

Stonebridge

We had just returned from Tom's funeral, and the air felt heavy with unspoken words and lingering sorrow. Tom's parents couldn't look us in the eye, which was alright as we wouldn't know what to say to her anyway. Linda, Carl, Mark, and I gathered in the corner of the reception room, the muffled chatter and clinking glasses of the wake providing a discordant backdrop to our private grief. Carl broke the silence, his voice tinged with an attempt at levity that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I thought we all gave him a good send-off. I hope my funeral will be as well-attended as Tom's was, although I doubt it," he said, his words barely masking the underlying sadness.

Linda, her face pale and drawn, let a single tear slip down her cheek. "I'm just glad it's all over," she said softly, her voice cracking. "I don't think I will ever return to ghost-hunting." Her eyes were lowered, fixed, as if searching for solace in the scuffed wooden floor. Before anyone could respond, Tom's mother approached us; her grief was obvious as she wiped away her tears. "I blame all of you," she said, her voice a mixture of anguish and accusation. "Meddling in things that ought to be left alone. I think it better if you all left."

I rose from my seat, my heart aching for the woman who had lost so much. "We are all very sorry for your loss," I began, my voice sincere, but she cut me off before I could say more.

"I want you all to leave, please... now." Her voice was firm, though the tears streaming down her face told a different story. She turned away, hastily wiping her eyes, leaving us with the weight of her words.

My expression was one of quiet resignation. "I think we should go back to my flat. We can have our own little remembrance there," I suggested, my tone subdued.

"That's a good idea," Mark agreed, feeling the need to retreat.

"We should leave; we don't want to cause any more grief." Said Linda, desperately trying to fight back the tears.

We all nodded in agreement, and made our way out of the pub. As we drove to my flat, the weight of what had transpired in the asylum, and the unsettling way Tom had met his end, still hung heavily in our hearts. Once inside, I made us all a coffee, then we settled into the comfort of the armchairs. The room was dimly lit by a single table lamp, casting a soft glow that barely penetrated to the corners.

"We need to talk about what happened," Carl said, breaking the silence as he stared into his drink. "Tom's death wasn't an accident; he was murdered by that... that thing. In all my days ghost-hunting and wanting to see and record some physical evidence, I never in my wildest dreams thought we would ever come across anything like that."

Linda's gaze, which had been fixed on the floor, shifted up to Carl. "I don't think any of us did. The only person to get anything out of this was you, Steve."

I took a deep breath, the sweet taste of the coffee blending with the bitterness of my memories. "Yes, I lost my scepticism and saw my sister again. But before that, I thought we were all going to die. The terror was unlike anything I've ever felt."

A solitary fly buzzed around the room, its erratic flight punctuating the uneasy silence. Carl swatted at it with a grimace. "If I never see another fly again, it'll be too soon. They should be wiped from the face of the earth," he muttered, his irritation adding a touch of levity that felt oddly out of place amidst our current situation. The table lamp flickered, casting uneasy shadows before plunging us briefly into darkness. Linda inhaled sharply, her eyes wide with apprehension. The light flickered back on, casting an unreliable glow across the room. Everyone instinctively looked around, as if the brief darkness might be hiding something sinister.

"Sorry about that," I said, trying to offer a reassuring smile. "The lamp's been acting up for days. I really need to change the bulb."

Carl puffed out his cheeks, letting out a long sigh. "For a nasty moment there, I thought I was back in the asylum. It's going to take a long time before we get over the effect it had on us."

Linda nodded, her fingers nervously twisting a napkin in her lap. "I still have nightmares. I jump at the craziest things, every creak, every shadow. It's as though the darkness from Ravenwood has seeped into my everyday life."

I watched as Linda's gaze drifted to the half-empty cup of coffee on the table, its steam curling lazily into the air. Her words struck a chord with me. The asylum had left scars deeper than any we could see, and the echoes of that place will linger for a long time to come.

