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Cynthia *knew* she should have left the light on.

Because now the noise came again, soft, like the purr of a rat or the settling of disturbed lint.

A layer of lint had gathered under her bed because she couldn't clean there. She was afraid of that dark, mysterious space that had never been explained to her satisfaction. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and pictured the sea of dust, the fine powdered layers of accumulated motes. Beggar's velvet, she'd heard it called. But that thick gray fur didn't bother her. What bothered her was *the beggar*, the man that wore the dust, the creature that slept in the bright of day and made those terrible sounds at night.

The noise came again, a flutter or sigh. Louder tonight. The beggar must be more formed, closer to whole.

Cynthia had moved in three weeks ago, though the efficiency flat was a little beyond her means. She'd been attracted by the cleanliness, the wooden floors, the queen-sized four-poster in the bedroom. That, and the streetlights that burned outside the bedroom window. Best of all, the neighbors were within easy screaming distance.

Not that she would scream. If she screamed, the beggar would awaken, reach up with one monstrous hand and grab her around the ankle, tug her down twisted sheets and all, draw her into the deep, thick fog of the underthere. Better to bite her lip, close her eyes, and put the pillow around her head.

She shouldn't have moved so often. She should have stayed and faced him that first time, back when she had a roommate. So what if the roommate, a fellow college student, looked at Cynthia strangely when Cynthia crossed the room at a run and dived into the bed from several feet away? So what if the roommate poked fun because Cynthia always slept in socks? The roommate wasn't the one who had to worry about the beggar, because he only lived under *Cynthia's* bed.

Six months, and the roommate had forced Cynthia to leave. Cynthia's name wasn't on the

lease, she was behind on her half of the bills, and she'd lost her job because she had to sleep during the day. Perhaps having to move out was for the best, though. Her roommate had started muttering strange languages in her sleep.

So Cynthia dropped out of college, worked the graveyard shift at the Hop'N Go, and took a cramped studio apartment downtown. That place lasted two months, and she'd ended up sleeping on the couch. Even with such a small space to work with, the beggar had still knitted himself into flesh, worked the lint into skin and flesh, formed arms and legs from the dust, shaped its terrible rasping mouth.

Though her new landlord said a professional cleaning crew had given the efficiency a white-glove treatment, the dust gathered fast, like clouds in a thunderstorm. The noises had started on the second night, so hushed that nobody would have heard them who didn't know what to listen for. Every night louder, every night another ounce of substance incorporated, every night a new muscle to be flexed.

But the beggar had never been as loud as he was tonight. Her night off from work, she should have known better. If only she had a friend to stay with, but she was a stranger in this city, locked out of the social circles by her odd hours. But here she was, in the dark, a silver swathe from the streetlight the only companion.

Except for her beggar.

Even with the pillow wrapped so tightly around her head that she could barely breath, the muted clatter reached her, chilled her, cut like a claw on bone. Maybe if she held her breath...

She did, her heart a distressed timpani, thudding in a merciless race to some vague coda.

But it worked. The rustling died, the velvet fell in upon itself, the dust settled back into its slumber. All was still in the underthere.

Cynthia couldn't hold her breath forever. Every time she exhaled, slowly, the air burning through her throat, the noises came again. With each new lungful of darkness, the beggar twitched. She should have slept with the light on. Not that the light made any difference.

But worse than the fear, the tension in her limbs and stomach from clenching in anticipation of his touch, would be actually seeing that hand rise above the edge of the mattress, claws glittering amid the matted gray fur, the beggar made flesh.

Better to imagine him, because she was sure her imagination could never paint as terrible a picture as reality could.

Better to hold her breath and swallow her whimpers and bathe in her own sweat than to peek out from under the blankets and see if tonight would be the night of the hand.

Better to lie here and never dream, eyes closed, better to wait for morning, morning, morning.

