“Night of the Traitor”

I watched a bird fly from one side of the window to the other, landing on a thin tree branch. It bobbed slightly under its weight and then balanced out as the bird hopped closer to the base of the tree.

I stared out the window from the floor-bound mattress. He wrapped me in blankets before he left but the attic was more stuffy than drafty, so I ended up pulling them off in my sleep.

It had been a few days since we got there, and he didn’t want me going outside, but I could leave the attic if I needed to. He hid my shoes on the first day, and I haven’t had any luck finding them; I suspected they were in his truck. I was mad at him for taking them from me, but I guessed we’d be on our way out of this state eventually, and I could have them back. My stomach grumbled for the second time since I woke up, but sleep weighed so heavily on my body that I just couldn’t get out of bed. He kept me up half the night ranting about how his dealings were taking too long, and we should’ve been out of here a while ago. I tried to calm him down, but I realized I just had to let him get it out of his system. When he left, he said he’d come back with food, though it had been hours since then. I sat up too quickly and felt woozy — *fuck, I need food.*

I slowly got up but swayed a bit on my feet and lumbered to the ladder. I had been scared of climbing it; it was creaky, unfinished wood that probably hadn’t been touched in years. Somehow, I got to the second storey without falling and headed down the main stairs to the kitchen.

The fridge was empty except for a stack of American cheese slices, lunch meat, and two six-packs of beer. I pulled a can from the ring and took the ham and cheese from the shelf. The bread was on the counter and I grabbed one of the three plates from the cabinet.

The kitchen was joined to the living room; there were two windows on either side of it and a fireplace built into the center wall. This would’ve been a nice place for a person to live if it weren’t so removed. I made my sandwich, grabbed my beer, and left the kitchen.

Back upstairs, I sat on the mattress and ate. The attic was a fair size. There was a big dark wooden dresser next to the head of the mattress, and boxes were stacked against the wall closest to the far window. My attic back home was around the same size, but it was filled to the brim with my grandmother's old stuff. My mother never had the time to go through it, and the rest of the family (the ones that talked to us, anyway) didn't think she had anything precious to take. I used to go up there and rifle through her old letters, clothes, and jewelry. I stole one of her lockets when I was about twelve, and my father yelled at me for wearing it, but when he died, I wore it to his funeral and every day afterward.

During our stay in the cabin, we littered the ground with pill bottles, take-out containers, cigarette butts— all of that bullshit. I realized I didn't know what time it was. I judged by the shadows on the ground; it would have been around mid-afternoon, but the fact that I wasn't sure put me on edge.

I finished my sandwich and put the plate on the floor. I stood, walked to the window, and looked out of it, down at the ground. The tree mostly obscured it, but the sliver of the world I could see wasn't much of anything: dirt and patches of grass led to a larger woodland. I sighed, leaning my forehead against the glass; it was cool on my skin — a fairly pleasant sensation. My eyes trailed down to the hardwood floor. *Maybe I'll go back to sleep*. There was a stray pill bottle at my feet, separate from the others in the pile across the room. The label was ripped off, but whatever it said before probably wasn't what was in there anymore. I plucked it from the ground, and it gave a low rattle as I opened it. A few pills were left in there, all uniform in shape: white and ovate. I poured two out, and I took it — whatever it was — and washed it down with the rest of the beer. I lay back down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling until I drifted off again.

I woke up to the sound of shuffling. He was back. The sun had almost completely set, but the remnants of fading blue light would hold on for at least a couple more minutes. I rolled over in bed to see what he was doing; the light coming from the stairs below was just enough to illuminate him. He was looking through a box.

"God*dammit!*" He threw something down.

I shot right up, fighting the fact that my head was spinning, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He jerked at the sound of my voice but waved me off seconds later, “It’s nothing.”

I put my head on my knees to recoup. “It’s dark out,” I said, looking back up, “Where have you been all day?”

“You ask too many questions, you know that?”

“I was just worried.”

“Well, don’t be.”

“Fine,” I groped in the dark for the little lamp I plugged in at the foot of the bed. My hands found the embossed brass base and clicked it on. I could see his face now, he looked…different. Harsher. Something was behind his eyes, and it made him even more guarded than usual. He was on something. Granted, so was I, but he was *scary*. He loomed at the other end of the room, glaring at me. I sank into myself, pulling my knees up to my chest. His frown deepened, and his expression turned to obvious anger. He stepped forward.

“I thought I told you not to go outside.”

“You did…”

“So why’d you do it?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Your feet are dirty.”

I checked the soles of my feet, and they were blackened with grime. “My feet are dirty because the floor is dirty.”

