

PERSISTERS

“I don’t feel so good, Gareth. Can’t we just stop for a minute?”

Gareth, my husband of almost two months, turns to look down at me from the step ladder, a frown of annoyance clearly visible through the mask and goggles he’s wearing. His marigold-clad hands jerk outwards in a display of masculine annoyance.

“So, you want me to do all this myself? The whole house? It’s just a headache, Monica. Try to ignore it.”

My pulse is pounding in my ears. The edges of my vision blur; now all I can see is Gareth, face glowering in condemnation. The stray thought that perhaps I made a mistake marrying him flashes through my mind. I sit down on the floor and before I know it, I’m sobbing. What’s got into me?

In another moment, I feel a firm hand on my shoulder. Gareth’s voice has softened.

“Look, I’m sorry, alright? Sometimes I get fixated. It’s OK, I can handle it. You just go and lie down.”

I feel guilty now. Gareth’s right. His focus is exactly what attracted me to him in the first place. He’s a talented scientist, and everyone who knows him knows he’ll go far. And he’s not a bad husband, not by any stretch. I relent, letting him help me to our bedroom; he tucks the bedclothes around me, drawing the curtains half-shut. In the muted sunlight, my headache eases up a little. I can hear Gareth downstairs, already back to scrubbing the grimy walls of our new home.

We’re trying hard not to admit it, but it’s clear to both of us that we’ve made a big mistake moving here. Old houses always have problems, no matter how beautiful they look on the outside, and that’s even more true with houses that have stood unoccupied for years. The local gossip about the place had made us laugh, mostly; the over-active imaginations of under-educated rural types is a well-known cliché for a reason, certainly nothing to be taken seriously. But it’s obvious now that there really *is* something wrong with this place, even if it can be better explained in the language of the microbiologist than that of the mystic. There are no fairies or goblins in this house, but there are things on the walls – living things – that won’t wash off, no matter how hard we try. For every square metre we rinse clean, another two blossom into ugly, resilient life.

And now the headaches are getting worse.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the searing pain squirming behind my eyebrows and hairline. Downstairs, I can just make out Gareth mumbling to himself; a single, run-on sentence with no conclusion. The tempo and pitch are odd, and it’s not like Gareth to talk to himself. What on Earth is he saying, anyway?

I sit up in bed and, holding my body as still as I can, strain to listen to the words that seem to seep like liquid under the ever-present sounds of antiseptic-soaked wire brush against crumbling plaster. It’s strange, incoherent, like the jarring stream-of-consciousness of an elderly man reciting Allen Ginsberg.

Surely that can’t be my Gareth, mumbling like that.

I groan and rise, getting unsteadily to my feet. The room about me swims. Stumbling to the door, I call downstairs.

“Knock it off, sweetie. I can’t sleep with you mumbling away like that, OK?”

The muttering abruptly stops. I sigh with relief. *Thank you.*

I turn back to the bed and freeze in my tracks.

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“Tell me it was there before,” I growl, peering through the pain at Gareth’s defensive expression. “Look me in the eye and *tell* me it didn’t just appear on the wall, just like *that.*” I snap my fingers, driving the point home.

“Well, we were focusing on downstairs. We could have missed it. There’s no way a mature biofilm could just spring into existence in a couple of hours, is there? You know that as well as I do.”

I can tell by his face that he doesn’t really believe it, either. But he *wants* to believe it.

“And yet, here we are.”

Gareth relents. “Here we are,” he parrots back at me, his voice tinged with bewilderment.

We stare at the wall together for a moment in silence. At first glance, it looks to me like some kind of fungal species – perhaps *Aspergillus* – greenish black at the edges with a fluffy white overlayer, growing almost an inch thick at the centre. Beneath the white haze, barely-visible dark ridges snake and crawl, seeming almost to move a little in the corners of my vision. The smell reminds me of damp bathrooms but there is something more to it, something worse. Something I can’t quite place. I feel my lungs constrict reflexively. The look on Gareth’s face tells me he’s just as disgusted as I am, and just as disturbed.

“What were you muttering about downstairs, before?”

“What?”

“You know. You were muttering downstairs while you were cleaning. You wouldn’t shut up.”

Gareth’s eyes narrow. “What are you talking about?”

“You were talking,” I press. “You were mumbling on and on.”

“I wasn’t mumbling about anything. I wasn’t even making any sound at all. Look, I’m tired. There’s too much to do. I’ve got to put the oven on at six and I’m not even half-done with the dining room. Can you just let it drop? Maybe it was the wind, or something. I don’t know.”

