

V.

The Traveller

Superhero movie weekend had been a great one. The movie was an absolute blast, I got ahead on some of my coursework, and caught up on sleep. Things were really looking up.

I wish I could have said the same about the weekend that followed.

It started Thursday night. I had the nightmare again. The only difference this time is that I was somehow aware of being asleep. The feral shadow prowled at the edge of my bed. I couldn't move, and I couldn't wake up. I was paralyzed, utterly turned to stone. It jumped to the bed again, and my heart began to pound. It bared its teeth to me, and I felt a jolt like two knives being plunged into my shoulder, just up by my neck. I began to bleed. Hot and thick like tar my body bled, until my sheets were soaked, and I felt myself floating in a sea of pulsing crimson. My head felt light, my breath left my lungs, and my body slipped under.

I woke in a cold sweat, gasping for breath, in the room that previously had been overflowing with my own blood. I clutched my aching shoulder, but my fur was dry. I looked to the door – ready to run to the bathroom to shower, or pee, or retch, or some combination of the three – but I froze.

Standing at the far end of my bed, illuminated by the standby light of my computer, was a male figure. Its fur was ragged, and its face was hidden behind a curtain of hair that fell past its chest. A sculpture could not have been more still than the spectre that stood before me. I stared at it until my stinging eyes forced me to blink, and as I did so, it moved to the door without actually moving. The next moment, the door was open, and the second after that, it vanished through the doorway. I blinked again, and the door was shut.

With the shadow out of sight I threw the sheets off of me and dashed to the door. I jiggled the knob in an anxious hand. It was locked, just as it had been when I laid down. I was terrified to look outside, but I flipped on my lights and unlocked the door. Light poured out of my room and into the hallway. My shadow stretched across the floor, all the way to Salvador's door. I stepped out and looked around, one hand holding onto my doorknob like a lifeline against the swallowing dark. From where I stood, I could see across the hall, and down the other way, I could see most of the kitchen and part of the living room.

Not satisfied with my survey, I retreated into my doorway and ran a hand along the wall until my fingers flipped the switch for the hall light. It flicked on, a blinding white. I had to glance away until my eyes adjusted. I released my doorknob and ventured into the hall, keeping one hand on the wall as though I might fall through the floor if I wasn't. I passed under the overhead hall light, and my shadow moved to hide from it.

I grabbed Salvador's door knob as I reached the end of the hall, and I tried to turn it. It was locked fast. Having satisfied myself with that, I darted into the bathroom, turned on the lights, and shut the door. I stripped off my underwear and jumped into the shower, turning the water up hot enough to steam. I began to shake, and the scene replayed itself in my head, deepening with every repetition.

Dreams and nightmares. Those fade so quickly from memory after you wake. But this? This only got stronger.

After spending far too much of my night under a steaming cascade, I worked up the will to get out and dry off. Steam floated against the ceiling and clouded the mirror as I toweled

myself off. Once I was dry, I slipped my underwear on and crept back into my room. I closed the door and made sure it was locked this time, and wrapped myself up tight in the sheets.

I woke up the next day in the afternoon, exhausted and groggy. My eyelids were heavy and my eyes stung, and every muscle in my body was sore and aching. I barely managed to roll out of bed, keeping the sheets wrapped around my body as I trudged out into the living room. My feet felt like they were trapped in cinderblocks, and my arms felt like deflated noodle balloons. It took everything I had to get to the couch, where I flopped over onto my side, groaning.

“Okay so, on a scale of one to Everclear, how hungover are you?” I found Salvador looking down at me, his head turned to one side and a half eaten sandwich in his hand.

I barely had the energy to reply, but I made an effort. “I’m not hungover. I didn’t sleep. Another nightmare.”

“Ah... Do you wanna talk about it?” Salvador sat on what little of the couch I wasn’t occupying and placed a hand on my sheet-wrapped side.

I grunted my best approximation of a yes. “It was the same as last time, but worse.”

“The one from the beginning of the year?” He pulled his hand off me for a moment, seeming to recoil from me, his face tensed with concern. I nodded. He put his hand back on me and started to rub my side. It was comforting. I closed my eyes and told him about it. The feral shadow, the sea of blood, and even the spectre I saw when I woke up. His expression was sad and full of worry. “That is... really freaky. Sounds like you’re being haunted.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I groaned to him. He sighed and got up, returning momentarily with a glass of water for me. I thanked him for it and drank it down. “I think I might just try and nap here for a bit,” I told him as he took the empty glass from me.

“Feel free. If you need anything just try and holler for me, okay? I don’t have plans to be anywhere today.” Salvador rubbed my head for a moment before removing himself to the kitchen. I heard him drop the glass in the sink, and after that the sound of his footsteps disappeared down the hall. The door to his room never closed, left open to hear me better should I need his help.

