THEY SAY THE SKY IS FULL OF SNAKEWOLVES

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THE BRUISES HAVEN'T healed from the invisible finger grease on the wall incident, and he's already chasing her again. Ava runs up the stairs. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But when you live in a narrow row house, what are you going to do? There's nowhere to hide in the open kitchen/living room where the chase began. The unfinished basement offers no escape tunnels and has a lot less to pass the time than the bedroom. It's not like going outside is an option. At least the monster inside can be reasoned with. Maybe. And at least he's only one monster.

Ava crashes through the bedroom door and slams it shut, turns the lock. The dresser sits on soft pads to protect the precious hardwood floors. No other wood may touch them. No shoes either. Or knives. But it was Ava's running shoes that caused Jason to throw the knife, which missed her and lodged itself in the floor that precipitated this latest chase. The pads let the dresser slide with no resistance against the door. Jason crashes into the door. It doesn't budge. The lock does its job. Is it worth going "Here's Johnny" on his precious door? Ava hopes not, as the dresser will slide on its pads until it reaches the bed, leaving plenty of space for her fiancé to hurl himself into the room and resume the beatings that would continue until Ava's respect for his house improved. What would it be this time? A broken wrist? A shattered orbital socket like he'd threatened when he wielded the cast-iron skillet last week?

"Let me in, Ava." Jason must wish he didn't have that reverence for his home now. It would be liberating to crash through the door and tackle Ava onto the bed, grab her by the neck and bounce her skull on the wooden headboard until the lesson sunk in. But he won't do that, Ava hopes. Will he? "Every second I'm out here is only making it worse. You have so little respect for the floors, and now you're gonna make me destroy this door."

She's shaking. The swollen areas of her chest throb. Is that psychosomatic? The impact of the meat tenderizer he swung after she let

bacon fat go down the drain had stopped hurting days ago. Is it the anticipation of new pain that makes the healing wounds hurt anew?

"Ava."

"No." She has so many words to say to him, but that's all she can let out beneath the thunderous heartbeat. It's as if her bruised chest is sucking itself in. Is it fear or anger? Does it matter?

As soon as she'd poured the fat into the sink, he was on her, swinging the metal hammer with its sharp little pyramids into her clavicle. Was it any less painful than taking the broom handle to the solar plexus after she'd hidden in the bathroom to let him "mellow out"? It was like a reverse Heimlich, one that made her feel that she was choking to death. The blisters from the scalding-water attack when the shower hair trap dislodged from the drain are now little white scars dotting her left arm. The ringing in her ear from that blow to the side of the head isn't dissipating.

It could be worse. He could hold her hand over the flame on the gas burner when ground beef sizzled out of the pan onto the pristine stainless steel range. The skin would burn red first, then turn to black as it charred more than the steak that had left an odor in the air that he feared would seep into the walls, prompting him to drag a steak knife over her forearm. If the house would be scarred, then so would Ava. The skin on her hand would melt away from the bone onto the greasy range, adding blood and plasma and liquefied collagen to the ground beef, thus necessitating another punishment. Maybe rape with the mop handle wasn't just a threat. Is today the day it will go that far? All she did was step onto the kitchen floor in her sneakers. Usually she slid the laundry basket onto the tiles and removed her shoes while still on the dusty, wooden steps. It wasn't the restored hardwood. Tile was easily cleaned. He mopped it twice a day. It wasn't the damage; it was the carelessness. She could never, ever slip. In this small house, his domain, she would never get away with anything. And with no escape, he could get away with everything.

Apologies and promises weren't working. She doesn't want to feel the mop handle.

She looks around the bedroom that doubles as her home office. Books, electronics, lamps. Everything would have to be thrown to fend him off. And Ava isn't Randy Johnson. The painting on the wall—shatter the glass and use the shard as a shiv? What good would that do when he has the rest of the house? The knives in the kitchen that he's already shown he'll use. The hammer in the basement where she would have run had the door locked (after the meat tenderizer incident, she'd researched her options). Even the fire extinguisher. Shit. She should have run into the bathroom. Shampoo shot into the eyes would be more effective than anything in here. No More Tears—hopefully that's false advertising.

