

CHAPTER 3

"It's not raining today," I said.

"Yeah?" the Tapers clerk responded, looking outside. "You're right, it's not."

He looked around, back and forth, between me and the window. Waiting for me to continue.

"Well, alright." I began. "As long as you understand that."

"I do."

"Okay, I believe you!"

I looked around at the cameras behind him, scanning around for something decent. The clerk noticed this and gave me a funny look.

"You're not picking out *another*, are you?" he asked.

"Oh, of course I am." I said. "It's not raining today. That old waterproof taper is overkill, now."

I winked at him, not for any particular reason, but as sort of a signal to him that we were cool and he was part of my "respected people" list. He didn't take it as that, and instead looked at me in an even stranger way.

I kneeled down next to the wall of cameras to get an even better view at the bottom row. The good ones were always on the very bottom, and now that I think about it, that was probably some kind of clever symbolism. Again, these guys were very deep, smart fellows. I wished for the day I could shake their hands.

A bit disappointed, I stood back up.

"Hey," I said.

"Yes?" the clerk responded.

"Sorry to be a bother," I began. "But you don't happen to have a camera that looks similar to my waterproof one?"

The clerk rolled his eyes.

Her window would not close.

Care already tried with all of her might to close it, but it would not budge. She was never able to open it, either. And yet her mother did that without a problem, it seemed.

Unfortunately, it was cold that night. Very cold.

Her bed was positioned next to this window. It was usually a good thing; every night she would stare into the sky, waiting for something to happen. Something different. Or perhaps she didn't want that to happen at all; maybe this was the only place that stayed pretty much the same, unlike everything else in her life.

It was quiet, in this empty room. There was not a whole lot that Care owned, other than a group of small dolls that had, sadly, died long ago. She used to be given a new one every Christmas. This stopped happening, and instead her mother would have a fit every Christmas and rip one of her existing one's apart, telling her that it was dead and it was time to grow up.

Her room consisted of two separate halves - the sleeping half, and the deceased dolls half. The dolls were arranged in a circle, holding hands, missing various limbs. Of course, by now, she knew that they were never real. It was more of a relief than anything.

In the other half of the room, there was a bed. That's all there was.

Other than that, the room was utterly empty. Care was yet to earn her possessions back.

The window was not going to close tonight. That was for sure. Care gave up and collapsed into her bed, shivering.

There was a noticeable lack of blankets on this bed. Her mother, in her fit of anger, had taken those away. Fortunately, there was still a pillow. Even more fortunately, there was still a bed.

She looked up at the ceiling. The black paint seemed to grow darker with every passing night. By this time, she was convinced that this was no illusion.

Behind it, Care remembered, was a layer of bright green paint. It covered the entire house. It covered her life. She hadn't seen even a tiny speck of bright green on the walls since then. Maybe it would have made her feel warmer, if that green were visible.

She knew this was silly. Paint was just paint. It did nothing but paint.

In her dreams, though, she would picture the black paint peeling off. All of it, at the same time, falling to the floor in one clump. Everything in her life was fine, after that. Nobody was angry, and the green would show through not only the walls, but everyone around her.

Someday, maybe.

Care sat up and looked out of her open window.

She observed the houses surrounding hers. The windows were closed. The lights were on. None of them were painted black. They were different - or normal, rather.

Completely normal.

Those people were happy. They held, in their delicate hands, the remedy. And they were sharing it amongst themselves.

Marvin figured he wasn't going back home that night. He found a seat next to a window, and sat down on the grass. He checked the time. It was getting a little late - maybe he was overdue for some rest.

Rest was always the answer.

He had his day planned out, believe it or not. Marvin pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, held it up close to his face, and read the words he had previously written down on it:

"School."

Yes indeed - he should have been there for a much longer time. But he was planning on sitting on the bench, which did not happen.

Marvin felt the anger coming back. That large, fat man - telling him what to do, making him go home. He *obeyed* that man! He couldn't help but think of himself as a coward, someone who couldn't even stand up to a fat man, let alone his greatest fears. Those were an even larger threat to him. In fact, those fears were beginning to show up at this very moment.

He continued to read off the paper.

"Walk home", "lay down", "sleep" - three things that also did not happen. Those might have been better choices, and he still could certainly have turned back.

That wasn't what Marvin wanted to do, though.

There was something different that he wanted to do. It was the perfect time for it, the perfect place for it, and he would probably get away with doing it. This struck him as being incredibly absurd. In fact, having gone this far already, he was disgusted with himself.

He turned around and looked toward the window in back of him. It was open. The lights were off in the house. Nobody was around.

No. Please, no.

