

A VISITOR

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Abby had been staring at the dead girl for some time now.

It was surprising that no one had come across her - either of them, really. The sun was beginning to set, disappearing behind the great stone wall that separated the access road from the highway itself.

Abby's small apartment complex sat right off the access road in a suburban neighborhood on the west side of the highway. It felt self-contained, at least to Abby. There was only one way in or out - straight onto the access road - and walls cut off the rest of the neighborhood.

The dead girl – the corpse – had been thrown into the big dumpster that sat in a corner of the parking lot. Just dumped there, like trash. She lay at a twisted angle near the bottom of the bin. Abby could see only a few bags of garbage underneath the girl.

Abby herself was leaning over the trash bin, feet off the ground, arms folded across the lip of the metal monstrosity. She didn't know what compelled her to look into the great, yawning mouth of the thing in the first place. It had just come to her, an unconscious order, as she was walking home from work.

The dead girl's neck was bent to one side and Abby could see broken bone just underneath the skin. The dead girl was naked and pale - white as the belly of a fish. Her hair was tangled and hung over her face.

All the same, Abby thought that she recognized the young woman. She was fairly certain that the dead girl had lived in the apartment below her. Did she share the place with two guys? Abby wasn't sure. There were definitely two guys always hanging around, it seemed.

The big, foreboding headlights of a car spotlighted Abby. The vehicle was coming up the access road, slowing down to turn into the apartment complex. Abby immediately backed away from the dumpster and crossed the parking lot. She didn't want to be around when someone - well, someone else, anyway - found the girl's body.

She headed up the stairs of the complex and entered her room. Shut and locked the door behind her. For a moment she stayed by the door, ear pressed up against it, listening for anything out of the

ordinary. For some sound of alarm as someone else discovered the girl's body.

Abby hadn't reacted at all when she found the body - had simply found it a curiosity. She had known for some time that she wasn't like most people. What alarmed or scared others only interested her.

Abby was twenty years old, small and dark-haired. She was a college student who earned money by working at the record store east of the highway - only about half a mile from the complex.

It was summer in Phoenix. Hot - stifling even. With no school for these few months, she could work full time, earn a little more money to keep herself afloat.

She shared the apartment with another young woman - who worked at the same record store - but it was still expensive. Renee, her roommate, was on vacation - visiting her parents and extended family in Indiana - so Abby had the place to herself for the rest of the week.

She made herself a late dinner, sat and ate it at the small kitchen table that she and Renee had found at a thrift shop nearby. She consumed the meal robotically, not concentrating on it. Normally, she would play music on the turntable as she ate or perhaps put something on the television but tonight she wanted to wait and listen for the inevitable sirens or perhaps the general chaos that accompanied the discovery of a dead body.

A human dead body, of course. A dead animal - even a cat or dog - never attracted the same kind of circus that accompanied the discovery of a dead human. Why was that? It was curious.

She finished her meal, cleaned up and went to sit on the little couch that faced the TV - another thrift store find. Still there were no sirens. No screams. Nothing at all, in fact.

Abby frowned as she listened. Would nothing happen? Was this young woman not worthy of the kind of attention that warranted the usual discovery of a dead body?

Abby searched her memory, trying to recall the few times she had seen the young woman. Nothing concrete came to mind. She remembered seeing her as she was going to or coming home from work - quick glances, nods of acknowledgment. Nothing more.

Maybe she was a drug addict. People didn't seem to mind when a drug addict was found dead - another curiosity, Abby thought. She tried to recall if she had ever seen any drug paraphernalia around the young woman - besides the fairly standard smell of marijuana wafting from below. Nothing came to mind.

It didn't make any sense. Why was no one reacting to this woman's death? Had they not found her yet?

Surely that couldn't be the case. It had now been at least an hour since Abby had discovered her in the dumpster. Someone must have found her by now.

Finally, Abby got up and pulled aside the curtain - just a crack - and looked out the window. She had

a good view of the parking lot and the dumpster itself. There was no activity.

The sun had set and it was getting dark rapidly. Abby let the curtain swing back into place and sat back down on the couch.

She turned on the television, just for something to do. She wasn't really paying attention to whatever was on - her mind was elsewhere.

