

AROUND DUSK

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I don't recognize the number on my phone, but I answer. It's Bob, the manager from my old apartment. This is odd, considering Bob loathes me. When I lived in his building, he only dealt with my ex-girlfriend, the two striking up an unlikely friendship over makeup and George Clooney. We make small talk, I'm polite, and after a few minutes he asks if I'm still living locally.

"I'm over in the Valley, now." I yawn into my arm, "Sherman Oaks."

It's *technically* Van Nuys since I'm north of the 101, but he doesn't need to know all that.

"Listen kid," Bob begins, his voice dropping a level above a whisper. "*I didn't just call to catch up—I need to talk to you in person about something. It's...well, it's strange.*"

Stretched out on my futon, I now prop myself up on my elbows, intrigued.

"Strange how?"

"Could you come over to the building tonight?"

"Am in trouble?" I ask, suddenly suspicious of this impromptu contact—I'm trying to recall everything I destroyed before moving out, but the list of casualties is too long.

"You're *not* in trouble. You know me—I wouldn't be calling you if it wasn't important."

I look around at my spartan apartment: the blank canvas I bought months ago with the paint set still in its plastic, the stack of used philosophy books I haven't opened since the day I purchased them, the tiny television playing Baywatch with the volume off: I can't even pretend to be busy.

"Yeah, I guess I'm free."

"Wonderful! Can you come by around six-thirty?"

"Sure. What's this all about, though?"

"Trust me," he says before hanging up. "You need to hear this in person."

I pull up to my old place off Hollywood Boulevard just after six-thirty, and Club my Honda. Even in the dead



of summer with the sun still up, the tweakers and freaks are shambling around like the living dead, looking for a score. There's fresh graffiti on the trunks of the dying palm trees lining the street, their angled shadows at this time of day reminding me of mausoleum pillars. That, and the red-tinged sky from the fires up north, lend an apocalyptic vibe to Hollywood that feels... *appropriate*.

My old building looks the same—shabby, slumping, and still an eyesore wedged between two newer, fancier condominiums catering to the influx of transplants. I stroll through the cinder block propped-open gate with a quick glance at the mailboxes, checking for familiar names and recognizing a few. Bob answers his door on the third knock, and I'm taken aback by how poorly he's aged in two years, his hair completely gray now, his gut more pronounced.

The aging queen still projects the same self-assured decadence, though, greeting me in a bright green silk kimono with a yellow dragon curling up the side.

"Come in," he says curtly, a cigarette dangling between his lips. "You're letting all the cold air out."

I enter, then take the fuzzy pink recliner offered to me while he takes the loveseat, tucking his legs under him. He offers me a martini, and I politely decline. He makes some awkward small talk about the weather and some terrible band he saw at the Echoplex the week before, and I finally get fed up with his banter.

"Bob?" I interrupt. "Why am I here?"

He hesitates.

"First, you need to understand that I'm not crazy."

"Fine, it's been established that you're not crazy."

"I'm not making any of this up."

"Making *what* up?"

"Your old apartment."

"What about it?"

"It's haunted," he says, blowing smoke. "I haven't been able to rent it for more than six months at a time since you moved out."

I laugh. He doesn't.

"I lived in that apartment *fifteen* years." I remind him.

"It's not haunted."

“Yes, it is.”

“I never once saw anything resembling Casper the Friendly—”

“It’s haunted by *you*, Justin.”

I consider this.

“By me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m haunting it?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you need to be dead to haunt something?”

“Apparently not.”

“Is the apartment vacant right now?”

“It is.”

“Then let’s go over there.” I invite, standing up. “I want to see my ghost.”

He takes a key from his robe pocket.

“Your timing is perfect—it gets active around dusk.”

We cross the shaded courtyard while the collective hum of air conditioners provides the city equivalent of a cicada buzz. I keep my head down, embarrassed to be seen by my old neighbors—I *am* the former pariah of the building, after all. When I lived here, the cops were called to my place no less than twenty-five times.

We at last reach my old one bedroom at the back of the building, and I’m relieved to see the door has been replaced. At least *something* is different.

Bob uses his key, and we go inside.

It’s hard describing how I feel being back in a place I never thought I would see again. I lived here a decade and a half, experiencing the most important and difficult times of my life within these walls. The apartment stinks of fresh paint, the color a bland eggshell white.

When I lived here, the walls were constantly changing colors, but never once were they *ever* eggshell white. The fist-sized holes I left in the plaster have obviously been patched up, the boot scuffs obliterated, the hundreds of nail holes puttied shut.

If not for my supposed ghost, it’s as if I never existed in this place.

The carpet is a dreadful cream color and new enough that we leave snowy footprints walking into the kitch-



en. There's no stove or refrigerator, and the linoleum, once a groovy 60s baby shit yellow/brown, is now a tasteful checkered black and white tile.

"I've gotten lots of complaints about activity in here specifically," Bob explains as he runs a thumb along the counter for dust, "Dishes shattering, the faucet turning on, people being shoved violently..."

He turns to me.

"Have you talked to Sarah recently?"

