

From Wrists and Walls - *Dylan Fisk*

“She’s been following me around for as long as I can remember. No, haunting. That word suits *her* far better.

“I wasn’t very old when I first encountered her. No older than six or seven, anyway. Back then, her presence was a lot less loud. In fact, I barely noticed her, and probably wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for that damn roller coaster. Oh man do I remember that roller coaster! Seeing it flip and dip and twist, speeding over that sleek red steel faster than a bullet... it made me mad for a while. Mad when my mother took me over to the measuring pole just to humiliate me! It was never fair that my brothers could ride the coaster—could flip and dip and twist—and I was stuck on the baby helicopters in Kiddie Land! ‘Just wait a little bit longer,’ Mom said. ‘You’ll grow taller, you just have to wait,’ Mom said. And she laughed, but it wasn’t hers.

“I know that now. Did I know that then? I’m not so sure. Whether it was my mother’s laugh or *her* laugh, it didn’t help me get any taller either way. It just mocked me and my small stature. Mocked a boy forced to wait to grow.

“I’ve heard that condescending laugh plenty of times since then. It became a staple of my little childhood, irking me as I crawled out of bed each weekday morning, already eager to see the day’s end. It gave background instrumentals to my failed plans of convincing my mom to show me *any* Marvel movie in the video store. It again added to the chorus of laughter as my older brothers pummeled me in whatever game we were playing. It loved to mock what I wanted the most but couldn’t yet have. The sound grew to be familiar in its strangeness, something I felt like I could recognize from somewhere else, a not-so-far-away memory. It was... almost metallic. As if the gears of a clock were grinding together inside my head, slowly unraveling each second, and with it, this cackling mockery.

“I was too young to question it then. After all, as far as I knew, everyone else heard her laughing too. So I did as any young boy had to do and grew in spite of her.

“Isn’t it strange, though? How everything you care so much about as a kid just up and fades away when you touch high school? That roller coaster? Yeah I had been on that about a dozen times at this point. I was watching every bloody fight scene I could ever care to and no one batted an eye. I was still getting crushed in my brothers’ games, though, those bastards. Yet even as every one of those old dreams I thought I’d never see came true, I needed new things, and I could not get rid of her.

“It was when I found love where *she*—

“Oh, my beloved Dawn! I still remember falling in love with her in bits and pieces day by day in our English class! What an angel, light-brown hair flowing gracefully down, framing her smile in such perfect light; her glasses—which I always argued with her for criticizing—giving such divine shape to her face; her eyes, the—*ahem*.

“I was in love. And love changes everything about a man. Dawn became my everything, first emotionally, then physically, and I began to yearn for what I knew I could not yet have; what I knew I had to wait for. I dreamt about the day we’d be married, united under God and finally able to carry our passions to their natural end. Oh, how the dreams tormented me night after night! I was right under the measuring pole again. And as I wept for my selfish longing, I was not greeted by laughter. This time, it was a hand thrown carelessly over my shoulder.

“A thoughtful gesture with a heartless posture. I could sense it in the way *her* hand limply laid there, cold and unfeeling. I wanted to believe this was her attempt at comforting a poor soul at a measuring pole, but even I could not be so stupid. It was mockery at its core. If she truly cared, she’d say something! But she just left her hand there as I cried. And I looked back to see if

I could find any genuine care in her eyes. But she was gone. I was again alone at the measuring pole, glad my shoulder was relieved of her mocking hand.

“This time, I was conscious of her cruelty. It infuriated me. And in my fury, I sought rebellion. I sought the growth that I could not propel in my past. I was going to get on that roller coaster, no matter what the world said. And so, I began to plan a wedding.

“Dawn was immediately on board. Not surprising, as we were deeply in love and going through the same conflict between passion and promise. After all, we knew we were the ones. Why wait anyway? My parents, on the other hand? It gives me chills just thinking about the way they screamed at me. ‘You can’t get married at eighteen, are you insane?! What about...’ and a list of six hundred reasons came spouting out of two raving mouths, sounding like three.

“I cried again that night, alone in my room, scared to ever leave. And *she* had the nerve to come back and try to ‘comfort’ me. Her hand fell again on that same shoulder with less care than I felt the last time. This was my last straw. Truly, the world was against me, clawing at my legs to slow me down, to force me to wait. But things were already so damn slow! In that moment, I believe I would have given everything I had to fast forward my life.

“But *slowly*, God did lead the way, to my parents’ dismay—oh how I love rhymes—and we were on track to marry out of high school. But first, I had a different mountain to climb: the obligation of college. It was almost time for me to be done with high school. I never thought I’d see the day. Oh yes, I remember this night well. I was told to go research some schools and fill out some applications or something, so I remember sitting there alone in my room at my desk running through some options of schools, having zero clue what I planned to do at them. The first school I looked at was a small little local one that I figured would save me some money over the bigger, *fancier* ones I couldn’t care less about. I liked the look of it, so I rushed together an

application and got ready to submit it. Yet as I was right over the ‘submit’ button, I felt a pinch on the back of my neck.

