door in the middle of the night. He sent me down the stairs of my townhouse apartment first, saying it made more sense. If an intruder knocked him out with the first surprising punch there’d be no way for me to fight him off. On the other hand, if I got knocked out first, he’d be right there to deliver the second blow and protect me.

I look through the slats in the shutters. The front of the house is dimly lit by a streetlamp. Two men stand on the stoop. One shines a flashlight around the door frame. The other one has his back to the house, watching the street. I get a sinking feeling. My husband’s snores provide background music to the accelerating percussion in my chest. I can't believe he's fallen back to sleep with some kind of emergency at the front door. Did he seriously not even bother to listen for a few minutes to be sure it was Clayton?

I flip on the porch light and the two men look up. Police uniforms. That makes me feel a little better. I unlock the door and open it just a crack. "Can I help you?"

"Everything all right, Ma'am?" The one with the flashlight says.

"Yes. What's the matter?" I'm standing behind the door sticking my head around; peering through the small opening I've created. I'm wearing only a t-shirt and panties, no bra, so modesty prevents me from opening the door all the way. But also, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking if they try to push the door open I'll be able to throw my whole body into it and hit the lock.

"We got a call. Your alarm went off."

Hmm. Red flag. My clammy hand slides to the dead bolt. The other flattens against the door, ready to slam it shut. "Our alarm isn't hooked up to the police department."

"This 1427 Morgan Way?"

"Yes, but--"

"You mind stepping out from behind the door so we can see you're okay."

"Show me a badge."

He does. I move to where he can see me better through the small crack, keeping one hand on the door. Paul will surely sidle up to me any moment now to see what's going on. He can undoubtedly hear the conversation. After all, I could hear him snoring a minute ago. I try to listen for signs of his whereabouts. The snoring has stopped.

"Ma'am, we need for you to open the door all the way, so we can see no one's in there, meaning you harm."

I know I'm acting a little suspicious, standing behind the door, hand up ready to slam it shut. I move aside, let the door come all the way open. "See? I'm fine. No intruders." I smile to assure them, now wondering if someone else in the neighborhood is getting robbed blind while they waste their time assessing my distress level.

The first one steps in, looks around the front room with his flashlight. The second guy scans the front yard again, and then follows his partner in. They close the front door and before I know it, one of them clamps a hand over my mouth. I try to scream. A second set of hands grip my throat.

"You scream? I'll kill everyone in this house."

He tightens his grip. It feels like every little bitty bone in my neck would snap like dried spaghetti. I nod my understanding and he lets go. As I suck in a life-saving lungful of air, a foul tasting cloth is stuffed into my mouth. Another long one is tied to hold it in place. I gag.

They shove me onto a dining room chair and bind my wrists and ankles. My heart's pounding. Why hasn't Paul come out from the bedroom? Maybe he's gotten his baseball bat and he's poised and ready to strike when they enter the bedroom. Surely they'll go in the bedroom looking for jewelry. Won't they at least check the bedrooms to see if someone else is home? But they don't go in the bedroom. Don't even ask me who else is home.

The ropes cut into my wrists. Paul's college tactic seems to make sense now. If he'd answered the door and been attacked what could I have done? This is better. He'll come around the corner any second now, with a good solid double-fisted grip on the baseball bat.

One man, the bigger of the two, stands over me. The streetlamp offers enough light for me to see he's barely a man. Maybe twenty-one. His skin is young and fresh, but he's hairy. It sticks out the cuff of the police uniform. And the neck. There's stubble on his face. This might make him look older than he really is. I don't know, I can't read his age, but non-verbal cues I can read. He looks worried, conflicted. The way he keeps pulling at his ear, flexing and straightening his fingers. Even his breath is giving him away. Pulling in too much air, holding it, releasing it hard. He's a bundle of nerves.

Across the room, the other guy is little more than a shadow. I can't tell much, except that he's slight, which makes me think he's young too. The fact that he's keeping his distance makes me think he's a little shook up as well.

"Well, are you going to do it?" The slight one asks.

What? Do what? I ask with my eyes.

"Yeah, I'll do it. Just let me think for a minute." His voice is deep, but raises a note with each word.

"Thinking's no good in a situation like this! Just do it."

No, thinking is good. Thinking. Yes. Think about it. I nod in agreement and blink away tears. Maybe these guys are in a gang. This could be some kind of initiation. If only I could talk I'd let them know I'd embellish to the cops. Tell them they did all sorts of unthinkable crimes to me so they'd look bad and tough to fellow gangsters.

The hairy guy holds the flat of a knife up to my face. The cold steel presses hard onto the cheekbone. I stop breathing for fear any movement at all might send the sharp point into my eye. He slides the metal down my face and throat real slow until it bears down on my collar bone.