I'm blindsided by this question.

"Sarah? No... not for a long time. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Is *she* haunting this place, too?"

He hesitates.

"Yes, it's the both of you."

"Come on..."

"The other tenants are scared!" he suddenly screams at me.

"They want to have a fucking exorcism in here, that's how serious this is!"

At a loss for words, I follow him through the living room and down the hall past the bathroom to the bedroom. Despite the fresh paint and new blinds, it's the same ugly room I remember, with the terrible view of the parking lot and the overflowing dumpsters.

"It's the worst in here." Bob explains, calm again but barely holding it together. "People being shaken awake, objects being thrown, sightings of you and Sarah—I've seen it with my own eyes, Justin."

"This is nuts."

"You'll see." Bob promises, grabbing my hand and placing the key in it. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to my air conditioning and my *Housewives of Potomac* marathon. Take your time. There's power if you need light. Drop the key off when you're done. Ciao."

"What do you expect me to do?"

He pauses in the doorway.

"Whatever you can, kid."

I hear him leave, and then it's just me and the ghosts.

I remain completely still, waiting and listening for anything supernatural to occur. After a few minutes I feel really stupid, and go into the living room to find the sunlight quickly

giving way to the encroaching night.

I make sure the paint is dry, then lean against the wall to watch YouTube videos on my phone. I do not like being here—it's painful even two years later. I watch a couple funny dog compilation videos, and that cheers me up a little. I notice that it's seven-twenty.

Dusk.

Again, I wait in anticipation of spirits, my expectations slowly fading as the minutes tick by. After twenty minutes, I'm done waiting.

"Whatever." I mutter, putting my phone away. I don't want to admit it to myself, but I'm pretty disappointed, as if seeing the unexplainable will fill the holes that I carry inside.

As I leave my spot for the front door, I notice a reflection of light gleaming off the bare wall. I look down the hall to see the bathroom light is now on, and my breath catches in my throat—this is getting interesting.

Delighted *and* frightened, I force myself to walk down the hall and enter the bathroom. The walls are freshly painted like the rest of the apartment, but the painter was sloppy in here, the coat uneven, the counter drawers sealed shut.

Behind me is a new toilet, and to my sadness, a new bathtub. I remember *my* bathtub when I lived here: a huge, gaudy antique. Whoever moves in will never know the wonders of a shared bath, or that this wet cathedral can safely hold three dozen burning candles before it gets dangerously hot and hard to breathe.

I remember *her* face emerging from the steam to kiss me in that old tub, and I catch myself beginning to dwell on Sarah, and put a stop to it at once. Realizing my bladder is full, I decide to christen this toilet with its first urination.

I unzip, and I'm in mid-stream and thinking about what to microwave for dinner when the door slams shut behind me, making me scream and spin around, inadvertently pissing all over the bathtub. The sealed drawers begin rattling loudly in their inlets, then something pounds so hard on the door that I nearly fall into the tub.

This interaction stops as suddenly as it began, leaving me quaking and my heart jackhammering.

"Hello?" I manage to say as I zip up with trembling



fingers.

I slowly open the door and peek out, first to my left—the bedroom door is now shut—and then to my right. I opt for the living room, but first I rinse the tub out while cautiously watching the door.

In the living room, I take a seat against the far wall where our TV cabinet once stood. I wait and listen as the room grows gloomier, my thoughts journeying backwards in time.

My mind encapsulates thousands of hours in this room, alone or with Sarah or with friends, watching movies, smoking joints, ripping lines, playing a succession of video game consoles, listening to music...

I think about bands that formed, blew up, and broke up, all within the lifecycle of my relationship with Sarah, here in this apartment.

Sarah... now that's a painful chapter in my life.

You know this story: two kids from Nowhere, USA, fresh out of high school with no grounded plans like college. Just those big Hollywood delusions driving us onward.

This was our first apartment, and we had great and terrible times together in these rooms. We loved and hated each other and forgave one another again and again within these walls, and in the end, we nearly destroyed each other trying to fix something that broke long ago.

Like I said, you know this story.

Sarah escaped first, moving out suddenly one afternoon. I came home from work to find her gone, the place half-empty. Instead of leaving and starting over myself, I stayed another year and died every night in this apartment, missing and hating and loving her in equal parts.

The few lousy friends I had left finally wised up and called my parents to intervene, but only after I had overdosed on Vicodin and whiskey.

I'm sweating profusely now, the room stifling, and I get up and open the window to let some air in. I look down the hall, and to my surprise I notice the bedroom door now stands open. I head back there to crack the window to get a cross-breeze going, and as I'm sliding it open, I catch not only my own reflection in the glass, but a younger me as well: shirtless, blotto, and deranged, watching from the shadowy corner. I wheel around to find the corner empty, then back at the mirror: it's just my reflection.

I despise this fucking room.

I remember Sarah staying in here for weeks at a time during those darkest days: the blinds drawn, the constant crying. I remember our terrible arguments in here as we unraveled.

I wasted my life with you.

I remember when she said that to me. I was standing over in that corner, drunk and bare-chested and every bit the failure she thought I was. During that last year without her, this room became **my** tomb, as well.