The next morning came as always, the sun strong and orange this time, not sulking behind clouds. It was the kind of morning where she could sleep, and no sounds rose from that strange land beneath the bed. She slept until early afternoon, then rose, still tired.

Cynthia always felt silly in the morning. She wasn't a child, after all. As Mom was so fond of reminding her.

With the sun so bright and the world busy outside, normal people on everyday errands, Cynthia almost had the courage to jump out of bed, go to the other side of the room, bend down on her hands and knees, and look at the empty space under the bed. Because everyone knew nothing was there. Just an old story to scare children with.

But she wouldn't dare look. Because *he* might look back, his eyes cold amongst the velvet, his hand reaching out, wanting to touch.

Cynthia shuddered, her bedclothes damp from perspiration. She kicked off the blankets and stretched her cramped body. She rolled off the side of the bed, looking between her legs. But he only stirred at night. The floor was safe.

She showered, brushed her teeth, adjusted the angle of the cabinet mirror so that she couldn't see the bed.

"Why don't you put the mattress on the floor?" her reflection asked. "That way, there would be no underthere."

"No," she said, a froth of toothpaste around her lips. "Then I'd *be* in the underthere. Lying right alongside him, or on top of him, or him on top of me, or something."

"It's only dust."

"From dust we come, to dust we go. Haven't you ever heard that?"

"Only crazy people talk to mirrors," her reflection said.

"You said it, I didn't."

Behind the mirror were drab vials with small pills. Pills could talk, if you let them. She couldn't trust pills, not with those strange runes scribbled across their faces. One therapist said they made you shrink, another said they made you grow tall. She wasn't that hungry.

The telephone rang. Cynthia went into the living room to answer it, standing so she could keep an eye under the bed. It was Mom.

“Hey, honey, how's school going?” Mom was five hundred miles away, but sounded twice as far.

“Great,” Cynthia said, too loudly, too assuredly.

After a pause, Mom asked, “Have you had any more of your ... problems?”

“They told me I was so much over it that I didn't need to come in for a while.”

“I know we shouldn't talk about it—”

Yet they did. Every time they talked. As if this were all the two of them had in common. “I'm fine, Mom. Really.”

“He wasn't like that when I married him. If only I had known—”

Here it came, the Capital-G Guilt Trip, as Mom shifted the blame from the one who deserved it onto Cynthia. That way, Mom wouldn't have any share of it. “I know I should have told you,” Cynthia said. “But it's the kind of thing you just try to forget about. You lie to yourself about it, know what I mean?”

“Yes, honey, you're right. He's dead. Let's forget about him.”

Forget*who*, Cynthia wanted to say. But lying to herself didn't do any good. “So, how's Aunt Reba?”

They talked about Aunt Reba, Mom's new car, and Cynthia's grades. Somehow Mom was never able to turn the conversation back to that sore spot she loved so much. Cynthia could never understand her mother's fixation with the past. Let the dead be dust.

“Got to go, Mom,” Cynthia finally cut in. “Got class. Love you, bye.”

Cynthia locked the apartment, left the beggar to his daydreams, and caught a bus downtown. A fat man with an anaconda face sat next to her.

“Afternoon for the pigeons,” he said.

Cynthia stared straight ahead. She didn't want to hear him.

“At the airport, cannonball to the heart,” he said, thumping his chest for emphasis.

He didn't exist. None of them did, not him, not the Puerto Rican woman with the scars on her cheeks, not the longhair with the busted boombox, not the old man asleep under his beret. These people were nothing but hollow flesh. Formed from dust, passing through on their way back to dust.

The bus stopped and she got off, even though she was two blocks from her destination. "Cigarette weather," the fat man shouted after her.

She bought a hot dog from a street vendor, after checking under his cart to make sure the beggar wasn't hiding there. She sat on a park bench, ate the hot dog, and threw the wrapper into the bushes. Pigeons pecked at the paper.

