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The Storyteller:
A Collection of Short Horror Stories
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The Party

He was decent. Got decent grades, married a decent girl, stuck with the first decent job offered to him. He had always done what was asked of him, never underachieving or overachieving, simply a decent man with a decent life.

And he liked it that way. He could expect the same things every day; his work was easy; his lunch always tasted fine; he never had much cause to be terribly worried about anything.

It was certainly unlike him to divert from his routine on his way home from work. To the silent confusion of his coworkers, he had turned down his boss' daily carpool invitation in favor of walking.

The air was crisp and the last remnants of summer could be felt in the breeze. Of course, he still took the route he would have driven, it was the most direct. Besides, it was a nice area.

The church had always been there, and yet he had barely ever noticed it. A relic from his parents' generation, he thought. Its steeple was a prominent fixture, making it by far the tallest structure on main street, but rarely used by the general public. Despite the week's sermon topic being consistently updated on the sign in front, he couldn't name a single person he knew who attended service there.

Driving past, one would not have much time to register the dance hall flanking the back of the building, as it was far from the street and hidden behind a fair amount of underbrush. Walking along on a chilly night, however, the light emanating from it was obvious, warm, and lively. He strained his eyes, trying to get a look through its windows.

Whatever it was that was going on, it looked spectacular. Through the thin curtains dancers appeared to leap impossibly high, spinning each other around, grins obvious even from this distance. The light inside glimmered with all the magic and romance of candlelight. The dancing, the laughing, the shimmery light through sheer curtain, it struck something in him, some fantastical emotion from his childhood. Remnants of fairy tales, thoughts of secret woodland meetings and magic and joy. Things he had not thought about in quite some time.

He was dressed nice enough, he decided, and he quickly began to think of an excuse as to why he would be intruding on the event. Perhaps it was a wedding reception? He could feign some distant relation with the bride. Honestly, though, he doubted anyone would notice him with all of the evident merriment surrounding them.

He planned to open and close the door quietly and confidently. A motion he practiced, subtly, as he made his way around back to the dance hall door. He was quite nervous, truth be told, as he was never one to go where he was not explicitly wanted.

In all the exhilaration of his entry, it was only after he succeeded in shutting himself in that he realized what he was hearing was not music. Rhythmic, yes, but lacking melody. There were no divergences from this beat, no swells of great emotion through any instrument. There was only movement.

Squeak, drag, thump, squeak, clatter.

He turned to the dance hall, and he noticed the wires.

The dancers, paralyzed, limbs stretched out to grotesque angles, were being jerked around by a series of pulleys. The lights were flat and fluorescent, only having appeared beautiful from the outside due to the shadows thrown by the violent tugging the rig imposed on the bodies. The performers slammed into each other, nose smashing into nose, teeth into teeth, red-rimmed glassy eyes and grins glued up at the corners. Their eyes were watering, their teeth chipping more and more with each collision. Most bore heavy, dark bruises stretched across the surface of their limbs. And while they occasionally twitched, or their eyes darted from side to side, the dancers frozen bodies did not react.

He turned back to the door when he felt the air around him turn to molasses. Slowly, slowly, his knees creaked to a stop, freezing him in his panicked stance. His arm, reaching for the door, was stuck in front of him. His face, frozen halfway between recognition and horror, began to feel like some mockery of elation. His grimace was a grin.

After a few moments he heard shuffling, but saw nothing as he felt the slow, sharp pinch of fish hooks being inserted into the flesh of his shoulders.

He had joined the dance.

Halloween

The night felt really, truly alive. It was fittingly foggy, orange and purple lights shining through in shafts of brilliant color. Children ran from door to door, trying to contain their excitement, struggling to only ring the doorbell once, politely, straightening out their various masks and capes and preparing for this new influx of sugar.

Adults sporting various amounts of decor eagerly opened their doors, graciously handing out the candy they would love to have received themselves. And, of course, occasionally helping themselves to a piece. They made sure each child received a gracious helping before themselves returning to various party games and scary movies.

It was almost an hour after sunset, trick-or-treating hours were hitting their peak. Some older children hid behind trees, ready to jump out at the next unlucky soul to pass them by. They used the fog to their advantage, staying as still as possible, using the mist to help hide their giggling forms.

They would be the first to feel it.