“It had hurt enough to get my attention, and I immediately whipped around and rubbed my neck to check whether it had been person or bug. Yet nothing was there. Trying to recall the sensation, I realized it had felt distinctly like human fingernails. The coldness is what told me it must have been *her*. And though annoyed by the initial pain, a wave of sadness set in to take its place. It felt like grief, a weird feeling I now know quite well but had never met until that day. The years of school that I was leaving behind flooded my mind, and I grieved them. The days of my childhood, where the only thing I ever wanted was to ride the roller coaster, seemed, for the first time, sweet to me. I would take the laughter over this cruel game of mocking comfort and painful remembrance. In that moment, I believe I would have given everything I had to rewind my life.”

“It wasn’t long until I moved on from high school to college, though, and married Dawn, the love of my life, yet each day came with new instances of *her* meddling. It hurt to look either forward or backward, so I thought I would just try to take things day by day as a husband. It took a while, but I eventually got used to that role. And so, I was content... but was I? Things were tough, and I found myself still grieving the days when I could work less and looking impatiently forward to the return of those days. And the kids. Oh what a mix of emotions those little buggers were back then. Bundles of joy and expenses, time and tantrums, I swear. But I can’t say I didn’t love raising them. Or, ‘raising them.’ I have a feeling a lot of it wasn’t really me. Let me tell you why.

“I remember being in the kitchen one afternoon, washing some dishes for dinner that night while Dawn was away at the store. This is back when we had just our first kid, Sophie. Simpler times. Sophie was crawling around in the hallway behind me, last time I had checked. And after a few more dishes, I did a quick glance behind me to check on her. And, behold, there at the end of the hallway with Sophie was none other than *her*. I had never seen her full figure before and yet the moment I saw her, something within me knew. She was there with Sophie, sat on the floor, seeming to talk to her, but I could not make out any words. Just Sophie’s giggling replies. All of a sudden, *she* got up and began slowly and exaggeratedly placing one foot in front of the other in a small section of the hallway. It was clear by her bumbling that Sophie wished to copy the woman, but could not yet follow suit. Just who did she think she was, teaching *my* child to walk and talk? How could I let her? Oh, how I let her! At this point, I concluded this as another act of her spite towards me and my blood boiled. Yet the strange thing was, I could not move. I was powerless in sight of her, and my muscles, including my tongue, refused to stir in retaliation. All I could do was watch in anguish as my child was taught the ways of the world by another. And so I did, for half an hour until Dawn came home. I went over to greet her and urge her to look upon our baby’s secret teacher, but when our eyes peered around the corner down the hallway, *she* was gone, having slipped through my hand like sand into the glass below for the first of oh so many times. There was only Sophie there, loafing around, giggling, and failing to walk.

“Dawn always thought I was a little crazy for that. It’s a good thing she liked my imagination, since she gave my little ‘episode’ a pass. But I know what I saw, and this eyewitness proof just served to piss me off even more. I think the worst part even still is that I had to watch it happen with every single one of our three kids. One by one they grew and *she*

taught them to talk and to walk. And when Dawn was jumping for joy at each milestone, a part of me ached, knowing the truth, and so I faked a smile.

“Even at their birthday parties, when they were a bit older and running around the backyard, I saw glimpses of *her* running behind them, one hand on their backs, pushing them forward. And they smiled. And I shook my head. It was all happening too fast.

“I remember another time when Tommy, my youngest, was about six or seven years old. He was playing a video game with his two older siblings while I watched them from the other room. I couldn’t make out much of their game, but after a few minutes, I saw him burst into tears and throw his controller into the bean bag chair across the room. It was then that I felt an awful pinch on my neck and a stinging in my soul. I remembered being his age and doing the very same thing over the games I played with my brothers. I wanted nothing more than to beat them for the longest time, and it took me until the day before my wedding to finally do that. But it was easy. It was too easy, and I wanted to cry. We haven’t played together since that night. I looked at Tommy and I whispered, ‘Hang in there, Tommy. You’ll beat them one day. But you’ll wish you never had.’

“This mix of seeing *her* constantly raising my children and her more frequent, more painful pinches is what I remember the most from being a parent.”

“But, as always, I grew older. My birds left the nest, or whatever they like to call it. That hurt like hell. You’ll see what I mean. In fact, once I hit retirement, everything started to hurt like hell. Someone once promised me carefree island getaways for the rest of my life. Look at me now! I had a few weeks of my retirement fun before the pain set in again. And when it set in this time, it hurt far more than ever before.

“The pinching on the back of my neck was replaced with a continuous feeling that rarely let up. The only thing I could possibly liken it to is the sensation of having a knife ever so slowly dragged across your neck in a straight line, over and over and over and over again. And while that was excruciating, it was accompanied by the most grief I had ever been made to feel. I was old. There was a lot more life behind than ahead; that was a chilling thought, and *she* used every chance she got to remind me. So I spent my days in agony, living in memories as I watched the world grow at the same speed as it had when I used to be angry at a roller coaster.

