

THE SEPTIC MONSTER

by M. Augustus Ryer

I

Travis first heard it when he was ten years old. He ran whimpering from his father's small bathroom dripping soap like a cape.

He squelched to the den and told his father about the noise snaking its way up the calcium-tinged drain at the base of the shower. A soft keen at first, it had grown from a light ringing in his ears to a wail that filled the chamber. The sound anchored itself in his mind and coiled within Travis where it still ricocheted around and around inside his skull.

His father didn't turn from the infomercial or even seem to notice his only son raining soap and water onto the shag carpet. Instead, he picked up a sweating glass balanced on his thigh and took a prolonged sip. TV light glinted off the silver links of his watch. A circular tattoo of moisture adorned his jeans where the tumbler had rested a moment before.

"Dad?" the boy asked again, shivering as water evaporated from his scrawny frame.

This time his father answered. A small, sad smile twitched at his lips. "Must be the septic monster."

Travis stared wide-eyed at the back of his father's head. "What's that?"

In answer, his father placed the now-empty glass on an unoccupied couch cushion—ice cubes dancing a slow waltz around the bottom—and turned up the volume.

Travis realized in a vague way that his father was probably putting him on. But ever since he'd received that letter from Aunt Julia, his father confused Travis. It was as if the older man's mind had changed playlists and muted the kid-speak adults adapted themselves to in the presence of children. He couldn't understand his father's jokes and, though there had been a time when Travis could never have gotten away with using some of the bad words he picked up online or at Greenslake Elementary, the strongest reprimand he now received was a distracted frown. Even for the really bad ones.

Travis didn't want to go back to the shower now that a monster might be around, so he hurried to the kitchen and rinsed off whatever suds still clung to his body onto last night's dishes and the sink ants. He patted upstairs to his room and toweled himself off with an old t-shirt from the hamper. The smell of dry earth and wood smoke from Jamie Gibson's fire last weekend clung to him for the rest of the day.

II

Travis and Jamie rode the bus home Monday afternoon, and when it pulled up to Jamie's house, lights blinking, the two boys got out together. Their good-natured argument tapered off at the sound of a siren. Two police cars lurked down the street, flashers rotating in the crisp fall air.

Five or six people congregated around the vehicles like supplicants at an altar, each one speaking in turn to a police officer. The boys were just in time to glimpse the retreating lights of an ambulance as it screamed onto Sycamore Lane.

Mrs. Gibson was waiting on the cobbled walkway leading to her house when they arrived. "Come inside, boys. We tried calling the school, but your bus had already left."

Jamie craned his neck to see further down the street. "What's up, Mom?" The fading siren was the only evidence of the ambulance.

"What's going on at my house?"

"Well, we're just not sure." Mrs. Gibson ushered them through the front door. "Come inside where we can talk."

Jamie's mother was lying. Sometime during the early afternoon, Travis's father had shot himself in the head with the old 1911 his grandfather brought back from Korea. Frank had laid half-slumped in that little shower of his, bleeding for what must have been close to an hour. The gun had rested on the other side of the room, hurled by the force of its recoil.

When Bill, her husband, had dropped by to see if Frank had any 2-stroke, he found the front door open but the windows fogged from the inside. Used to occasionally—*or more*, she ruminated—joining his neighbor for an afternoon beer, he let himself in. Humid air wafted into the crisp fall day, and a sickly, metallic smell permeated the small ranch, soaking into his jacket, hair and skin. The bathroom door was ajar, shower running. He'd forced himself to look inside.

Sam led the boys to the kitchen where she poured some Hi-C with shaking hands before easing onto her usual counter stool.

Travis's father had, in a drunken haze, tried to be perversely considerate by blowing his brains all over the shower. After all, wouldn't the water and steam wash everything away, leaving a nice and clean corpse for his little boy to find? Judging by what Bill had described while they waited for the police, it hadn't worked. No note either, not that it could give Travis much comfort.

And the drunk couldn't even shoot himself right. Instead of plowing a hole through the better part of his skull, the bullet had exited off to one side, leaving most of his head intact. He was still alive when Bill found him, but the faces of the EMT crew showed it was some kind of poisoned miracle.

