

Darkness Like An Ocean

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She walks through the mall in her plaid flannel pants, like pajama bottoms. She feels out of place, but she tells herself if she acts comfortable, no one will know. If you act like you feel out of place, everyone will think you are. She strides along like it doesn't bother her a bit.

Why couldn't he have waited till they were dressed? Here she is, walking along, pretending she's a mall-walking suburban house wife, pretending she chose these pants for some reason, pretending everything's just fine, thank you very much. Green. She feels green, more than anything else. Green like she's new at all this, all this sneaking around and pretending. Green like the bruises are old already. Green like she wants the lives of these other women, walking along in their walking shoes, their arms power-striding along like legs, passing her in twos and threes and chatting about PTA meetings or soccer games or board meetings, sometimes all in the same breath. Want their lives? Never! She hates them one and all! What would they do if they knew?

Here comes a security guy, coffee in his hand, window-shopping the still-closed jewelers and clothing shops like he has something to buy for his wife, but he's not sure what. He stops, looking in the window of Victoria's Secret like he'd like his wife to try something on so he could take it off. His life? No. No, she's stuck with what she's got, stuck with what she just made for herself, back there in the hotel room. She's pretty sure no one can connect her with that place.

You know what? If your husband beats you, and you stay with him, but then eventually you pour gasoline on his bed and burn him in his sleep, you're a hero. But if your husband is the nicest, most gentle man on the face of the Earth, and you love him with all your heart and soul, but you go out and get yourself a boyfriend anyway, and your new boyfriend beats you black and blue, just because he can, just because he likes it, and then he threatens to kill your little girl if anyone ever finds out, so you snatch up a vase and knock him out and then you take your panty-hose and strangle him, then you're not a hero. You're a faithless wife. You're a tramp, a slut, a whore that doesn't even get paid. You're a criminal, and the only thing that can save you is looking like you don't feel out of place at all, mall-walking in your plaid flannel pajama bottoms.

Well, *his* plaid flannel pajama bottoms. His pajama bottoms, and her grey sweatshirt, and last night's makeup, and all the further she can see, all the further she can plan, is to get to the bathroom. The little one, up this side corridor here, the one they call the "family" bathroom. If she can get in there, she can at least stop and breathe. She can at least wash her face. She can at least break down and cry. She's pretty sure no one can connect her with that place.

Then the door's closing behind her, and then she sinks to the floor, her back to the wall and her knees pulled up to hide her face behind, and here comes the shaking pounding fear. The sneaking of her hand toward the vase was only hatred. The blow to the back of his head was only the strength and speed of her old fast-pitch swing. The grunting, squeaking strain of the panty-hose was only grim determination. The long swift walk here was only coasting. And now she is only fear.

She cries so hard, there's no sound. She cries so hard, there's no breathing, and the room spins around her, tilting and whirling and sliding down toward some grim infinity of tears and terror. When she can cry no more, when there's no more air at all in her, and she's only straining her empty lungs, trying to cry some more, then she slides down into a darkness like an ocean.

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turning rising grey are these yours dots floating silent voices foreign accents red spinning twisting bed meadow blanket flowers sailing ship i think i know it purple glitter swirl stars cool green stem falling rising from the i think they are vase fast dust spinning rising floating from the ocean drifting raft river spinning up from the bottom to the table picnic meadow are these yours floating gasping wet dripping from the ocean sandy beach from the ocean that swallowed jonah fish vase straining squeaking floating up from the ocean that swallowed her whole lying on the cold cold floor her face wet i think they're yours and she sits up slowly.

Rising from the floor, she thinks, too late, to scan the ceiling, to search for cameras, for microphones, for big brother watching you, but there's nothing. Washing her face, she wants to pry the mirror from the wall, look back there, but she has no tools. Twisting her head in the feeble breeze from the white enamel dryer, she wants to pry the big chrome button out, see if it's a lens. Turning the doorknob in her hand, she wants to pull it out and take it with her, a weak weapon against the world, a weight of comfort in her hand, in her pocket. Her hands are empty in her sweatshirt pocket. There is no weight, there is no comfort. Her hands are clenched together in her sweatshirt pocket.

She's pretty sure they *can* connect her with that place. He took the room in his name, in his fake name. He paid cash; they're used to that. She never set foot in the office, never walked past its windows, never filled the ice bucket for the wine coolers he chilled to get her drunk. But then she left her purse in the room. The clock on the wall in the little closed credit union branch says 7:36. Check-out time was 11:00. She can go back. She can't go back. She has to go back. These are the doors she came in through, she'll go back, she'll go out through these doors, and she'll go back, but she doesn't. She wheels past them, following the other walkers.

