

CHAPTER 6

Staring into the television screen did not help. The picture didn't make any more sense than before; in fact, it made less sense. Everything was wrong; *everything*.

Nobody was going to understand this. It was garbage.

I was discouraged for a while. On the screen was a house, a smallish one, laying in the dark. The windows were open. The lights were off.

A dark house. Okay. What does this have to do with anything?

Unfortunately, there wasn't a whole lot else that I filmed that night. As I was walking toward her house, I had my camera pointed downward, taping the sidewalk. Before that, I taped the sky. And before *that*, I taped my wall.

Nice.

A wall, a sidewalk, and a house. And the sky. What a great, productive day.

To be fair though, my wall was beautiful. And the sky didn't look bad, either. The sidewalk was the ugliest thing I had ever seen in my life (and I've seen some ugly things), but it's the inside that counts.

Also to be fair, the house did have some relevance. My daughter lived there, supposedly, and I definitely did film *her* the day before. But it didn't feel interesting enough. This wasn't going to win anything.

I picked up my remote and began to rewind the tape.

The house was still in view. I was leaving at this point, but now I was going back to it - knocking on the door in reverse, looking through the window in reverse, probably thinking in reverse as well.

Waiting. Waiting.

Last night I was standing by her door, just waiting.

Waiting. Knocking on the door. Waiting. Looking inside. Knocking. Waiting. Thinking. Knocking. Thinking. Knocking.

And I knocked harder. Waiting. It made sense that she didn't answer the door. It was late at night. The only reason I myself was not asleep at that time was, well, because I wanted to check on my daughter.

I wanted her to smile for the camera.

Watching myself do this again, in reverse, brought the feeling back. I wanted to see her. Not just for the footage, but to bring it

all back just for one second. And to, of course, meet her mother again. That would have made my day.

I watched it all unfold. Everything was exactly as it looked earlier - peaceful and depressing. The exact opposite of what I remembered from way back when.

Then I spotted something, and stood up from my bed, staring into the television.

Beyond the open window, hiding in the blackness, was a head. A body. Two arms. Hands, fingers. Dark. Looking out. Looking in. Looking out, again.

Okay, then.

The figure walked back and forth, in a panic, wishing for all of it to end. Then he was lying on the floor. It was an odd sight.

I paused the tape and looked closer.

Wow.

This wasn't a person I recognized. But right away, at that moment, I realized what was going on. There was a feeling of relief, a feeling of regret, and a feeling that couldn't be described, all rolled into one and lodged into every opening in my head.

I shut off the TV, placed the remote on my bed, and left the house.

But I didn't forget the camera.

Life at Tapers felt infinitely better than life at home. If I could have really lived there, I would have done so.

It was magical. Everything about it was magical. If you ever tried to think about the Tapers store without thinking of magic, and if you succeeded at this, surely you were not actually thinking of the Tapers store. Maybe you were thinking of something else that sounded like "Tapers store," like "papers, more!" for instance. There's not a lot of magic involved in requesting for more paper.

Even the door looked nice. It had a little smile on it, as if saying "come on, open me!" to each and every customer, no matter how ugly.

Everybody was allowed in Tapers. Everybody was allowed to have a Taper. Everybody was allowed to annoy the Tapers clerk.

And so I decided to go inside, ready greet him with a big "hello" like I always have done. I opened the door, a smile on my face, and waved.

"Hello!" I said, closing the door and then quickly glancing at the wall of cameras.

He released one of his giant sighs. Then he looked away, like he was trying to ignore my presence. For some reason, he looked *especially* Taper-y that day. That made me feel even better about the world.

"Come on, where's my greeting?" I said. "I like you, man. You're my favorite Taperman."

The clerk looked over at me. He didn't appear to be in a bad mood or anything; perhaps he was just so glad to see me that he needed to refrain from going too crazy. I, of course, understood completely.

"Okay, yeah, whatever, shut up." he responded, waving back but with very little effort put into it. "Hello, I mean."

I walked up to the counter. He looked at me for a second, but then returned to reading his magazine. From my view it looked like he was reading the Tapers magazine, though there was probably nothing else you could get at the Tapers store anyway as far as magazines go. And if it were anything *but* the Tapers magazine, the manager probably would have taken it from him and hit him with it.

The clerk tried to ignore the fact that I was staring at him.

"Hey," I said.

He looked up from the magazine, stared back at me for a few seconds, and then spoke.

"Yeah?" he asked, as if waiting for me to continue.

"Yeah." I replied. "I'm, uhâ€¦ I need to talk to somebody about this."

"About what?"

"Well, uh..." I began. "You have time, right? Are you busy right now?"

This definitely wasn't how that clerk wanted to spend his time, but still, he couldn't lie and say that he was busy because he really wasn't busy at all. In fact, it was rare for somebody to even visit the store.

See, Tapers wasn't exactly popular. Right across the street was another store, one that sold equally great cameras. A very lame store, this was, but somehow people liked it. It was named "Camlandar" (printed as CAMLANDAR) because it was open every single day. Yes, that's how lame it was.

And yet, somehow, everybody was there. As in, not here at Tapers. That was bad.

The only reason that Tapers was still around at all was the magazine. Everybody loved that for some reason. CAMLANDAR tried making a magazine once, but it was hated by pretty much everybody. They never quite understood why this was, but soon happily forgot about it and returned to their store.

Regardless of the magazine's success, Tapers was still a largely unpopular store.

A fortunate side effect for this lucky clerk here was that he could be paid for doing absolutely nothing but deal with me every day. Almost nobody else came in, at least not on days like this. They were all at CAMLANDAR having a ball.

"Sure..." I have time." he responded, immediately regretting it.

