

I dream the face of death.

It's an ever-changing face, worn by many at the wrong time, worn by all eventually. I have looked into this face, over and over and over. It's what you do, dummy. A voice in my dream tells me this. The voice is right. I am in the Los Angeles branch of the FBI, and I am responsible for hunting the worst of the worst. Child killers, serial killers, men (and sometimes women) without conscience or restraint or remorse. It's what I have done for over a decade and if I haven't seen death in all its guises, I've seen it in most. Death is endless and erosive. Its unfettered face wears on a person's soul. Tonight, the face changes like a strobe in a fog, moving between three people I once knew.

Husband, daughter, friend. Matt, Alexa, Annie. Dead, dead, and dead. I find myself facing a mirror with no reflection. The mirror laughs at me. It hee-haws like a donkey, it lows like a cow. I hit it with my fist and the mirror shatters. A purple bruise blossoms on my cheek like a rose. The bruise is lovely, I can feel it. My reflection appears in the mirror shards. The voice again: Broken things still catch the light. I wake from this dream by opening my eyes. It's a strange thing, going from a deep sleep to full awareness in the space of a blink. But at least I don't wake up screaming anymore. I can't say the same for Bonnie. I turn on my side to look at her, being careful not to jostle. I find she is already awake, staring into my eyes." Did I wake you up, honey?" I ask. She shakes her head. No, she's saying. It's late, and this is one of those times where sleep still beckons. If Bonnie and I are willing, it will draw us back down again. I open my arms to her. My adopted daughter moves close to me. I hug her tight, but not too tight. I smell the sweetness of her hair and darkness claims us with the whisper of an ocean tide.

When I wake up, I feel great. Really and truly rested, in a way I haven't for a long time. The dream has left me feeling cleansed. Gently scoured. I feel unrushed and distant and peaceful. I don't have anything in particular to worry about, which is strange; worry is a phantom limb for me. This is like being in a bubble--or maybe the womb. I go with it, floating for a little while, listening to my own white noise. This is a Saturday morning, not just in name, but as a state of being. I look over to where Bonnie should be, and see only rumpled sheets. I cock an ear and hear faint patterings.

Ten-year-old feet, moving through the house. Having a ten-year-old daughter can be like living with a fairy. Something magical. I stretch and it feels glorious and catlike. Just one item is needed to make this morning a thing of perfection. As I think it, my nose twitches. Coffee. I bound out of bed, and head down the stairs to the kitchen. I note with satisfaction that I'm wearing nothing but an old T-shirt and what I call my "granny panties," along with a pair of ridiculous fluffy slippers in the shape of elephants. My hair looks like it just went through a hurricane. None of it matters, because it's Saturday, and no one else is here but us girls. Bonnie meets me at the bottom of the stairs with a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, munchkin." I take a sip. "Perfect," I say, nodding. And it is. I sit down at the dining table, sipping my coffee. Bonnie drinks a glass of milk, and we look at each other. It's a very, very comfortable silence. I grin." This is some great morning, isn't it?" She

grins back, and that smile steals my heart again, nothing new. She nods. Bonnie does not speak. Her muteness is not a result of any physical defect.

It's the result of her mother getting butchered while she watched. And of the killer then tying her to her mother's corpse, face-to-face. She was there for three days like that. She hasn't spoken a word since. Annie--her mother--was my best friend in the world. The killer came for her to hurt me. At times, I know that Annie died because she was my friend. Most of the time I don't know this. I pretend it isn't there, something just too huge and dark and crushing, a shadow the size of a whale. If I were to know that truth too often, it would break me.

Once, when I was six, I was angry at my mother for some reason. I can't even remember why. I had a kitten that I'd named Mr. Mittens, and he came up to me with that empathy animals can have, knowing I was upset. Mr. Mittens approached me with unconditional love, and my response was to give him a little kick. He wasn't hurt, not permanently. Not even temporarily. But he was never really a kitten again. He would always flinch first when you went to pet him. To this day, if I think about Mr. Mittens, I'm consumed with guilt. Not just a twinge, but a feeling of pure awfulness, a kind of crippling of the soul. It was an evil act. I did permanent harm to something innocent. I never told anyone what I did to Mr. Mittens. It's a secret I plan to take to my grave, a sin I'd rather go to hell for than confess. Thinking about Annie makes me feel like I kicked Mr. Mittens to death. So I'm comfortable not knowing, most of the time. Annie left Bonnie to me.

