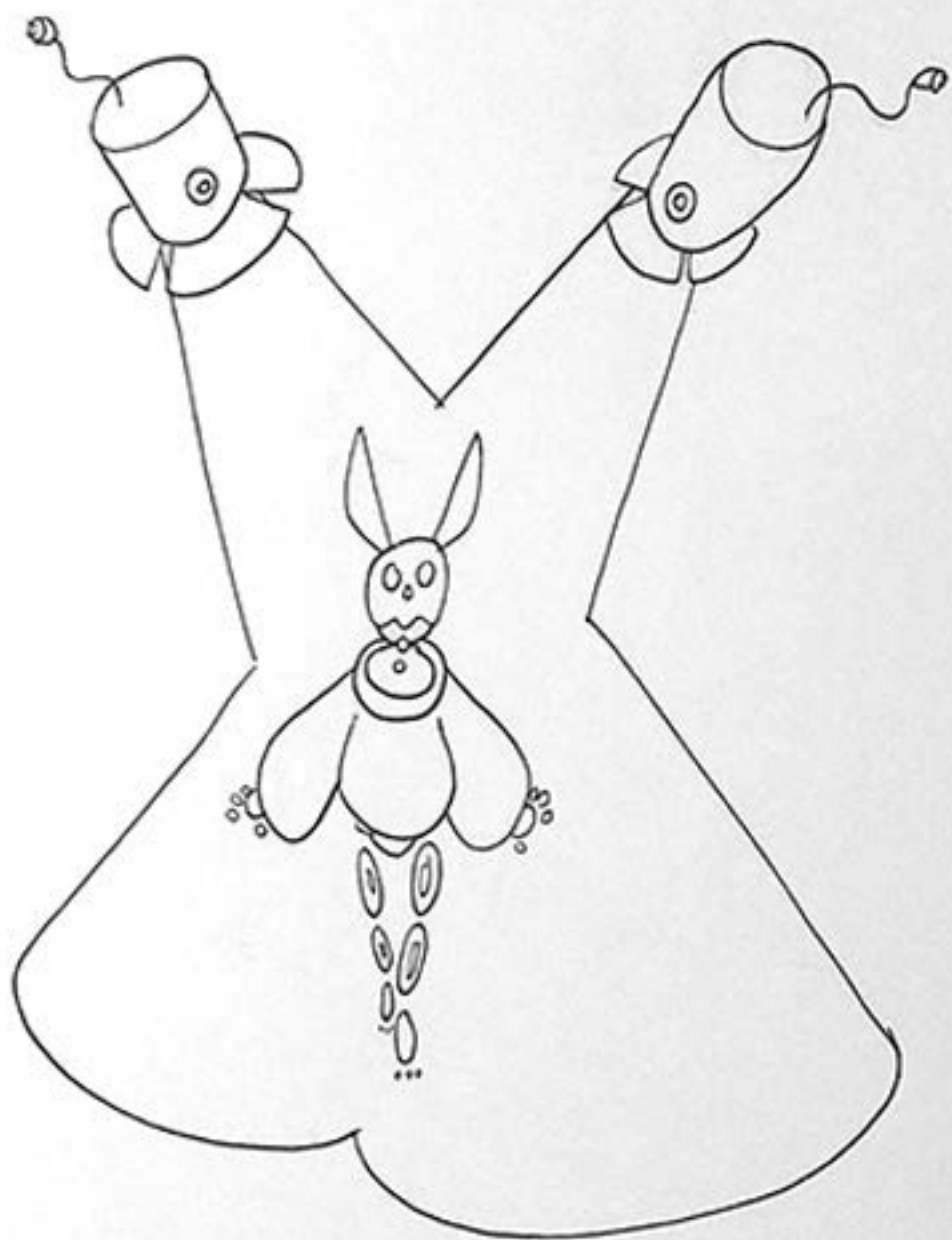


TOXIC BUBBLEGUM



ISSUE #10: ILLUMINATION

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FOREWARD

This month's zine turned out to be quite interesting.

This is the first collaborative comic we've featured that I didn't write, and it was really great to take a step back and still see things coming together so beautifully.

As for my contributions to this month's zine, I not only got to feature one of my longer pieces, I also got to include a picture that I took, which was really neat for me. Photography is an art form that I wish I had more time for, and I always love when I get the opportunity to work on art to accompany my own stories.

-Toxic

This issue of the zine was very fun for me. The script for the comic was a collaborative effort between myself and my partner Ben, and it was very exciting to build a comic around a couple of characters we've had in the works for awhile.

I decided to work mostly in pencil again this issue, as I find it very nice and I like the rough quality it gives overall. It makes it feel very natural and pleasant to me.

-Bubblegum

PC: The Bad Advice Llama



Feigning emergencies
is a great way to shed
some light on who
your real friends are.

He thought it was pretty funny the first time that I pointed out the lamp, but I can assure you he's not laughing anymore. My husband is, or rather was, a well-known writer. By all rights he should be the one here, telling our story and I should have been the one who...well... took care of things at the hotel. A story from him would have been paced perfectly and filled with exciting subplots to keep the reader invested, we would have both had clever aliases, and things would have been tied up in a neat little bow at the end. All his books ended with neat little bows. I can't make any such promises for my rendition of what transpired there, I'm not really a writer after all. What I can tell you is that my version of things will be more honest. I want people to know how things went, not write a bestseller.

The aliases are a good idea though because, Lord knows, I don't need any more of this kind of publicity. Between my husband being who he was and the mysterious way in which he vanished, far too much attention has been drawn onto this as is. I'm telling you this as a warning, not to spread rumors about my late husband's involvement with the occult or some such nonsense.

I'll be the first to admit that I'm neither as clever nor as original as he was, though, and I don't have a lot of time to nitpick over something as irrelevant as names. I don't think I have much time at all. I'll be referring to the two of us simply as John and Jane Smith from here on out.

I always saw myself as a sort of trophy wife to John, which is not to say that I did not care for him deeply. Over the years that we knew each other I came to care for him a great deal in fact, even love him, far more than I ever would have imagined possible. All I mean to say is that we weren't exactly Romeo and Juliet (a comparison that John would have undoubtedly hated anyway.) We didn't get together under the most conventional circumstances.