Sam knew she couldn't explain to the boy what had actually happened. Right now, she was the closest thing he had to family, but how did you tell a kid that his father had put a pistol to his head? How a person could travel those shadowed, muddy paths.

So, she told Travis his father slipped in the shower. She held back her tears, hugged him, and told him everything was going to be all right before asking if he had any family she could call.

With a frown, she said she'd try to reach his Aunt Julia before dinner.

III

At seven that evening Travis fumbled with the tap and stepped into the shower. He allowed the frigid water to envelop his body and stood there, feeling it warm to a comfortable temperature. He couldn't help but think of his father's accident. Would he be okay? Would Travis slip like his dad?

The heat continued to rise, and Travis waited in a growing haze of vapor until he finally twisted the knob and got down to the business of washing himself. Jamie's shower was much bigger than the one in his house, and Travis felt exposed in the larger space. Mrs. Gibson's words rang in his ears still, mushing together until they pushed out all other thought and his mind was left a static-filled shell.

And then, Travis realized that the noise wasn't inside his head at all. It was all around him, emanating from the floors, walls and ceiling. He knew, completely and unequivocally *knew*, that it was the thing his father had called the septic monster.

His father hadn't slipped in the shower. Maybe that's what everyone thought, but Travis knew what really sent him to the hospital.

A flurry of clicks replaced the peal before it started up again. His eyes locked on the drain. It came and went, undulating, growing with each cycle. Travis imagined some grisly and sore-riddled abomination, squished up like a puzzle-box, worming its way along the copper pipes, clicking and ticking as it climbed, claws tracing brilliant scars along the metal and screeching as it slipped back into the sewers.

When he couldn't stand the sound any longer, Travis stomped on the drain, spraying a plume of soap onto the tiled walls, and squeezed his eyes shut.

The noise stopped. In the trough of its rhythm, it failed to return, as if he had turned down the volume on a TV. The prolonged silence surprised him so much that his eyes flicked open, and he had to rub at them until the invasion of shampoo rinsed away and he could see.

A delicate, glassy black claw erupted through his foot like a hellish jack-in-the-box. The floor turned pink as blood mixed with the water pooling around the blocked drain. He screamed and tried to wrench his foot away, but it was nailed to the floor and could only rotate on its new axis.

He did the only thing he could think of. The hand-held shower head was attached to the wall by a piece of metal screwed into pearly grout. He stretched, hair-fine serrations tearing at his flesh as he resisted its terrible pull down, *down* into the pipe. Immense weight lay behind that force, but he jumped and knocked the faucet from its clip. Water sprayed along the shower walls and ceiling as he flailed at the metal hose.

Travis captured the faucet and clubbed at the thing piercing his foot. In the back of his mind, he was aware of pounding on the bathroom door—probably Jamie's mom or dad—but he ignored it. Travis brought the shower head down again until, on the fifth strike, the talon broke off an inch above his skin. The shattered chunk ricocheted off the wall and upset a herd of shampoo bottles in the corner, landing with a discordant clatter against the glass door.

He pulled his foot free of the stump and watched as his flesh elastically sealed over the wound. Curiously, there wasn't much pain, or, at least, the deep, throbbing ache that nestled itself in his arch wasn't as bad as he expected. However, when he tried to stand something ground within his foot,

and he immediately collapsed.

His head hit the floor like a wooden log cracking ice, and his vision dimmed. The knocking intensified. Jamie's dad was shouting, asking if he was all right. *Of course I'm not all right*, he thought and laughed a little despite the pain.

His father hadn't slipped.

Travis lay on the floor of the shower and decided that, if the septic monster had attacked his father with no one home to save him, he was surely dead.

Bill fell through the cheap laminate door. The man's face evolved through terror to confusion, and then back again before he regained his balance and waved his hands in a futile attempt to clear the steam. He reached the shower and slammed the glass door aside, kneeling to Travis's crumpled form. There was something wrong with the boy's foot, but the haze and falling water obscured his glasses. He paid no heed to the spray that soaked his head and sleeve all the way to the shoulder but shook Travis and asked if he was okay.

The boy had fainted.

IV

Frank Urbanski died on November 15th, the same day Julia arrived in Greenslake. Surgeons successfully repaired a large portion of his skull, and the damage his brain sustained from the .45 caliber slug was surprisingly minor.