The itching began more quickly for those standing still, those without masks, without cloaks, the ones who had let the fog seep under their costumes. It began as a sharp itch, some would recognize it as feeling like lice. The shock hit some more quickly than others, and their peers would chuckle as they watched them jump around and yip like a kicked dog. When the itching finally began for the last of the trick-or-treaters, some of them had already begun to feel the burning.

It started in their faces, chests, backs, any part of them most facing the wind. Their eyelids blistered, their hands and arms were scratched raw on any surface they felt could offer relief. Most were not strong enough to make their way to the nearest home, but for those that did, they would find them locked, adults turning up their music and movies to drown out the moaning outside their own doors. Some of the adults vomited from the barbeque-esque stench that made its way into their homes. They closed their blinds and cleaned themselves up. They did not, not a single person, let the children in.

For those who managed to get some sleep, they could wake up the next morning and almost imagine the night before as a horrific dream. Some cleaned up their decorations, sweeping up bone fragments as if they had been part of their displays all along. The majority of the ash had been blown away by the wind, into the river, mixing with the soil and finding itself unrecognizable.

Some, the ones who had desperately feigned exhaustion to convince their muted hosts to allow them to sleep at their houses, would find their cars unperturbed and ready for their long journeys home. It was only after leaving the cul-de-sac that the telephone poles would become unbearable, their posts papered white, childrens' faces fluttering in the breeze, each one reading the same: **MISSING**.

The Woman

The neighborhood woke to the screeching of tires.

Or, no. That wasn't right. The noise was too prolonged, irregular, and was becoming far too familiar. All at once, I think, we understood what it was.

A woman. Head tilted back, long brown hair swaying behind her in the rhythm of her footsteps. She was screaming, her shriek the type of noise that makes your teeth ache, like metal scraping metal or long nails pressed hard against chalkboard.

There was something horribly unearthly about it, in that all of the residents of the street could see her without once looking out at her. We just *knew*. All of us, lying in separate beds yards away from each other, all with the innate knowledge of what was happening. We heard, her, first, and thoughts of her bare feet and ratty pale blue sweatshirt with sleeves hiding unkempt nails woke us from our sleep. The unwillingness to get up from our beds proved, in reality, to be inability. We were frozen by more than just our unease. All together, with muscles tensing and cramping from our inability to move, we pictured her. Her face, with mouth wide open, portrayed no powerful emotion. Her eyes were glassy and unblinking, even as she began to claw at them. But she was not screaming from grief or pain, no. And yet its volume continued to grow in intensity and fervor until the glass in our window panes began to vibrate. That was when we realized she was not alone.

All at once, the screaming death rattle of a horde of wild animals overtook us. They came in the dozens, and then the hundreds. All of

them, mouths wide open, eyes glassy and staring straight ahead, none showing any sign of emotion or of consciousness. All of us, frozen to the spot, forced to bear witness to the macabre parade happening feet away from us. In our minds' eyes we were unable to see or hear anything outside these people. They were our only thoughts, penetrating and punctuating any chance we had for freedom. We lay there, unable to wipe the sweat or tears from our eyes, unable even to pray for the ordeal to end as bearing witness was the only thing we were capable of doing.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, they turned the corner and were gone. As soon as the last one was gone, the shrieking stopped harshly, cut off as if their vocal chords had been slashed suddenly.

I don't know if anyone else was able to fall asleep. Any sense of connection I felt with my fellow neighbors fell apart as soon as the horde had vanished. I never talked with anyone about it, and nobody ever brought it up as far as I'm aware.

Hot Coffee

1992

They had turned on the sign.

For months we had been herded into an even smaller, fenced-off section of the train station. Construction, they said. We, the many commuters, had been forced into even smaller quarters for this time, pressed together, sticky and scrambling to get by, cinched together by the chain link fences and blue tarp hiding the ongoing “renovations”.

And yet it was here, it was finally here, and I was there, and the fences had been taken away and the station that had been so forcefully crammed opened up, just slightly, to allow those in need of space just a little reprieve.

And the sign hummed and glowed, its plastic shell hiding buzzing fluorescent lights, attempting to mimic the beauty of neon. It was a new coffee stall. A few feet of tile in front of the stall had been switched out for mock wood grain, the counter of the space featuring the same texture. And yet there was no flour, no sugar sprinkled over any back counter, no deep fryers or ovens. Just microwaves on steel. No smell of fresh ground coffee or baking pastry, no, only the smell of sweat, of people, of the crowd, and of the station.

The line was longer than I anticipated it would be in the coming weeks, the morning commuters sensing more adventure in this slight deviation from their morning routine than most got from their sex lives. A few people must have noticed me slipping in front of the line, and yet, no one said a thing. Cowards.

