



The Weeping Stairwell

A Childhood Haunting in Death's Waiting Room

The air in this place always felt heavy - as if the particles around us had increased in mass. An invisible snow that chilled as much as it weighed down.

I never liked coming here...

Something about this care home for the elderly just always feels *off*.

There was always a lingering sorrow that oppressed you just as much as the smell when you walked through the door. Bleach and sanitising alcohol, mixed with faeces and the acrid, sour smell of urine that hung in the back of your throat like an infectious bat...

My grandfather would always joke that these places were death's waiting room. I had never really known what he meant, until I stepped foot in this dreaded house...

My sister and I are not here by choice. My mum unfortunately can't always find a sitter for us, which means we have to spend the odd day here and there with her during the summertime. It's not so bad - once you get used to the smell - and if you're there in the daytime.

It was the night times that were the worst...

Despite the unpredictable behaviour of some residents afflicted with dementia, we still had some fun times. Celebrating birthdays with the residents, hearing their stories from generations I'll never know, and helping myself to as many *Werther's Originals* as I could get my hands on.

Despite the perks I never truly felt comfortable.

Ominous vibrations were all around us, as if something else was present...

The night shifts were when the home would start to reveal its darker side.

We would stay in the manager's top-floor flat, attempting to sleep despite the wails and moans rising through the floorboards to meet us.

The infirm and aged unwittingly becoming our night-time tormentors.

One night, my curiosity got the better of me - so I ventured out of the flat...

Looking back now, as I recount this tale for you dear reader, I realise that it wasn't curiosity at all that got me out of that bed - I was answering the call of that which beckoned.

Obedying the thing that begged me to follow.

A light.

The glow appeared around the edges of the large, pockmarked oak fire door that separated us from the residents, pulsing slightly as it caressed the gap between the door and its frame.

A whisper flew past my ear. It was a sound that felt familiar, despite having never heard it before. Youthful. Safe.

My bare feet gently kissed the mottled and slightly damp beige carpet that was coming loose of the floor in multiple corners, and at the edges along the corridor as I crept forwards.

Running lights for the fire exit illuminated the walls with a neon green, making the shadowed spots appear like tomb pillars. At the very least, the light hid the moulding and

peeling wallpaper. A small plastic humidifier sat in an almost defeated state in the corner, as green mould stains had got it surrounded - the poor thing looking out of place in such an old house.

I pushed through the next fire door into another corridor. The running lights were off, replaced by an orange glow that engulfed the passage ahead... a light that had no source. At least, none that I could see.

The glow moved along the corridor. I made sure to keep pace with it, fearful of being engulfed by the darkness it left in its wake.

Then, it stopped at a large glass door. The central panel of which was a motif of flowers - chicken wire hidden within, as if to contain anything, or anyone, that would wish to smash through it...

"Something for the more violent residents..." I thought to myself.

The door opened independently as I approached...

I followed.

The glow came to a stop at the top of the stairwell. Centralising itself now within the ceiling, its brightness increased slightly as it enveloped the chandelier before it evaporated - a dim glow now only coming from the running lights on each step that descended.

The chandelier, limp and lifeless moments before, now appeared to sway from side to side.

"Odd..." I thought to myself, as there was no wind. The air was deathly still...

The chandelier cared not and swung all the same...

Cobwebs in the candle stick holders fluttering.

As it slowed, I heard another faint whisper...

Then...

THUMP!

I could do nothing - reduced to a petrified coward of a spectator.

A child finding himself in a very real and adult situation - a confrontation with the unknown.

"Why is nobody helping him?!" she bellowed to the shadows. Out of which emerged two carers.

"Edith, oh my word! Come here... What are you doing out of bed?"

Edith was frantic, desperately trying to free herself from my mother and her colleague...

Desperate to remain on the floor at the bottom of the stairwell.

She held up her empty arms.

"Help him, please... for God's sake he's **DYING!**"

Her hysterics were starting to wake the other residents. Moans and cries echoing now through the halls of the manor house...