For the sake of saving time, I suppose I should just begin the story with our honeymoon – omitting the unusual details of our courtship. Honestly, there's a part of me that would like nothing more than to get all the dirty little details off my chest and tell our story from beginning to end in its entirety – but I won't. There are bigger things at stake than my neurotic ramblings.

The one thing that I will say about the early days with John is that I'm grateful for every moment. There were times of doubt, times when I felt like he was trying to change me – and in retrospect our roots might not put either of us in the best light. I wouldn't do a damn thing differently, though, even knowing how it turned out. I learned so much, and I genuinely believe that I'm a better person for knowing him. The Jane who I was a few years back would have walked out the second things got weird. Now, here I am – trying my best until the bitter end. For better or worse I'm grateful to John for making me the kind of person who tries and who sticks around.

With that said, I will jump right in at the honeymoon– which was something that we had argued about even before the ceremony. I wanted to leave straight away after the reception, which he readily agreed to. While I had been looking at pamphlets for exotic vacation spots in places like Aruba and Barbados he had been booking our rooms at some obscure hotel in the middle-of-nowhere part of Vermont. It was only after he had already made arrangements for the trip that he revealed to me he had a business venture planned for only one short week after our wedding.

I was furious, and initially I refused to go. He reminded me pointedly that he couldn't go alone, and that we'd have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves if we got there early. After a lot of late-night discussions, some bribery, and the promise that I would get to choose both the length and location of our next trip away together, I reluctantly agreed and thus our fate was sealed.

The fall was beginning to turn to winter and on the day that we got married, there was a slight chill in the air – and that’s back home where even the coldest months require no more than a fashionable spring jacket to stay warm. In Vermont, it was nothing like the bikini weather that I so desperately longed for. I resigned myself to the fact that I would be spending most of the trip indoors which was honestly a prospect that appealed to me very little. I knew it was only going to get worse after the first week, when John would inevitably start working and I would be left to my own devices. As the reception drew to a close and John and I boarded our plane, I tried to take comfort in the fact that, knowing my husband, the hotel would probably be some sort of five-star location filled with luxury. The exact opposite turned out to be true.

It was a tall, deserted building with odd proportions that made me instantly uncomfortable upon seeing it. It wasn’t wide, and looking at it you could tell that there couldn’t be that many rooms on each level, but there had to be well over ten floors which left the building with a skinny, almost lanky feel from the outside. I felt almost like it was looming over me as we approached in the rental car.

It was also secluded, not in a peaceful way that promised privacy, but in an eerie way that seemed to promise doom. It looked as though the place had been abandoned for some time with only the minimal effort made to keep it standing. I rightly assumed that it was the seclusion that had drawn my husband to this particular hotel, especially considering he was mostly there to negotiate terms for a new horror movie. While I imagined that the location might be very fitting and perhaps inspiring for a writer, I wanted nothing to do with the place.

My initial apprehension caused by the building grew as he pulled into a spot right by the entrance. Our car was the only one in sight, which of course did nothing to ease my mind. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew something terrible would happen if we went into that hotel.

“It’s a little, uhm…” I searched my brain for a word that would make him reconsider our lodgings for the next two weeks that wouldn’t make me sound insane for being afraid of a building. I found none.

“-beautiful?” He finished for me. I shook my head to indicate that no, I did not find it beautiful, but he was staring up at the hotel with admiration and didn’t seem to notice. “This building is over a hundred years old, can you believe it?”

I could in fact believe it. I would have believed it if he had told me it was over a thousand years old.

“It must have quite the history” he said, still staring up at it. I could see him start to drift off like he did sometimes when he was getting an idea for a novel. Then he snapped himself out of it before he could get lost in his thought process and got out of the car.

“Don’t you find it at all strange that we’re the only two here?” I asked as I reluctantly followed suit and climbed out of the passenger’s side. It felt good to stretch my legs properly, but I would have quickly given up that feeling to get back in the car and drive as far away as possible.

“There are other people here, Jane.” He said with a smirk. “This isn’t going to be like *The Shining* or anything.”

“The what?” I asked, not getting the iconic reference. My literary advancements had at the time stopped just short of horror fiction (you may have noticed, I’m the type to scare easily.)

John shook his head. “The Shining, dear. It’s a horror novel about a man who – you know what, never mind.”

“You know I hate those kinds of stories” I whined as I walked around to the trunk of the car to help him with our luggage. Everything about our situation was quickly making me very irritable.

“My point is,” he continued as he started lifting out our bags “is that it’s an old building. It needs constant care. I’m sure there’s a full staff staying here to attend to it – we won’t be alone in the building.”

I nodded, trying to feel reassured, but I found at that moment that I was quite distracted. My attention had turned back to the giant, creepy building that we’d be staying in. Something was definitely off about it, and I needed to know what.

“Just try not to worry about it too much,” he continued “and let’s have a nice relaxing week together, alright?”

I nodded again, this time adding a “yes honey” but my focus was still on the hotel, my brain now actively trying to pinpoint what was off about it. I finally saw it. The curtains were drawn in all of the East facing windows visible from the parking lot, except for one window on the top right. In that window was a large, illuminated lamp that seemed to cast no light into the suspiciously dark room behind it.

“Jane?” He asked, and it was only then that I realized he had been talking to me while I was staring through the windows.

“Do you see the lamp?” I asked.

He glanced up at the top right window absentmindedly to see what I was talking about, his eyes being drawn straight to the right place. “Sure, okay, what about it?”

“It’s the only room that has its curtains open, and that lamp is huge, way too big to be there it would block the entire view. Plus look at it, it’s not casting any light into the room, it looks so creepy. It’s like it’s watching us.”

I’m not sure what I expected him to say, but rather than to check on the window again, he just laughed. “You’re afraid of a lamp now?”

“Shut up,” I said defensively as he locked the car back up. I was embarrassed by my little lamp rant and not entirely sure what I had hoped to accomplish with it in the first place. “I’m not afraid of the lamp” I said, grasping for a way to make him understand my escalating sense of unease with our entire situation “it’s just weird isn’t it? I mean, it’s the only one there, doesn’t that seem a bit off to you?”

“You said it yourself, honey, there are curtains covering the other windows. There are probably lamps like that in all the rooms, we just can’t see them.”

“Okay, well why is that the only room with the curtains open, then?”

“They probably just wanted to let some extra light into our room while they get it ready.”

