

Tell-Tale Heart - Point Of View [neighbor]

Every day when I got up in the morning I used to see the two men from next door chatting, I was looking through their window out of curiosity and nothing more. They had lived together since I can remember yet I hadn't really talked with either of them, the older man and I had exchanged greetings and a few more words at the store farther into town, but only once and the conversation had been short lived. The younger man, however, had never tried to talk to me, he seemed almost obsessed with the one he lived with and didn't care much about the rest of his neighbors. I was fine with him not speaking with me, I didn't trust him.

This was because his personality had never really sat right with me. I didn't know why I felt this way in entirety and all I truly knew was that his laugh made his eyes dilate in an almost predatory way. I didn't like that. His laugh, on its own, was fine with only the slightest edge of knives against slate. But when you looked at his eyes it wasn't natural. It felt as though you were to become prey and that aspect was what struck fear into me.

Not that I would act on that fear of course.

All I wanted to do was stay away from him, but I lived next door and did not have enough money for a new house. I had no control over where I lived, having lived in this house here since I was born. This was my home and I had grown up with these two men in the house next door for almost certainly as long as my lifetime.

I knew their pain and I knew their sorrows. I heard how they spoke to each other and how they laughed with one another. But I only heard the details of these things when we were all outside or in a store together, for in their shared house they talked so silently that you could not hear any difference than if they were not there at all. I wondered if they had better hearing than my other neighbors who would fight at the top of their lungs with seemingly no care about the people trying to sleep behind the thin walls so close to them.

I lived alone and although the voices of other people were comforting when I felt lonely it would get tiresome quickly. On those common nights I would sit in the side of my room closer to the two men's home and listen to the peaceful silence. Wistfully, I would think of times when I also had a family to live with me, a family who would tell off the neighbors who were always

fighting. A family who could talk to me when I felt lonely or sad, but still always mindful of how loud they would speak.

But since they were gone I would sit against the wall and listen to the nothingness of the next door house to try and ignore my skin crawling at the idea of the younger man's knife-on-slate laugh. Trying to no longer feel at all. To fall into the oblivion of my breathing. The empty, slow heartbeat in my chest or the way it sometimes seemed to leap into my throat at the fighting from beyond the wall across from me. It reminded me of my friend's family and that was why it hurt me so.

When I was a child I had a friend who I have since not permitted myself to say the name of. Her beautiful name that went so well with her quiet laugh or her soft breathing as she slept. The name that I thought should have never had to endure a life like the one it was given to.

Her mother and father used to fight almost constantly, their screaming voices reaching her even in the hiding places under the thin and moth eaten blankets. She would sneak out to my house, knowing she would not be missed in her own. When she climbed through the window I would help her in, asking her in whispers if she needed anything. She would usually say no but that didn't fool me. I could see her ribs through her old dress, poking through like the scars of her neglectful life. Of course I would bring her a small portion of bread and butter, even if I had to sneak it to my bedroom from the downstairs cupboard.

This went on until the day she was married away.

Her parents have both since passed and I have not heard from her since she moved with her husband. All I can hope is that she is having a better life than when I knew her. That is all I can truly hope for in her respect and if I never say her name again she might be able to shed the constricting skin of her childhood and move into a new and better existence.

Not that I will ever meet up with her and be able to tell.

If I thought about this while I listened to the silence from the house beyond the walls of mine I would feel calmer, but if I heard the voices from my other neighbors I would again be filled with that old fear. Even worse if I heard any noise even in my head that resembled that cursed laugh from the younger man. When this happened I would be left in a state of terror

stricken emptiness. It was like the gritty feeling in your teeth when you are in shock. The same broken glass bloodstream from when someone you love is hurt.

My eyes would widen, showing the whites that matched the complexion of my quickly paling skin. I would try to get the noise out of my head by pulling my knees up even closer to my chest. My heart beating through my shirt and my quiet yet frantic breathing might play into a music-like beat that would calm me. If I was able to hang onto my own heartbeat I could calm myself enough to focus in on the silence instead of the fear. That silence was what I lived by, what could save me of a panic filled existence, what could calm my every fear.

Other than that laugh.

Anything that would break that silence, be it the laugh, floor boards creaking, or even the clicking sound of horses hooves on the cobblestone road. This type of fear was the other thing that controlled my life. It was either terror or complete, solid calm. The two extremes that pulled me in either direction at any given moment. The highest degrees of all emotions.

One night when I was sitting with my back pushed up against the paisley white and green wallpaper I heard a noise. At first, I thought it was just a bump from the other house, the house where the couple fought constantly. But soon enough I realized that it was not, in fact, from that house but instead from the one I listened to in order to quell my fears.

I sat up straighter, trying to listen for anything else, but again it was quiet. With the louder neighbors finally asleep I had planned on sitting here for a few more minutes before going to the bed and resting. But then came that bump, a noise I wasn't even sure I had heard, though at the same time was positive it was real. It was so quiet that it shouldn't have mattered, but at the same time not feeling right.

I sat there, still as anything and trying to hear any other noises that would break the utter stillness and echoing silence.