Eventually, she drifted to sleep. She fell to one side and slept on the couch. She did not sleep well.

The next morning, after getting ready for work, she walked outside. She was expecting to see police cars or at least some police presence but there was nothing. No one had come during the night. She was a light sleeper and would have heard them, would have heard a car door slamming or the noisy activity involved with fishing a body out of a metal dumpster. But there had been nothing.

As she left for work, she peeked into the dumpster, standing on her toes to peek in. Nothing. Just trash. There was no dead girl or any indication that she had ever been there.

Had she imagined the whole thing? That seemed unlikely. She wasn't exactly an imaginative person. She liked music, art and television but had never felt the urge to create for herself. She was happy to enjoy, critique and analyze. Music theory was her major in college.

She walked to work in a haze, her mind turning the problem over and over, picking it up and examining it from all angles. Had the body been moved? Perhaps by the killer himself - because he was certainly male. But wouldn't Abby have heard that, as well?

It didn't make any sense. She got to work and clocked in. The day went by slowly.

After clocking out for the day, she returned home. Standing near the stairs of the complex, smoking a cigarette, was one of the men that she was pretty certain lived in the apartment below her. The same one she thought the dead girl lived in.

He didn't say anything to her as she ascended the stairs, just watched her. He had small eyes that were too close together. Abby didn't like him.

From the safety of her apartment, she watched from the window. She couldn't see the man but she could see the smoke from his cigarette. It drifted up into the air in a cloud, a thin chimney reaching towards the heavens.

After a few minutes, he tossed the cigarette into the parking lot and stepped into it himself. Abby could see him now. He walked halfway across the parking lot and stopped. He tapped one foot absent-mindedly.

Was he looking at the dumpster? Abby thought he was. He ran a hand through his hair, turned back around and headed into the apartment below her. Abby could hear the door slam. After that, she could hear muffled conversation. It sounded heated, desperate, but she couldn't be certain. She couldn't

actually hear what he and the other man - of course it was another man - were talking about.

Another late dinner. Another quiet night in. The apartment seemed more silent than it had ever been. Abby found that she was missing Renee. This was a surprise to her. She had always found the other woman to be a little on the annoying side but now she genuinely missed her.

The apartment seemed empty. It was as if Abby herself wasn't even here. As if she were an intruder in her own home.

Her phone rang and she jumped. It was silly. She had worked herself up over nothing. None of this was anything important. Certainly not important enough to scare her. It was unlike her.

She grabbed her phone off the little kitchen table and swiped to answer it. She just missed it and the call went to voicemail. She sighed. Missed it again. It had been happening a lot lately. Had, in fact, become a problem, especially since she was also having trouble accessing her mailbox to listen to her messages.

She went to bed early, drifting into a troubled, haunted sleep. She didn't dream - or, at least, she didn't remember any dreams. She was awoken late - past three in the morning - by a sound outside.

She got out of bed and went to the window of her room, which also looked out into the parking lot. Abby squinted at the dumpster. Was there something inside it? She couldn't really tell from here. It looked like there was.

A thin chimney of smoke drifted out of it in a cloud. Abby shuttered, closed the curtains and went back to bed. She pulled the covers over her head - something she hadn't done since she was five years old.

Another morning. Another day of waiting to see if a police car would show up at the complex. Another day of being disappointed.

There was nothing. Abby made sure to check the dumpster again as she was leaving for work. She was just in time to see that the dumpster was empty when she heard a door open behind her, across the parking lot - an apartment door.

Instinctively, she knelt down and hid behind the dumpster. The apartment door that had opened was the one right below her's.

"Cliff?" a voice called. "Cliff, you out there? Come on, man? Where are you?"

Tentatively, Abby poked her head around the dumpster. She saw a man that was a little older than the smoking man she had seen yesterday - Cliff, presumably. This man was larger, both taller and wider. He had a three-day-old beard and a harried look in his eyes. To Abby, he looked on the edge of panic.

He turned in place and scratched his chin. He was in a plain white T-shirt and boxer briefs, as if he

had just woken up and discovered that his roommate was unexpectedly gone. He slapped his hands together, then turned around and went back inside his apartment.