"You're going to have to come out eventually. And I suggest you do it

now. Before all the anger builds in me and I really think about the damage to the floor from that knife you made me throw."

There's nothing sharp in this room. It's just a bedroom/office where she sits all day on her connection to the world. The laptop! The tool that led her to him. She touches her fingertip to the keyboard, and the screen turns on. Yes! Her breathing slows.

He goes on. "I polish those floors every two weeks. Sweep every night. I'm on my hands and knees, picking up every little pebble you somehow manage to drag in every time you get a delivery. When you can't hang up your helmet and it drops on the floor, who's there buffing out the damage? You understand this was a last straw today. Your complete lack of respect for my property."

I knew it, Ava thinks. It's mop handle day. Well, it's the last straw for you too. Keep talking, she thinks. Keep talking, and you won't hear the keys clicking. She pulls up a browser. No connection. She stops breathing. Her line to the outside world severed. He must have unplugged the router, allowing her that second lead on him up the stairs but now trapping her here. There's no way out.

She should have listened to her mother. You can't know someone online. They can choose what to present to you. But Mom, I don't have your options. I can't just leave anytime I want like you could. You didn't have monsters outside when you met Dad.

It's not like the monsters sleep regular—or any consistent range of—hours. Even if I were to schedule a date, when would that be? We're all on call based on when the monsters decide to come out. And I'm not going on a date in my suit. Every inch of me covered in that loose silver foil. Even when it stops whooshing, you can't hear anything under the damn helmet.

Oh, don't get me started on the helmets, her mother had said.

Mom, we've been over this. You want the monsters to smell you? Come out of hiding and tear you apart? 'Cause that's what they do.

I know. Your Aunt Clare's podiatrist's godson—a lady from his church got ripped to shreds. Guts splattered all over the sidewalk, exploded like a bunch of kids were gonna start grabbing for candy. I heard the monsters tore through the suit. She was in ribbons. Her muscles hanging off the bones, face torn completely off. They found an eyeball a block away, still attached to all the nerves. They say it rolled all the way. Can you imagine? When they streamed the funeral, that must have been what they were all thinking. Tendons dangling out like she was wearing some sort of flapper dress, a shiny one with all that silver from the suit mixed into the entrails.

I know, Ma. That's why you gotta wear your helmet. The suits are just meant to conceal the smell of humans, not protect from the claws or fangs or talons or whatever it is the monsters use for their slicing and dicing.

Ava's helmet and suit are where they should be; in the closet by the

front door. No way will she have time to slide into the jumpsuit, zip it all the way up to her chin, and strap on her helmet before Jason slashes her to bits. Which monster would she prefer? This one may fall asleep eventually. At least drift off on the couch long enough to knock him over the head.

How would she knock the monsters unconscious though? Do they even have heads? Are they eel-like creatures that slither up from the sewers or flying rats that hover above the clouds only to descend when they smell a human? Or does our scent create them anew each time? Are they the scaly snakewolves that her colleague Kendra's brother's optometrist's grandson saw out his window? How do you defend yourself from monsters you've never seen when you're cowering in a bedroom from a monster you promised to marry?

"We live in a palace!" he shouts, his voice cracking. He believes it. Has he not seen the interiors of other homes on video calls? The home tours that go viral on every social network? Yes, these videos can use tricks to make the homes seem more palatial than if you were to explore them in person, but that's an illusion we must face in our current situation. Were people able to disguise their homes as Jason disguised himself on the Monster Match dating app?

Everyone has a reality at home, inside, an existence disconnected from everyone else's. And this is mine, Ava thinks. Trapped in a well-kept row house with a man who transforms into a monster when she forgets to take off her shoes after a trip to the basement.