"We need to focus," Mark interjected quietly, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate with underlying tension. "Whatever happened at Ravenwood isn't just over because we've left. If anything, it feels like we've brought a piece of it back with us."

Carl's face tightened, his eyes darting to the shadows in the room. "You mean whatever was at Ravenwood has followed us here? I thought we left it all behind. We banished that thing and sent spirits back into the light."

"I don't know," Mark said, rubbing his temples. "But ever since we left the asylum, there have been these... occurrences. Small things at first, odd noises, unexplained shadows. I thought they were just my mind playing tricks on me."

Linda's eyes widened, her hands trembling slightly as she spoke. "I've experienced similar things. At first, I thought it was just stress or fatigue. But now... I'm not so sure. There's something that feels off, something I can't quite explain."

A shiver ran through the room as the implications of Linda's words settled over us. The sense of safety we had hoped to find in the familiarity of our lives seemed increasingly elusive. It was as though the darkness we thought we had left behind had insinuated itself into our reality, waiting for the right moment to strike.

"I think we're all still reeling from what we went through," I said, trying to infuse a note of reassurance into my voice. "We'll see shadows and hear unexplained noises. That doesn't necessarily mean they come with ill intent. I think we're all overreacting. As time goes on, we'll get back to how we were before. Father Ambrose blessed us all with Holy Water. It's probably just our imaginations playing tricks on us."

Carl nodded, though his expression remained troubled. "I guess you're right; we've all been through an horrific turn of events."

"Exactly," I said, trying to offer a comforting smile. "We need to remember that we're here to honour Tom. At least he is now at peace."

Linda shifted in her chair; her gaze distant as she looked past the flickering lamp. "I hope you're right, Steve."

We spent the rest of that afternoon in a quieter mood, trying to find solace and laughter amidst the lingering shadows of our ordeal. Linda, Mark, and Carl took turns sharing stories about Tom, their voices carrying a mix of fondness and bittersweet nostalgia. The stories painted a picture of Tom as not just a colleague but a friend with a knack for mischief and a talent for lightening the mood, even in the darkest of times. Linda began with a smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Do you remember the time Tom tried to cook us all dinner during one of our late-night investigations? He'd never cooked a meal before, but he was determined to make us 'spaghetti a la Tom.'"

Mark chuckled, his deep voice rumbling with amusement. "How could I forget? The kitchen was a disaster zone. We ended up with a pot of something that looked like it had been through a blender. We had to order takeout instead. Tom was so proud of his 'creation,' though, and he kept insisting that it was just an acquired taste."

Carl laughed, shaking his head. "And then there was the time he convinced us that the best way to ward off spirits was to dance around the campfire wearing ridiculous costumes. I think he borrowed his sister's old Halloween gear for that one. We were all out there, looking like a bunch of lunatics, while Tom led us in a 'spirit-banishing' dance."

Linda's laughter mingled with Carl's, and for a moment, the heaviness of our recent experiences seemed to lift. The room felt warmer, the echoes of Tom's laughter ringing through the stories. It was as though, for a few precious hours, we could hold onto the memory of our friend without the shadow of the asylum looming over us. Mark's face softened as he spoke. "Tom had a way of making everything seem less grim, even when things were at their darkest. His sense of humour was his armour against the things that frightened us. I think he'd want us to remember the good times, not the bad."

Linda nodded, wiping a tear from her eye. "He always had this way of making us feel like everything would turn out alright, no matter how bad things seemed. I'm grateful for those memories. They remind us of who Tom was and what he brought into our lives."

Carl leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. "It's a shame that the darkness we faced took him from us. But remembering the way he lived, the way he brought laughter into our lives, is the best way to honour him."