Marvin got up. It was time to quit thinking entirely. Nothing good was coming out of it, and his thoughts scared him more than his actions did - and his actions weren't usually very pretty, either.

"Stop it," he told himself. "Shut up."

Nothing was stopping him. Nobody was after him. Nothing was going to happen. It was perfect.

No, he thought. He screamed this repeatedly in his mind. No!

He held his hands over his ears. It would not stop. Marvin had been struggling with this very problem during his entire walk. Nothing out there would make the thoughts stop, and nothing out there would stop him from acting on them. Trying to do something about it was like attempting to lift the sun with your tongue -

there's actually not much of a relation between those two tasks, but they were both very difficult nonetheless.

He had visions of people walking by - terrible people - staring into his thoughts, looking inside of his brain, and laughing for the rest of their lives. Hundreds of little men, hungry for secrets; the most unbelievable of them, the kind that people paid attention to. Marvin was afraid of his secrets.

This would not be the first time that they were fed.

However, that wouldn't happen anymore. Not at all. Marvin thought about this for a while, and considered the choices involved here. He could leave right now, or of course he could stay and go on with his business. Either way, he was determined to make this the last time he would ever set foot outside.

This was certain; leaving his home in the first place was a mere habit. Certainly not a necessity by any means.

The difference between these two choices of his, therefore, was not a matter of going home or not. It was a matter of what he would take with him on his way there.

Silence, now. Silence.

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He was accustomed to the silence.

The silence meant that it was *his* turn.

Marvin looked at the window - just enough space. He pulled himself inside and his feet met the floor; it was surprisingly cold.

Looking around the house now, it seemed every window was open. Marvin was concerned - if someone got there before him, this would have all been useless. He crossed his fingers.

He was standing in what looked like the kitchen. The entire house was pretty much a gigantic mess, but that kitchen was *really* something. The fridge was half open, pots and pans were lying on the floor next to other, less kitchen-like items, such as broken light bulbs and torn papers (the papers were blank; it seemed as if they were spread on the floor on purpose). A baseball bat lied on the floor next to him, with pieces of broken glass surrounding it. Next to both of these things was a table with a lamp on it that had been tipped over.

It was as if they were baking babies in here, and the babies struck back.

Next to the kitchen was the living room, or what looked like a living room. An empty, wooden chair stood by the window.

Beyond the window was our lonely, dark world.

Out there, he could see a man walking by the house. Marvin could tell, by a quick glance, that the only motivation behind this quick stroll through the neighborhood was pure hunger and greed.

He knew what hungry people looked like. They took pictures and wrote on papers. Some of them had video cameras.

This man had a video camera.

Marvin quickly moved away from the window. Feeding the hungry was a bad idea.

He waited, and after only half a minute, he heard the knocking. This man was after him.

Marvin thought about it. Would it make sense for this to be happening? Is this something that would be possible in our world? Would it be socially acceptable for him to react to this situation in a particular way? Because he had something in mind.

More knocking.

He sat on the floor and waited for this to pass. It would end. There was an end to everything.

Knock, knock.

Marvin repeated to himself, over and over, his favorite numbers. He made a list of them. The list hung on his wall, but he had them committed to memory. These numbers were all even - he would not allow an odd number in his list, for those were far too evil.

"Four."

"Eight."

"Fourteen."

"Eighteen."

He continued, holding his head down in fear, hoping it would all go away.

"Forty-four."

"Forty-eight."

"Eighty-four."

The knock was louder, now. It didn't stop.

The door was breaking, the door was breaking, and the door was breaking. The door was going to break. The door was not going to be in one piece, because the door was going to break, and the door was breaking as the door broke.

The knock, that knock, another knock - four knocks, eight knocks, fourteen knocks - more knocks, more knocks, speeding up now.

Speeding up. Speeding up, now. Speeding up.

Louder. The door was breaking.

Marvin ran up the stairs, tripping several times along the way, finally to collapse on to the floor when he made it up there. It wasn't going to stop.

The noise, though - it was filling the house, and he knew that if he screamed, nobody would hear. It was relieving, but he did not take the chance.

The door was breaking. The door was breaking.

Up on that second floor, there was but one room visible to him. He stood up and walked toward the door, then grabbed the knob and turned. He opened the door.

Inside was almost an empty room, if it were not for a bed and a collection of little dolls. Marvin walked over to the bed; it was not empty.

How wonderful. How *beautiful*.

He reached for the girl's hand, grabbed it, and held tight. At that moment, the knocking stopped, and it was quiet.

Completely quiet.

Marvin felt as if he were waking up from ten thousand dreams, and brought into a new world. Nobody was at the door. Nobody was ever knocking. The door was fine.

He almost cried.

It was time to go home.