His explanation seemed plausible enough to me and I felt better about it until his words finished sinking in. “Wait, did you say our room?”

He glanced up at the window one last time. “Yeah, our room. Top floor, double room on the right, 1508. It’s the honeymoon suite, I booked it special.” He flashed me his most charming smile, but I wasn’t in a mood for that. My unease was beginning to border on panic.

“You mean to tell me that we’re staying in the haunted lamp room?”

He broke out into a full-blown fit of laughter at that, obviously not concerned by my distress. “It’s not a haunted lamp room, Jane.” He said when he had caught his breath. “That’s not a thing. I’m sure it’s great. You’ll see. We’ll get you up there, get some food in you, and you’ll feel a lot better.”

He had a point. We had been on the road for over an hour after our second connecting flight and I was starving, not to mention exhausted. Resigned to our lodgings I followed him to the door and then reluctantly into the building. Despite being vacant it was surprisingly normal on the inside – almost inviting. Together we approached the front desk.

“Hello,” said the woman who was waiting there to greet us. Her smile looked a little over the top to me, but she seemed friendly enough and I tried for the first of many times to convince myself that everything would be fine. “Welcome to the Grand River Hotel. How may I help you?”

John stepped forward, pulling his wallet from his pocket to get his ID. “Smith,” he said. “We have a reservation?”

“Alrighty,” she said, typing away on her keyboard, presumably to confirm we had a room. At the time I wondered if it was even necessary since we were obviously the only guests currently there. I wondered how the hotel even stayed in business, let alone afforded the upkeep costs for the building. I kept my mouth shut, knowing that John would most likely just write off my suspicions anyway and having no desire to look paranoid in front of the hotel attendant. She checked his identification and verified his payment.

“Mr. Smith” she said in confirmation as she handed his license back along with an envelope containing two keycards for our room. “You and your wife will just follow this hall to the elevators, head up to the fourteenth floor, take a left at the end of the short hallway, and it’s the fourth door on the right hand side.”

“I’m sorry, the fourteenth floor?” He sounded concerned, a feeling with which I was quickly becoming all too familiar.

The woman nodded and flashed him another smile. “Yes, sir. The fourteenth floor.”

“I booked the honeymoon suite,” he said “I chose that room specifically, room 1508.”

“The building only has fourteen floors.”

I should have insisted right then that we leave. It was one too many weird things, and I could feel the panic really starting to set in. Out of place things were adding up, the isolated building, the vacant atmosphere, the curtains, the lamp and now even our room number had changed because apparently the hotel had lost its top floor.

"I swear the site said fifteen" he said. At the time I hoped that he was starting to feel the same sense of dread I was and we'd be able to leave, but retroactively I know better. He was just concerned with us getting the best room.

"Originally the building had fifteen floors, but there was a fire and the hotel recently underwent some renovations. Management decided that it was cheaper just to remove the top floor rather than to rebuild, and the honeymoon suite was moved one floor down. If there's a problem with your room—"

"No," he said, seeming perfectly content with the explanation he had been offered. "I'm sure it will be fine."

"Alright Mr. Smith. You two enjoy your stay."

"We will. Come on, Jane."

He led me toward the elevators and I swallowed my apprehension to trail behind him. Another stab of fear coursed through me when I saw that the elevator on the right was out of order. He had pulled out his phone and by the time I'd lugged my bags into the working elevator, he was thoroughly distracted by his email. He reached out to hit the button for our floor, only he didn't hit fourteen. He hit fifteen.

"John," I said, the fear adding a squeaky quality to my voice as the doors closed. "John, you hit fifteen." I wasn't sure why that terrified me as much as it did, maybe because I was already feeling so anxious, but I felt like he had somehow condemned us by pressing the wrong button. Maybe he did. He'd go on to assure me multiple times that things were fine, but I might not have felt so foolish had I known then what I do now. Again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Oh," he said, not giving it much thought as he hit the button for fourteen. I didn't say anything else but I felt myself almost paralyzed with fear as the elevator ascended. The air around us suddenly felt uncomfortably warm. I had no idea what to expect, but I prepared myself for the worst, almost positive that something terrible was about to happen.

The elevator stopped at floor fourteen and the doors opened to a pleasant hallway with a furnished waiting area. John, who hadn't been particularly attentive on the ride up, finally looked up from his phone screen with another smirk. "Were you holding your breath?"

I realized that I must have been, though not intentionally. "Leave me alone" I snapped, getting a bit more defensive than I really needed to. He wrapped an arm around me lovingly and steered me toward our room. "It's creepy," I continued. "Why is there a button to a floor that isn't even there?"

He kissed my cheek lightly. "You heard the girl, the renovations were pretty recent. That button used to lead somewhere; they probably just haven't taken it out yet."

"They can't have been that recent" I countered. "If they had been, there would still be work crews around or at least signs of when there were. This place looks like it's been abandoned for some time – I was

shocked there was even an attendant. Besides, how does a fire do enough damage that they need to remove an entire floor, but not manage to spread to the rest of the building? That seems highly unlikely. Fires spread, John. Plus, it was probably burning awhile because there's no fire station anywhere close to here. There's nothing close to here, it's a very weird place to have a hotel."

"Sweetie," he said calmly "you're over-thinking things. I'm sure it's completely safe. You're making this whole thing out to be like one of my novels, and it's not."

"Yeah," I said with a sigh. "I guess. This is your fault, you know. I never used to think up stuff like this until you came along."

He laughed.

"But seriously, where do you think the elevator would have taken us if you hadn't hit the right button on time?"

"I'm sure it would have taken us right through the ceiling to the imaginary floor with the cenobites."

I rolled my eyes at the comment. At the time I had no idea what a cenobite might be (and let me tell you, I wasn't all too pleased with the answer when I finally got a chance to look it up) but I got the gist of his joke and could tell he was just being facetious.

"You could at least try to hide the fact that you're openly mocking me." I scolded, annoyed as he dug out one of our keycards and handed me the envelope with the other. When I took it and his hand was freed up, he unlocked our room and swung the door open.

"See?" He asked after I tentatively followed him inside. "The hotel is fine. We're on the top floor, there's no Hellelevators, no demonic lamps, and nothing you need to worry about."

