CLOWN DOLL

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CHARLENE WOKE IN the middle of the night to the sound of manic laughter.

First, she checked the time—3:17 a.m. by the digital green numbers that cut through the dark at her bedside—and then, blinking away sleep, she felt for her boyfriend who had become a warm lump of blankets beside her.

"Karl," she murmured, gently shoving his shoulder.

The laughter came and went in peals, like a wave. It was coming from outside.

They lived in a one-bedroom apartment nestled in a courtyard building on one of those narrow hilly streets in Los Angeles. Their place was on the second floor, shadowed by the looming behemoth of a cemetery, one of its rolling hills crowned by a massive white cross. The living room window offered a generous view of the carport below. From the bedroom, you could see the courtyard, where a fountain burbled.

Since it was never fully dark in Los Angeles, the reddish haze of city light permeated the window. Its missing slats where cheap blinds had fallen out gave it a gap-toothed grin. Charlene rolled out of bed and crept to the window to peer out of one empty spot that let in a vague line of semi-darkness. The courtyard lights never went out, so she could see the grassy area below illuminated by a dull yellow glow.

There, she spotted the culprit.

It was two weeks until Halloween, and their neighbor, Dan—an aging pothead who frequently worked on his pickup in the carport while blasting classic rock—had decorated the entrance to his apartment in the courtyard below. Fake spiderwebs clung to the shrubs, and an ugly clown puppet dangled on a string, one of those annoying props with a motion sensor that gives its hideous laugh any time someone walks past.

But no one was walking past at three o'clock in the morning.

Instead, a woman stood in front of the dangling puppet, her arms

reaching up to clutch it in both hands. She shook the toy, and the puppet laughed and laughed and laughed.

"What the fuck?" Karl muttered, finally rousing.

"It's Dan's wife," said Charlene as she stepped aside to let her boyfriend peer out the window.

"What the hell is she doing?"

"Maybe she's trying to take it down?"

Karl squinted through the gap in the blinds. "Maybe it's broken and she's trying to fix it."

"By shaking it?"

Karl shrugged. "If she keeps it up, I'll go down there."

"I'm sure she'll stop," said Charlene, not sure at all.

"You want to listen to that all night?"

Of course she didn't, but neither did she relish the idea of Karl confronting a hostile stranger in the courtyard—not that Dan's wife would be hostile, but they really didn't know her, and only knew Dan as the easy-going middle-aged guy who sometimes signed for their packages when they weren't home. Karl's scarecrow-like frame made it nearly impossible to imagine him intimidating anyone. The problem was he *thought* he could be intimidating, and that's what really worried Charlene. Like the time that bearded hipster guy had started smoking cigarettes right outside of their window, the smell permeating into their apartment at eight o'clock in the morning, and he had finally gone down to tell him to smoke somewhere else. She had watched from above, looking down on their heads in the carport. The guy was twice as big as Karl and for a moment seemed about to tell him to fuck off, based on the dark brewing in his eyes and the way he kept blowing smoke in Karl's face. Charlene had felt the moment of tension in her bones, as if she were down there herself—she hated the way she internalized the anxiety of the world around her—but at last, the guy had shrugged and walked away.

"Someone else will have woken up," she reasoned as they stood huddled against the window. "Don't you think? Arman will hear, and he'll go tell her to be quiet."

Arman, the apartment manager, was a chummy, balding man who, in spite of his general good humor, never hesitated to chastise the kids who ran amok in the carport, or to tell off inconsiderate motorists who blocked the driveway.

"I don't see any lights on in his apartment."

"We can't be the only ones hearing this."

Karl rolled his eyes. "Maybe everyone else is doing the same thing we are, waiting for someone else to go take care of it."

"She isn't *crazy*, is she? I mean, she doesn't have some kind of . . . mental issue?"

"Hell, how would I know?"

"Or maybe it's some kind of Halloween prank?"

"I don't give a shit *why* she's doing it," said Karl. "I just want her to stop so I can fucking sleep."

The night, the unforgiving reddish haze of the city, and the starkness of the courtyard lights conspired to make the sound of laughter impel a strange disturbance into the air like ripples in the ocean, soundwaves in a thick polluted night lapping against her brain.

They were no strangers to unusual sounds in the night. Not here, in L.A. Sirens blared, helicopters went waffling overhead; once, bloodcurdling screams had shaken them at midnight. They never found out who it was. They decided it must be an actor rehearsing for an audition. None of their business. And then there was the obscene growl of the G-Class that went in and out of the carport at two in the morning, the blaring of Armenian dance music, the crying of neighbor children up far past their bedtime, the eerie howl of coyotes in the surrounding hills.

