

Do You See?

3:00 AM

A cool wind blows in through the bedroom window. The heavy damask curtains rise and fall in time with the rush of air. Janice turns over in her sleep, her lips slightly parted. Her chest rattles as she inhales; the only sound in a house filled with silence.

4:22 AM

A black cat walks down the street, its long, lanky tail cocked and curling around itself. The electricity that has been building in the air makes its hair stand on end. Sparks fly as the strands bristle against each other.

5:30 AM

Somewhere in the house, something begins to beep. A tinny, mechanical sound that is barely audible. No one notices; no one awakens. Everyone sleeps.

7:03 AM

Janice opens her eyes as the first few real beams of sunlight warm her face through the window. In a few hours, the rays that come through will be so hot, the particles in the air moving so fast, that sitting under it without sweating will be impossible. Already, her clothing has begun to stick to her. The creases of her body, the inside of her elbow and the spaces between her fingers, actually contain small pools of liquid.

She throws off the quilt, moaning slightly as it lands at the far right corner of the bed. As the quilt flies across the air, take note of the pink and blue floral pattern, a design so utterly feminine and virginal that

no man would be caught dead with it on his marriage bed; it is the comforter of a girl just sweet sixteen, of a five-year old sugar plum princess.

Notice that this is not a marriage bed. Do you see the indentation that lies almost exactly in the middle of the mattress? Only those who always sleep alone forget the comfort of moving over for someone, sleeping a bit to the left or to the right so that someone else can have just a little bit more room. Instead, they take up as much space as they can to fill up the fact that there will never be anyone to move over for.

The Fisher Price baby monitor that rests on the bedside table is silent. *Good, they're still asleep*, she thinks as she heads to the bathroom.

8:10 AM

The first hits of caffeine are jarring but after a few sips the bitter liquid goes down easy. That's what she likes about it though: that each time she drinks it, it's like the first time all over again. It's scalding and shocking, and nothing like anything she's ever tasted. But by the middle of the cup it's lukewarm, a little bit sweet, and exactly what she knows she has been craving since she opened her eyes.

She is standing at the kitchen counter in her bathrobe, looking out the window: a ritual of sorts. The Perkins kids are heading off to the bus stop on the corner; all except the eldest, who insists on walking. Janice inevitably smiles at this miniature rebellion. She remembers how she yearned to be strong enough to sneak out or stay out past curfew; just once would have sufficed. It had never quite turned out, though.

Her mind wanders to the one time she had come home drunk. It had been about 35 years ago; the fall that she turned 16. She had gone to her high school's homecoming game and someone had brought a bottle of vodka. It had been thrilling, taking that first shot, feeling the warm buzz as the liquid slipped down her throat and into her stomach, the taste utterly revolting and yet so perfect at the same time. She remembers thinking then that that was the way she wanted to live her life: full of laughter and inside jokes and incidents that would only be funny to those who were there at the time. She had had such hopes back then, she thinks, everything had seemed possible.

The smile remains on Janice's face long after it should have faded, her eyes drifting off before her face has time to react, so that she looks lost. And, maybe, she is lost. Lost in this house that she spent so long saving up for by working a secretarial position that she had never really liked, lost in all the years that have passed, and lost in the life that she had never really wanted or planned for, but that she had somehow gotten stuck with anyway.

"I wonder if David will pick them up this weekend..." Janice mumbles to herself, a habit she developed in the years of living alone, before her parents became so immersed in senility that they could no longer function on their own. She knows her brother doesn't like having to expose his children to their grandparents' increasingly worsening state though, so she doubts it.

"Janice, why are you up so late? You'd better go to bed soon otherwise you won't want to wake up for school tomorrow," her mother interrupts as she shuffles into the kitchen.

"Mom, I told you to wait to come downstairs so that I could help you."

“Why do you always make your coffee so strong? I haven’t even tasted it yet and I know it’s going to taste like gasoline,” her mother says as she lifts the coffee pot and peers into it, her hand shaking uncontrollably all the while.

“Mom, let me pour that for you,” Janice says. She gently takes the urn from out of her mother’s hands and pours some coffee into a thermal mug, which she then places on the kitchen table. She only fills the cup halfway, as one would for a child, so that there won’t be that much to clean up if it spills.

“Mom, I’m going to go upstairs and get changed before Emma Jean comes okay? I’ll be right back”

Janice’s mother stares blankly up at her daughter, and then down at her lap, the cup of coffee already forgotten.

9:32 AM

Janice pulls her Nissan into a spot at the local supermarket. As she gets out, she notices that the air feels heavier than usual, almost wet to the touch. She reminds herself to shut the windows when she gets home.

11:00 AM

“Alright Emma Jean, well thank you for coming early today. I just had to get the shopping done before noon otherwise the store gets too crowded,” Janice says, her tone a little bit too friendly. She speaks to Emma Jean the same way she speaks to telemarketers or door-to-door evangelists, all of whom are

people she wishes she didn't have to come into contact with, but who find their way into her life nonetheless.

“No problem, Ms. Barlow. You know, I noticed that the carbon monoxide monitor's batteries have run out again. I couldn't find new ones but it would probably be a good idea to replace them soon, since you know how much Mrs. Barlow likes to take it upon herself to make a cup of tea,” Emma Jean replies, her face erupting into a smile that Janice can tell is supposed to imply that an inside joke has passed between the two women.

Janice smiles back, not wanting to offend the aide but thinking that, really, this woman has no idea what it's like to live with two senile adults who need to be watched 24/7 – spending a few hours with them, for which she is paid no less, doesn't even compare. “I don't think we have any more so I suppose I'll just have to watch my mother extra carefully until I can buy new ones.”

“Alright then, I'll see you tomorrow,” Emma Jean says as she walks out the door, presumably on her way to her next client's house.

