

Jingle

Kara Reedy

** This short story was the winner of the Malcolm M. Sedam Writing Award for 2022

...jingle ...jingle jingle ...

I'm frozen where I lie, the mattress sinking and swamping my sides with immovable weight. I had been in and out of a restless slumber, preoccupied with the fact that this would only be my second time getting out of bed tonight. I roll to my left side, pinching my wrist underneath the sharp folds of my pillow. I slowly rip off the thin layer of jagged fabric clinging to my legs and sit up into the low dip.

Alright, time to start moving. The blood in my veins began to flow rapidly as I prepared to start moving through my nightly routine. My house shoes feel icy cold and the edges stab into the surface of my feet. I slip on my glasses, taking in the faint light from the hallway. I sleep with my door open so that I don't miss a thing. Stepping lightly to my door, I realize that no one else is awake. I squint at my digital clock standing precariously on the edge of my dresser to see the red glow showing 1:34; it's time to start up again.

I inch towards the pasty banister, placing my left palm upon the rough edge. Every other door on the upstairs landing is shut. I shiver a little, recognizing the silence that grows the longer I stand in the pitch-black hall. A glare reflects dull light on the TV screen in the middle of the upstairs sitting area; the light filters in from the streetlamps, a dim flicker bringing me back to the task at hand.

One step at a time, I tiptoe down each step as quietly as I can possibly manage. Even still, I cringe at the harsh squeaks that creak out at every rushed movement. The ragged old T-shirt I'm wearing engulfs me as though I am sopping wet. The ratty fabric is now too old, placing scratches on my knobby knees each time I move even slightly. I grip the handrail leading down the stairwell, my knuckles turning as white as snow from the pressure. On the tenth step down, a particularly shrieking crack sounds from one of the boards, jolting me from my thoughts.

It's ok, just the step. I ease myself back down from the bubbling terror wrenching its way through my stomach. I wait for a few moments—my heart settling a bit—before starting up again. I'm now at the bottom of the stairway. If I turn to my left, I'll be in the kitchen and if I turn to my right, I'll be in the living room. I make the snap decision to check the kitchen first and find everything is in the same place it was only a short while earlier. I walk towards the laundry room at the far side of the kitchen and find nothing but dust and drying clothes. The door leading out to the garage is right across from the laundry room, so I check to see if the garage door is down. It is, so I gently shut the door and latch the deadbolt.

I slink towards the back door next to the kitchen sink and find it locked. Then, I check the front door, and it's in the same condition as the back. Satisfied with the safety of my home for

another hour or two, I slide towards the staircase once more, but I hear it again about halfway up the stairs, this time coming from the kitchen.

...jingle jingle ...jingle jingle ...

My feet turn to stone as I stare at the step directly in my field of vision. I gulp back the rising tension as I turn back down the stairs. My hands have begun to sweat, the slick smoothing the glide of my hand on the railing. A tightness settles itself in the center of my chest, and I am gripped by the sounds that bounce about the house. Soft echoes rummage through every corner as I descend to the first floor of the house, steeling myself for whatever comes.

I make my rounds yet again, going to check every little corner now. The kitchen is empty; the laundry room and extra bathroom haven't changed either. Nothing is out of place, and I can't figure out what could have been the cause of the noise this time. I work my way through the entire first floor, checking windows, doors, cabinets, even my parents' desks. In the end, I can't find the cause of the jingle and decide that whatever it was, is gone now. I hear it again when I'm checking the garage.

Jingle ...jingle jingle jingle ...

"What the—" Right as I hear the jingle just behind my right shoulder, I'm falling in towards the garage. I smack against my mom's car, bruising my left thigh as I slam into the concrete below. I'm quite sure I screamed while going down, but all I could focus on was the shadow darting from the bathroom into the kitchen.

I woke everyone in the house. Mom and dad came running down the stairs and threw themselves on me, trying to check if I'd broken anything in the fall. Once they realized that I wasn't hurt, their annoyance at being awakened abruptly during the workweek had them yelling at me for being up—I'd never told them about my nightly escapades.

"It's way past your bedtime, Tink. You should be asleep right now; it's a school night." My parents looked a little angry, but they mostly seemed concerned. I don't think they understood the babbling responses I'd given them. Unfortunately, every time I cry, I turn into a blubbling mess. The tears from the corners of my eyes slid crisply down to my chin. I had started to cough up a storm, my breath ragged from my distress. I tried to tell them about what had happened, but all I could get out was incoherent whimpers.

"Come on, let's get you back to bed." Mom and dad led me back up the stairs and into my bedroom. They tucked me cozily into the folds of the mattress, my blanket reverting back into its pillowy plushness upon being introduced to the light source of my room. I was still in the grips of waning fear, but the anxiety slowly subsided to the warm, comforting glow of the dusk bulbs above my head. I sank deep into the bedspread; the ache of the fall feels dull in my bones.

"Can you and dad please stay the night?" I mutter brokenly, a runoff of my terror. They look at one another, silently deciding their fate for the night.