His teasing was making me pretty irate at that point, but I did feel silly as I stood in what appeared to be a perfectly normal hotel room. He dragged all our things into the space while I looked around, waiting for something to pop out and scare me, but nothing did. Our accommodations were surprisingly lovely, and though it was far from the nicest place we had stayed together, it seemed like it might be plenty comfortable.

"Everything will be fine," he repeated.

"It does look pretty nice," I conceded as he stepped behind me to rub my shoulders.

"How about you and I get dressed up and I'll take you out for dinner? Someplace nice? I'm sure we won't have to go too far."

I readily agreed, the ache in my stomach telling me that food was long overdue. I was just leaning over my suitcase to dig out a nice dress to wear when John's phone began to ring.

"Honey, I'm sorry. It's Billy – I've got to take this."

I nodded, making an honest effort to hide my disappointment. Knowing Billy, I had enough sense to guess with frightening accuracy the length of the phone call, and so I wasted no time in lying down with the hopes of catching some sleep. As I was drifting off something about the room vaguely caught my attention. I was either too distracted by hunger or too drowsy to put my finger on what exactly it was – though it continued to haunt the back of my mind until sleep finally found me.

I was awoken a few hours later by my husband who apologetically explained why his call had lasted as long as it had and asking me if I still wanted to go to dinner, apologizing even more for the fact that we'd have to go somewhere less fancy due to the late hour. That was fine by me, as I honestly would have eaten anything at that point and I readily agreed to the offer. A little over an hour later the two of us were being seated at a chain restaurant, and it tasted better than any other meal I could have chosen.

Although the food was delicious (and more importantly, filling) I almost wish that we hadn't gone out. The fact that we had to drive out so far was disconcerting to say the least, and it wasn't like I had been picky. We ate at the first place we found, it was just that far away from the hotel, which really hammered in just how isolated we were there. I couldn't imagine why anyone would need a hotel of that size so far away from anything that people might want to visit, and I was beginning to have an even deeper understanding of why the place was so vacant. I didn't mention anything about it that time around, not in the mood to be picked on for my "paranoia."

I'll spare you the details of what happened later that night, and the few nights following. Nothing overly relevant to the story happened during that time – and that period can be summed up by simply saying that John and I spent most of those days engaging in what you might consider traditional honeymoon activities from within our room. Suffice to say I enjoyed myself, and for awhile at least, my attention was drawn from the oddities of the hotel. It's strange to think that it was really only those few days that we spent as a happily married, carefree couple. It just feels like we were married so much longer than we really were, though, I suppose that's just because we started the relationship pretending to already be so serious. I digress.

I'll skip ahead then, to the next important development, on our 5th night of staying in the hotel. Every time I had lain in the bed, I had gotten the creeping suspicion that there was something not quite right with my surroundings, though for the life of me I had not been able to figure out what it might be. The first couple times it was just a nagging feeling that picked on me when I laid down and got up, but that night was different. That was the night that I began to have the dreams.

I found myself walking down the hallway, away from our room. I couldn't remember getting out of bed or leaving John's side, but all of the sudden I was there in the middle of the hall making my way toward the elevators. I was incredibly aware of the goose bumps forming on my arms and legs, both of which were incredibly exposed. It occurred to me then that I was still dressed in one of the lacy nightgowns that had been bought for my honeymoon with no intention to ever wear it outside the bedroom area. I wasn't cold exactly, but there was an icy feeling in the pit of my stomach that made me want to turn back. Still, I walked on.

I slowly began to get control of my thoughts as I made the slow journey, but my body was a different story. I was unable to turn myself around, no matter how desperately I wanted to. Ordinarily this might have tipped me off to the fact that I was dreaming, but I wasn't used to experiencing dreams – let alone ones that felt so vivid or so real.

I stopped walking only when I reached the elevators. The one to the right was open, as if it was waiting for me. I stepped inside and immediately the doors closed. I remembered too late that this was the elevator that was supposed to be out of order, and that revelation was quickly overshadowed when the elevator began to move up instead of down. At first it was just a vague sense of panic colliding with all the other things that were scaring me at the moment, but then it came to me that the only floor above ours was floor fifteen, and it was as if my heart had stopped completely.

The doors opened to a floor nearly identical in layout to the one below, but twisted and blackened. It was as though the color had been drained from the world up there, every color but one. Red was splattered across the floor to form a path that to my utter horror, I began to follow. The first step was rough, the blackened remains of what had once been carpet felt hard and pointed on my bare feet. The next step was worse, as my right foot first made contact with where the red started and sank in under my body weight. Warm liquid sloshed over my foot and between my toes and I found that the twisted flooring was saturated with the substance. I felt far too sickened to continue, but once again it seemed as though I had no choice.

I began to tune out as my body carried me down the short hall to the left, and then down another, longer hall. It seemed impossibly long when compared to the corresponding hall down on fourteen that I had just minutes ago been walking down, and longer even than the dimensions of the building should have allowed. I began taking the horrific images in stride, unable to fully process all that I was seeing. Smudged, ashy handprints stained the once cheery and now decrepit wallpaper, contrasting just enough for me to make them out from the rest of the grime coating the hall.

As I moved further along, patches of the wall seemed to have burned away, embers still glowing around the edges of the holes that peered into dark and lifeless rooms. Smoke was pouring from under the doors, dancing around my feet. The further I went the warmer the air around me got.

Finally the hellish walk ended when I stopped outside of room 1508. There was the strange scent of charred flesh and something that smelled worse, more metallic. I thought that over the course of the walk I had become desensitized to fear but a new and even stronger wave of terror flooded through me as I saw my own hand reach for the handle. I tried to resist, but of course I was powerless once again. For one brief moment there was hope. I found myself thinking that the door wouldn't possibly open. There was no real reason why it should, after all. All the doors in the building locked automatically when they closed and I didn't have the keycard. I thought surely there was no way I could get in. The handle twisted and the door swung open, rendering me completely without hope.

The room looked a lot like the one below it, but like the rest of this floor it was charred and under-furnished. There was a smoldering pile of ash and jagged pieces of wood that I assumed had once been a bed, and it was from there that the red seemed to be emanating. I had expected, or rather sensed that there would be something truly frightening in the room, but at first glance there was nothing there that was any scarier than what I had seen in the rest of the floor. As my captive eyes continued to scan the room they stopped at the window and it was only then that I saw it.