When I had already been there until almost the sunrise I thought that maybe it had been nothing. Finally, I started to get up and into my bed. And then, even though I was sure it had been nothing at all, I heard a scream.

It was a short scream, cutting off at the end quickly, but it was a scream none-the-less. A chilling scream that was somehow worse than the laugh. That cursed laugh that froze my very bone marrow into blocks of cylindrical ice.

As soon as I heard the scream I sprang to my feet as if pulled up by the very sound of the fear from the next door house. But then I stood in complete stillness, my heartbeat so much faster than it had ever been before. I was already jumpy for fear of things I didn't know. So when such a noise rang out I had no choice but to enter panic mode.

With my blood pounding in my ears I struggled to take a shocked step towards the door.

What could that scream have been? Was someone hurt? Or even more importantly if someone was hurt, who was it and what had happened? I took another shakey step as these thoughts circulated in my head.

With my heart still pounding, I listened for any other noise but there was now nothing. No noise at all. The house with the couple who fought was now silent and the one with the two men was eerily so, of course I still heard my own heartbeat and my own frantic but quiet breathing. I stood there for slightly longer, still listening, until my body bullied itself into moving. When that happened I took three slow steps before springing into action, flinging myself to the door of my room and opening it so quickly the air whistled.

I sprinted out of my house faster than I had ever ran, calculating the distance I would have to go to get to the police office near the farmers market in town. I couldn't send the police a telegraph so I had to get there by myself. It was a far way to sprint but I knew I could do it if I had to, and this newfound adrenaline was going to help significantly. If I could get there then I could report the scream.

I knew that the police could and probably would tell me off for wasting their time if I didn't describe the fear I felt properly. If I only said that there had been a yell then that would not be valid, I had to describe how it felt. How the sound resonated in my bones and how so many goosebumps rose on my arms with the thought of it. That pure fear that traveled from whoever had made the noise to me. That chilling terror that burrowed into the bottom of your stomach and hurt you in a physical way. That absolute agony was what I had to describe.

I thought about this all the way through my run to the police station. By the time I got to the station I was out of breath and the sun had already risen. There were other bleary eyed people now going to work. Those people stared at me as I, still as scared as I had been the moment I had started my run, feverishly opened the door to the police station.

The man behind the desk looked up at me as I paced my way to him, fidgeting with the hands I held behind my back. He blinked once, looking tired and unimpressed by my dirty clothing. But he did ask the question I had been waiting for.

“Can I help you?”

I opened my mouth and the words flooded the small room, painting my own artistic rendering of the scream I had heard. I described the fear I had felt and by the end of my long and complicated speech I no longer thought that the police would doubt me. His eyes had widened as he looked at me, clasped hands on his desk now with white knuckles.

As soon as I had finished he took in a long breath and tilted his head back a little bit, “We will send some officers over as soon as possible sir. We will escort you home as well, there is no need to worry anymore,” it was one breathy exhale, but still in understandable and comforting words.

I sighed and in that second all of the energy seemed to leave me.

“Right,” I whispered, “thank you,”

While the shock left and acceptance settled in I let the two officers escort me home and watched them leave to check my neighbors house. Wondering what would be revealed, I sat down against the wall, listening to the police officer's voices through the walls and only occasionally hearing a hint of the younger man's voice, but none of the older man's.

Realizing how tired I really was, I shut my eyes and leaned my head back, swallowing as if to push the still pulsing adrenaline out of my system. The darkness that met my eyes was as empty as I could wish for in that moment and the only noise I could hear was still the conversation from beyond the walls. Swallowing again I raised my hands up to my face and rubbed my eyes, trying to remain awake for long enough to hear what was happening.

And when I heard something new the new sound was the man's laugh.

That cursed, metal on metal noise. One of the three noises I hated most, the one that had so recently been joined by screams. The group of terrifying sounds that filled my nightmares if I wasn't careful. It joined the sound of people fighting, which grated on my soul and caused painful almost-flashbacks and of course the laugh that had cursed me for so many years.

Fighting had plagued me for so long and, unfortunately, it didn't seem like it would end anytime soon. I had to suffer through the sounds of that, the sounds of a couple screaming at each other. That was why I had trouble raising my voice at anyone or even talking back if someone treated me wrongly. It was unfair that I had to live with this even though my family had never fought in this way. How had I been affected so heavily?

What was wrong with me?

Unfortunately, my thoughts were again interrupted by another laugh from the other house. I recoiled away from the wall at the noise, falling onto my hands and knees beside the bed. Why did it sound like that and why did it hit me so hard? Was it because it was an odd sound in its own right or was it the way I saw the younger man's predatory eyes in my head when I heard it?

Whatever the case, I knew that for some reason it scared me. But I could not let myself act on that fear, the fear that was an instinct. To eliminate what was troubling you, a basic instinct that was not socially acceptable. Of course I could not bring myself to get rid of what scared me. I had heard stories about what happened to people who did that, and I didn't want to hurt anyone the way they did or be hurt the way they were. I didn't know about the younger man though, he could have felt any way on the subject.

By this point, wondering why I hadn't heard the older man speak, I started, with an agonizing pang in my heart, to realize what must have happened.