I start to protest again, but Gareth is already on his way downstairs, and I can tell by his gait that I’ve annoyed him. Again.

“Forget it, then,” I grumble. “I’m going back to bed.”

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I wake up suddenly, as though shaken by someone. It's almost pitch black and completely silent, but the impression of a shouted voice lingers in the room. I shudder and pull the covers around me, glancing over at the barely visible form of my slumbering husband in the double bed next to me.

A bad dream? I try to recall the details, any detail at all, but come up short.

A voice, shouting in anger. Or fear, maybe?

I feel sad, hopeless even, but have no idea why. I can feel that something's wrong, but what? I reach over to the bedside lamp and switch it on, shielding my eyes for a moment against the sudden glare. A moment later, my eyes are drawn to the wall opposite our bed. My shriek wakes Gareth up in a moment.

"There was a face...a human face in it, Gareth. I...no, *no!* I know what I saw!"

Gareth strides over to the wall, rubbing his eyes. He makes a show of examining the substance, holding his nose against the stench that oozes from the sodden plasterwork.

"A human face, Monica? In the wall? Do you know what you sound like?"

I try to think of an appropriate barb to fling back at Gareth, but I can't concentrate. My blood goes cold. The mumbling's back, and I realise now it's been growing steadily louder in the past minute or so, just below the level of my awareness. Gareth sees the change in me, and his features shift from anger to concern.

"What is it?" he says, and I can hear his voice is shaking.

"The voice," I say flatly. "The mumbling. It's back."

I leap out of bed, crossing the carpet to the wall in my bare feet. I stare again at the biofilm on the bedroom wall, scrutinising every little detail. Something shifts below the surface, as though offended at being observed, and all hell breaks loose. I stagger back two paces, trying to put distance between myself and it.

The voice becomes a low wail, then a scream. The living surface of the bedroom wall explodes outward in a flurry of unnatural, incomprehensible movement. I feel pressure on my wrists; my vision blurs at the edges as I feel myself dragged towards the seething mass. Gareth is behind me now, pulling in the other direction. But it's useless.

I'm inches from the wall now and, on its surface, I see blackened hollows where eyes should be. Lipless mouths gape, trying to swallow me. I struggle, uselessly now, turning my head in Gareth's direction.

His horror-stricken face is the last thing I see before the darkness takes me.

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Try as I might, I can't piece together the days that followed that night. Most of the time it's just a big, blank space. Sometimes the images come crashing in all at once, distorted and out of sequence, like a nonsense dream played backwards. Doctors and hospital beds. Piles of packets marked *Voriconazole*. Tears and shaking heads. Bloodied tissues on clean sheets. *It's a resistant strain*. Whatever happened, it wasn't good. But at least it's all over now.

All I know is that the pain is gone. No more headaches, no more coughing fits, no more nausea. I can't remember when I last slept, but I feel fine. Energised. You'd think that Gareth would be happy, but things have gotten worse between us. His cleaning routine has turned into a constant obsession. He won't speak to me, or even look at me, anymore. I have no idea what I'm supposed to have done and, believe me, I've tried to make him tell me. I've shouted and screamed; I've pleaded and begged. Nothing works.

The voices are louder and clearer than ever. They tell me to accept my new life here and to forget about all that's gone before. My memories of life before this house have become hazy and indistinct. Even trying to remember our wedding is like rifling through black and white photographs from a grandparent's photo album. A chasm seems to gape between me and my own life, but this house seems closer. At last it truly feels like home.

They tell me that it's here that I belong, and it's becoming harder to resist.

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My therapist, Dr. Ferguson, tells me that it might be time to try 'other treatments,' whatever that means. She says my OCD's spiralled out of control, and she's right. But I can't stop. I can't stop now.

This damned house just won't get clean.

The biofilms are reappearing faster than ever now, and it's all I can do to keep fighting it. It's the only thing that keeps those awful memories from flooding my mind. The doctors called it *acute cerebral aspergillosis* – the most violent case of it that the hospital had ever seen. She died in a matter of days. I keep thinking that there was more to it, but perhaps I'll never know.

Sometimes at night I awake to a scream and look at the wall opposite the bed, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. Perhaps I'm going mad, but I *feel* her there, in the wall where she collapsed. I can almost hear her voice. But that's just crazy. She is gone. It's just me and these filthy walls now. I clean and scrub and scrape at them day and night. This is my life.

One day I'll get these walls clean. If only the headaches would stop.