The bench was perfect for a late afternoon nap. The seat was made of evenly-spaced wooden slats, so she could occasionally open her eyes and make sure the beggar wasn't lying on the ground beneath her. He could have been hiding in the shadows of the tall oaks. But he was most likely in her bedroom, waiting.

Cynthia's back ached by the time she awoke near dusk. At least some of the weariness, built up over months of restless nights, had ebbed away. She hurried around the corner, ignoring the strange people on the sidewalk. Their faces were blank in the glow of shop windows.

The counter clerk at the Hop'N Go nodded when Cynthia walked in the door. They settled the register, Cynthia mumbling responses to the clerk's attempts at conversation. Her shift started at ten, and she rang up cigarettes, condoms, candy bars, corn chips, shiny products in shiny wrappers, taking the money without touching the hands of those giving it. At midnight, the other clerk left and the beer sales increased.

At around two in the morning, a young man in an army jacket came through the door. It was that point in the shift when the wild-eyed ones came in, those who smelled of danger and sweat. Cynthia wasn't afraid of being robbed, though. Compared to the beggar, even a loaded automatic was a laughable threat. But this customer had no gun.

He placed a can of insect spray on the counter. His fingers were dirty.

"Four-seventeen," she said after ringing up the purchase.

"You don't look like the type of person who works a night shift at a convenience store," he said. He put a five in her hand.

She tried to smile the way the manager had taught her, but her face felt like a brick. She glanced into the man's eyes. They were bright, warm, focused.

"How fresh is the coffee?" he asked when she gave him change.

"I made it an hour ago."

"Bet you drink a few cups to get through the night. Always thought it was weird, people who didn't sleep in a regular cycle."

There was a button under the counter which she could press and send an alarm to the police. If he kept being friendly...

"It's natural to sleep when it's dark," he continued. He smiled, his rows of teeth even between his lips. He looked to be two or three years older than Cynthia.

"Unless you have to work in the dark," she said.

"Throws your whole cycle off. Do you go to State?"

Another customer came in, this one the normal, shifty-eyed sort. The man in the army jacket poured a cup of coffee and sat in one of the corner booths near the refrigerated sandwiches. The shifty-eyed man bought a can of smokeless tobacco, glared at Army Jacket, then asked for a copy of Score from the rack behind Cynthia. The magazine was wrapped in plain brown paper, but Cynthia could imagine the lurid pose of the cover girl, airbrushed breasts thrust teasingly out.

The shifty-eyed man paid, rolled the magazine and tucked it under his arm, then headed out under the streetlights. Army Jacket brought his coffee to the counter.

"Pervert," Army Jacket said. "Bet you get a lot of weirdoes on this shift."

To Cynthia, the weirdest people were the ones who talked to her. But this guy didn't talk crazy. Even for a man whose mouth was a cavern filled with invisible snakes.

"It's okay," she said, feeling under the counter for the alarm button. "My job likes me."

He laughed, took a sip of his coffee, then poked his tongue out. "Ouch. That's hot."

She pointed to the sign that was taped to the coffee maker. "Caution! Coffee is hot," she read aloud.

Army Jacket laughed again for some reason. She read the name sewn in a patch above his breast pocket. Weams. He didn't look like a Weams, so she decided to still think of him as Army Jacket.

"My name's David," he said. "What's yours?"

"Alice Miller Jones," she said, making up a name from somewhere.

"Alice. That's a good, old-fashioned name. Most girls these days are named Maleena or Caitlin or something trendy like that."

"Ask Alice. Wasn't that in an old Sixties' song?"

Army Jacket, who might be a David as far as she could tell, shook his head and took

another, smaller sip of his coffee. He reached in his pocket for change. "Guess I better pay for this."

"Ask Alice."

He smiled. "What do you do when you're not running a convenience store register, Alice?"

"Trying not to sleep."

His eyelids drooped slightly. "Sleep is the greatest waste of time ever invented. There are so many better ways to spend time. Even in bed."