Mom speaks first, "We'll stay and sleep by the door." Dad smiles at me tiredly, and they both slump towards the door. I quickly beg them to keep the lights on, and they oblige me. I rumble

off into slumber while my parents lean by the door waiting for me to slip away so that they can slip back into their own rooms for the night. They turn off the light once more before leaving me to my restless slumber.

Jingle jingle ...jingle jingle ...

I'm startled awake once more to feel the emptiness of my house. I peer over to my clock and see the face reading 4:08. I whip my head to look over towards the door, expecting to see the sloped forms of my parents, but am greeted with an empty, pitch-black hall. It's time to move again.

I flip my body into a roll and fall to the floor in a controlled crouch. I quickly slip my shoes on, not needing to grab my glasses since I had neglected to pluck them from my face before lying down the third time. I walk into the upstairs sitting room. All of the stillness and quietness has faded away, replaced with a notion that I have somewhere to go. I turn to the stairs and watch a shadow drag around the bottom step to move towards the front of the house. I creep down each step, wary of the dark shape; I don't even notice the noise I make with the shrieking of every aging board I step on. It's at the bottom step that I feel the chill hit me.

The front door is wide open; I'd never even heard the door hit the back wall. I tried to get a good look through the door but could only see darkness. I hesitate only for a moment before leaving the safety of my home.

I step out onto the street, finding only my house and four streetlamps remaining. The lamps emit a soft light that shimmers off the surface of my glasses. The area surrounding my home, the street, and the streetlamps consist of a thick fog. There are no clouds in the sky, but I can't see any of the flickering stars either. All around me is a grungy black film; everything looks dirty. The grass spread over the lawn in front of my disheveled-looking house is razor-sharp with spikes lurching in odd ways. The concrete beneath the rough soles of my shoes is cracked and decayed. My neighborhood has disintegrated into an apocalyptic and lonely street.

Movement draws me back from the silent wave of confusion, planting me in a new reality of horror. Standing maybe twenty feet in front of me is a tall and lanky being. This creature wears a black, skin-tight suit that clings in a twisted manner to what I could only assume is its skin. The body underneath the tough-looking fabric reminds me of the sporadic stuffing of a teddy bear that's lost most of its fluff. The only expression worn by the being is an ornate mask.

The face is made of fractured porcelain, discolored, and yellowed with age. Black and red paint splatter across the holes where eyes should be looking back at me. Golden designs glitter across the edges of its face and line the sides of the mask where skin should meet. Five long and spindly tendrils reach incomprehensibly out from the top of the mask. The spirals are smothered with black and white checks, and glints of gold hang from the ends. The mouth is set in a stern

line, and a bright rouge paints the lips and pinches the cheeks of the mask. The creature glares at me with a mysterious look.

I think of screaming, but part of me recognizes that it will rush at me if I do. I consider running back inside, but something tells me I'm not fast enough. I have nowhere else to go.

...jingle ...jingle ...

The familiar spritely jingle sounds again, and I finally see where the sound originated from with my own eyes. The gold that dangles from the tips of the tendrils are bells, and the ringing sounds every time the creature tilts its head in a questioning manner. It's almost as if the being wants me to approach first, and so I do.

I muster up every ounce of courage that I can and walk cautiously towards the thing in front of me. I take one step, then another, all the while the being ahead of me continues to watch with what appear to be scheming black holes. I am only about five feet from the creature when it snaps into motion, stalking towards me briskly. There's no way I can run now. Why would I ever choose to walk towards it—am I trying to get myself killed? Before I can gag on the choking weight of terror, the creature stops at arm's length from me.

I am glued to where I stand, my shoes feel like rocks embedded in the ground. The being is hulking compared to me, being at least six feet tall, likely more. We stare at each other quietly. I can hear my heartbeat growing rapidly in my chest in the dense silence. My palms are slippery from the anxiety rising in my stomach. The terrifying being looks at me before placing a gnarled hand against my shoulder, giving me a comforting squeeze.

What I'd perceived as a glare had been a look of concern that was no different from the one my parents had given me. This creature wasn't angry or menacing and the darkness it represented was far from dangerous. I could feel through the soft hold on my shoulder that every time I'd heard the jingle, this thing had been watching over me with a gentle and kind heart. This being wasn't some monster; it was an integral part of who I am.

We share a knowing look with one another, and I feel myself drifting back into a restful state, getting the best sleep I've ever had in my life. I awoke the following day, having been tucked back into the cushion of my bed. My glasses are set carefully on the dresser and my shoes have been placed next to the scratchy old carpet beneath my bed. I move calmly through the day, having experienced one of the most changeable nights of my life.

I still feel the weight of the being on my back, the fear and anxiety bubbling back into fruition every now and then, but we have an understanding. I know that the creature doesn't mean me any harm and that it is always as scared of everything else as I am. We feed each other with our shared emotions and protect one another in the face of possible danger. My fear is not something to be afraid of. Instead, my fear is something from which I can grow. I no longer need to move through my nightly routine, but I still find myself checking to see if the doors are locked tightly. Just because I know the face of my own demon doesn't mean that the monsters all slip away to nothing. I can remain calm in the night because every time I hear the creature's soft jingly song, I know that something else is watching over me, standing guard against everything that would hurt us.