All manner of sounds made the city a peculiar place. But none, somehow, disturbed Charlene more than the pre-recorded laughter of the clown puppet. It crept up and down the crevices of her spine.

"That's it," said Karl. "I'm going out there."

Her heart lurched. She felt afraid for him, as if it would be *her* going out there to confront the woman. Like the way she always pressed an imaginary brake when sitting in the passenger's seat of Karl's car, unable to close her eyes and allow him to guide them down the road. Until he came back up to the apartment, she would feel every bit of tension, as if she were the one out there. Even observing the world was too much, sometimes. She was like a sponge left out in the rain, absorbing every stabbing drop.

"Wait another minute, in case someone else is heading out to talk to her. Let them deal with it."

Karl made a sound in the back of his throat. Charlene wished she could be easygoing, carefree. Not riddled with every feeling the city threw at her with its deafening traffic, the groaning footsteps every time someone passed on the walkway outside their apartment, the noise of neighbors whose communication style seemed to be composed solely of shouting. It made her want to curl up in a ball and cocoon herself, her and Karl, and pretend they weren't part of it.

"I don't see anyone else going out there," he said and started pulling on his shoes. He took a moment to peer out the peephole—a habit he had probably picked up from Charlene, who always wanted to be sure she wouldn't accidentally open the door with anyone nearby—and opened the front door onto the deserted walkway.

It was darker there, covered, looking across to the little alcove where the neighbors left a ratty computer chair by their own door. Karl stepped

out, and Charlene listened to his footsteps groan across the walkway, which ran along their windowless wall. Following the sound, she went back to the bedroom to peer out the window.

The woman was still shaking the puppet.

What a terrible sound was laughter, Charlene thought. When it went on and on, with nothing funny happening—when it simply continued. It was madness.

She spotted Karl heading down the staircase and watched him cross the dewy grass. He spoke to the woman. Charlene did not hear what he said. She considered opening the window but decided against it, fearing that if she heard the conversation, it would put her even more *down there* with them, when she just wanted to be here, safe in her little apartment.

People frightened her because she didn't know what lurked inside of them. If it was the same sort of storm that lived in her. And this woman, in particular, seemed inscrutable, unpredictable.

Karl came up beside the woman, and her girth obscured him from Charlene's view. Perhaps he was asking her what she was doing.

Charlene nearly shouted with relief when the woman finally let go of the clown and stepped away from it. At merciful last, its laughter subsided. The quiet held a note of expectant calm.

The woman turned and crossed the courtyard. Charlene expected to see Karl turn to her and give her a thumbs up, but he remained where he stood, looking up at the dangling puppet, perhaps trying to determine what the woman had been trying to do with it.

Then he reached up and took hold of it. Charlene thought he might be looking for an off switch or trying to take it down. He gave it a little shake, and the laughter burbled up again. Charlene winced. It must have been an accident.

But then he shook it again.

She wanted to slam her fist against the window. Was this some sort of joke?

Her attention skittered when she noticed a figure emerging from the stairwell. The woman had come up to the second floor instead of returning to her own apartment. She walked with a slow, uneven gait, as if taking great pains to control all of her limbs—just a large, lumbering shadow dragging itself across the walkway.

As the woman came closer, Karl continued shaking the clown in the courtyard. It laughed and laughed. But it wasn't genuine, was it? It was the laughter of the demented, laughter devoid of humor or mirth. Laughter for its own sick sake.

Why are you laughing? She wanted to scream. What is there to laugh about?

Suddenly the woman's face appeared in the window.

Charlene lurched backward.

Through the thin veneer of glass, her face loomed like a full moon in the semi-darkness. A pair of blank, dead eyes stared through the window, and below those oddly lifeless eyes stretched a vast, ear-to-ear grin.

Charlene cursed the cheap blinds that fell down even after Arman replaced them. She worried about someone peeking through the empty slats. Here was a pale fleshy face pressed against the glass, and she could not even pull the blinds to block it out.

There was no mirth in the grin. It stretched her face grotesquely. Lines of blood split the middle of the strained lips. Slightly crooked teeth lined up like tombstones in the mouth's darkness.

At last, the woman peeled herself from the window and began stumping away. Below, Karl continued to shake the puppet, eliciting its laughter. Only now he had turned his face up toward their bedroom window. Grinning.

