

Late Night Trip to the Bathroom

Jason's eyes flickered open at 1:47 am. This was according to the luminescent green display of the clock-radio on his bedside table. It rarely told him fibs. Except when he forgot to put it forward an hour at the commencement of daylight saving, or back an hour when daylight saving went on hiatus.

The Carlton Dry in his bladder sought release. He'd drunk his fair share of it while studying the ins and outs of human physiology on his mobile phone. Pornhub was his favorite medical site. But he must have checked out dozens of them last night. Some he'd never heard of. Some probably no one had ever heard of.

He swept his doona aside, swung his legs over the edge of the bed and, after several seconds of willing himself to sit up, sat up. A beery belch rustled his lips. He felt somewhere between tipsy and "Get your damn hands off of me, constable." He stood, weighed whether to risk a step forward. There was a good chance he'd tongue-kiss the carpet if he did. But his laden urinary tract urged him on.

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Jason peed long and hard. Then he peed some more. Then still more. He stayed till the last hesitant dribble. He wasn't getting out of bed again.

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He flicked on the bathroom light and shambled over to the basin. His reflection was best forgotten. He washed and dried his hands. He took another look at his mirror image to see if it had improved since a few seconds ago. Negative on that. Then he noticed something in the mirror: the outline of a person standing in the darkness at the opposite end of the hall, watching him.

His soul turned to ice water and splashed the pit of his gut. He spun about-face. “Who the fuck are you?”

Too small to be a fully-grown man but too big to be a child, the figure said nothing.

Jason grabbed his electric shaver and made like he was going to throw it. “If you don’t get out now, I’ll crack your skull open. I’m not joking.”

The figure drifted out of the darkness. It was an old woman in a sepulchral ankle-reaching black dress. Falls of wiry gray hair hung about her wan face, and an impish malevolence danced like an ancient Canaanite in her bloodshot hazel eyes. “Oh no,” she said, head tilted to one side. “Oh no, don’t be scared. I don’t mean you any harm. Auntie Esme wouldn’t hurt you. Auntie Esme wouldn’t hurt a soul. Oh no.” Her voice was a scratchy snarl.

“How’d you get inside?” Jason asked uneasily. “The doors, the windows, they’re all locked.”

She placed a gnarled hand, fingernails black and pointed, over her mouth in a halfhearted attempt to stifle mirth. A gruff guffaw propagated into many guffaws.

Jason's bowels slackened. He was a foot taller than the woman and outweighed her by close to 100 pounds but was shit-scared of her. She gave off Chernobyl levels of malignant energy.

A grin like a cannibal's necklace spread across her face. "Did I say I wouldn't hurt a soul?"

Jason was about to issue another hollow threat, when suddenly she was in his face, scratching and grabbing and making nightmarish screeches that bloodied his sanity. He waved his arms erratically, as though trying to fend off a swarm of wasps, and let loose a manly scream.

Sliding on his back along the floor.

He was sliding on his back along the floor.

How did that happen? Did he black out?

The woman had him by the ankles. She was dragging him down the hall so fast static electricity from his silk boxers rubbing against the carpet zapped him in the bum. *Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!*

His head caromed off a door jamb as she sped around a corner, into his living room. She leaped backward onto his sofa, then scurried, also backward, up the bare-brick wall behind it. He gave chase, trashing a lamp and a framed family photo.

Up and down, round and round the walls, floor, and ceiling they went. The laws of physics just couldn't keep up. The woman cackled insanely. Jason's hardwood coffee table assaulted his vertebrae, and the glass screen of his wall-mounted OLED slit open his left elbow. Blood flowed like beer at a buck's turn.

The woman slapped him down on his kitchen tiles. The pain that

shot through his back was award-winning. He almost passed out, but the drive to survive kept him clinging to consciousness.

He had to find his mobile phone, call the cops. But tell them what? That he was being assaulted by a superhumanly strong old woman who could stick to ceilings like a B-movie ninja? Yeah, good luck with that.

She got on her haunches and ran her weaponized fingernails up and down his lower legs, taunting him.

“What are you?” he said.