Despite this, a weakened blood vessel ruptured overnight, and Travis's father suffered a massive intracerebral hemorrhage from which he was unable to recover. Hospital staff notified Julia—the man's listed emergency contact—shortly after she departed for San Francisco International Airport.

V

Julia pulled her rented Kia into the Gibson's driveway and shut the car off. Closing her eyes for a moment, she leaned against the headrest before getting out and walking the cobbled path to the entryway. She knocked—she had always hated doorbells—and was greeted by Jamie's mother. Julia thought her name was Sam, but she couldn't quite remember. “Julia Sherman. It's been a while.”

“It's Soto now. How's Travis?”

Maybe-Sam's eyes flicked to the ring on Julia's left hand. “He's fine. Bill took them to the movies—you know, to take Travis's mind off things. Come in, I'll get you a cup of coffee.”

Julia wondered if a bag of overpriced popcorn could distract a boy after the death of his father, but she followed Sam into the kitchen where a chipped mug was thrust into her hands. She warmed her chilled fingers around it and took a grateful sip.

She'd done what she promised never to do: return to Greenslake. She thought back to her last conversation with Frank—her on a cheap prepaid cell, crammed into a gas station bathroom in San Rafael, spinning her ring around and around her knuckle. Him probably splayed on their sagging

couch, cracked-screen phone sticky and smudged. Julia had refused his pleas to return then, even when the asshole invoked Travis. Three weeks later, she texted him for the last time, instructing that any reply should go through Sabin, Sabin & LaRoux. Hell, she still hated him, even if he was dead.

Julia lifted her mug, inhaling the steam rising off the coffee's oily sheen, and wondered at how she held onto resentment. It would be good to see Travis, at least. Leaving her buddy had been her one regret. But it had been necessary.

Sam topped off her own cup with a generous glug of vanilla creamer. "Is it condolences or congratulations?"

"Second one, for me."

Sam raised her eyebrows but said nothing. After a moment, when no further gossip seemed forthcoming, her brow settled to its normal height like a receding tide. "But a tragedy for the boy."

"Mhmm."

"Does he have anyone else?"

"Other than me, you mean? No, I get it. Frank's brother, Peter. He's coming Friday."

"Where will you be staying?"

Julia took another sip. "Frank's—Travis's—house. I think he'd feel more comfortable there than the Budget Beds. I spoke to Detective Frusher. He says a cleaning service came by this morning."

Sam nodded. "I saw their van." Her face took on a strange, almost eager aspect that mixed with its contrived pity. It was as if she found it almost entertaining to be so close to all the horror. "You can ask my husband about it when he comes home," she continued, lowering her voice. "Bill's the one who found him."

"I'm two hours behind the clock. Think I'll just set up in the house if it's all the same."

"Of course, of course. That's fine," Sam said, "I'll give you a call when Travis and Jamie get home. Won't you join us for dinner? You can hear about it then."

VI

Later that evening, over a graveyard of paper and foam take-out containers, Julia and Travis spoke. He'd hopped to her when he returned from the movies, and she was surprised to realize just how much she'd missed him.

Kids take to grief strangely. Instead of any reaction she'd braced herself for—crying, screaming, fierce denials—the boy had looked down at his casted foot and nodded so faintly she hardly caught the motion. To add to his misery, the doctor said his broken foot would take almost two months to heal. Maybe it was something to focus on other than death.

She had her own reasons for, while not necessarily finding satisfaction in his demise, at least feeling some sense of closure. They'd spent three years together. Three years she'd never get back. She'd known it was a mistake after six months, but something had kept her rooted. What mattered was that she *had* left. If she'd escaped earlier—and it had been a dead-of-the-night Shawshank disappearance—she wouldn't have wound up in St. Louis. Wouldn't have met Victor.

Okay, so there was satisfaction.

But Frank had been the boy's father, and she'd been...not a mother, but something. Julia couldn't stand to see him so hollow.

Throughout the evening, the boy seemed drained and wandered about with a haunted look. Sluggishness engulfed him beyond what could be explained by the cast encasing his foot and broken bones within. Everything he did was in slow motion, like he'd been spliced into this world missing a few frames per second. The only time his body showed life was when, periodically, his head would snap up and look around as if he heard something.