I smiled and went on.

"I stopped by at my ex-wife's house yesterday," I began. "Just wanted to see her again. I brought the camera."

"A camera?" he asked, hiding his amusement. "Were you going to film her killing you?"

"No. I was gonna film my kid. She's a good girl, but she ran from me last time. I wanted a second try."

"Ah."

"It's for a contest. Anyway, that wasn't the only reason."

"No? It wasn't?" his interest was slowly dying away, and his eyes started moving back toward the Tapers magazine.

It was a good magazine, after all. You couldn't help but stare at it.

"I also kind of wanted to see my wife again," I said. "We had this *thing*, you know? But I have this weird feeling that she doesn't

want me around."

"Doesn't want you around? My god, why would that be?" the clerk said sarcastically, staring into one of the pages.

"I don't know." I responded. "But I saw this guy in there last night. He was kind of big."

"Big, huh?" he asked. He still couldn't get his eyes off of that page. Maybe there was a really good-looking Taper on it.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure he's a boyfriend of hers or something. Which makes it even more hopeless for me."

"Well, you *are* hopeless, after all." he whispered, almost to himself.

"What?" I asked.

His eyes left the magazine and he started looking back at me.

"Nothing." he said.

There wasn't much left to think about, but there were definitely *many* things left to regret. But it was over at this point. The house was already freezing, and what ever happened couldn't be taken back.

It would always take at least ten or so hours for her to take anything back. For her to feel regretful. Not to say that she was ever actually angry; in fact, that was hardly ever the case. She didn't have anger problems by any means, and nobody would disagree with me on that.

Most of it, instead, had to do with self-esteem and loneliness.

Not that it mattered what her problem was. Nobody was going to cure it; for that to happen, some one out there would need to care.

She had nothing in particular to do on this Saturday morning. It would be almost acceptable for her to fear getting out of bed. Almost.

Coincidentally, she really did have this fear. It was a very common occurrence. What she was *really* afraid of, though, was her daughter.

Of course, Care couldn't have actually done anything to her. But the fear was still there. She feared even the thought of starting a conversation with her; the guilt was taking over every single mental process. Nothing could be done.

It took a while for this to wear off. Probably two hours, if not three, of lying down in bed. But no matter how long, it still didn't feel like enough.

She left her bed, making sure not to wake herself, and walked slowly out of the room.

The windows were still open; she could tell, not only because she didn't remember closing them, but from the temperature inside the house. Unbearable. That was a big mistake.

She knew it was a mistake because of the temperature, obviously. But even if this wasn't true - even if temperature didn't exist, and everybody was comfortable all of the time, and we all had a big "no temperature" party every day of our lives (which, I must admit, would be pretty damn cool; no pun intended) - it would not make any difference. This was still a big mistake. Leaving the windows open didn't just cause a little bit of cold, it caused something else.

She looked around. The house was still a mess.

Thinking for a bit, she decided that it would be much better for herself if she procrastinated. She was *going* to say hello to Care, and possibly apologize, but that wasn't exactly something she was looking forward to. And what better way to procrastinate than clean up the house?

Of course. What a great idea.

She looked up; there was a broom on the ceiling. Perfect.

Picking it up was a challenge; she stuck it up there pretty well last night. Nobody was going to get that thing in a million years, she told herself the night before, with a grin on her face. What an idiot. She felt like slapping herself.

It was stuck to the ceiling with glue. How nice. After a few seconds of embarrassing attempts, she gave up on getting it. That broom was a piece of garbage, anyway.

Very frustrating, though! She began wondering why it was even up there. Putting it on the ceiling wasn't exactly necessary, after all. It would have been quite easy to make the house a mess without completely ruining her *own* life in the process, but no, that's not what she ultimately chose to do.

To make matters worse, the other brooms were stuck too. One of them was on the wall, another was on the floor, and her favorite broom (yes, she had a favorite broom) was inside of another broom. I'm not even going to begin explaining how that happened.

The obvious next step here would be to procrastinate again.

To distract herself from this annoying task of cleaning up her ugly house, she decided to wake up Care and possibly apologize for her awful behavior the night before. It was the nicest thing to do. After all, everybody likes to be apologized to. It makes them feel great.

She walked up the stairs, tripping once (you couldn't walk up those stairs without tripping at least one time), and looked over at Care's door. It was a pretty door; perfectly black, like the rest of the house. Maybe it wasn't unique, but that was kind of a good thing to her.

The door was also open.

Opened doors are very inviting. Even if you can't be like Tapers and have a smile on your door, you can go for the next best thing and just keep it open all of the time. CAMLANDAR did neither of those things, and even though they were completely successful, don't use them as an example.

Care's mother didn't like this open door. She saw it as a bad thing, and in fact it was.

"Care?" she said.

There was no response.

"Care?" she repeated, looking around her room. "Care, are you there?"

I wouldn't have been able to make that rhyme with a straight face. Care's mother really had no sense of humor, and even when she did laugh, it wasn't at anything funny. I kind of liked that about her, though.

She stepped into Care's room and looked around some more, a worried look finally showing up on her face. The bed looked absolutely perfect; in fact, the whole room looked perfect. Everything looked great. But there was a missing child.

The black walls stared her down, as if chanting "leave the room, leave the room" hundreds of times per second, until she finally obeyed their request. The dolls continued to sit down quietly, ignoring the angry walls and going back to being deceased. She could feel the hatred built up in this room; it was overwhelming. Even the bed wanted her dead.

(See, I found that rhyme to be amusing. If Care's mother had said it, I don't think she would have even giggled in response to it.)

She walked back down the stairs, tripping of course, and called her name one last time.

"Care!"

No response.