Janice stands in the doorway, smiling, as the aide gets in her car and drives away. *Well, at least someone gets to leave*, she thinks as she walks back into the house, the door softly thudding behind her.

12:30 PM

“Mom, Dad, it’s almost time for lunch, so get your appetites ready!” Janice calls into the living room. Her voice is high and artificial, in the way of mothers cooing at their children, not expecting to receive a response or even a hint of cognizance in return. It irritates her.

Okay...turkey...provolone...oh, right, the mayo. Janice swivels on one foot to face the refrigerator. The friction is there, but then midway through the turn, it is gone. Instead there is tile – hard, fast, and cold. The counter is grabbed at, but no, she is too far down already. Forgetting everything she has been taught about how you should try to land on the softest part of your body, her hip and shoulder hit the ground first, and why is her back twisted in such an unnatural position? There is a splintering of calcium chloride as pieces of her body that were never meant to come apart shatter. Her head is the last part of her to come down, but as it hits the floor, she doesn’t feel it. The pain-induced shock has already begun.

1:17 PM

“Oh, look honey, baby Janice is taking a nap,” Janice’s mother says to her husband as she enters the kitchen, “Why don’t you go get her a blanket...”

She spots the unfinished sandwiches on the counter. “Mmmm, turkey.”

1:23 PM

Janice’s father sits on the living room couch, eyes shut, one leg crossed over the other, his hands folded in his lap. He hums quietly. Guttural sounds, grunts almost, that are completely atonal. There is no melody or pattern, no structure. It is chaos.

2:03 PM

The sound of water against ceramic slowly ceases as the bottom of the bathroom sink becomes saturated. Soon the entire basin will be full.

Janice's mother shuffles past and glances in. "I have to get baby Janice ready for her bath," she mumbles.

2:34 PM

Black fades to white, which is slowly transformed into color. Only primary colors at first, but then they slowly mix so that soon the whole spectrum is visible. Janice's eyelids are heavy and she feels intoxicated. Nothing is the right shape or size, none of the edges are sharp enough, and there is just enough distortion so that she is not yet sure if she is awake or dreaming.

"Aarmph." She tries to say something, anything, that might get her parents' attention but she doesn't have enough control over her vocal chords to be able to form words.

"Aarmph," she tries again.

She hears footsteps and sees her mother's light pink slippers approach the entrance to the kitchen.

"Don't worry sweetie, the bathtub is almost full," Janice's mother says as she briefly glances at her daughter's body splayed on the floor in front of her. She carefully walks around the body, eyes straight ahead, into the next room.

2:46 PM

When Janice comes to for the second time it is with much more clarity. She can feel the pain shooting and pulsing through her, and she can feel her chest deflate as she realizes that she will not be getting up off of the floor until Emma Jean arrives the next morning. *I am helpless*, she thinks, which is ironic because she has spent most of her life telling herself just how trapped she is; how the forces that be and not her inaction have caused her to live a life marked with regret and missed opportunities.

As the seconds wear on, she notices more and more how dirty the patch of tile that she has been staring at is. It is full of hairline cracks and little specks that cannot be seen on first inspection. *It will be okay*, she tells herself, *Tomorrow Emma Jean will come and everything will be okay*.

But what if Emma Jean calls in sick? How long will it be before someone wonders why Janice hasn't called them back? Janice begins to cry, the hot tears running down her face. As they move across her cheeks, the salt makes her skin itchy, eventually reaching her lips which are soon saturated with the flavor. *I want to have someone who will call every day and get worried when I don't pick up*, she thinks. *I can't be alone anymore*.

3:05 PM

"Mom," Janice manages to croak out. Her voice is deeper than normal, making the word come out quieter than she intended. She can feel the vibrations reverberate around her rib cage.

“Mom,” she says, this time louder and more pronounced. She still can’t move. One arm is lying uselessly beneath her, she thinks it has been dislocated, and, well, she can move the other one but every time she does, an acute pain shoots across her back so intense that she forgets to breathe.

And her legs. There is definitely something weird going on with one of her hips, and maybe her knee as well...the lower half of her leg should not be jutting out at that angle.

The slippers reappear.

“Honey, the floor is so cold; you’re going to catch pneumonia.”

“Mom,” Janice rasps, her voice desperate and shaky. “I need you to call someone, 911. I am very hurt. Please.” She looks hard at what she can see of the imitation leather, her eyes squinting in an attempt to will her mother to understand.

“Don’t worry dear, I closed the windows a few minutes ago when it started to rain. All of them. No water will get in at all.” She smiles down at her daughter, bending down to pat her daughter’s hair.

“I think I’ll have a cup of tea, it would be so cozy on a day like today. Have a nice nap, sweetie,” she says as she walks to the stove and places the tea kettle on top of one of the burners. She turns the knob that controls the gas so that the pilot begins to click, turns around, and walks back into the living room.

4:05 PM

Janice's father's eyes stare at the white wall in front of him. He breathes in short, shallow gasps. Eventually, he stops blinking.

4:23 PM

Janice's mother thuds as her knees give out. Her eyes roll back into her head as she falls. Her lips are tinged slightly blue.

5:05 PM

Janice is the lowest to the ground so she is the last person to be affected. Eventually, though, she too stops breathing. As it happens, she tells herself that one of her ribs has probably poked a hole in one of her lungs. She doesn't feel any chest pain though because really, the problem is that there is not enough oxygen in the air.

Maybe if it hadn't been raining, things would have turned out differently; if it had been mustard instead of mayo, one minute later, or one minute earlier, if she had balanced her weight just a little bit more to the left everything would have been okay. If one event out of an entire lifetime's worth had been altered, nothing may have been the same. See how little it takes for everything to change. See.