The home was becoming a restless beast at the midnight hour.

The carers helped her up and guided her gently back to her room - trying to console what they didn't understand.

I returned back to the flat, the wails and moans reverberating around me, as I climbed into bed, placed my head under the pillow and pressed down hard to drown them out.

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Breakfast seemed to take an age to arrive - and when it did, I wasn't sure I had slept enough to have earned it.

"Was your shift okay, mum?" I asked with a tone that I feared may give away that I already knew the answer due to my midnight snooping.

"It was a tough one. One of the residents had a bit of a disturbed night... bless her," she explained.

"Was that what that noise was around midnight? The screams..."

My mum nodded softly through fatigue, as she wrapped both hands around her mug of tea - a morning hug.

"Yes... Edith seems to be struggling more every day..."

She hung her head...

"I just hope we can get her calm and a bit more settled... Life is hard enough at this age. The last thing we want is for this not to feel like home. We just want her to feel safe, but she's always on edge..."

I nodded in agreement. Then a thought crept up on me.

"Mum?"

"Yes?"

"Is this what getting old looks like? Screaming and living somewhere that wasn't always your home?"

Her eyes grew wet as she reached her hand across the table to place over mine.

"Not for everyone... but, even if it does look like this for most, at the very least it will be after living a full and wonderful life..."

She stared intently into my eyes as she gave my hand a little squeeze, as if to comfort the voice of worry she could hear in my head. The kind of thought that was far down the line, imagining the end of my life... and how I feared it would resemble what I saw the night before...

"Well... just remember, ageing is a privilege, so if this is the price, then I am sure we'll pay it gladly when we get there..."

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The nights remained the same. A recurrence of that same evening.

A glowing light.

The chandelier swinging.

The whispers.

The weeping at the bottom of the stairwell.

Edith, crying out the same phrases. Over. And over. And over again.

"Why won't you help him?"

More cradling of nothingness.

The chandelier would continue to swing in the dead space above.

The events finally stopped the night after Edith passed away.

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Around a year passed since Edith's final screams at the bottom of the stairwell.

The nights were now only filled with the usual hum of the other residents. The odd beep would go out from a piece of medical machinery to punctuate. A metronome with which the elderly could not keep in rhythm with. They had lost that before arriving here..

The incidents in the stairwell were well on their way to being retired to memory.

That changed when the manager decided it was time to sort through the attic..

Within the dusty, musty attic, atop old, withered planks, nestled by fibreglass and wrapped in chilled air, was an old trunk...

Hidden within were all manner of ancestral trinkets and antiquities belonging to the previous owners. Long forgotten, it would seem. Baby clothes, partially eaten by moths. A jar of teeth. Photographs. A book of collected stamps. A lock of hair.

And a leather-bound diary..

It creaked as it opened - releasing the scent of days long gone. Words scribbled from those that had moved on..

And that is where we learned of the tragedy that had befallen the house, many years ago.

The loss of a five-year-old son..

One day, while the children were playing unsupervised, the five-year-old boy had attempted to swing from the chandelier. He fell headfirst through the centre of the stairwell...

To his death...

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I lay awake that night. Another late shift with my mum in the flat.

The door creaked open as a cold gust rushed over me. Vapour escaped my lips in a twisting mist.

I felt the call again, as a whisper lightly touched my ear. The light emanated once more from behind the door, as it creaked slowly open.

I followed.

At the top of the stairwell, I watched the light dissolve around the chandelier as it began to sway.

"HOWWWWWWWWWWWLLLLLLLLL!!!!!"

I ran to the bannister to look down - only to find empty space in the darkness below. No grey hair. No cradling nothingness.

"Won't somebody please help him?" I hear a voice cry out, but it sounds trapped... Disembodied.

The rest of the home is waking. The moans and the wails...

Then, a moment of silence arrives, however fleeting...

And in it, I hear only one sound...

That of a child's laughter, coming from the chandelier...

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