The next hour was a blur of falling in and out of sleep while tossing and turning on the couch. At some point Salvador took my temperature, as I woke up to a thermometer sitting on the coffee table. I managed to sit up, now nursing a headache, but not feeling quite so terrible as before. I called out for Salvador, but I was drowned out by the sound of the doorbell ringing. It made my skull split, but Salvador bounded down the hall and grabbed the front door knob, unlocking it and pulling it open.

“Well hello there good sir, and what a wonderful day it is! It is so nice to be greeted with such a handsome face. I do say, you’re the best looking one I’ve seen all day!” A boisterous border collie was standing at the door, dressed in a sharp-looking suit and tie. Salvador backed up a few steps from the volume of his greeting.

“Uhhh, thank you? What are, uh, how can I help you?” Salvador managed to stammer out.

“No no my friend, the real question is, how can I help you? You see I’m a door-to-door salesman, and boy oh boy do I have the cure to what ails you! Like your friend over there,

what's wrong with him?" the salesman asked as he peered past Salvador to see me sitting up on the couch, looking like death.

"Nightmare. Really doubt you can-"

"Nightmares? Hah! I laugh at such silly things! See here now pal, buddy, take a gander at these!" The salesman easily pushed past Salvador and walked over to me, dragging along with him a suitcase I hadn't been able to see before. He placed it on the coffee table and snapped it open, revealing a nicely-arranged selection of... Well. Occult items, really. Definitely not what I or my roommate were expecting.

Without even looking at his inventory, he grabbed a coin about the size of an old half-dollar. It was covered in weird symbols, and shone silver in the light. "See this here, this is guaranteed to chase nightmares away so long as you keep it close in bed! If your nightmares don't scatter after buying this, then, well, buddy. Pal. You've got bigger problems than nightmares! But I can one hundred percent guarantee that my charms work!"

I rolled my eyes, and intended to tell him off when Salvador spoke up. "I'll take two," the striped hyena said, his wallet already fished out from his pocket.

"What? Really?" I gave him an incredulous look.

He nodded to me and paid the salesman, who handed over two of the coins with a tip of his hat. "You look like hell, and if these things work? You won't have to worry about waking up like this again."

"You know I don't believe in stuff like that..." I croaked.

"And you know that I do." He shrugged. "I did say it sounded like you were being haunted. If these don't work, we'll know it's more than just a nightmare."

"That doesn't sound very scientific."

"Magic never is," he said, matter-of-factly.

The salesman closed his briefcase with a click and lifted it off the table, being courteous enough to not scratch it. "Well, it was a pleasure doing business with you sir!" He made for the door, ready to bolt, but stopped short and turned around slowly with a business card in hand. "You know..." he started, looking at Salvador. "You've got some pretty sharp canine teeth. I know a guy who can get those filed down for you. Must be hell when you bite your tongue." He held his hand forward, the card pinched between two fingers.

Salvador bristled, his fur puffing up as his mane stood on-end where it poked out of his shirt. "Excuse me?"

"Hey, sorry pal, I didn't mean any harm! Just an offer, after all."

"Hmph." Salvador grunted and pouted. "Well, thanks but no thanks."

"Suit yourself." The salesman seemed unphased, and with a flick of his wrist he sailed the card around Salvador and landed it in my lap. "You need anything buddy, give that number a call, alright?" Without another word, he bowed out, closing the door behind him. Salvador came down from his flare-up, once the man was out of sight.

"Sal, am I having a fever dream?" I asked as I flipped the card over in my hands.

"For better or for worse, no. I think you're okay. No fever." He put a hand to my forehead anyways to double check. "For sure, no fever. That was, uh... A thing, I guess. Here." He handed me one of the coins, and I took it from him.

"Thanks, I guess." I placed it and the business card on the table.

Salvador snorted at me. "You guess? I'm trying to help."

"Sorry, I just don't really-"

"And why not? Look, I'm not really *that* superstitious okay, but something really messed up is going on, and I'm tired of just hoping it'll go away, especially when it's doing *this* to you," he said as he gestured at me. He had a point.

"Sal... I appreciate the gesture, but it's just not that easy. You've seen me, right?" I looked him in the eyes.

I was met with a quizzical look. "Yeah, I know what you look like."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And, what am I?"

"A cat?"

I rolled my eyes. "What kind of cat, Sal."

"A black c- ohhhh."

"Exactly, a black cat. Do you know how much flak I get from people who believe the stuff that you do? I've even been beat up a couple of times... It's so stupid. If black cats were bad luck, don't you think I would have noticed that by now? But it's not true! None of this supernatural stuff is." I almost threw the coin across the room to make a point, but the thought of upsetting Salvador with the gesture held my hand. Besides, I was too tired to throw far enough to make my point.

"I never... I never believed that one, if that helps," Salvador said, trying to be reassuring.

"A little, I guess." A wave of lethargy washed over me, and I laid back down on my side on the couch that I had yet to rise from. A long groan escaped my mouth.

"You look awful still... You uh, just keep resting up okay? You'll feel better tomorrow." He gave me a sympathetic smile and rubbed my head between my ears. I closed my eyes, and he got up and vanished back into his room.