She looked at him. His eyes were like Styrofoam picnic plates, bright and empty. "I have a strange bed," she said. "Would you like to see it?"

His hand shook, splashing a few drops of coffee on the floor. She took the change from him and the coins were covered in sweat.

"Sure," Army Jacket said, leaning stiffly against the counter in an attempt to look relaxed.

"How do you feel about dust?" she asked.

His eyebrows raised in a questioning expression. "I don't mind a little dust. Dust thou art, isn't that what the Bible says?"

"Only talking Bibles."

A couple of people came in the store, rummaged around near the candy rack, then came to the counter with a bottle of wine. Cynthia thought one of them had swiped a candy bar. He had a bulge in his front pocket. She decided to let him wait, so that the chocolate would melt and stain his underwear.

"I can't sell wine," she said. "It's illegal to sell alcohol after 2 AM."

The man with the bulge looked at his wristwatch, which was plated with fake gold. "Sister, it five o'clock. It already tomorrow, and I goin' by *tomorrow* time."

"Sorry," she said, folding her arms. "Cigarette weather."

"What the hell?" the man said.

His companion, a pasty-looking blonde, grabbed his arm. "Forget it, Jerry. I got some back at my place."

“This bitch tellin’ me it ain’t tomorrow yet,” he said.

Army Jacket cleared his throat and straightened himself. “Sir, she’s only doing her job,” he said, looking down at the man from a four-inch height advantage.

“She’s only doing her job,” Cynthia said.

“Don’t get smart with me, bitch.” The man raised the wine bottle as if he were going to swing it. Army Jacket stepped forward and grabbed his wrist, taking the bottle with his other hand. The man grunted and the aroma of vomit and cheap booze wafted across the room. He struggled free and headed for the door, the blonde following.

At the door, the man paused and squeezed the bulge in his pants. “Got something for ya next time,” he said. The blonde pulled him cussing toward the street.

Army Jacket placed his coffee cup on the counter.

“You get a lot of weirdoes on this shift,” Cynthia said.

“I already said that. When do you get off work?”

They had breakfast in a little sidewalk cafe. Cynthia ordered coffee and butter croissants and scrambled eggs. Army Jacket was a vegetarian, but he said he could eat eggs. Cynthia thought that was strange, because eggs weren’t vegetables.

They reached Cynthia’s apartment just before noon. “So, where’s this bed of yours?” Army Jacket asked.

Cynthia had a few boyfriends in high school. After the beggar had started sleeping under her bed, she’d quit dating. But now that Army Jacket was in her apartment, she decided that she’d been foolish to face the fear alone. She’d give Army Jacket what he wanted, and then she’d get what she wanted.

She led him to the tiny bedroom. She half-suspected that the beggar crawled from beneath the bed while she was gone, to sleep between cloth sheets and dream of being human. But the beggar belonged to dust, the dark, permanent shadow of underthere. The blankets were rumped, just as she’d left them.

“You don’t mess around, do you?” Army Jacket said.

“It’s only dust,” she said.

“I didn’t mean *that* kind of mess,” he said, looking at the dirty laundry scattered on the floor. He sat on the bed, Cynthia watching from across the room, waiting to see if the gray hand would clutch his ankle.

He patted the mattress beside him. "Come on over. Don't be shy."

She looked out the window. "Looks like cigarette weather."

Army Jacket took off his army jacket. Without the jacket, he was just a David. Not a protector. Not some big, brave hero who would slay the beggar.

"Come on," he said. "This isn't a spectator sport."

She crossed the room, crawled onto the bed beside him, mindful of her feet. They undressed in silence. David kissed her, then clumsily leaned her back against the pillows. Through it all, she listened for the breathing, the soft knitting of dust into flesh, the strange animations of the beggar.

David finished, rolled away. "Where are the cigarettes?"

"I don't smoke."