The doors past the next anchor store, they'll be open, she'll go out there, she'll go back, she'll get her purse, she'll get her car from the Target lot, she'll go home, she'll get breakfast ready like she got home early from having to work late last night. These doors right here, she'll go out through these doors, but she strides past them, not looking out. The next anchor store doesn't have doors by it, and she can not go out there just as well as she didn't go out here, and she keeps walking.

Another whole lap, past all the closed stores, past all the open exits, past the bored security guy, looking in the Sears window. A mower. He's going to buy his wife a mower, and she fights down an urge to giggle; to giggle, perhaps to scream. Aye, there's the rub. Deep gasping breath, breathe in more air, breathe in more sanity. She can't go back. She has to go back. She'll go back. These are the doors she came in through, and she'll turn to them, she'll go out here, but she can't, she'll go on by, but she turns to the doors and out into the cold morning air.

They picked the hotel because it's close to the mall. They picked the mall because there's a Target store there with a lot that has cars in it all night long. She left her car there, and walked up over the hill at the back of the lot, and there was this cheap hotel. The hill's longer now, it's steeper now, it's Sisyphus's eternal hill now and she's his rock and she'll never make it but she does. Across the hotel's back lot, just like last night, only slower now, guiltier now, bloodier now, although she washed her hands and face and there was no blood anyway. And then, the door in sight, the end in sight, the room right there, her purse right there on the floor inside the door, she almost stops. The key the key the key she has no key!

Did she lock the door behind her when she left? Did she think to do that, did she think at all? She dropped his lifeless body from its sprawl across her lap on the bed, she leaped up and clamped her hands to her mouth, she stared in shock and horror at what she'd done, she slipped spinning through the whole of her life, she hugged her precious daughter to her chest, she said goodbye to her patient husband, she let her life as she'd known it slide from her not-bloody, bloodied fingers, she died an eternal death as she felt the God of her youth turn away from her, she snatched up his pajama pants and her grey sweatshirt, she pulled them hurry hurry frantic over her naked body, she shivered bouncing on her toes, her hands to her face at the horrid ickiness of stepping over him to reach the door, but did she lock the door behind her?

She almost stops, she almost pauses, she almost hesitates, but the doorknob turns in her hand, the door slips open in her hand, she slips through the door, pulls it silent behind her. Right here on the floor, her purse is right

here on the floor, her purse isn't right here on the floor, and she throws up, right here on the floor, but she barely doesn't, she's ok, she'll make it to the bathroom, hurry hurry, not looking on the floor behind the bed, not looking, not thinking, just hurry hurry, and she goes to her knees in front of the toilet, throwing up now like she cried before, the room tunneling down into a long grey streak around her, spinning and spinning and spinning, and she hears voices sees stars feels the cool wet waves of that ocean again, but she's ok.

Her vision cycles slowly back around to normal again, her hearing buzzing, her head spinning like the room isn't, now. Small whitepurple specks worm swiftly through the air, but she's ok. There's a groaning in her somewhere, but she's ok. She shakes and shudders to her feet, cold and clammy, runs a glass of rusty water. There's a groaning in her somewhere, but she's ok. Drinking, watching her face, listening to the groaning, going cold and still and bloodrushy all over, the water still to her lips listening to the groaning in her somewhere and it isn't in her it's in the bedroom behind her and she almost falls as the room begins to spin again spinning spinning faster faster out of control and the knob shakes in the door.

A weapon a weapon a club a knife a big wrench a bat a vase there's nothing nothing nothing there's nothing but more nothing and the knob turns and it's a big room it's the wheelchair room and the bathroom's big and she slips behind the door as it opens and when she sees his back she shoves him hard into the shower and sprints for the front door and he's slipping hard he's falling but he's not down and he grabs her arm and pulls her down with him.

She screams but she can't scream, there's nothing but a mad gibbering "Ngh-ngh-ngh-ngh!" as she fights hard, pulling the bathroom rug across the floor as he drags her backward, both of them sprawled on the cheap tile floor, his hand in her hair, pulling, pulling hard with a sound like splinters breaking, like hair coming out, and suddenly through her mind comes the thought that this is really going to hurt tomorrow, and then comes the thought that she might not have a tomorrow, and then comes the thought that if she's going to be dead tomorrow, her hair doesn't matter, and she rips loose from him, and the shredding in her scalp is nothing to the scream she screams now.

The door the door the door, moving away from her with an eerie life, pulling back, taunting her, the door the door her purse she still doesn't have her purse and she won't stop now and she reaches the eerie moving door and he grabs at her again and the door opens and she screams across the sidewalk screams into the rushing street screaming screaming screaming and the bus that misses her ends him in a smash of glass and chrome and she goes to her knees in the street and that darkness like an ocean claims her again in the mass of rushing people.