“You’re a little liar! You could mess up this whole plan — *our* plan, remember?” He pointed at me, “You’re considered a missing person, they’re saying I *kidnapped* you — do you *want* me to go to jail?”

“No, I don’t! Even if I did go out, we’re in the middle of the woods, there’s no one around for miles!”

“Get up.” He demanded.

“What?”

“Stand up.”

I scrambled to my feet, he closed the gap between us, and got up in my face. His forehead was uncomfortably sweaty, and his pupils were like saucers. I tried softening my tone, “Hey, maybe you should lie down, you don’t look–”

“No,” he lowered his voice but kept the same intensity, “If you wanna leave so bad, then do it.”

“What?”

“Do it. Run. Run back to your mama and your piece of shit town, where they can laugh and beat the shit out of you for being a fucking freak. *I* accepted you, *I* wanted you to come with me because I *knew* you wouldn’t survive there!”

I could only sputter trying to tell him I didn’t want to go.

“Run, or I’ll fucking kill you!” He yelled, pushing me back onto the mattress. I didn’t know if he was serious or not, and I didn’t want to find out. I bolted back up and rushed to the ladder behind him. I didn’t know how I climbed down that thing so fast, but I hit the floor in no time and started down the other set of stairs.

That’s when I heard him following me.

He was shouting my name along with every slur he could call me. I stumbled to the kitchen in hopes of finding his keys. I thanked God for the first time in a while because there they were sitting on the countertop. I grabbed them and headed in the opposite direction towards the door.

He was at the bottom of the stairs. I undid the deadbolt and the lock and swung open the door. The cool night breeze cut through me and I felt a swell of ecstasy, but as it came, it soon went; his truck wasn’t anywhere to be seen. It was dead black out there, so he usually parked in front of the door just in case we had to make a quick exit. I was about to book it to the road on the slim chance I’d run into another car, but I felt his big arms wrap around my middle and hoist me up. I started to scream and I couldn’t stop. I dropped the keys on the porch as he dragged me back inside.

I wriggled in his grasp as he carried me into the kitchen. He let go suddenly, and I dropped to the floor with a hard thud. I struggled back up and tried to run past him, but he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me to the ground. And before I could get up again, he knelt over me, “*Stay down*,” he kept saying. I thrashed and kicked but he got my arms under him. I whined out a series of ‘*Please*’, ‘*Don’t do this*’, and ‘*I love you’s*.

He barked at me to shut up and, when I wouldn't, he put his hands around my neck. I pleaded with him, but he squeezed his hands tight. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't speak, I couldn't *think*. It couldn't have been for more than two minutes, but it felt truly infinite.

And then, he let up. He took all of his weight off me and got up from the floor. The sudden rush of air and lightness was a shock to my system; I knew I needed to move, but my body and my brain weren't working in tandem anymore. He wasn't far away. I heard drawers open and shut. I sat up on my elbows, but the clanging stopped, and his shadow fell over me. I braced myself to look up — he gripped a kitchen knife.

"*No!*"I screamed, and he dropped back to his knees, held me to the floor, and thrust the knife down.

It pierced my stomach. The obtrusion stung, almost burned. He left it there for a moment as if unsure of what he was doing.

There is a knife in me.

Tightening his grip on it, he pulled it out; blood came with it. I groaned. He brought it up…and down again. Warm blood filled my throat and mouth, and I spewed it out. I couldn't lift my head. I felt the knife everywhere on my torso, and then the feeling faded away. It stopped at some point, but I didn't know when. Either way, it was done, and I wasn't breathing. I was still. I was *dead*. My eyes, however, were open. The ceiling and part of the counter were all there was for me.

An hour passed, and nothing else happened.

He reappeared, covered in blood from his head to his shirt, with a ghastly look on his face. Kneeling to the ground, he struggled with something around me. He pulled off my shirt and did the same with my jeans and underwear. He left, taking my clothes with him. And again, that was it for a while.

The next time he came back, he looked considerably filthier. His nails were caked in black dirt, and there was a large patch of sweat on the front of his shirt. He lifted me and brought me outside.

Orange light flickered off the trees; there was a fire going, and it made living shadows on the ground. He put me down a ways away from the flame, my head lolled to the side, facing it. A shovel was lodged in the ground next to a pile of dirt. He picked up my

clothes, which were lying in a heap on the ground, and tossed them into the fire. The flames grew; he watched them burn.

He pulled up the shovel and began digging again, but gave up after a short while.

He came to me, gawking like he noticed something strange. Moving his hand just below my collar and tore my locket from me, examining, then pocketing it.

He took me up and placed me in my grave. The sun was starting to come up; it was as blue-gray as the sunset before. He began to shovel dirt over me, all without closing my eyes.

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