She is my penance. It's not fair, because Bonnie is magic and wonder and sunny days. Muteness, night screams, and all. Penance should involve suffering; Bonnie brings me smiles. I think about all this in an instant, looking at her. Thought moves fast." How about we hang out and be lazy for a few hours, and then we go shopping?" Bonnie considers this for a moment. This is one of her traits. She doesn't blithely respond to anything. She gives it real thought, makes sure that when she answers, it's the truth. I don't know if this is a product of what she went through, or a quirk of character she was born with. She lets me know what she's decided with a smile and a nod.

"Coolio. Want breakfast?"

This requires no consideration, food being a consistent exception to that quirk. Affirmation is instant and enthusiastic. I putter around, making bacon, eggs, toast. As we munch, I decide to broach the coming week with her." I told you I took a few weeks off, didn't I?"

She nods.

"I did it for a lot of reasons, but one in particular. I wanted to talk to you about it because . . . well . . . it'll be a good thing, but it might be a little bit hard too. For me, I mean."

She leans forward, watching me with a steady, patient intensity. I sip my coffee.

"I've decided it's time to put some things away. Things like Matt's clothes, his bathroom stuff. Some of Alexa's toys. Not the photos or anything like that. I'm not talking about erasing them. It's just . . ." I'm looking for the words. I find them, and they form a simple sentence: "It's just that they don't live here anymore."

Succinct, a single line. Filled with all of the meaning and knowledge and fear and love and hope and despair in the world. Spoken after crossing a desert of darkness. I am the head of the Violent Crimes Unit in Los Angeles. I'm good at my job--real good. I oversee a team of three other people, all hand-selected by me, all exemplary law-enforcement professionals. I could be modest, I suppose, but I would just be lying. The truth is, you really don't want to be the psycho that my team is after.

A year ago, we were hunting a man named Joseph Sands. Nice guy to his neighbors, loving father of two, bearer of just a single flaw: He was hollow inside. He didn't seem to mind, but I'm sure the young women he tortured and murdered did. We were hot on his trail--close to figuring out that it was him, in other words--when he changed my world. He broke into my home one night and, using just rope and a hunting knife, ended the universe as I knew it. He killed my husband, Matt, in front of me. He raped and disfigured me. He pulled my daughter, Alexa, up, using her as a human shield to catch the bullet that I had fired at him. I returned the favor by filling him up with every bullet in my gun, and reloading to do it all again. I spent six months after that deciding whether I was going to go on living or blow my brains out. Then Annie got killed, and Bonnie was there, and somewhere along the way, life got a firm grip on me again. Most people can't truly conceive of being in a place where death might be preferable to life.

Life is strong. It grips you in many ways, from the beating of your heart, to the sun on your face, to the feel of the ground beneath your feet. It grasps you. Its grip on me was as thin as a thread. A strand of spider's silk, holding me over the edge of the chasm of forever. Then it was two threads. Then five. Then it was a rope. The chasm began to recede, and at some point I realized that life once again had a grip on me. It had snared me back into the moment to moment of drawing breath and pumping blood, and I cared about it all again. The chasm was gone, replaced by a horizon." It's time to make this a real home again, honey. You understand?"

She nods. I can tell she understands it in every way.

"Now--here's the part you might like." I give her a small smile. "Aunt Callie took some time off, and she's going to come stay with us and help out"--this elicits a smile of pure delight from Bonnie--"and Elaina is going to be coming over too."

Her eyes become lighthouses of happiness. The smile is blinding. Definite approval.

I grin.

"Glad it makes you happy."

She nods, we get back to eating. I'm woolgathering when I realize she is studying me again, head cocked. She has a soft, quizzical look on her face."

You wonder why they're coming?" She nods."

Because . . ." I sigh. It's another single, simple sentence: "Because I can't do it by myself." I'm resolute about this, about moving forward. But I'm a little bit afraid of it too. I've spent so much time being fucked up, I'm suspicious of my recent bout of stability. I want friends around to support me if I get a little bit wobbly. Bonnie gets out of her chair, comes over to me. I feel such softness in this child. Such goodness. If my dreams contain the face of death, then this is the face of love. She reaches up and traces the scars that cover the left side of my face with a light finger. Broken pieces. I am the mirror. My heart fills and empties, fills and empties.

"I love you too, sweetheart." Quick hug, canyon of meaning, back to breakfast. We finish and I sigh with contentment. Bonnie burps, huge and loud. A shocked silence follows-- and then we both break out in laughter that comes straight from the belly. We laugh until we cry, it subsides to giggles, ends in smiles.

"Want to go watch some cartoons, munchkin?" A blazing smile, like the sun on a field of roses. I realize that this is the best day I have had in the last year. The very, very best.

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