My screaming was enough to wake both myself and John and I sat up in bed shaking, drenched in sweat, the realization of what I had seen in my dream hitting me hard. John had jumped up when I started screaming, panicked and alert, albeit obviously confused. He looked as though he was ready to take on anything, but of course he couldn't see what it was I was shrieking about. I was no help as at the time I was completely inconsolable. Seeing no immediate threat he pulled me into his arms, kissed my forehead

and told me over and over it was just a dream while I sobbed into his chest, unable to explain what was wrong. Finally I calmed down just enough to point to our window.

He looked at it, not sure what he was supposed to be seeing. There was nothing there but curtains which we had drawn before going to bed. "Jane, honey. I don't get it. What is it? What's wrong?"

I mustered up all the courage I had in order to find my voice and answer. "There's no lamp in the window."

His mouth opened a little, but he said nothing. I'm not sure what he'd been expecting me to say but probably not that. He hugged me a little tighter in response. I wasn't able to see his face or read his reaction, and it began to dawn on me how insane I probably sounded. I started to worry that my husband thought of me as a lunatic. I might not have blamed him had that been the case because just then I was starting to feel like I was losing my mind. There I was in the middle of the night screaming my head off over the fact that after five nights in the hotel I had finally noticed there was no lamp in our window. Even in my panic, I knew that it must seem psychotic from an outside point of view.

"John?" I asked quietly while I tried to find the words that I would need to rationally explain my irrational fear to him.

"The lamp," he answered just as quietly. His voice was steady enough, but all the same I could tell that he was concerned. "We joked about it on the day we got here."

"We did!" I said, suddenly elated to find that he was following my train of thought. "-but it was never here." I pulled away from him so that I could look up at his face, though I was still unable to tell what was going on in his mind.

"We must have been looking in the wrong room," he said, trying to rationalize.

"We weren't." I argued. "Top floor, the last room on the right. You double checked."

He shook his head slowly. It seemed like a stupid thing to be freaking out over, and I could see him struggling to make sense of things. "It's some kind of mistake." He offered at long last, clearly unwilling to be afraid of a lamp or lack thereof. "Just go back to sleep and we'll figure it out in the morning."

I didn't want to go back to sleep and I certainly didn't want to be in that hotel for even a second longer, but he held me tight and rubbed my back gently until I agreed and then eventually fell back into an uneasy slumber.

The next morning we talked it over. He asked me about my dream and reluctantly I recounted my experience, though I had to struggle to put into words what I had seen. There really is no way of describing it that accurately conveys how terrible it was to go through. He was very patient with me though, nodding along and not saying a single word until I had finished stumbling through.

"Maybe we were looking at the wrong floor," he muttered, almost more to himself than to me.

"What are you talking about?"

“Your dream. You say that you traveled up the floor above us where you saw the lamp in the window. We saw it on the top floor from outside, but according to this vision that you had, this is only the second highest floor. Maybe there really is something to this ghost floor idea. Jane, you’re a genius.” The excitement in his voice had grown with every word and he was practically shouting by the end, though I couldn’t grasp what he meant or why he seemed so happy about it.

“You’re saying you think that there’s an imaginary and haunted lamp-wielding ghost floor above us?” I asked. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the idea.

“I’m saying I’ve got the idea for my next book.” He said grinning and kissing the top of my head lightly.

“What about the lamp?” I thundered, suddenly furious with him for not taking our situation seriously.

“I’ll take you downstairs, we’ll get some breakfast, and then I’ll show you what I mean.”

I grumbled something about how not all of our problems could be solved with food, but I got ready all the same. Being in the elevator (even the one on the left) made me nervous, but I kept quiet about it. Picking up on my anxiety anyway John took my hand in his and squeezed it as we rode down to the lobby. I found his comfort to be almost as condescending as his mocking had been.

He took me to the buffet located through the double doors in the lobby. I wished that we could go somewhere else for breakfast. I didn’t feel hungry to begin with and the idea of actually ingesting anything that came from that building made my stomach churn. I wanted nothing more than to pack our bags and get the hell out of there.

John could tell that he had gotten on my bad side and his behavior made it obvious that he felt guilty about it. Being nice during our meal (well, his meal and my cup of tea) didn’t justify how he had acted. He had been worried about the lamp situation too, and I know that it was a serious concern for him just the night before. It may seem silly to him now by the light of day, but to share my panic briefly and then treat it like a joke the next morning was something that I found to be hypocritical, and frankly insulting.

We said very little to one another as he ate, and afterwards he took me outside to count the floors. At first, even the suggestion infuriated me. I felt like he was humoring me, like he might want to humor a frightened child. I was about to refuse until I noticed that he seemed almost apprehensive about it. It was almost like he expected there to be fifteen floors when we counted. Of course, he never said anything to that effect out loud, but I could tell. After that I softened toward him – feeling sort of bad for getting so angry in the first place. Almost a full week of me complaining to him about the building and I’d finally gotten in his head about it.

He was either too stubborn or too proud (most likely both) to admit that the lamp not being in our room obviously bothered him, but I could see that it did. Keeping that in mind I had less trouble counting floors with him. We each counted the number of floors two times and all four counts came up to fourteen.

“See?” He asked, and I could hear the relief in his voice. “No extra floors.”

“But the lamp, John.” I countered with exasperation. “That still doesn’t explain the lamp we saw or why it’s not in our room.”

I could tell that he didn't actually have any real theories regarding this, but that did nothing to slow down his denial of our situation.

"I don't know what happened with the lamp, Jane, but it could have been anything. Maybe the cleaning staff moved it or it broke, maybe it wasn't even our room we saw it in. I mean look how high up that is, I can barely even see our room now. And with the glare in the window, I'm not even sure if I could see a lamp if there was one there. Maybe there never was a lamp there to begin with."

I sighed, feeling myself getting frustrated with him again. I understood why he wanted so badly to let this go – no one wants to worry about killer lamps on their honeymoon, but something weird was going on and denying it wasn't going to get us anywhere. "You saw it, too. We talked about it. You teased me about it. You can't just tell me that it was never there."

He could see that I was just mere seconds away from getting hysterical over this again. "Look, all I'm saying is that anything is possible. It's not all that hard to move a lamp."

"John..." I sighed, but I had no follow up.

"Alright," he said calmly before I was able to come up with more to say. "Why don't you tell me what you think is going on?"