Jason would never cry over spilled milk, but he'd make sure Ava did.

She sits on the bed, grasping the lamp on the nightstand. She tosses off the shade. The base is lightweight, but stands about two feet tall. It would give her enough space to swing it at him without immediately being brought to the floor like the time her red hair dye—that color he said was so sexy in her Monster Match profile pic—dripped onto the white bathroom tile.

"Ava, it's becoming impossible to live with you like this." He sounds calmer, pleading even. "You don't appreciate how good you have it." Maybe that's true, she thinks. She's never known anything else.

The monsters unleashed their reign of terror when Ava was nine, before dating years in most states. It was no individual's fault, some sort of accident. Climate change. Cell towers. Factory farming. The Rothschilds. Opioids being flushed down the toilet and interacting with the fluoride that was already contaminating the water supply. Racists. Misinformation. Disinformation. Cisinformation. Everything that was for the worst in all possible worlds colliding and releasing unholy horror on them all.

It started where it always starts, in Florida. The headlines told a terrible story: "Florida Man Clawed to Bits in Walmart Parking Lot." The

respectable papers didn't include the details, but they were easy to find on the internet. An ear was shredded like cheese; the crime lab analysts reconstructed it to the best of their abilities, but it appeared parts were taken by the assailant. The cheek was pierced to the bone, leaving the most extreme dimple one could imagine. The tongue was split in two, and the Adam's apple rolled through the parking lot until it was eventually squished by a motorized scooter. Bile spilled from the flayed stomach. It was too early in the morning for any witnesses—or more victims, as it turned out—as most of the Walmart customers did not take advantage of the store's 24-hour shopping.

At first, the law blamed the most likely culprit, another Florida Man. A fight over the importance of returning shopping carts to their tents had taken a bizarre and macabre turn. The second Florida Man was in custody when another outdoor shredding followed. The media blamed it on bath salts. Social media. Cults. Then similar reports came out of states they took seriously. The Oregon maulings started the mass panic. People stopped leaving their homes. They barely left for six months. When someone did, it would be on the news with a blanket over the corpse to protect viewers. No one was old enough to see how long an intestine really was.

Whatever cataclysmic event or set of circumstances unleashed the monsters is still up for debate. And it doesn't matter to most people. They stay inside. Leaving only in emergencies and always wearing their suits. They await the random sirens that alert them when the monsters sleep, allowing them to leave their homes. They step outside and rarely venture far from the door in case the second siren sounds to warn them the monsters have awakened.

They stay inside and live their lives through their on-screen avatars. Their little worlds are smaller, but everyone is just a tap away. That's how Ava ended up alone in this strange city with this monster. Monsters like Jason thrived. They could be anyone on the screens. It isn't until a lonely, naive woman moves across the county to live with them that they reveal the side that wields frying pans when you use the wrong mop.

Silence. Only the ringing in Ava's ear that has been there since the frying pan incident last month. She peers out the window. Gray, as usual. But no sign of any monsters. Just the desolate city street. Red brick houses filled with occupants she has never seen. They won't help her, the strange, likely hysterical woman who wants to invade their little sanctuary after destroying that of their neighbor. I'm Ava. Please let me in. I sometimes forget to take off my shoes, and my hair often falls out and collects in the carpet.

That won't do. No neighbors would allow someone like that to desecrate their world, the only part of the universe they can control.

She tiptoes from the bed to the door, turns her good ear toward it. Still

silence. No breathing even from the other side. Maybe he has just gone to the bathroom on the other side of the landing. She waits. Minutes. No flush of a toilet. No running of the faucet. She keeps waiting, putting off the inevitable. Leaving this room may be the last time she has any agency. She leaves this room, she's at his whims, under his control. She stays here? Well, that puts her under his control as well. Remote control. Hah. And what is the plan when she does leave? She'll have to knock him unconscious, tie him up, and call the police. And hope he stays unconscious until they arrive. And that when they arrive, they believe her and her bruises and cauliflower ear.