No answer was forthcoming. He looked for it in her eyes. They were like maelstroms. No. They weren't like maelstroms. They were maelstroms. He could see screaming people, men, young men like him, being sucked down into their churning, fathomless depths. Was this to be his fate?

Snickering, the woman held a hand up. Its nails grew at least an inch before his eyes. She sunk their predatory tips into his left leg and made bloody furrows all the way down to his ankle.

Roars of pain.

Cackles of delight.

The kitchen resounded with them.

He slammed his right foot into her face. “You fucking bitch!”

With an irritated grunt she scabbled into the living room.

Blood sprinkling the cream tiles, he limped, groaning, over to a bench, armed himself with the two largest knives from his stabbed-man novelty knife block, then went and faced the living room door. He stood favoring his non-furrowed leg, knives held in the “let's rock”

position.

Shod in a hobnail boot, one of the woman's feet was sticking just past the jamb. She was lying on the living room floor. Was she unconscious? Dead? He'd kicked her pretty hard.

Booming, animalistic grunts confirmed she yet lived.

He threw on some bravado. "Come on, you old hag, let's finish this. Come on, I'm not afraid of you."

Silence. The last thing he wanted to hear.

Derisive, guttural laughter. The second-last thing he wanted to hear.

He gripped the knives white-knuckle tight.

Such was his shocked state that he hadn't thought to switch the lights on. Keeping one eye on the door, he twisted toward the nearest switch and flicked it. The kitchen burst with electric sunshine.

The woman's foot had disappeared. It and the rest of her now stood by the light switch. She sneeringly flicked it off. Darkness ruled once more.

Before Jason could do anything he was sailing toward the living room, propelled by an invisibly quick shove of her terrible hands. He smashed into his sofa. It flipped over, slapping him against the brick wall, then landed on top of him, entombing him the instant he hit the floor. The woman flung it aside. Her fingernails drew trickles of blood as she lifted him one-handed by his neck several feet off the floor. Turning a purpler shade of elderberry, he struggled to break her unbreakable grip. She chuckled, waved a finger at him. *Naughty, naughty.*

A casual jerk of her wrist launched him into the ceiling. He wiggled and kicked, trying to extricate his head, then down he came, plaster and all. He lay on the floor, looking up at the unseemly hole he'd made. He would have to get that fixed.

It dawned on him that the woman had gone. Had she left the house or just moved out of his line of sight?

A pair of bloodshot holes suddenly appeared amidst the darkness in the far corner of the room. The woman took shape there. It was as if she had fused with the night but was now materializing back to separate, three-dimensional form.

She stalked toward him. A demonic growl accompanied her. If Jason had had any urine left in his bladder, he would have wet himself.

A hobnail boot was planted on each side of his hips. From his worm's-eye view, the woman looked like a sneering crone who'd pigged-out on human growth hormone. She slowly raised one of her hands. Something was in it. What, he couldn't tell, but knew it had to spell death or dismemberment for him.

Down came death or dismemberment.

He cried out in horror.

A cold, hard object hit his chest. It sat inertly for a moment, then lit up and began to vibrate. He gasped. Was it going to explode?

Only if its battery overheated.

It was his mobile phone.

He contemplated it fleetingly, then looked at the woman in puzzlement. She grinned, motioned to it with a slight nod. He picked

it up. Someone had left him a text message:

Having fun with the Aunt Esme? Want fun to stop? Better send 1000 US dollar in Bitcoin. Fastly now!!!

The text included a Bitcoin address.

The woman pulled Jason into a sitting position by his nose, then traced one of his eye sockets with a pointed fingernail. “Fastly now,” she snarled.

“Fastly now,” he repeated in a tremulous, nasally tone.

He was no stranger to Bitcoin. He’d used it before to buy stuff he didn’t want the usual authorities to know he’d bought. Within five minutes the sender had received the requested funds. A smiley emoji acknowledged receipt.

Jason showed the emoji to the woman. She patted him on the head, then threw hers back and cackled. A moment later she vanished as if she’d been abruptly edited out of reality.

His phone vibrated. The woman filled the display. “Don’t be scared,” she said with a wink.

The home screen reasserted itself.

Jason limped outside and, with a brick from his garden, bashed the phone to bits.

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