"I..." I didn't know. I didn't really think the lamp had moved on its own and up until recently (and possibly including then) I didn't really believe in ghosts. The extra floor theory was starting to make sense to me, but I didn't want him thinking I was crazy. I had nothing to say to argue my point, but I was unwilling to drop the subject just yet, especially when I had come so close to finally having him on my side. "I don't know." I admitted, finally giving up. "I don't know what's going on, but I know that it's not normal."

"Okay," he said carefully. "Well how would you like to handle it?"

"I just want to go home." I hadn't realized how close I was to crying until the moment when the tears started rolling down my cheeks.

He pulled me into a tight embrace, wrapping both his arms around me securely. "I know it's weird. Even I'll admit, the whole thing is deeply unsettling. If I hadn't arranged a conference here and if it weren't starting tomorrow, I'd pack us up and we would leave right now. This wasn't the best place to come, I see that now, and I apologize, but we need to stay here a little longer, okay? The guys will be here tomorrow, and we'll take it from there. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded. I didn't want to stay, but it was easier to agree now that he was finally starting to take me seriously. There was also still a tiny part of me that believed I was being paranoid and overreacting to the whole thing. On the off-chance that was the case, I didn't want to ruin his conference over nothing.

"Thank you," he said gently. " - And I really am sorry. I know this trip has been weird, and it's not what you had in mind for our honeymoon, but I promise if you just bear with me I'll make it up to you when we get home. While I'm getting my work finished, you can plan the Smith Honeymoon Take 2. We can go anywhere you want and do anything you want, and we'll forget all about this, okay?"

I just nodded again. I felt deeply emotional, and I didn't trust myself to speak out loud just then.

“And we’re just going to take it easy today, okay?”

“Okay.” I said, weakly. I knew that “taking it easy” meant staying in the hotel, which was not a plan I was overly fond of, but I felt emotionally exhausted and it was beginning to seem like I had no choice. True to his word, he stopped teasing me about the lamp and though I wasn’t entirely able to put the drama behind me, that day did make it seem as though things were going to get better for us.

That night however, I had the dream again. Just like the night before I was walking down the hall, toward the elevators, unable to stop myself. I made a right and got into the one that was supposedly out of order, but which I found to be open and waiting for me. It took me to the fifteenth floor.

When I got up there, the elevator stopped. The doors opened and I got out. The lights flickered in the freakishly long hallway and as I approached the room, fear once again began to mount inside me. I pulled the door open. The room was charred, just like before, only this time around there really was something horrible there in the room with me. The charred pile of boards had reverted back into a bed that looked uncannily like the one I had fallen asleep in. The red was still there, saturating the bed-spread, and there was a woman lying face down in it.

The parts of her that weren’t covered in what I could only assume to be her own blood were the palest white I’ve ever seen, and though I could see no visible injuries I knew that she was dead. I wanted nothing more than to get my husband and get out of there, but I couldn’t regain control.

My gaze turned toward the lamp, standing there in front of the window. I noticed that it was much lighter outside than it should have been. I watched my hands as they reached to pull the curtains open, only they weren’t mine. I don’t know how I hadn’t noticed that before, they were too small to be my hands and on top of that they were an unnerving shade of white. I wanted to look at myself, but of course was unable to do so. Once the curtains were open though, I saw my reflection in the glass.

I would have gasped if I could. I had already figured out that the body I was inhabiting was not my own, but the appearance was startling all the same. The face staring back at me was a woman’s face. She appeared to be around my age, but smaller. She was deathly pale and had blood matted in her dark hair. I knew at once it was the reflection of the girl on the bed.

Through her eyes I watched as a single car pulled into the lot. After a moment a man got out and then a woman. I choked up when I realized that I was looking down at myself and my husband about to check into the hotel. In horror I watched as I, or rather the ghost girl whose body I was in, reached out and turned on the lamp.

I woke up screaming again. My body was drenched in a cold sweat and I could not stop shaking. I wished that John was there to comfort me, but I found the bed empty and rightly assumed he had already gone to work.

The first day alone in our room was not as scary as I thought it would be. Ultimately it proved to be more boring than anything. There wasn’t much for me to do – and even less of it was stuff that I felt like doing. I had planned on pampering myself while John was at his conference, but that was back when I thought we’d be staying somewhere nice and normal. There was no sauna, no hot-tub, and I had no desire to visit a fitness center that I believed might very well be haunted.

The second day though, boredom really kicked in and I caved. I put on my workout clothes and rode the elevator (the one on the left of course) down to the lobby so I could find the fitness center. Again, the day wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been – though I was constantly worried about just how quiet the place was. There were (allegedly) other people already in the hotel at that point for the conference but I had yet to come across anyone. I couldn't even remember the last time I had seen a staff member. Surely we must have interacted with some staff members since our check-in, but I couldn't remember. I tried to convince myself that it was just because the conference was on the second floor and the other wives had probably been smart enough to stay home. Keeping that in mind I was able to stay fairly distracted and it was only when I decided to call it a night and go back up to the room that things got really bad. I entered the lobby and immediately noticed something that made my stomach churn.

The “out of order” sign was now posted on the left elevator, making the right one available. I didn't want to get into the elevator on the right – in fact that was the last thing that I ever wanted to have to do. I thought about taking the stairs – but after a long day filled with vigorous working out, I wasn't sure my legs had it in them to make it up fourteen flights of stairs. Still, the idea of getting into that stupid elevator made my heart pound uncontrollably in my chest. Reluctantly I pressed the button.

The doors opened and I had to resist the urge to call John and let him know that we were going home, no excuses. I looked straight ahead as I pressed the button for fourteen and the doors closed. The sound they made when they sealed shut was so ominous and as it began to rise I felt the tension building. I did everything in my power to keep myself from looking up at the numbers. Part of me wanted to, just to make sure that I stopped on fourteen, but there was this growing feeling inside me that told me if I looked up, I'd regret it.

Slowly the elevator pulled to a stop and I patiently waited for the doors to open. It felt like an eternity. I began to feel trapped. I tried to breathe deeply, but the air around me suddenly felt stale. I realized I was sweating. I couldn't remember it being this hot in the hotel. I tried to talk myself down while keeping my gaze straight ahead of me at the doors I kept praying were about to open any second. It had been a tense ride; I had gotten myself worked up, it made sense that it felt I had been in there longer than I actually had been. I started counting the seconds in my head, knowing that the doors had to be about to open. After sixty seconds my resolve died and I glanced up at the floor numbers. I screamed before I could entirely process what I was seeing. According to the elevator I was on the fifteenth floor.