"What's this about 'cigarette weather,' then?"

"The man with the anaconda face said that."

"Huh?"

She put her arm across his chest, afraid he'd leave. She scolded herself for being so dumb. If David left, she'd be alone again when darkness fell. Alone with the beggar.

David kissed her on the forehead. "Ocean eyes like ice cream," he said.

She tensed beside him, sticky from the body contact. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Under the bed. A noise."

"I don't hear anything." David made a show of checking the clock on her dresser.

The soft choking sound came again, the painful drawing of an inhuman breath. The beggar stirred, fingers creeping like thick worms across the floor. He was angry, jealous. Cynthia should not have brought another man to this bed. Cynthia belonged to the beggar, and always had.

"He's coming," she said.

David sat up and looked at the door. "Damn. Why didn't you tell me you had a boyfriend?"

“Only crazy people talk to mirrors.”

David reached off the bed, grabbed his clothes, and began dressing. “*You’re* crazy, Alice.”

“Who’s Alice?”

David ignored her, teeth clenched in his rush to pull up his pants. “I hope to hell he doesn’t carry a gun.”

“Shhh. He’ll hear you.”

David slipped his arms into his jacket. Now he was Army Jacket again, just another one of *them*, a hollow man, a mound of dust surrounding a bag of air. None of them were real.

Except the man under the bed.

Army Jacket struggled into his shoes. Cynthia leaned forward and watched, wondering how far the beggar would let Army Jacket get before pulling him into the velvet.

“Green licorice. Frightened of storms?” Army Jacket asked, his breath shallow and rapid.

“No, only of *him*.”

“Razor in the closet since yesterday.” Army Jacket tiptoed out of the room, paused at the front door and listened.

“He doesn’t use the door,” Cynthia called out, giggling. The beggar would slide out from under the bed any moment now, shake of the accumulated dust of his long sleep, and make Army Jacket go away.

The phone rang. It had to be Mom. Seven rings before Mom gave up.

Army Jacket swallowed, twisted the knob, and yanked the door open, falling into a defensive crouch. The hallway was empty.

“Allergies,” he yelled at her, then slipped out the doorway and disappeared.

Cynthia fell back on the pillows, sweat gathering on her brow. The beggar hadn’t taken him. The beggar had not been jealous. The beggar was too confident, too patient, to be jealous.

She clutched the blankets as the afternoon sun sank and the shadows grew long on the bedroom wall. She should have fled while it was still light, but her limbs were limp as sacks of jelly. Fleeing was useless, anyway. He’d always had her.

Dusk came, dangling its gray rags, shaking lint over the world.

Under the bed, stirrings and scratches.

Under the bed, breathing.

Cynthia whimpered, curled into a fetal position, nude and burning and vulnerable.
Waiting, like always.

The hand scabbled along the side of the mattress. It clutched the blankets and began dragging the body that wore it from the vague ether. Cynthia closed her eyes, tight like she had as a small child, so tight the tears pressed out. She trembled, her sobs in rhythm with the horrible rasping of the beggar's breath.

She could feel it looming over her now, its legs formed, the transition from dust back to flesh complete. Cynthia held her breath, the last trick. Maybe if she could hold her breath forever...

The hand touched her gently. The skin was soft, soft as velvet.

Cynthia almost screamed. But she knew what would happen if she screamed. Because Mommy might hear and things like this are secret and it's okay to touch people who love you but some people wouldn't understand. Bad girls who scream have to be punished. They have to be sent into the dark place under the bed.

And they have to stay under the bed until Daddy says it's okay to come out.

So Cynthia didn't scream, even as the hand ran over her skin, leaving a trail of dust.

She didn't make a sound as the beggar climbed onto the bed. If she was a good little girl, then the beggar would go away after he finished, and wouldn't drag her into the underthere.

The dust settled over her, a smothering blanket of velvet.

If only she could hold her breath forever.

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