As the afternoon light began to wane, the room was filled with a sense of shared comfort and camaraderie. The stories had done their work, stitching together the fragments of our shattered sense of normality with the warmth of friendship and remembrance. We knew that the darkness of Ravenswood would still haunt us for quite some time, but for now, we took solace in the laughter and memories we shared. Tom's presence, though no longer physical, was felt in the stories and the moments of levity he had left behind. As the evening drew in,

we resolved to face whatever lay ahead with the same bravery and humour that Tom had embodied. His memory would be our strength, a reminder of the resilience and camaraderie that had brought us through the horrors of the asylum. We talked into the early evening, discussing the events leading up to Tom's death and reliving our nightmares. It was time to call it a night, I was struggling to stay awake and so were the others. We all said our goodbyes, and I decided to have an early night hoping that sleep would claim me and I could remain asleep for once. I woke up to a disorienting blur, a lingering haze that seemed to cling to the edges of my mind. My head throbbed, and my body felt heavier than it should. For a moment, I lay still, listening to the silence that filled my small flat. The events of the asylum still weighed heavily on me, casting its long shadows into every corner of my thoughts. I blinked hard and opened my eyes wide, then sat up, the world tilting ever so slightly. My bedside table was cluttered with the remnants of restless nights: an empty glass, a half-read book, and a tangled cord from my headphones. I pushed the covers aside and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, planting my feet on the cold floor. A faint buzzing sound filled my ears, like an echo of a distant conversation I couldn't quite place.

As I stood, my reflection in the wardrobe mirror caught my eye. The shadows under my eyes were dark, and my skin was pale, almost ghostly. I shook my head and turned away. It was all in my head, I told myself. Just stress and lack of sleep. The flat felt colder than usual, a chill that seemed to seep from the walls themselves. I moved to the kitchen, intending to start my day with a strong cup of coffee. As I reached for the kettle, I noticed the cupboard door was slightly ajar. I was certain I had closed it last night. I pushed it shut with a small sigh, trying to shake off the feeling of unease that had settled in my stomach. Things had been strange since I'd left the asylum behind, but I figured it was just my mind playing tricks on me. A creak in the floorboards, a flicker in the lights, the occasional faint buzzing sound, I could easily dismiss these as the ordinary quirks of an old building. After all, the events of Ravenswood were enough to make anyone jumpy.

With a mug of coffee in hand, I moved to the small window that overlooked the communal garden. The block of flats I lived in was an old, red-brick building, with ten units in total. It was a quiet place, mostly. The kind of place where everyone kept to themselves, but you knew enough about your neighbours to nod at them in passing. I noticed Mrs. Thompson, the elderly lady from Flat 3, down in the garden, tending to the flower beds. She was out there most mornings, regardless of the weather, a small figure wrapped in a woollen cardigan, her silver hair tucked under a sunhat. She had a gentle smile, always ready with a kind word or a plate of homemade biscuits. As I watched her, I heard a shuffle outside my door. The sound was faint, but distinct. I walked over and peered through the peephole, seeing Mr. Wilkins, the nosy tenant from Flat 5. He was pretending to adjust his shoelaces, but I knew better. He had a habit of listening at doors, always eager for gossip or a hint of scandal. I waited until he moved on before opening the door, stepping out into the hallway.

"Morning, Steve!" a cheerful voice called out, breaking the quiet of the corridor.

I turned to see Lisa and Ben from Flat 7, the young couple with a young child. They arrived here from Jamaica about 3 months ago, little Jamie in tow. Jamie was a bright-eyed 3 year old toddler, always clutching a stuffed rabbit that looked as worn out as the rest of us.

"Morning, Steve!" a cheerful voice rang out, breaking the quiet of the corridor.

I turned to see Lisa and Ben from Flat 7, the young couple who'd moved in three months ago with their toddler, Jamie. Jamie, with his bright eyes and constant grip on a well-loved stuffed rabbit, had already become a familiar presence here.

"Morning, Steve! Hope you're doing well and recovering from everything that happened. We read about it in the local paper."

"Good morning," I replied, managing a smile.