I stepped up to the counter. A pretty girl (well, not so pretty, but prettier than no girl at all) stepped up to greet me. She was obviously bothered by having to work.

And I was happy to bother her.

“Your coffee, is it hot?”

“Uh,” she blinked. “I mean, yeah.”

I paused for a minute, which seemed to irritate her, so I continued doing so.

When she opened her mouth to speak, I interrupted her.

“A large, then.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“No.”

She turned to the steel counters and, realizing how little there was left in the pot, she sighed. I was thankful for that. It’s never hot enough when it sits in the pot.

Raising her arms a gracious amount to force the beans into the mouth of the grinder, I felt a bit bad for her, someone so delicate. Someone who hates working.

How could you hate serving the public? All the people you must meet! What stories they would tell you if only you weren't afraid to be a little more soc--

And then the cup was in front of me. Having been distracted by my fantasies I did not bother her anymore as I paid and went on my way.

The platform was so busy, anyone walking to get from one part to another would have to brave walking on the yellow line in order to avoid pushing through the sardine-like mass. I loved watching those people and their slow, careful steps, those that trusted (as you should) that nobody would push them into the train's deep track pit. I don't believe I've ever seen anyone fall in, but would people in the back of the crowd really notice? Would the operators stop, holding up hundreds of commuters for hours to scrape them off the rails? Or would they simply power through, hoping nobody reported it and everyone could forget and go on with their day?

And then my thoughts returned to my coffee. Yes, no, I hadn't checked it! I hadn't even noticed the girl had fitted a secondary styrofoam cup around the one holding my beverage. How was I supposed to tell if it were really, truly, hot enough?

Never the matter. I had heard a story of a woman, a few months before, who had spilled her coffee on her pants while at a drive-thru. She got third degree burns all

over, the awful bubbling yellowish sort, just skipping right over that second-degree fleshy pink to the whiteish pustule type. I think it might be white blood cells, that sort of thing, but I was never sure.

Most of it hit her vagina directly. I wondered, was her clit whiteish-yellowish now too? Could she still feel it stinging after all these months, or only the pulsating tingle of a less severe burn?

I found myself thumbing the lid of the cup, tracing circles around the mouth hole. As yet another train came and went, I thought, no, I should wait, I should wait for the station to fill up again. Who would even notice me, though?

Regardless of the size of the crowd, everybody is always minding their own business. Nobody would look at me, but oh, I wanted them to see.

I popped the cover off, it flipped and landed on the ground a little bit away from me. Some looked up, but thinking it an accident, lost interest and turned back in on themselves.

But I'd make sure they'd see. I hoped the scent of coffee, the only homey scent in this sweat-filled cavern, would draw them in, remind them to live in the moment a little.

I tried a finger. Dipping it in, deeper and deeper away from the surface of the coffee, and oh, it was so hot. The burning hit me almost immediately as I had slid my finger in. And I knew there would be more to come.

I wiggled it around, the pain growing stronger and consuming, tingling all the way up to my arm. I tried some more fingers, shaking now, sliding them in less carefully than I had done with the first. I wiggled them and stirred, and found the movements to add sudden little jolts that carried up my arm and into my shoulder. I wanted to step into it, to feel this sharp heat around me, but the cup was so small and tight and I was so large and all I could do was thrust my hand in and out, in and out, spilling it now, and feeling the layers of skin peeling off of my hand and new tingling as the liquid spilled out over my other hand that I had secured around the cup and thinking god, what could be better than this?

And then I noticed the women around me, many of them staring now at my hand as it put on a show for them, I looked up and around and saw them all staring not at my face or the slowly forming puddle of coffee around me but at my bleeding, raw, bubbling hand as I thrust it in and ripped it out, gaining speed to try and regain the feeling I was losing. Had I made the coffee cold with all my commotion? Oh god, it couldn't end this quick, and I took my hand out of the coffee and with fingers I could neither feel nor control I threw them at the zipper

to my pants, hoping I could get it out and force it into the liquid before it became too cold, and somebody started screaming as I finally felt something so very hot wrapping around my cock--

And then I was lost in my thoughts again, and I was being pulled sharply. But not as sharply as those beautiful seconds before. In fact, the aggression was not aggressive enough, and I turned to see the men in blue suits pulling me away.

Men! A disappointing fact of life: only men in uniform pay attention.