And as the woman's footfalls moved away, she realized where they were going—around the corner, down the walkway outside her windowless hall.

Toward the front door.

Feet flew her through the apartment, and she twisted the lock before those footfalls could make it there.

When they did, the doorknob twisted one way and then the other, giving a little rattle. Charlene backed up, heart pounding. Why was this woman trying to get into her apartment? Was she lost? Confused? What was *wrong* with her?

The doorknob stopped rattling.

Charlene pressed her eye to the peephole.

A dark shape occupied the neighbor's chair. It was large, fleshy.

The lights did not quite reach the shadow. It was like the figures she used to think she saw as a child, in her bedroom at night—all manner of shapes that could be anything, that might rear up to attack her when she closed her eyes.

She pulled back, and that's when she heard the slow, heavy footfalls coming down the walkway. Groaning, step by step, along the windowless wall. Someone stopped on the other side of the door. Charlene's heart stood in her throat. The doorknob rattled.

A fist banged.

"Karl? Is that you?"

No answer. She knew it *must* be him. Why wouldn't he answer?

Trembling hands found her phone, but she was at a loss for who to call. The police? No one had committed a crime.

And now she could hear that old voice in her head, the one at parties that told her no one wanted to hear about homeless women raped on Skid Row, or the impending existential crisis of wildfire season; everyone just

wants to have a good time. Shut up and stop being such a worrywart, Charlene. Stop being so negative, so anxious, so concerned. Just relax and have fun. Be yourself. Smile. Laugh, once in a while.

That voice often sounded like Karl. After all, he'd told her all those things, at some point or other, in the course of their relationship.

She was simply too full of everything except for herself. Sometimes she drank just to empty her *self* out of herself.

She found Arman's number in her phone. She hit "call." The phone rang in her ear once, twice. Again.

No answer.

When his voicemail picked up, she angrily thumbed the "end call" button and scrolled through her contacts. She remembered the time she and Karl had gone out of town for a wedding and had asked Dan to water their plants. She had saved his number.

She found it.

The phone rang.

"Huh—hello?" a groggy voice emerged from the other end of the line.

There was relief, of a kind. But she hesitated, wordless.

"Carlos? Jesus Christ, the answer is no, I'm not picking you up again, I don't care where you woke up this time—"

"No," she cut in. "No, it's Charlene, from apartment 23."

Dan grunted. "Charlene? What the . . . Jesus Christ, why are you calling me at . . . three-thirty in the morning?"

"I'm sorry. But—there's something weird going on outside your apartment."

She sensed him growing alert on the other end. Rustling, movement—maybe drawing back a curtain to peer out the window. "What is it? What's going on?"

"A few minutes ago, your wife was outside—"

"My wife?" he cut in. There was a pause. "My wife is here in bed. Dead asleep."

The back of Charlene's neck prickled.

Who was the figure sitting in the neighbor's chair?

"Then . . . then *someone* was outside your apartment, messing with your Halloween decorations. You know, the one that laughs?"

"Huh?"

"The clown. The one that laughs when you walk past."

"No," said Dan. "No, I'm pretty sure we don't have a clown decoration. Christ, I hate those things. Can't stand motion-sensors, either."

Charlene sputtered. "But . . . "

"Look, why are you calling? Is everything okay?"

"I don't . . . " She glanced back to the front door where she knew Karl was still standing. Waiting. "I don't know. I locked Karl out."

"Why did you do that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He seemed . . . different."

"Well, why don't you let him in?"

Dan's voice had changed subtly. Its cadence. It was like a flat line. Charlene's breath caught in her throat, and her voice came out a whisper. "What?"

"Why . . . " said Dan, his voice crackling, shifting, in her ear, "don't . . . you . . . let . . . him . . . "

A bang on the front door.

" . . . IN?"

With a gasp, Charlene dropped her phone, which erupted in crackling peals of laughter, like electric lights popping. She saw the call had been disconnected—and that it had only lasted fifteen seconds. But that wasn't right. They'd spoken for at least a minute.

Another bang on the door.

"Karl?" she said again, trying to raise her voice above a shaky murmur. Hesitantly, she approached the door, leaned in, looked out the peephole.

Darkness.

She blinked, hoping to adjust her eyes after staring at the brightness of her phone. How many times had she hesitated here, waiting for the neighbor across the way to get up from the chair and go back inside? She perceived that shape still sitting in the chair in the dark.