I continued screaming, not able to stop myself even as the elevator slowly began to move back down to fourteen. By the time the doors were open and I had clambered out into the safety of the hall my lungs were burning for air. It had waited. It wasn't enough that the goddamned thing had taken me up to that ghost floor, but it had waited until I had looked up at the numbers. It waited until I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt where I was before it had let me go. I thanked God for the small mercy that at least the doors had not opened onto fifteen, terrified of what I might have seen if they had.

Our vacation had been creeping by so slowly up until that point, but everything that happened after I picked myself up off the floor of the hallway went by so quickly in comparison that I barely remember – and there's a part of me that still feels like I might have been dreaming. I rushed back to our room, my legs shaking the whole way. I closed the door solidly behind me, and before I could talk myself out of it or reconsider I began to pack our things. Something had finally clicked in my brain that this wasn't a prank, it wasn't paranoia and even though I couldn't explain it, I knew it was dangerous. I'd be damned if I was

about to let John or anyone talk me into spending another night in that room. It turns out, I was damned anyway.

I figured John would be skeptical of my story, and I didn't care. I was determined that we were going to leave. Little did I know that at that point it was already too late.

I tried calling him a few times, left more than a few frantic voicemails, and sent at least a dozen texts. I hadn't really expected an answer since he was busy, but I was past caring. I had to try. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. I waited up for him that night, intent on leaving the second he got back to the room. I figured it was going to be a long night – but the adrenaline had me too worked up to have gone to bed had I wanted to. I spent the time that it took him to return going over my arguments for leaving over and over again in my head, trying to think about what I'd do if he insisted on staying.

It was obvious when the door opened that my time had been wasted. One look at my husband's face told me that I wouldn't have to argue my case at all. I was no longer the only one wanting to leave. He had experienced it too, and I was almost relieved.

"The elevator-" I started, but he cut me off, grabbing my shoulders roughly.

"Jane," he met my eyes with his, looking more serious than I could ever recall seeing him before. "Don't. If they open don't go out there. Don't you dare."

I could feel the tears streaming down my face. I knew what he was talking about, but at the same time I felt like I had a million questions. Did that mean the doors had opened for him? Had he gone out there? What had he seen? What had happened that had gotten him so suddenly and completely on board? He kissed the top of my head gently before picking up his share of the luggage and leading me out of the room for the last time, toward the elevators. My heart was racing, but it was the happiest I had been since our arrival – we were finally about to leave. When we got to the end of the last hallway however, he pushed the button to go up and pointed me toward the stairs.

"I'll meet you at the bottom."

"John, no, where are you-" I knew there was only one place he could be thinking of going, but I couldn't wrap my head around why. He placed his bags in the door to keep the elevator from closing, and then pulled a bag from the pocket of his jacket. Inside was a handful of small bottles from the mini-bar (though it occurred to me later, they couldn't have been from our room), a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, and a box of matches.

"It's the best I could scrape up. It's not much, but it will have to do."

His intentions, retroactively, were obvious, but I couldn't make the leap at the time. "What are you planning on doing?"

"It has to burn. Those things up there have to burn."

I didn't know what things he was talking about and my heart fluttered. Suddenly I didn't care as much about the paranormal aspect or the haunted ghost floor or the dysfunctional elevator. I was still panicked, but the tiny, rational part of my brain was realizing that my husband was planning on burning down a

building. At the time, that seemed like a bigger deal. “John, no. Forget about it. Let’s just leave. This isn’t our problem. Whatever is going on, it’s not our problem. We can go home.”

He shook his head. “It is. It is our problem. It’s not a ghost floor, Jane. It’s a real floor and the things up there....they shouldn’t exist. They shouldn’t be alive. But they are. They’re real and they saw me.” For the first time I noticed how wide his eyes were, and how bloodshot. “I have to do this.”

“You can’t.” I choked up a little. It felt like my brain was starting to go numb and even though I was hearing his words, I was unable to process them correctly. I felt like it was a pivotal moment, and something bad was about to happen. “You can’t.” I repeated. “There are people in the building, and you can’t just....you can’t.”

“Things happened up in that room, Jane. Things were born up in there. The first fire was supposed to take care of it, but, it just made things worse. Now I have to try again, I have to end this before something a hell of a lot worse than fire starts spreading in this damned hotel. Someone needs to end this once and for all.”

“John!” I cried out, scared. He had stopped saying things I knew how to react to or was able to rationalize. I believed him, but at the same time I didn’t want him to go up there. He put his hands on my shoulders again.

“You were afraid of the lamp, Jane, but it was just a warning. They wanted to draw our attention up, up there. They wanted us to know that there were things trapped up on that floor and now it’s too late. You have to understand that it’s too late. We’ve seen them now and if we don’t end this then neither one of us is going to be safe. Not now, not if we go home, not ever. We’ve seen them.”

“John, I haven’t seen anything.”

“You have. In your dreams. She was telling you, warning you. Goddamn it, I should have listened. We should have gotten out. We weren’t safe, not from the start. I have to go, someone has to finish this. When I come down, I promise you, we’ll leave. We’ll go home and you and I will be free of this whole thing.” He kissed me quickly, and before I could object he had pulled his luggage in behind him.

“I love you!” I called as the doors started to move.

“I love you too,” he paused briefly before repeating his instructions to me. “Take the stairs. I’ll see you at the bottom.”

The doors closed, and that was the last I ever saw of him. It took me a long time to reach the lobby carrying all my bags down fourteen flights of stairs and he wasn’t there. I waited for him for a long time. I sat on my bags, staring at the elevator until the fire alarms started ringing and I was eventually ushered out onto the street.

When I got outside I turned to face the building and counted the floors. There were fifteen. I watched from the ground as smoke began to fill the room, clouding my view of the lamp, still shining. I knew already that John wouldn’t be coming back down, but I didn’t dare weep for him until it was over. I stared up, too afraid to blink and I watched as the ghost floor was destroyed, taking my husband along with it.