"What is it?" she asked. "Gibsons at the door?" Sam had dropped off a casserole earlier, but they'd ordered out anyway and it now sat cooling on the counter.

Julia thought he would say something like, *I can't believe he's gone*, but in a soft, almost rasping voice he asked, "Can't you hear it?"

"Can't I hear what, buddy?"

"You got to listen real hard, but you can hear it sometimes. It has trouble climbing the pipes, so it slips down, but it gets closer each time."

"What gets closer?" she asked.

"The septic monster. It's what killed dad."

A little something broke inside her, and tears welled in her vision. The loss of his father must have sparked in Travis some minor childhood fear no doubt present before his father died. That it was manifesting now in such a powerful emotional form, she supposed made sense.

"No," she shook her head, "no, that's not what happened. He- Here, eat your fortune cookie." She grabbed her own, hidden underneath an errant strand of lo-mein, and cracked it open.

The glowworm is always the first to be eaten.

Lucky Numbers: 3, 17, 44, 72

She examined the slip, thought about reading the fortune to Travis like the old days but decided against it. "Aren't you going to eat yours? I want to hear what it says."

VII

That night, while Travis slept an uninterrupted yet fitful sleep, Julia lay alone in the bed she and Frank had shared for three years. She wasn't disturbed by how the mattress bowed on what had been his side, as if the dead man was dozing soundly next to her. Instead, she stared at the ceiling fan as it cast lazy, revolving shadows against the plaster ceiling and listened to Travis turning in his sleep through the old walls.

Peter was a fucking asshole. His brother offs himself, leaving an orphaned son, and the chickenshit said his life was *just too crazy right now*? The whole family was fucked. She was glad she was out.

She laughed at the irony of her thought, given where she lay.

Julia stretched out her arm and caressed the indentation beside her, half-expecting to feel

residual warmth. She thought about her arrival in Greenslake a little more than four years ago—how she'd stepped out of the warmth of that Greyhound and into the frozen night air of an Illinois winter. Idly jingling what change she had left in the pocket of her overcoat, she'd begun trekking down Rt. 122, toward the greatest concentration of lights, without any particular destination in mind. Just as long as it took her further from Anamosa.

A man had pulled up as she post-holed through the gathering roadside drifts and asked where she was going. She'd waved, hands peeking through her jacket's too-long sleeves as if they'd once tried to escape and had been punished for it. She was going wherever he was, as long as it had heat.

He'd laughed and told her to climb into the cab. On the way to his house, she learned his name was Frank, his wife had died two years ago, and that he had a son named Travis.

What would happen to Travis? With Peter flaking, she'd have to call Family Services in the morning. What would she tell Victor? He understood why she had to come, but would he wasn't ready for a child. They were married, but it hadn't been that long. Not really.

A noise, light scratching and extended squeaking, pried into her awareness. It came from the wall to the right. The kitchen and bathroom were on the other side. *Mice looking for crumbs. Looking for a little warmth.* She couldn't blame them.

Julia groaned and threw off the covers. Sleep wouldn't come, so she joined the mice in the kitchen, poured herself a drink, and thought about the future she couldn't have with Travis.

VIII

In the morning, she made waffles.

A few taps on her phone brought up Netflix. She wiped last night's takeout containers into the open trashcan and propped her phone between a bottle of fake syrup and the waffle plate. "Pick what you want, okay? I'm gonna take a shower, then we can go to the park, toss a little Frisbee?"

Travis looked up at her with wide, frightened eyes. "Please don't leave."

Julia crouched in front of him and placed her hands on his shoulders. "I'm not going anywhere." She immediately regretted the words, but he brushed right by them.

"It's not safe. The septic monster. It could get you."

Julia let out a relieved breath. "That's what you're worried about? No such thing, buddy. Your dad had an accident, and you just fainted from the heat. That's how you broke your foot. Monsters aren't real. And besides," she added, "you don't even have a septic."

Julia left the bathroom door open a crack, disrobed, and turned on the water. She shut it off again and examined the shower top to bottom. The cleaners had done a thorough job, but there was something unsettling about standing where your own monster died. Where was the bullet hole? Surely the police would have found and circled it like they did on TV. Had the cleaners patched it? Or had it gone through the open window? Who kept a window open in late fall?