“I remember this next part very well. It was the night before my granddaughter’s wedding. Just me and Dawn were laying together in our hotel room, staring at the ceiling, laughing, reminiscing. She began to tell of our own wedding. Oh, what a joyous mess that was! Looking back, we may have been a touch too young to get married. The wedding itself was wonderful, oh just wonderful, and Dawn shimmered in that white dress she chose, but the money? Let’s just say our honeymoon was one night in a hotel three miles from the venue.

“And it was during these very same thoughts of ours that something stole my attention. A sound. No, many. Well, two, over and over again. It appeared suddenly, yet not very loudly at all. I had to strain myself to hear it, but I could hear it, and that’s what mattered. The sounds were clear to me right away as the sounds of a knife being sharpened, moved *forward... back... forward... back...* along a metal edge, keeping such perfect time between each movement. It did sound quite far away at the time, and I could have convinced myself that someone in one of the other rooms must have just been up to some late night chef work. But I couldn’t shake the sound despite its quietness. It was familiar to me from somewhere else, yet I couldn’t quite place it. It lingered through that entire night and I didn’t get a wink of sleep. I was surprised to see Dawn fall asleep mere minutes after our lights went out, especially since she was the light sleeper of us

two. That's how I decided it was better not to bring up the sounds with her, and just resolved to lie there alone in the dark, listening to the sharpening of a knife.

"Every single night from then on, I heard the same awful, repetitive sounds grow louder and louder. And yet, still did Dawn sleep through each night the same, and still did I lie there next to her, alone, tired, and scared. What was this sound? This cruel, familiar, rhythmic movement? Why did it grow louder and louder? I found out soon after.

"A month after the wedding, we again laid down to sleep next to each other, as we always did. The sounds were absent that evening, to my pleasant surprise, and I looked forward to finding some actual sleep. So I drifted off, Dawn's right hand in my left, and prepared to finally be at peace.

"About an hour later, my sleep was cruelly interrupted. Something was off and I felt a pull to wake up within me, yet I was in such deep sleep that I only managed half-consciousness. I was able to partially open my eyes, and after doing so, I wished I hadn't. There *she* was. I had been free from the sight of that demon since my grandchildren had reached maturity, yet here she was again. It seemed like the neverending cuts she placed on my neck weren't enough for her. She was there kneeling on the bed, hovering over Dawn. In front of her face, *she* awkwardly held a freshly sharpened knife in her two hands. It was clear she intended to hold it above her head, preparing to strike, but one of her arms seemed incapable of reaching that high. Whatever she intended, I hated it. What was she doing with a knife pointed toward *my* Dawn? I wanted to scream. I should have screamed. I wanted to throw her to the ground and flip that knife on her. For all that she's done to me, I should have stabbed her in her hollow chest. But I laid there. Once again, I was powerless in sight of her, and though every muscle desired vengeance, all they got was the anguish of forced inaction. I couldn't move, and *she* didn't move, and we remained

in that idle state until my eyelids couldn't hold themselves any longer. So I was forced to drift again to sleep, to dream of anything but her.

"The next morning, the hand in my left hand was cold. The bright, fiery eyes I fell in love with had been extinguished. *She* had put an end to my Dawn and irreconcilably shattered my heart. Though something wasn't right: not a single drop of blood nor wound nor rip of clothing was present on Dawn's body at all. But I knew it was *her*. I had no proof, but I knew it was her. I know it was her. I can't doubt my own eyes.

"Yet I sat there, reading over Dawn's death certificate, and sure enough, it read 'old age' even after my constant insistence. I was outraged. I wouldn't stand for these lies! I saw it! *She* did it! *She* murdered my Dawn and ruined my life! And she'll kill me too! She'll kill us all!"

You stare at me across the table in silence but your look says it all: you think I'm crazy. They always do. At least you aren't laughing at me. They always do that, too, just to mock me.

Your wordless eyes cut deep into my heart. You don't know this, but I had hoped you would be the one to finally understand. I thought you might see things the way that I do, and break me free from the label of a madman. But it seems that I was wrong. And yet, I am forever bound to this truth, no matter how many times my story is perceived as a fantasy.

Without another word, I rise up from the table and walk back towards my room, my hands covering my face in shame. Why? Why couldn't you just believe me? After all you've been through, I thought maybe you could see *her*, hear *her*, feel *her*, too. But it's hopeless now.

When I get back to my room, I immediately head towards my bed and cover myself in the freshly washed sheets. At least they take good care of me here, I think with a half smile, trying to distract myself from the excruciating pain on the back of my neck. It always hurts the most, recalling that story, but I must for their sakes and for Dawn's. Or maybe I should just give it up.

At that thought, I began to hear some sounds I recognized. For a moment, I was terrified. It was the sounds of the knife being sharpened. But then, it clicked. And I smiled. I had finally figured out where else I had heard that sound. It was—it has always been—the ticking of a clock. *Tick... tock... tick... tock...* I had known it all along. And I laughed, for the mystery was solved. And I drifted to sleep.