At some point the hotel must have evacuated John's colleagues as well, for as the smoke began to clear I became vaguely aware that I was surrounded by other people. Still, nothing drew my attention away from the window until I saw a familiar hand turn off the lamp. I glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed. They hadn't, and when I looked back up the lamp was gone. I counted the floors, then I recounted again and again. There were only fourteen.

None of the hotel staff noticed that there was a floor missing – and why would they? As far as they had been concerned, they had lost the fifteenth floor a long time ago. The alarms stopped ringing on their own, and once the smoke cleared there was no sign of a fire. It was like the whole thing had never happened. It was, in the end, attributed to “faulty wiring.” I didn't correct them, or try to explain full well what I knew to be the truth – not even when they took my report. All I told them was that, during the fire, my husband went missing and I hadn't seen him since. I knew they wouldn't be able to find him any more than I could, but I also knew that such reports were customary. The case is, to the public, “unsolved.” He's been a “missing person” for over a year now.

As I told you when I started, I'm not a writer. I can't wrap this whole thing up for you in a way that's nice or neat or makes any sense past what little I understand. That was always John's job. He was the writer, and he had this need to wrap things up neatly, to ask the big questions and to finish things. He died wrapping up someone else's story. That just leaves me here, unsure of the details or of what I should tell any of you who might be reading this. The one thing that I can leave you with is what motivated me to type this all out after living with it for so long.

You see, John said that the lamp was a warning and I believe that's probably true. Since researching the history of the hotel brought me no closer to the answers I sought, I have been reading about all things paranormal. It's a common part of many mythologies that the dead use lights as a way to communicate with the living and vice versa. Ghosts can induce fear by putting us in the dark and, in some cases, draw our attention with illumination.

There were things up on that floor that wanted blood, and other things that wanted to keep us safe. I think that's usually how it goes, that we're protected by the dead as often as we're hunted by them. I think that the lamp was lit because there was danger, and I think it went out when the danger had been, at least temporarily, resolved.

Here's the thing. When I came home the other day every single light in my house, the fireplace, the night lights, the candles, the lamps, every single one was lit. There's only one set of creatures from the beyond that I can think of that would want me silenced for having seen them. I don't know how they could have gotten here or why they're not gone, but I know it must be them. On the other side of that however, I can only think of one person from the beyond who would go out of his way to try and warn me.

I don't think it matters what started this. Despite my best attempts to do research on ghosts and lights and the history of that building, it's very possible I won't live long enough to get the answers I've been looking for. What's worse is that I can't promise that it would even end with my death. If the destruction of their home didn't stop whatever was up there, who knows where they'll go next – which is why I'm doing my best to let people know before I go that there are dangers out there that we can't begin to understand in this life. Maybe this story will help people see the warning signs before it's too late.

As for what I'll do? Well that's easy. I plan to stay. I miss John, more than words could possibly say, and more than I ever could have imagined. I'm looking forward to seeing him again. He can't scare me out of

our home anymore than I could scare him out of that hotel, and regardless of what he's trying to tell me, I won't leave. I never wanted to spend my life running; I just wanted to spend it with him. I'm going to stay, and I'm going to make sure those lights get turned off for good, one way or the other.



LIGHTING LIFE

WRITTEN BY BEN PETT AND ALAN JOHNSON

ILLUSTRATED BY ALAN JOHNSON

My parents always told me that
I was special.



I've always had these
weird powers.



Dad says it's magic.



But mom says I'm a
psychic, like her.

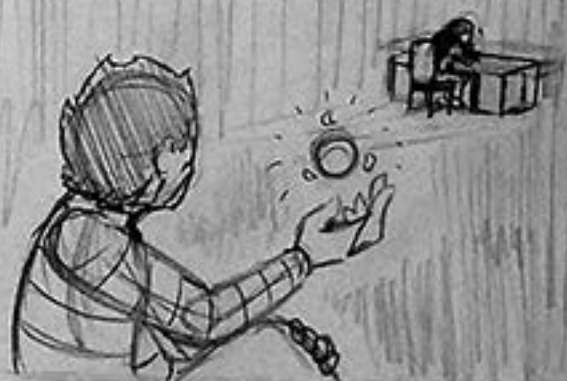


Dad's nice, but I like spending
time with Mom more. She's
cool, calm, collected - and her
powers are strong too.

She doesn't show her emotions
much, but she loves me more than anything.

Still, she was never really
happy or anything.

She didn't love Dad,
and we didn't live near
him or her other friends.
So when she thought I
wasn't looking, she'd get
real sad.



And then, **he** showed up.



WHAM!

CZAR IS HERE!



How's that for a fuckin' announcement?



...



Who the fuck is this kid?



Are you one of mom's friends?



Well, you could say -



Wait, Siren, you're a mom??





She's more than
a mom! She's the
best mom!



"Great"
is putting it
lightly.

So you must
be pretty great if
you're allowed here.



My gang owns this town,

Wa ha ha!><



That's a
good one,
mister!



Ha ha ha!

What, you some
kind of political
analyst now!?

Everyone knows
mom's in charge
around here!



Ha ha ha!



Siven, is your kid
keeping score or something?



I suppose so.



Czar, this is
my son, Icarus. Icarus,
this is Czar.



I guess
you could say
we're some form
of acquaintances.



EWOOSH!

ACQUAINTANCES!>



BEEP BEEP!

Hi, Dad!





So... what did you come here for?

Well, you know what I was here for, but... there's your kid here. So, eh.



So, you're leaving?



Nah.

I know you'd miss me if I left anyways, so I'll stick around.



Right, of course.



What would I do without you?

Yeah, she's real close to him now!



I hadn't ever seen my mom get that close to anyone for a long time. And even though she'd never admit it, Czar would go on to be a very important person in her life.

And in mine too.



Czar was special, too. He was a "pyrokinetic," a psychic who could control fire. Usually by making things spontaneously combust. It was almost as cool as mom's!

He radiated a kind of warmth, both literally and figuratively.



The kind of guy with infectious energy. The life of the party, even when he wasn't invited.

But most importantly, he made mom so, so happy, in a way I never could.

It was like he lit a fire inside her right next to the one I did. Mine was better, of course, but you know what I mean.



I guess what I'm saying with
all this is that sometimes people
come into our lives to make
them brighter.



Even when you have cool
light powers like me!

[End.]

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Toxic Bubblegum 2018