With a disgusted grunt, she twisted the faucet and got in. The water was warm, but the pressure sucked. And of course Frank only had 3-in-1 soap. She'd left in such a rush that she hadn't brought her own. *At least I remembered my toothbrush.*

She spotted another bottle in the corner. Her old shampoo. Still here, more than a year later. Mildew creeping up from its bottom.

Thunk. Something in the wall shifted, and the water spat cold for a second before warming again. Shitty post-war construction.

Julia became aware of a high whistling noise, soft at first, but building. The pipes must have shifted. Maybe there was a pinhole leak. She lifted closed eyes to the spray and washed her old soap from her face and hair. Another knock and the water froze again. “Fuck.” It was time to get out.

She opened her eyes and saw red. Blood. She was covered in it everyfuckingwhere, pooling around her feet and running down her hair and into her mouth. Julia screamed, tasting metal, and over it all flowed the terrible sound.

The door flew open, and Travis ran in. Through the red-orange haze clinging to the transparent shower curtain she could just make out the thin, hooked silhouette of a fireplace poker in his hand.

“Aunt Julia! I’m coming!”

Orange? It was already dissipating. Julia fell against the plastic wall. Rust. It was just rust. “Travis, wait.”

“Get away from her,” the child screamed, and swung.

IX

Julia sat with Travis, ignoring Detective Frusher’s skeptical eye. She rested her left arm, cast a pair to Travis’, on a stained cushion. “You understand why we’re here?”

She took a sip of coffee and willed her feet to stop bouncing. “Sure. Your people screwed up the first time.” Her eyes flicked toward the bathroom where a uniformed officer was peering under the vanity. A high, teapot whistle crept at the edge of her hearing. Maybe the TV was still on. Just electronic feedback. That’s all.

Detective Frusher sighed. “Before forensics got ahold of the gun, there was no way to know that the recovered casing was not the only one...” He trailed off, looking at Travis. “We found.”

Travis’s attention seemed drawn to the bathroom as well. “She shouldn’t be in there.”

The detective leaned forward. “It’s okay, sport, Officer Clayton won’t touch anything of yours.” His tone shifting, he returned his attention to Julia. “It’s to close our file, you understand.”

“Sure.” The noise was definitely there. And then silence.

She craned her neck, and a flash of movement caught her eye. Shiny onyx, just behind the rust-stained curtain. A curved digit. Sharp. Cruel. Reaching for the oblivious officer.

Julia shot to her feet, hardly registering how the detective’s hand darted to the gun on his belt. “Behind you!”

The officer spun, falling before she could draw her weapon. She scrambled against the wall, seeking whatever danger was upon her. The claw slipped back, and the noise once more filled her mind.

“Mrs. Soto,” the detective said in a voice as calm as a San Francisco Muni announcement, “I’m going to ask you to sit back down and tell me what’s going on.”

“I-” Julia muttered. No sign of the claw remained. Didn’t they hear it? “I saw a wasp.”

Detective Frusher relaxed and drew his hand away from his gun. “I’m sure Officer Clayton is grateful.”

The police finished their search without finding the missing shell casing. The cleaners probably threw it away by accident, they said. Happens all the time.

At the door, Detective Frusher handed her a lollipop, “for the kid. Must be tough.”

“Thanks.” She was sure he could hear her voice shake.

“Remain here until HFS arrives.” He looked again at her cast. “They’ll have some questions.”

“Three o’clock. Got it.”

Detective Frusher tipped an invisible hat and picked his way down the frosted walkway. When he was gone, Julia slammed the door and spun to find Travis standing behind her. “You saw it too?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. “Pack your things. We’re leaving.”

X

Victor opened their condo’s door as the elevator disgorged an exhausted Julia and Travis. Julia broke into a run and embraced him, almost knocking him back over the threshold. “Thank god,” she said. “It’s so good to see you.”

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “You’re home. It’s okay.”

Behind her, a shy Travis lugged his duffel-bag and casted foot, staring at the floor. Julia released Victor and crouched, gesturing the boy forward with her good arm. “Vic, I’d like you to meet Travis. Travis, meet Victor.”

Victor joined his wife in a crouch and extended a hand. “It’s good to meet you, Travis.”