Lisa's face softened as she looked me over. "How are you holding up? You look a little... under the weather."

"I'm all right," I lied. "Just didn't sleep well."

Ben nodded in sympathy. "If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to knock. We're right here."

"Thanks," I said, grateful for the kindness. Even with all the strangeness hanging over me, it was comforting to know some of the neighbours were looking out for me.

As they continued down the hall, I noticed Mr. Wilkins watching us from his doorway. His eyes were narrow and suspicious, quickly darting away when he saw me looking. I closed my door, trying to shake off the prickling feeling of being watched. The flat felt colder, the silence heavy. I busied myself with mundane tasks, washing dishes, tidying up, anything to distract from the creeping unease. But every now and then, I'd hear that faint, nagging buzzing sound again, like a whisper just out of reach. I sat down at the kitchen table, staring at the empty chair across from me. In my mind, I could almost see Tom there, grinning as he shared some off-colour joke. The memory hit like a punch to the gut, and I quickly looked away, blinking back tears.

"Get a grip, Steve," I muttered, willing myself to hold it together. There was nothing here but shadows in my own mind. But as I sat there, those shadows seemed to grow longer, stretching out across the walls, reaching for me. I shook my head to clear it. Just my imagination, I told myself again. Just nerves. And yet, the flat seemed almost alive around me, the silence broken only by the faint, persistent buzz of a lone fly. The days blurred into a kind of routine, one I clung to like a lifeline. Every morning I woke up feeling disoriented, but I forced myself to keep moving, shower, coffee, staring blankly out the window at Mrs. Thompson tending her flowers below. Her presence became a small comfort, a reminder of normality in the midst of all this strangeness. Each morning she waved up at me, and I'd nod in return. She was the type who made everyone feel like family, always asking after your health, offering herbal remedies, and sharing stories of her late husband, God rest his soul.

One morning, she caught me as I left the building. "Steve, dear," she said warmly, though her eyes held a flicker of concern. "You look like you haven't been sleeping well. Would you like some chamomile tea? It's good for the nerves."

I forced a smile. "Thanks, Mrs. Thompson, but I'm fine. Just... you know... life."

She patted my arm with a wrinkled hand. "Well, you know where I am if you need anything."

I nodded, feeling her eyes follow me down the path. Her kindness was genuine, but I could tell she sensed something was off. They all did, in their own way. Back in my flat, the air felt heavier, more oppressive. I tried to brush it off, taking walks to the local park, replying to emails, making phone calls, anything to keep my mind occupied. But the disturbances grew harder to ignore. The lights flickered more often, and I could've sworn I heard faint whispers just at the edge of hearing, like a conversation drifting from another room. Finally, I decided I needed a real escape. I threw on my coat and headed out; telling myself that a bit of fresh air would do me good. On my way out, I bumped into Lisa and Jamie again. Jamie clutched his worn-out stuffed rabbit, his wide eyes taking in everything around him with that innocent curiosity only children have.

"Hey, Steve," Lisa greeted with a warm smile. "Taking a little stroll, are you?"

"Yeah," I said, trying to sound casual. "Just need to clear my head."

Jamie tugged on my trouser leg, looking up at me with those big eyes. "Mr. Steve, why do you look so sad?"

His innocent question caught me off guard. For a moment, I didn't know how to respond. Lisa quickly pulled him back, apologising with a sheepish smile. "Sorry, he just... you know how kids can be."

I nodded, forcing a smile of my own. "It's all right. He's just being honest. That's kids for you."