Yes, that's the plan. It's better than any other. But she needs something to knock him unconscious, and the lamp isn't going to be it. Maybe. She bounces it up and down, gauging the weight. If she gets the right amount of torque, she can generate enough force to do some cranial damage. But he'll duck or block it before that can happen. Unless he can't see...

And she knows how to make that happen. She shakes again. The thought of the knife plunging into the wood floor inches from her foot. Yes, she's wearing her running shoes, but they won't stop the blade from piercing flesh and cutting bone. She could deal with the bruises and the hearing loss, but her feet are the only freedom she's known since she was nine years old.

She breathes in deep, closes her eyes, tries to remember more calming hacks she's seen online. Her heart rate slows enough to let her stand without her legs wobbling. She slides the dresser back away from the door. She unlocks it as slowly as possible, hoping to eliminate any sort of click. Grasping the lamp base, she pushes it open. No creak. At least the spatula spanking she'd endured had led to the positive effect of his fixing that.

The landing is empty. A noise is coming from downstairs. She doesn't know what it is, and it doesn't matter. All that matters is she knows where he is.

She tiptoes into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. Beneath the sink is an array of cleaning products, Jason's collection. Each serves its own special purpose and is to be used in a distinct order. If that system is violated, her head goes in the toilet. At least she knows the water will be clean. She'd listened so carefully to Jason's instructions she hadn't read the labels. All she looks for now in the fine print is a warning: Avoid eye contact. The spray bleach will work. Bleach and a lamp. She looks at her reflection in the mirror. She would laugh if it weren't so sad.

Behind the showerhead in the freestanding, claw-foot tub is a closet. At least, she assumes it's a closet. It could be a secret passage to a fantasy world for all she knows. He'd said to never look inside, that he was kind enough to share his home with her but he needed some space to himself. He'd said that before the terror began. She'd obeyed. She would have

respected that, she tells herself, even without the threats he always made good on. But now, she can't leave a potential weapons cache un-searched.

She pulls the door open. It isn't a closet, but a pantry with five shelves. Now it's obvious why he wanted to keep it secret. It's a mess. The white paint cracks off the shelf edges. Some sort of substance that looks sticky, but she doesn't want to touch to confirm, was spilled on the second shelf from the top. It's such an unkempt disaster, so incongruous with the rest of the house, that she almost fails to notice the bones. Fingers. Clean finger bones. No flesh, no tissue. None of the carnage the monsters leave behind outside. So tidy these bones, like the rest of the house. Five of them, each threaded through a ring. Ava looks down at her left hand, though she doesn't need to. She already knows, but she needs to make sure her eyes aren't deceiving her. Yes, it's identical to the engagement ring he'd given her when she moved in. He's like a Russian doll of monsters.

She has just lost her choice. Either she beats him and ties him up or she holds her finger down on the bleach trigger and empties the bottle in his nose and mouth until it eats away his insides.

The bottle in one hand, the lamp in the other, she leaves the bathroom. She walks down the steps. It doesn't matter what noise she makes; the open staircase that he somehow hasn't thrown her from yet will reveal her soon enough. She sees him first, right off the bottom of the steps, just before the kitchen. He pushes the floor buffer over the cut where the knife had plunged. He looks up at her and raises the buffer over his shoulder like a baseball bat.

"I hope you're here to help remove the damage that you've done to the floor. This buffer is doing a pretty good job of getting a knife wound out of hardwood. Imagine what it could do to your face."