“Hi.” He held out his own small hand and waggled it in the man’s larger one.

“Why don’t you head inside, take off your coat. I’ve got snacks out. Julia says you like popcorn?”

When he’d vanished into the kitchen, Victor turned to his wife. “Julia, you have to tell me what’s going on. You jet off at a moment’s notice to take care of your asshole ex’s kid, then show up with a rented car, said kid, and a broken arm? Christ, you look like you’re on the run.”

“I know, and I can explain. Just give me until morning.”

“Julia-”

“I promise I’ll tell you everything.” She cupped his stubbled cheek with her good hand and looked into his eyes. “Trust me.”

Victor returned her gaze, wishing her could see more than fear. “Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

XI

In the morning, Victor made the waffles. His were always better. A hint of coconut flour, he claimed, but every time she tried to emulate his recipe it came out a stodgy mess.

Travis was still sleeping, but the smell of cooking sugar roused Julia. She felt good, refreshed from her night's sleep. Maybe it was being out of that house, away from the place she'd felt trapped in for so long. It was no wonder she'd cracked.

She kissed Victor on a now-smooth cheek and poured herself a coffee, reveling in its smell. She'd gotten used to the artisanal stuff he methodically weighed out and ground every morning.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Hell yes. Got any ready?"

Victor flipped the waffle maker and nodded toward the oven. "Warm and ready."

"Just how I like it." She grinned and extracted a plate from the cupboard.

"You know the price?"

She wrapped her arms around him from behind. "Might be able to guess."

"Nice try. We've got a kid sleeping in the guest room, and you've got a story for me."

Julia groaned and stepped aside. "It all seems so silly now."

"Try me."

Julia wanted to. She really did. But Victor would think she'd had a mental break. Hell, maybe she had. "Let me get cleaned up first."

"When you get back."

She grabbed the plastic wrap. "When I get back," she agreed.

XII

Julia stood before her rainfall shower, still in PJs, and studied its sound. She knew she was being silly. There was no such thing as monsters, let alone *septic* monsters. Just one of Frank's sick jokes. He was in her head again, just like he was in Travis's. Steam wafted from the spray, sucked up by the jet-engine fan almost as fast as it manifested. No sound but the water.

It wasn't real.

Thinking of Travis, she engaged the privacy lock with a click. She kicked her PJs into a corner, wrapped her cast, and stepped in. The water was perfect. It washed away the madness of the last few days cramped in that rental. She felt almost giddy. She and Victor would laugh when she related how she and Travis had worked each other into a panic.

Septic monster. Frank couldn't even come up with a good name for it.

Her husband's voice came through the closed door. "Hey babe, just so you know we might have someone from Maintenance coming by today."

"Oh yeah?" Julia worked a sugar scrub into her shoulders. The cast was heavy, her muscles tense.

"Something's up with the pipes. Things were whistling or something when I took a shower this morning. Shitty developers strike again."

Julia froze, sound draining from the room. "The pipes?"

His response was drowned out by a high, piercing whine. It came from everywhere, echoing off marble and glass. She looked around for its source. The drain. It rose and fell, paused and advanced.

Something was climbing, digging narrow, serrated talons into copper pipes so shiny and new they couldn't grip, and sliding back down, only to inch back up again.

She couldn't move.

"Julia? You catch that?"

She opened her mouth to reply, to call for help, anything, but no sound came. Soap ran into her eyes, and she squeezed them shut at the sting, frantically wiping.

Again, the sound came. Again, it slipped back down.

Silence.

Julia opened her eyes and held a lungful of steam. Something glinted in the blackness past the silver drain. Needles as thin as shadow poked through the metal screen, engorging as they rose until three obsidian talons—two long and sharp, the third jagged and short—tapped against the tile floor, seeking her foot.

She jerked away, slipped.

"Julia? Is everything okay?"

As if the vibration of her step betrayed her position, the claws lashed out, digging each knife finger into soft ankle flesh. Muscle tore, but her tendons held. Minute barbs grabbed and she screamed not only in pain, but at the realization that it was pulling her relentlessly, irresistibly, downward.

She thrashed but found no purchase on the slick tile. Her broken arm smacked into the glass shower door, but she didn't register any pain.

