

the night

The horror begins quietly, in the midnight hours between May 11 and May 12, 1994, after one day has faded and before the next has begun. I've been sleeping for hours, curled on my side and wedged among my many stuffed animals, surrounded by the white, filigreed metal of my daybed, one palm pressed flat under my pillow. Then, through the fog of sleep, muffled voices push their way into my brain. An argument. A high voice, a low one. They come to me as if through deep water. I've heard this angry duet before, and it awakens me no further. I remain submerged, and moments later I slip back into unconsciousness. Uncountable dreamless minutes pass.

The stillness is shattered by my mother screaming "No! No! No!" Over and over and over. My body lurches into a sitting position as quickly as my eyes open, and suddenly all the lights are on inside me, my blood is slamming through my veins, a high humming is beginning in my head, and I can feel my eyes continuing to open, stretching wider and wider, as though alertness alone could serve as a defense. I'm frozen bolt upright, palms flat beside my thighs, fingers clenching the sheets tighter and tighter as my mother continues to scream. She's so loud it's inside my every cell, so loud her screams turn the wall beside my bed to paper. That wall is all that separates my room from the living room, which opens up into the kitchen. I think she's right in the middle, in the broad opening between those two rooms. I can hear her voice ring off the linoleum, the sturdy cabinets and drawers. We are

maybe fifteen feet away from each other. We live alone. Just the two of us.

Panic spills out of me in one word: “Mom?!” Then I try to recall that word, to pull that air back in, gasping sharply because I realize, suddenly, that she can’t answer me without giving me away. I ball my hands into fists and my spine bends down sharply, as though expecting a blow to the head. I shut my eyes for just a second and will myself to disappear. Then I open them wide and listen for any sign that whoever’s out there with her has heard me. I hope that her terror has drowned me out. This hope feels selfish, even in this moment. The screaming continues, and I hear no footsteps approach my room, so I assume I’m safe. Something terrible is happening, and I can still try to get help, try to get us through it. Mom is still screaming “No!”

I swing my legs over the side of my bed and take two steps to my bedroom door. My electrified body registers my footprints in the short, bristly carpet. I lift my bathrobe off the hook and wrap it around myself, holding my breath as the slightly rough terry drags across my bare skin. My partially open door lets in a faint orange light from the kitchen; the dimmer switch must be on low. But the hinges are on the far side, so I can only see down the hall, away from the screaming. I cannot risk opening the door farther and peering around to see what is happening. I don’t need to see. I need to survive. Mom is still screaming “No!”

I grip the door handle tightly in my sweating palm, turn it slowly. I hold the latch in while I push the door shut, as silently as possible. There is no quiet way to push the button to lock the door, and it sounds like a gunshot announcing my presence. I flinch and wait, but nothing changes. I sit back down on the bed. My feet hover parallel to the floor. My posture is perfect, and my eyes are still wide-open; even my ears feel wide-open. Mom is still screaming “No!” I can think of nothing to do but wait, silently, and strain to piece sound into meaning.

Then. Boots thundering across the linoleum. A drawer pulled to the end of its runners, slamming at the end. Metal on metal, a knife pulled out, surely. Impossibly, her screaming gets louder. In that scream I hear absolute terror, terror I didn’t even know existed. But

there's fury, too. In my bedroom, I'm still, so still my locked joints ache. I hardly blink or breathe. And then.

A heavy, wet thudding, fast-paced. My hectic mind brings me the image of a gigantic fish, a five-hundred-pound deepwater sturgeon, wet and thrashing for air and life on the hollow kitchen floor. A hopeless seizure. I know there is no fish. The fish is insanity.

The no's continue, now quieter and quieter, automatic animal moans, drained of anger. A sound of defeated sorrow. In tandem with one of these last moans, I hear a deep grunt, the sound of pure hatred, disgust. A finishing. Then, the staccato, robotic pulse of a phone left off the hook, beep-beep-beeping into the new silence.

Finally, the phone stops screaming, the prerecorded alarm reaching its limit. The house is utterly still, and the silence presses into my ears as though I've gone deaf. I do not hear a door open, do not hear anyone leave. I know I'm not safe but it's quiet now and this is what I've been waiting for and if I don't move now I never will. The gray morning light will creep into my window and I'll still be sitting here, wide-eyed on the edge of my bed. I'll have to go out there and see everything in the light, and no ambulance will have come. I have to get someone to come.