As they walked away, Jamie looked back at me with an odd seriousness, his little brows knitted in thought. There was something unsettling about that look, something in his eyes that felt... knowing. I shook off the feeling and continued on my way, trying to ignore the knot forming in my stomach. Outside, the sky was a dull grey, thick with the promise of rain. The streets were quiet, and as much as I'd been craving peace, I found myself missing the noise, the movement, the distraction. I made my way to the park, finding it almost empty save for a few birds foraging in the grass. I sat down on a bench, closing my eyes to let the stillness settle over me, to will the tension in my chest to loosen. But it didn't work. The feeling of being watched had followed me here, a weight pressing down on my shoulders. No matter how much I tried to rationalise it, I couldn't shake the sense that something was very, very wrong. I opened my eyes, taking a deep breath, and that's when I heard it, the faint buzzing sound again, closer this time. I scanned the empty park, searching for the source, but there was nothing. Just the low hum of distant traffic and the rustling of leaves in the breeze.

Maybe Mrs. Thompson was right. Maybe I needed that chamomile tea, something to calm my nerves. Or perhaps something stronger. I couldn't keep living like this, caught between the memories of Ravenswood and this creeping dread that seemed to cling to me, shadowing my every step. As I stood up to leave, a sudden chill ran down my spine, and for the briefest moment, I saw it, a dark shadow moving at the edge of my vision, slinking back into the trees just as I turned. But when I looked again, there was nothing there. Just the empty park and a world that felt as though it were holding its breath, waiting. Waiting for what, I didn't know. But I had a feeling I was about to find out. I decided to head back to the flat, the sense of unease clinging to me like a second skin. The walk home was unnervingly quiet, that deep kind of silence that feels heavy, pressing on your ears until you start to wonder if you've lost your hearing. Even the birds were silent, as though they, too, sensed something amiss. I

picked up my pace, eager to get back to the safety of my flat, but the feeling of being watched gnawed at me, an itch at the back of my mind that I couldn't quite scratch. At the entrance to the building, I hesitated, my hand hovering over the door handle. Instinctively, I glanced back, half-expecting to see someone, or something, lurking in the shadows, but the street was empty. I shook my head, muttering a curse under my breath. "Get a grip, Steve," I whispered. "It's all in your head." But my own words sounded hollow, like a lie I'd rehearsed one too many times.

Inside the building, the communal hallway was dimly lit, the flickering light bulb casting elongated shadows that stretched and twisted in ways they shouldn't. I took the stairs two at a time, desperate to be back in my flat, away from the unsettling silence of the world outside. On my floor, I could hear faint sounds from Mr. Wilkins' flat. His television was always too loud, filling the air with constant noise, as though he were afraid of silence. I fumbled with my keys, my hands shaking slightly as I unlocked the door. Inside, the flat looked the same as I'd left it, but it felt different, as though something had shifted, something that didn't want me here. I shut the door behind me and leaned against it, closing my eyes, trying to gather myself. There it was again, that faint buzzing, lurking at the edge of hearing, a low, persistent hum.

I crossed to the kitchen, telling myself that a cup of coffee might settle my nerves. As I filled the kettle, I noticed that one of the cupboard doors was slightly open. My heart gave a startled jolt, a cold sweat prickling on my forehead. I reached out to close it, my hand hesitating as I stared at the dark gap between the door and the frame. Had I left it open? I couldn't remember. My mind felt like a tangled mess of jumbled thoughts and foggy memories. Shaking my head, I pushed the door shut, the sound echoing through the silent flat. As I turned back to the kettle, something flickered in my peripheral vision, a quick, subtle movement, just at the edge. I spun around, heart thudding in my chest, but there was nothing there. Just the empty living room, the curtains drawn against the dull light outside. I forced a laugh, the sound harsh and unnatural. "You're losing it, mate," I muttered to myself. "Seeing things that aren't there." But the reassurance felt shaky.

The kettle clicked off, and I poured the hot water into a mug, watching as steam curled into the air like thin wisps of smoke. I took the mug to the living room and sat down on the sofa, staring at the dark, lifeless screen of the television. The room felt colder now, the shadows seemed deeper, and the buzzing louder, as if filling every corner. I tried to tell myself it was just tinnitus coming back after a few years, but something in me doubted that. I focused on the warmth of the coffee mug, its solid weight grounding me. But my mind kept drifting, drawn back to the buzzing, the shadows, and that nagging feeling that something was watching. I set the mug down on the coffee table and leaned back, closing my eyes.