"Julia?" Victor's voice, panic-tinged, came through the door, and the knob rattled. "Julia, let me in. Are you okay?"

Why did she lock the door? He was pounding on it now. The frame rattled. She wanted to call for help, to say she loved him one last time, to say sorry, and to *run*, but nothing came out but her scream.

The thing in the drain tugged. As she felt her vocal cords rip and her anklebone shatter on its way into the narrow pipe, the door finally burst open.

XIII

Victor fell into the room, skidding on the soaking floor. His wife's screams still echoed in his ears, but she was quiet now, crumpled on the tile. No way a person's spinal cord could accommodate that angle.

Scrambling, he lunged for the shower, not understanding anything but seeing her so still, so quiet, her knee popped sideways. It was a prank, just a little joke, just a-

A noise drew his attention. Loud at first, he thought it had been his own voice, but no. A high-pitched screech, fading now, floated from the drain.

"It followed us."

A small voice. Travis's voice. Behind him.

"What?" The kid wasn't making sense. None of this made sense.

“It’s coming.”

“Call 911!” Victor slid his hands under his wife, backs of his fingers scraping against the drain hard enough to cut skin, and lifted her from the shower. How did her leg get so mangled? Had she slipped?

“They can’t help.”

That noise was louder now, so loud he couldn’t hear himself think, couldn’t hear Julia’s breathing. “Fuck this.” He pushed past the kid and into the apartment, laying his wife on the kitchen island. It was here too, filling the apartment with a screech that vibrated his guts and teeth.

His phone. Where was his damned phone? He spotted it next to the sink, still playing his morning podcast. Victor lurched toward it, knocking it into a soapy, water-filled basin in his frenzy. It was supposed to be splashproof. It was okay.

He didn’t even know if he’d hear the operator over this howl.

Victor darted his hand into the sink, feeling the knife he’d zested a lime with—his real secret ingredient—sink into his palm. He screamed and pulled back, but something wouldn’t let his hand go.

A tug, deeper into the water. Victor’s forehead smacked into the cabinet.

“Travis!” There was no response. “Travis, please, get help!”

Silence, terrifying in its abruptness, chased all but the phantom echo of the screech from the kitchen. Victor heard retreating footsteps. A door slammed. Arm pinned in the sink, he turned to find no one in the room but himself and Julia, water dripping from her quiet body. Julia.

The force pulled his hand deeper, deeper into the sink, and then him into darkness.

XIV

Travis found himself in a utility closet on the ground floor of Aunt Julia’s building. He didn’t remember how he’d got there, and the sobs wracking his small frame could surely be heard by anyone in the hall. No one came.

Eventually, his crying slowed. He took one shuddering breath and then another.

It had taken Aunt Julia. Probably Mr. Victor too. He’d seemed nice. He’d made popcorn.

It would follow him. The septic monster learned about him in Greenslake, and if it could follow him here, it could follow him anywhere. He didn’t know why it was after him, but his dad had known about it. Even right at the end, when he didn’t seem to know much.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee. Taptaptap. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

A dirty, rectangular sink lurked at the back of the closet, a mop and bucket standing sentinel beside it.

Travis let out a sob. Not of fear, but of exhaustion. It wouldn’t stop, no matter what.

Travis thought about Aunt Julia. How she’d come back after everything. He remembered her and his father fighting at night, before she left. What he remembered best was how she always told his father to lower his voice. She’d wanted to protect him.

When she left, he’d thought it was something he’d done. But that wasn’t true. She’d loved him.

That's why she came back.

And now the septic monster had got her. He wasn't big. He couldn't protect her. But she'd come back. And he ran.

Travis levered himself to his feet and hobbled to the sink. It was louder now. Insistent, and eager. He could picture the claws and the grinding, milky teeth of whatever owned them. It was coming, and he couldn't run.

The mop released from the bucket easily, and Travis clumsily spun it, so the head was facing up. The noise grew. He lifted it high.

The screeching stopped as the monster reached the top of the pipe. One last time, a talon appeared, shy and seeking. He let another rise, and the stumpy third. Soon a wrist emerged, oiled with drain goop and grease, but something shiny hung from it. A silver watch. His father's watch.

Travis screamed and stabbed downward.

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