I stand up. I take two steps. I slowly start to open my door. Quiet still: grip doorknob, turn it to retract latch, pull door smoothly open. The button of the lock pops softly against my palm. The orange kitchen light has been switched off, but the night-light still shines dimly from the bathroom across the hall. There's a clock there in the bathroom, and I stare at it as I step into the hallway. It is exactly one o'clock, and the second hand is nestled in with the hour and minute hands. The trio makes a black mark on the night, and the black mark is, for a brief, horrifying moment, a large, segmented insect. A quivering insect, made of time. My eyes widen further, and then the funhouse mirror warps again and it is just a clock on the wall, ticking in the silence. I turn away, toward the living room, toward the kitchen.

Blood on the floor, on the part of the floor I can see past the couch, blood on the chair by that entryway, on the wall above the back of the chair. There are more pools and spatters, too many for me to take in;

they are black, darkness within darkness. A little hope blooms in me, a desperate, fervent vision: my mother standing over a body, holding a bloody knife and staring at me, wide-eyed, terrified, ashamed. Self-defense, like on TV.

I step slowly past the couch, avoiding my reflection in the wide mirror above it. I can see myself peripherally there, my slow-moving shadow, and I know that if I turn and see my own face, see myself in this horror, something in me will break and stay broken.

I approach the body, a crumpled shape wrapped in a familiar blue bathrobe. It's her, as I knew it would be. I shriek, "Mommy!" High-pitched but quiet, my throat compressed with fear. I hear myself do this, and I fear for myself, because I haven't called her that since I was very small. I can't slip now, I have to get help. Now is not a time to be small. A new part of me is born right here in the kitchen. This one doesn't waste time on terror or sadness; her only goal is to find a phone and make a call and get herself and me and Mom out of this alive. This second self begins acting without hesitation, propelling my body along, forward, forward, forward.

When the weak one screams out, the other one hushes her, hurries her along. *We can't stay here, she says. We have to get out of here, she says. You want to help her, right?*

And so I say nothing else, but open my eyes wider in the darkness. I perform one small test: I pinch my arm, clamping the flesh tightly for several seconds. I've had lucid nightmares before, and this is how I always escape. I wait for the moment when I pivot upright again in my bed, sweating, gasping, shaking off the residue of this vivid dream. Pain spreads from that point of contact, but I remain in the dark.

Reality confirmed, now comes the time for action. Her body is lying in front of the door. This helps the second self prevent the weaker one from running away. Another test: We reach a cautious foot out, touch the back of her pale, exposed calf. This is further proof that we aren't hallucinating. She is still, and we recoil at the solid fact of her. Her head is in the corner, near the hinges of the side door that is closed to the night outside. A glass panel in the door admits weak gray light from a far-off streetlamp. The longer we stand here, the more we can

see. The corner is dark, her hair is too dark. We can see the red now, closer to the light, but there is too much; we can't understand what we're looking at. There is a thick, fluid shadow covering her head, and it's impossible to figure out what is casting it. We quickly look away, to the safer territory of the leg.

The phone receiver lies on the floor, at the very end of its curly cord, near but not quite touching her hand. The very tip of it rests lightly on the linoleum. When we heard the droning of the open line, the tension of the cord must have drawn the receiver back across the floor, away from her.

We step over the legs and pick up the receiver. We must complete her last action. We would like to make a call. But nothing happens. We punch 911 repeatedly, and with some speed. Listen. Nothing, no sound at all from the plastic receiver. We punch 911 repeatedly. Silence. We return the phone to its cradle on the wall, turn away.

Now a journey begins. The house is very small, but the other phone is on the opposite end of it. We turn back toward the hallway from which we came. Step over the legs again. Do not give a final look to the mother. Either she is not the mother anymore, or we will succeed tonight, save her, and see her again, whole.

The hallway is short, but there is time for one distinct thought before we reach the end of it. It comes suddenly and fully formed like a voice, the voice of the second self, reverberating in my head: "There is no God." She's casting off comforting fantasies, stripping existence down to this carpet, these close walls, this hallway, the phone at the end. The short, swift feeling of desolation that follows is a surprise, because I had never believed in God before.

Her bedroom presents a challenge: it's dark, and the light must be turned on. A bit of terror leaks through the numb, autopilot feeling, a lightning flash of fear between darkness and exposure: what will the light reveal? Flip the switch: Nothing out of the ordinary. Empty room.

The bedroom smells like her, and the covers are neatly folded back. We note these details, to carry to the police later—we are already thinking about interviews in the safe fortress of the station downtown.

AFTER THE ECLIPSE

But the phone under the bed doesn't work, either. We dial over and over. Silence. We are huddled here in a blind corner. We did not hear anyone leave.

We must leave the house.

We go back to the living room, careful not to look back into the kitchen. We leave by the front door, which is very rarely used. We step out into a prickly, light rain, feel the sharpness of the cement porch under bare feet. Any working phone is our polestar, and now we will navigate through the dark, nausea gripping us as if from an ocean swell.