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Mr. Palshaw

English IV

3/4/29

Something In The Walls

 “Daddy, I think there’s something in the walls.”

 It’s a sentence every father loves hearing. Thomas sighed as he buried his head into his palms, running his hands through his short black hair.

 “Don’t be silly**.** I got the exterminator, and he said there’s nothing there, right?”

 Lilly looked down to the foot of her bed, and she crossed her arms. Her long black hair tumbled down over her eyes, and she uncrossed an arm for a moment to push her hair out of her deep brown eyes. “He’s wrong! I know there’s something there.”

 “Sweetie…”

 “No, daddy, you don’t understand.”

 “I understand fine. I’ll leave the night light on, but there’s nothing wrong with our house. Now, I’m going to bed--”

 “No, please!” Lilly looked up at him, and Thomas saw genuine fear in her eyes. “Let me sleep in your bed--just tonight, I promise!”

 The little skeptical part of Thomas that thought she was making something up for attention evaporated instantly, and he furrowed his brow in concern. He got up.

 “Well… okay, but just for tonight. You are a big girl now, and big girls are strong.”

 She pulled her covers off her legs and leapt onto her father. She hugged him tightly, and he picked her up. The soft pink cotton of her pajamas tickled his bare arms, but he paid no mind.

 The sticky mahogany wood creaked as he walked down the long hallway to the master bedroom. Somewhere above him, a support beam shifted and settled. The groans of the old house spooked Lilly, and she burrowed her face into his shoulder. Suddenly, Lilly coughed voraciously. She fought to suck in air between each cough, each one more wet-sounding than the last. Thomas patted her back, furrowing his brow in concern. It wasn’t a new cough, but he still worried for his daughter nonetheless.

 He pushed the painted-white wooden door that lead to his room. His reading lamp was still on, flickering and varying in its lumosity. He stepped onto the coarse coffee-colored shag carpet that covered his room and walked over to his bed. He put her down on her mother’s side of the bed, and he pulled the covers over her feet. He crawled into his own side and pulled the sheets over his own body. He pulled the chain of plastic beads on his lamp, and the satisfying double-click of the light accompanied the flash flood of newly birthed darkness.

 A timid voice sounded in the darkness. “Hey, daddy?”

 Thomas shifted in his position to look at Lilly.

 “Can you get the night light?”

 “Of course. Sorry about that, sweetie.”

 Thomas pushed the covers off of his legs and swung his feet over the side of the bed. He felt the carpet creep between his toes, and he shuddered. He never liked the texture of this carpet.

 He stumbled in the darkness towards his door. He reached his hands out and felt for the wall. The cold smooth finish of the wall greeted him, and he kept his hand on it until he reached the wooden frame of the door. He walked through it, still feeling the wall.

 In the hallway, his hand accidentally knocked into one of the family pictures that were in the hall. He heard the cheap frame thunk against the wood, and the house echoed back the sounds of his mistake.

 He muttered curses under his breath as he reached down for the picture and struggled to find the nail in the wall with the hook that was on the back of the frame. It took a couple attempts in the dark, but eventually the nail ensnared the hook.

 From the end of the hallway, a few more coughs rung out in the empty house.

 Thomas kept his hand on the wall, but this time he was conscientious of the frames that decorated the hall. He stumbled like a blind man over to his daughters doorway which was faintly illuminated by the night light within. After a quick pull, Thomas held the small blue square that defended his daughter from the things he couldn’t.

 Almost instantaneously, his daughter cried for her dad from the master bedroom. Thomas quickly scrambled out of her room and down the hall, bumping into the walls a couple times. He burst into his room to find his daughter curled tightly in a ball on his bed, shivering and gently wailing.

 “Daddy, thu-thu-there was this thing, this… this…” She trailed off as the tears began to fall from her face. Thomas sat on her side of the bed and hugged her tightly. Lilly was strangely cold.

 The house creaked against the brisk wind outside.

 After a little while of just sitting, Lilly coughed and gingerly pushed her dad away.

 “Can you turn the night light on?”

 “Of course,” Thomas said. He got up from the bed yet again and felt the base of the wall for an outlet. His fingers brushed against the cold white plastic, and he jammed the night light into the socket. A faint blue light began to emanate from the square.

 Thomas walked over to the bed again. He tried to put his arms around Lilly, but she rolled over in the covers.

 “I’m a big girl, I can sleep on my own,” she said with childish grit.

 Thomas sighed, smiled, and crawled over his daughter to get to his side of the bed.