Paul shouldn't wait to ambush. They're not going in the bedroom for jewelry. My purse is hanging from the chair next to me, neglected. They're not here to rob me and I don't want to think about why they are here. Paul should hurry, before the hairy kid works up his nerve. I'm tempted to steal a furtive glance toward our bedroom, but can't risk giving him away. His surprise is our only hope. Come on, Paul. Now.

"Well, are you gonna do it or not?"

Not, I plead telepathically. I think of all the things I didn't get to. Trips I didn't take, goals I didn't meet. Worst of all—all the nights I crawled into bed and made myself small. And



all the days I let him make me feel small. What if I'd been more understanding? Less bitchy? Thinner. Why didn't I work harder at being happy? So what if I'd just gone on loving him in spite of everything? Would that have been so bad? I could've chosen kinder words, made love more often. For the first time in a long time it doesn't seem like such a sin to love someone who didn't deserve it. Who deserves love anyway? All of us? None of us? What a waste I made of my life. I should've loved no matter what.

The kid lifts the knife from my collar bone, taps the flat of it against his thigh a hundred times. A thousand times.

"Come on, the longer you wait, the harder it is," the skinny kid says.

He's right about that, I think.

The other one bites his lip, pulls at his ear. "I don't know. We don't even know her. Seems a waste."

"You're a chicken-shit, you know that?" Scrawny boy says. He rubs a rather delicate hand on his forehead, like he's just as worried as the big one. Something's tattooed on his hand, but I can't tell what.

"Shut up. You think it's so easy? You do it."

I realize neither one of these guys will make eye contact with me. Maybe they're just tired of being invisible too. It's feasible the purpose of this stunt is to put them on the map and prove to somebody that they matter.

The skinny kid moves in closer. His eyes dart around the room, erratically. "It's not my job." His voice cracks. The hairy kid runs his hands down his pant legs, drying them off. They're scared, both of them. We're all three scared. None of us want to be in our current situation, but God knows finding an exit is not always easy.

A terrible thought hits me. What if this is Paul's exit. Maybe these kids aren't here on a gang initiation. Maybe my own husband hired them to break in and kill me in the night. That would explain why he didn't get up to investigate, or at the very least be kept awake by curiosity. Perhaps he fell back to sleep because he took a sleeping pill. And he took the sleeping pill as a way of explaining to the cops why he didn't hear a struggle.

The skinny kid grabs the knife from the other's hand and goes behind me. I feel the cold steel edge against my throat. "If you go across like this she won't feel a thing." He scrapes the back of the knife across my throat, demonstrating. Not enough air enters my flaring nostrils. I break out in a sweat. The knife gets passed to the one who's supposed to do it. I squeeze my eyes shut. There's a long silence. A lingering time when I'm deprived of my senses. No sights, no sounds, smells, touch. Only the faint taste of iron as I bite my cheek. There is no love in my heart, no blame, no hate. I'm an empty shell, invisible now even to myself.

But then, out of the blue I hear the front door open. I open my eyes. They're gone. I'm not. I'm here. I'm able to lift my hands. The rope has been cut. I want to thank them, but of course that sounds ridiculous. Thanking someone for not murdering you? And yet it is a huge gesture of love. Validation that I somehow matter.

I slink toward the bedroom, wondering if my return will shock the hell out of my husband. Will he be sitting on the edge of the bed, wringing his hands? At the desk reviewing the insurance policy? Maybe he'll be emptying the jewelry box to point the real cops to a botched robbery.

When I get there I find him in the same position I left him in, back to the door, head on the pillow. I pick up the bat I was certain he'd save me with and sneak around the foot of the bed, looking for signs that he's faking sleep. He sighs, a peaceful REM sort of sigh. Neon-orange

earplugs are mashed in his ears. Wait. I stop mid-stride, scratch my head. Were the earplugs in all along? Or did he put them in after I went to the front door so he wouldn't have to listen to the sounds of murder-for-hire? I raise the Louisville Slugger above my head. The maple grows slick beneath my sweaty grip. If he had the earplugs in when I woke him earlier shouldn't he have pulled them out to see that I was okay? I try to picture his ears when he told me to go back to sleep. I can't. I'm confused. Maybe he didn't hear anything.

I pull the bedroom chair next to the bed and sit. Looking out the east window, I see dawn has arrived. A rabbit pauses in the dewy grass, statue-still. The early morning sun glints off something in the garden. I squint and see four poles holding up a blue plastic tarp—a tomato shade.

I glance back at my husband. I'll wait. I'll hold this bat in my lap until he wakes up. And when he does, I'll know when I see his eyes. After all, ten long years with a man teaches you something.

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