The sudden shattering of glass in the kitchen snaps me from these terrible recollections, and I rush to see what's broken, switching on the kitchen light to discover nothing on the floor, and every cabinet standing open and empty.

I feel something like cool air brush past my arm, and I see the outline of Sarah over by the counter reaching into the cupboards, pulling dishes that aren't there. I can't make out what she's screaming, but I place this event at once: it's the night we drank too many bottles of red wine following weeks of chilly silence. A night of peace became a night of truths, and she broke every dish we owned when we ran out of words.

As this half-formed specter smashes phantom plates, I focus on the counters behind her, and suddenly recall the better times: the countless meals made on those countertops, and the bottles and drinks covering them during New Year's Eve's, this kitchen packed shoulder to shoulder with laughing, happy friends.

Good times.

Sarah's specter slowly fades away, and I'm alone once again.

Two hours pass without any signs of the paranormal.

It's almost ten, and I'm sitting in the slab of light from the kitchen doorway, recalling my 30th birthday in this room, when a sudden pounding on the front door jars me from my thoughts.

I watch the deadbolt snap right, the door swing open and stop abruptly as if caught by an invisible hand, then slam shut hard enough to shake the walls and rattle pictures that aren't there.



Two figures begin to take shape not five feet from me. I'm sitting rigid and enrapt, reliving this particular event that took place five months before the end. By then, I had been on the couch seven months, and we hadn't been intimate with one another in over a year, passing each other in these rooms like strangers.

Like ghosts.

It was only a matter of time before one of us cheated.

Unfortunately, it was me.

I watch the two ghosts move around the room in partial form, their screaming perfect recreations of myself and Sarah at our worst. I cringe when my phantom shouts, *I only stayed with you because I felt sorry for you!* before heading down the hall, punching the wall and the bathroom door before slamming the bedroom door shut.

That's where my recollection of the argument ends, but now I'm cruelly treated to the unseen aftermath: I watch her shadow in the kitchen doorway, her head down with her hand over her mouth, sobbing into it as quietly as possible. After a moment, the shadow turns and goes to the sink and leans against it, shuddering.

I'm on my feet and in the doorway in a heartbeat, trying to comfort a phantasm from an event long ago.

"*I'm so sorry I ever said that to you, Sarah.*" I whisper to the ghost. "*It's one of my biggest regrets, baby.*"

I don't expect a response, but the shade turns and looks at me as it dissipates, as if hearing me across time and space. At that I drop to my knees, unable to cope with the hurt any longer. I let my tenuous guard crumble as I cry, these bare walls all too familiar with my pain. When I'm done, I pick myself up and wash my face in the kitchen sink and dry my cheeks with my shirt, another long-forgotten ritual relived.

I return to the bedroom and plant myself against the wall where the headboard once was, and make myself remember the good times in this damned room—making love to Sarah in our bed, sharing our dreams and hopes and fears in the dark. Making promises we never thought we'd break.

Realization strikes me hard, and I understand at last what this is all about—of course it is. A single event.

It happened right here.

I hear her before I see her, not two feet in front of me

and laying on her side atop a bed no longer there. A bent shadow sits at the corner of this bed that isn't there, and I know it's me.

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This is it—the moment just after Sarah found out she couldn't have children, and also the moment I realized I would never be a father if I stayed with her.

In the end I *did* stay with her, and I promised her it could work, that the two of us would be enough, and for a while it was enough.

It was, until it wasn't.

"I love you, Sarah." I whisper. "I'm sorry."

When the spirits fade, I clumsily get to my feet and wipe my eyes.

Stepping into the hallway, the bathroom light turns on.

Unafraid, I enter. In the mirror I see how tired I look, yet beneath my weariness... is a peacefulness I never believed I would find again, especially in this place.

The bathroom door slams shut behind me, and I don't even flinch. The drawers begin to violently shake in their paint-sealed slots, and when they stop, on impulse I take hold of the top-drawer handle and force it open, breaking the shell of dry paint along its cracks. I'm not surprised to see a folded note with my name scrawled on it in neat print I recognize at once. I touch the paper to make sure it's real before picking it up and reading it.

Justin,

Bob called me about what's happening here. I asked him to call you, but to not mention me because I didn't think you'd come if he did. I'm leaving this note in this drawer, and in the hands of fate. Maybe you'll never find it. If you are reading this, though, then you've seen what I've seen, and you know we have unfinished business. I don't want to be angry anymore. Bob will give you my new number if you ask him for it.

With love, S

I read the note two more times before folding and pocketing it.

It's nearly midnight—Bob will still be awake, and I'll get Sarah's number from him and we'll deal with this



unfinished business.

Together.

I open the front door to a starless night, and hesitate in the doorway: I'm frightened of the unknown, yet excited by the possibilities. How will this time be any different than before? Does more pain and disappointment await us?

I feel the ghosts at my back, urging me to stay and visit a little while longer, but I resist their invitation—I have to leave them and this place behind. Life demands it.

With a deep breath, I let go.