It was too much, sometimes, being around people. She internalized every moment of awkwardness and embarrassment that she found lurking in the corners of the world. She was the shy girl at the coffeeshop trying to strike up a conversation with the attractive barista. She was the idiot who got lost while driving in a new neighborhood and could never decide which street to turn down. She was the student who had been called on and found his mind horrifically blank. This insecurity had plagued her all her life. She'd thought living with Karl might make her more sure of things, but it hadn't. The only one to guide her was herself, and sometimes she wasn't confident she had any business being behind the wheel of her own life.

She didn't know what to do.

The figure in the chair stood up.

She only had to wait until the person left, and then she would run down to the carport, get in her car, and . . . get the hell away from here. Go somewhere. She didn't know where. Maybe to her parents' house. It was only a forty-minute drive.

The figure took a step away from the chair, out of the shadows that crawled in that alcove, and into the dull light that permeated the walkway. Now free to look without fear of being seen, Charlene observed the woman and realized she wore a pair of ratty pajamas, dirty and frayed, red with white polka dots. She was barefoot, the tops of her feet fish-belly white.

The woman opened and shut her mouth, as if trying to speak, but nothing emerged from the creak of her jaws behind those stretched-out lips.

The lights of the building flickered—not like an electrical fluctuation, but more like when a large shape, a cloud, moves over the moon.

The woman began to shake.

At first, Charlene thought it was a seizure. But as her limbs flailed and her body jerked left and right, it looked more as if she were *being shaken* by something. Eyes rolled up white in her head. A burble of laughter emerged from her lips, echoing in the alcove behind her. She laughed and laughed.

Charlene grabbed her keys and went back to the bedroom, pushed the blinds to the side. Two more dislodged and clattered to the floor. She slid open the sticky old window, pried up the edges of the screen, and popped it free. But as she climbed onto the sill to jump down to the walkway below, she looked out, hoping to spot Karl.

She didn't see him.

She didn't see the clown puppet, either.

Where it had been suspended on its string, there was nothing.

Her skin prickled. She thought it most likely that Karl had taken it down, yet part of her could not help but imagine that all that shaking had finally pulled loose the string from which it dangled, setting it free—to skitter off on hollow legs; to crouch in the darkness like a spider.

Charlene dropped onto the walkway and padded for the staircase that led down to the courtyard, at the other end of which there was an archway underneath the second-floor apartments leading to the carport, where her trusty old Nissan with the dinged-up bumper waited. She could still hear the woman's laughter as she descended the stairs, and she thought there was more than just the woman's voice in it. Yet it sounded automatic, repetitive, as if recorded and looped.

Charlene's bare feet met the cool, dewy grass of the courtyard. On all four sides, two stories of apartments rose up around her, and she wondered if the people inside were so deeply asleep they hadn't heard a thing. Or if they were dangling from doorways, unable to get down.

She made it to the other side of the courtyard and entered the dark tunnel that led to the carport. From the lights on the other side, she could see a silhouette hanging from the end of the passageway.

Karl.

Karl hanged on a string.

Karl dangling, still but for the gentle creak from side to side as the wind prodded him.

Karl grinning, dripping blood, eyes rolled up white, empty grin revealing the emptiness inside his hollowed-out form.

Karl's bones clanking like a wooden wind chime.

Charlene dropped her keys.

She bent down, staring at the ground, not at the figure hanging on the other end of the passage, searching for her keys, running her hands through the darkness until her fingers found the metal. Snatching them, she stood up again—she had to look—

She blinked. Stepped closer.

It was not Karl.

It was the clown puppet.

It hung there at the end of the passage, blocking her way.

She considered turning back, but she didn't know where the woman was, if she was still in front of her apartment. If she was blocking the front entrance now. She couldn't hear her laughing anymore.

All she needed to do was sidle around the puppet, and she would be free.

Charlene stepped closer, seeing more of its detail. Its white cue ball eyes, pupils having long ago worn off, stared blankly into her above its empty grin. Everything about it was worn, old. Its red polka-dot clothing and painted mouth had faded to a dingy color like dried blood.

The more she gazed at it, the more she recognized something of its hollowness. She felt her mouth stretching wide with something that was not quite amusement.

The light behind the puppet flickered again, like something behemoth passing over it, something pulling on its strings, and Charlene felt the invisible hand reach up to take hold of her. Then she understood what was so funny. That nothing was funny. That nothingness could be so funny. She felt her bones rattle like hollow wooden legs, and she started to laugh, wondering what would happen when she was finally shaken free of her strings.