In a split second, Ava raises the bleach bottle and shoots it at his face. He shouts and blinks his eyes shut. Blind, he swings the buffer. She hops off the staircase to the open side in the living room and runs for the door. His right eye is shut, and those involuntary tears run down his cheek, but the left is wide open. He walks toward her, the buffer raised. She drops to the floor in a squat. Why? She doesn't know. He swings it down, catches her shoulder. She shouts in pain, and the bottle falls out of her grasp. He raises the buffer again with both hands behind his head, like he's about to swing a sledgehammer. She hops up and shoves him back while his arms are in the air. The weight of the buffer sends him back. He drops it behind him so he doesn't fall. He lunges at her, but she meets him with the bulb end of the lamp. The thin glass shatters in his T-shirt. She pulls it back and stabs it at his heart. The tiny glass shards aren't enough to penetrate deeper than the dermis, but it's enough to send him back. And enough time to run the five feet to the front door.

Fuck it. She'll take her chances with the monsters. It's better than giving this one the satisfaction. The monsters out there can't help it.

She unlocks the door and runs through. She runs down the middle of the desolate street, past the other row houses. She covers a block before she turns back. No one is on the street. No maniac swinging a floor buffer over his head. She keeps running straight down the street in the gray twilight. Thirteenth Street, 14th, 15th, 16th. She's never run this far before. She usually takes her jogs in her suit and helmet in laps around the block in case the sirens sound that the monsters have awakened. She keeps running. Nineteenth, 20th. Still no one behind her. She slows to a walk, looks around the neighborhood she's never seen, all these neighbors who may as well be worlds away.

In her fear of the monster inside the house, she forgot about the monsters outside. The monsters with the faces of wolves and bodies of snakes that used their giant claws to rip all humans to shreds and send chunks of tissue flying into neighbors' stoops. Or the scale-covered anthropoids with their vampire fangs that turn human legs into hula skirts. The monsters that are unleashed by the smell of humans. The monsters that she has feared since her mother told her about her godmother's sister's manicurist's nephew's accountant who went out to retrieve a package that had blown off the porch and returned with his arm ripped out at the socket, blood spraying the living room, drenching his poor, screaming wife until he finally collapsed on the carpet. During the early days, before the authorities understood how the monsters sleep, bodies could sit for weeks. Ava heard all about the one-armed, decomposing corpse, how the flesh turned green after a couple of days, the stiff cadaver turning squishy and liquefying right there in the living room. The stench of blood and voided bowels and rot soaking into the carpet, along with the fluids that used to keep him alive. By the time the cleanup crew finally arrived, he had seeped through the rug and left an asymmetrical body print on the hardwood floor beneath.

It was those monsters that stopped Ava from having a life at nine years old, that led her to Jason. So, where are they?

She stands in the middle of the empty street, breathing in the cool air that tastes so different from the air in the house, poisoned by floor buffers and bleach and elbow grease and bones. Time flies by as she breathes in the air with no anxiety about a pending siren for the first time in 15 years. Standing still, lacking all vigilance, she's like monster bait. But none comes. No claws. No breeze of rancid breath that the few survivors claimed. Silence. Peace. A feeling she needs to share.

"Neighbors! The monsters are dead!" Ava shouts. She runs up and down the street. "There are no monsters! Come outside! Live your life!"

She stops in the center of the street and spins, her arms outstretched, welcoming in this big, new world.

Bang.

Ava falls, in one motion sideways onto the street. The thud and the

crack sound at the same time. Blood seeps from the hole in her head. It makes the blacktop look wet.

The two men in silver suits approach. One carries a rifle over his shoulder. The other bends down and raises Ava's wrist in his silver-gloved hand. It's hard for the man with the gun to hear the other from beneath their helmets.

"She's dead."

"And I pray for her. But we can't let her wake the monsters. Remember, son, we must remain vigilant. You don't want to be the next one scalped in the street. Never forget about your grandfather's golfing buddy's pastor's son's transvestite lover and how the thing stuck its claws up his nostrils and pulled his face right off. Remember how a bird flew away with his bloody wig and used it to make a nest while the monsters ripped at his faceless body, pulling his brain out through the cleared-out nasal passage just like they did in ancient Egypt. Blood and snot and gray matter everywhere. Now is that what you want, Son?"

"No, Dad."

"Then shoot her again. Make sure she's dead."