 After a couple minutes of silence, Thomas noticed the winds outside the house began to pick up. Nothing to be scared of, but it was certainly some of the strongest winds here in a long while.

 The house groaned and shifted in response.

As the night wore on, Thomas found that he couldn’t sleep. His daughter, thankfully, had been sound asleep since he got the night light. Thomas lay in bed, trying to count sheep only to be interrupted by the ancient shifting supports of the house.

 Thomas shivered, and pulled the blankets tighter around him. He began to close his eyes yet again.

 *Thunk*.

 Above him. His heart skipped a beat, and his eyes shot open. He listened intently for a few minutes, trying to discern if the noise was fact or fiction, a simple trick of the mind.

 *Ku-thunk boomf.*

 A loud noise definitely came from the attic. Was it thieves? There was, after all, a window up there. He carefully but quickly stepped out of bed and grabbed the baseball bat that sat behind the nightstand. Careful not to disturb his daughter as his door creaked open, Thomas stepped down the hall for the third time since he put Lilly to bed, using the bat to discern where the walls of the hall were like a white cane as he made his way into the kitchen. He reached for the light switch.

 Nothing. He flipped it again. Still nothing.

 He sighed, his heart rate picking up slightly. It was probably nothing to be worried about, at most a broken circuit. Definitely wasn’t something he couldn’t fix. It would make money a little tight, though.

 He felt around the kitchen for the junk drawer, eventually managing to grab the metal handle and to pull it open. His other hand began to sift through the layers of miscellaneous tools, and eventually it found the cylindrical pocket flashlight. He clicked it on, praying that the batteries worked.

 A dim light came from the flashlight. He didn’t realize that he was holding his breath until he exhaled in relief. His eyes adjusted to the level of light that now populated the kitchen.

 *Scriiiiitch. Scriiiiitch.*

His heart stopped. The sounds from the attic were now right above him.

 They had moved from above the master bedroom to the kitchen, and now they were scuttling about the attic above the kitchen. Thomas’s feet felt fixed to the kitchen’s floor, but the thought of Lilly being predated by this intruder was too much to bear. He ripped his foot from the frozen position it was in, and he slogged through the tides of fear over to the hatch that led to the attic.

 A simple wooden hatch, really. The white paint barely clung to the gnarled and warped wood that composed the trap door. Grains of the wood coalesced like the plates of the Earth, constantly pushing against one another as they vied for dominance over the other. They would meet at points, pushing upwards against another to form a ridge in the wooden surface at the cost of chipping the paint, not that the paint wasn’t falling off already. In the dark light that the cheap plastic flashlight offered, Thomas could see that large chunks of the white paint that covered the ceilings of the house were shedding, flaking off like dandruff from a head. The brass metal that stapled the hatch to the ceiling was blackened by years and years of dirt and lack of maintenance. Each screw was a black cross against the faded white wooden door. Strung down from the hatch was a cord of cheap metal beads and a plastic bell-shaped knob to pull at the end of the cord.

 Thomas reached up with his hands quaking and snagged the cord, pulling softly against the wood to no avail. The hatch budged, but it would not give in to the slight pressure that Thomas applied. He yanked with less control, and the hatch creaked against the frame it sat in as it skirted loose. It swung like a pendulum back and forth. A small ladder tumbled down unceremoniously, stopping just before Thomas’s outstretched hands.

 The scuttling had stopped as soon as the hatch came loose, but Thomas paid no mind. He was determined to find the root of this noise and stop it.

 Thomas reached up and grabbed the rough wooden rungs of the ladder. He could practically feel the splinters infiltrate his skin and break off as he muscled up the ladder, eventually landing his feet onto the bottom rung which significantly eased the effort required. As he neared the top, he could see the edges of the flooring in the attic. He put his hands on the flat surface and pushed himself off the ladder and into the attic.

 Though the attic wasn’t insulated properly, the winds had seemingly subsided in the attic. Thomas could hear nothing except for the pounding of his blood in his veins.

 Strangely, Thomas noticed his breath escape his lungs into a fog of mist in front of his very eyes. Despite the bat in his hands, he held his sides with his arms and shivered. His teeth chattered, and his back gently convulsed. His shoulder blades wrenched back, and he felt his neck arch. It was only then did he realize that there was a cold hand on his neck.

 Thomas tried to make a noise, but he could not. His eyes were locked forward, and his neck was frozen in place. Again, he found himself powerless against the waves of terror that washed over his body.