I must have drifted off because when I opened my eyes, the room was dark. The only light came from a streetlamp outside, casting a faint, sickly glow. My coffee had gone cold. I sat up, rubbing my eyes, trying to shake off the grogginess, and that's when I heard it, soft, almost imperceptible, a whisper coming from the direction of the bathroom. My heart pounded, and I stood, moving slowly toward the sound. The whisper grew louder as I neared the bathroom door, a low, hissing murmur that seemed to seep through the cracks in the wood. My hand hesitated on the doorknob, every instinct screaming at me to turn around, to walk away.

But I couldn't. Something was pulling me toward the door, an irresistible force I felt deep in my bones. I took a steadying breath and turned the knob, pushing the door open, the hinges creaking as if in protest. The bathroom was pitch black, the mirror a dark, silent void. I fumbled for the light switch, my hand trembling, and flicked it on. The bulb flickered once, twice, then burst into a harsh glare. There, in the centre of the mirror, was a fly. It sat perfectly still, its wings folded against its body, its tiny eyes glistening in the light. A strange dread filled me as I stared at it, my skin prickling. The fly twitched, its wings buzzing briefly, then it darted away, disappearing into the room. I stood frozen, my pulse hammering, the silence pressing in around me. And then, from somewhere deep within the flat, I heard it again, a whisper, soft but insistent, calling my name.

"Steve..."

I turned, my breath catching in my throat, my steps cautious as I backed into the hallway, my eyes scanning the shadows for any movement. But there was nothing. Only darkness and that lingering whisper.

"Steve..."

"Emily, is that you?" I called out, my voice sounding hollow in the empty flat. There was no response.

The voice drew closer, almost as though it was right behind me. I spun around, pressing my back against the wall, my eyes wide, every nerve taut with fear. But again, nothing. Just the dim, quiet flat, cloaked in shadows. I don't know how long I stood there, pressed against the wall, listening to the whispers, the buzzing, the darkness pressing in on me. Finally, I forced myself to move, to step forward, then another step, until I reached the living room. I grabbed my phone, my hands trembling, and dialled Linda's number. It rang once, twice, three times, then went to voicemail. I hung up and tried Mark, then Carl, but no one answered. I was alone, truly alone, and the realisation sent a chill down my spine. I sank down onto the sofa, heart pounding, staring at the blank screen of the television, thoughts racing, each one more unsettling than the last. I told myself it was stress, exhaustion. Nothing more. I'd seen strange things before; my mind was playing tricks, surely. But just as I began to calm, the television flickered on, filling the room with a screen of static.

I jumped, my phone slipping from my hand as I stared at the screen, breath caught in my throat. For a moment, I thought I saw something in the static, a shape, a face. But then it was gone, replaced by the flickering grey emptiness of a dead channel. I grabbed the remote and turned the television off, my hands trembling, my mind reeling. I didn't know what was happening, but one thing was clear: whatever this was, it wasn't over. The shadows were still there, lurking, waiting, and biding their time. I could feel it, that sense of anticipation thick in the air. I got up, legs unsteady, and made my way to the bedroom, closing the door behind me. I sat on the edge of the bed, head in my hands, trying to make sense of it all. But the more I tried, the less sense it made. And then, just as I was about to give up and try to sleep, I heard it again, the buzzing, louder now, and the whisper, so close I could almost feel it.

"Steve..."

"Emily, please... is that you?"

I closed my eyes, heart racing, trying to block it out, to push it away. But the voice persisted, slipping into my mind like a dark thread unravelling, and I knew, with a deep, unsettling certainty, that the shadows were closing in, and there was nothing I could do to stop them.