When Abby felt safe, she scurried away from the complex and headed to work. It was a busy day at the record store and Abby barely had time to think about the events of the past couple days. Honestly, it was a relief.

At home, that night, Abby found that she could only eat about half her meal. Nothing else would go down. She poked and prodded at the food, played with it - something else she hadn't done since she was five years old.

She went to sleep even earlier than the previous night. She felt extremely tired lately. She wished that Renee would come home already. She needed someone to talk to. Someone that she lived with. But Renee would still be gone for another few days.

Sleep came eventually but it wasn't restful. Abby tossed and turned on either side then tried to sleep on her back to no avail.

She heard the scream just after three in the morning. She sat up in bed and went straight for the front door. For a moment, she paused at the door, not wanting to open it. Knowing that she had to.

She finally opened the door and stepped onto the landing near the stairs. She looked about. No one else was around. No one else had been aroused by the cry. Only her.

She bounded down the stairs, heading straight for the apartment below her. She paused at the bottom step.

The door to the apartment below her was standing open. To Abby, it looked like a mouth. A waiting, open mouth that stretched into darkness. Pitch black.

Abby dug deep and came up with a small rock of courage within her. She took a step towards the open apartment door. Then another.

It was as if she were standing still and the mouth was moving towards her. She took another step.

Now at the threshold of the apartment, she peered inside. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. When she could see, she saw that the apartment appeared to be empty. It was a carbon copy of her own apartment, of course. The small living room area faded into a kitchen and two rooms beyond, both of them closed. It was even furnished the same: the couch was in the same place, the turntable, the television, the little kitchen table.

There was a great crash behind her and Abby whirled around. The sound had come from the dumpster. Of course it had.

Abby could just see a few pieces of paper fly up into the air, the aftereffects of something heavy being tossed into the dumpster. The metal monstrosity was still shaking slightly from the sudden weight

that had been dropped into it.

There was someone standing by the dumpster. Someone who was staring at Abby. Someone who was naked. Someone whose neck was bent at an unnatural angle.

As Abby watched in terror, the figure started walking towards her. It was incredibly slow, a foot exploring the space in front of it before setting a sole down on the asphalt.

Abby ran back up the stairs and practically jumped into her apartment. She slammed the door shut behind her, locked it. She stood by the door, listening.

She could hear the figure as it crossed the parking lot. Could hear it as it started up the stairs, each footfall echoing like a distant bell in an abandoned village.

The figure stepped onto the landing and headed straight for Abby's door. Abby could see the shadows of its legs in the gap at the bottom doorjamb. She felt her heart beating like a jackhammer in her chest. Her breathing came in fast, labored grunts. She slapped a hand over her lips to keep herself from screaming.

The figure waited in front of Abby's door for some time. Finally, it left, heading down the stairs again. Abby could hear it walking across the parking lot, heading for the dumpster.

Abby waited for a half an hour before heading back to bed. After some considerable time, she was able to get an hour or so of sleep.

The next day, Abby didn't eat at all. She got up when she had to get up, got ready for work and walked there. She didn't bother checking the dumpster. It would be empty.

It took an eternity for work to end. She missed Renee more and more as the day went on. All she wanted was someone to share her living space with. Someone whose company she appreciated. Yes, Renee had been annoying, but wasn't that just life? People were annoying. That's what they were good at. Abby just wanted to spend time with someone. Perhaps someone to hold when it was late and dark.

That night - after work - Abby left her apartment door open. She didn't eat but she sat at the little kitchen table, facing the open door. She didn't listen to music, didn't put on the TV, didn't try to access the messages that were piling up on her phone - didn't touch her phone at all.

She just waited.

Finally, just after three in the morning, she heard something outside - below, in the parking lot. She listened as the figure ascended the stairs. Listened as it stepped onto the landing.

She had accepted the figure. Had accepted it as a part of life, anomalous as it was. It wanted to be with her, whatever it was.

Slowly, the figure was visible in the open doorway. It was naked and pale. Neck bent.

It stepped into the apartment. Abby could hear its footfalls on the carpet - her ears were sharper than

ever. There was an audible crack as the figure turned its broken neck to observe her. It shook every so slightly in place. It smiled wide showing far too many teeth; its eyes staring, unblinking.

Abby smiled back.

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