 “Oh, dear Thomas,” the figure whispered. “You just made it that much harder for yourself.”

 With every airy word that slithered out of the mouth that sat next to his right ear, Thomas felt the cold air exude from this figure.

 “Wh-wh-wh…” Thomas tried to wrench words of of his mouth, but he found himself unable.

 The figure snorted. “I always forget how… *impractical*… the mortal vessel is when confronted with a being who is *so much more* than they are.”

 The hand emphatically tightened when describing its owner. Surprisingly, it loosened and let go once a couple seconds had passed.

 The figure’s hand danced across Thomas’s shoulder, and the figure slinked into his line of sight. What he saw, he could not have seen.

 He saw an abomination of nature, a tall but thin skeleton of a human-like creature with tattered sinews and rotting muscles with patches of dusty brown fur loosely binding the figure together. Six thin stiff limbs spurted in between the rotten ribs. Massive, bulbous eyes protruded from the sides of the the skull in between where the eyes and ears of a normal human would be. Large antennae sprouted from the elongated forehead like the horns of a devil. They twitched and rubbed against the roof, feeling the rafters and the grains of the wood. The bone structure of the face was extremely malformed, as the cheekbones were far too high and the ridge where the nose would be was wider and flatter. The teeth were sharp and jagged, but also black and rotting. Small maggots wriggled in the holes of the teeth and the rotting gums of this being’s mouth. Long tendrils of drool seeped out of this being’s jaw and onto the floor.

 At first glance, Thomas thought the figure was wearing a leathery cloak, but then he noticed that the cloak was unevenly cut and it did not shift as the creature moved. The monstrosity had thin, papery wings that spurted dust onto the floor when they spasmed and shifted.

 “I am dust, I am decay, I am the rot of flesh’s fray.” The figure clasped the tips of two of its sticklike arms together. “I am Death, and we have met before, Thomas, though perhaps not… in the flesh.”

 Death’s breath was cold and smelly, like an uncooked slab of raw meat left in the fridge for too long. Thomas attempted to push the bat high enough to take a swing, but his arm and his grip on the bat was locked into place.

 “They say that bodies lock up when they die, you know. Some sort of side effect of me… rigor mortis, I believe you call it?”

 Though the dark eldritch eyes lacked pupils, Thomas could feel the gaze of Death see through him. It stared and stared at him, unflinching and unapologetic.

 “It has been a while, hasn’t it, dear Thomas? How old is your daughter now?”

 “Suh-suh-suh--”

 “That’s absolutely correct, Thomas! Six long years since we last sat in the same room. And tell me, how has raising your daughter been without… Laura, was it?”

 Thomas nodded. “Huh-huh-hard, sir.”

 Death cackled and cawed. “Oh, dear Thomas, you needn’t call me sir. There’s no need to pretend that you like--or even respect--me. And, in the case that you are calling me sir to appeal to me, I say that is a fruitless effort. I am, after all, here in your house.”

 “Wuh-well, Death, what would you have me do?”

 Death leaned over so that its face was inches from Thomas’s. “I expect you to beg for more time. I expect you to grovel for mercy when in reality, this is me being merciful. You will do all of this and more eventually--except, of course, for the fools that chase me.”

 Thomas crumpled to the floor, barely holding himself up against the crushing weight of remorse. There was so much more to do, so much more that Thomas thought he had time for, and yet he had none. Death, of course, stood back at its full terrifying height.

 “And wuh-wuh-what about Lilly, huh?”

 Death tilted its head. “Yes? What about her?”

 “She will have nobody left.”

 “I’m afraid she will have nobody regardless. You willn’t be there to protect her, so it matters not who she has left.

 “Shuh-she’s already lost more than most people should in their childhood!”

 “And sadly, she has yet to lose more. On the positive, she won’t lose much more after the sun rises tomorrow.”

 Thomas looked up into the dark alien orbs that protruded from Death’s skull. “Is that a promise? She won’t lose anything more?”

 “Of course, you have my word. Come morning, her misfortune regarding life and death is gone.”

 Thomas pushed off the ground and looked up at Death. After a quick silent prayer, Thomas stepped forward. “I’m ready… make it quick, please.”

 Death tilted his head again. “What do you mean?”

 “C’mon,” Thomas pleaded, stretching his arms out towards Death. “Don’t drag it out. Just kill me already.”

 Death shook his head. “You fool, dear Thomas. I thought you understood, but clearly, I am mistaken. I’m not here to take your life. I’m here to take hers.”