

Miasma

“What was that awful smell?” June twisted her body in the passenger seat, straining against the seatbelt as Michael guided the minivan into the garage while the mechanical door shut behind them. When the door touched down on concrete, clouds puffed around it, maybe exhaust fumes, but near the ground the smoke looked yellow, not like exhaust normally looked, not that June normally looked at exhaust.

Michael unfastened his seatbelt and reached for the back while June faced front, switched her Starbuck’s venti latte to her right hand, unbuckled, and gathered her purse. Rustling meant Michael had the shopping bag, so June got out of the minivan without giving him another look. He was saying something when she shut the door.

With the coffee balanced in her left hand again, she was fishing for her keys to open the house’s garage entrance when the driver’s side door slammed shut. “I think it followed us home.”

June clenched her keys. “What?”

“The... odor,” Michael said, coming to her side. “The foulness. Let’s get inside.”

She pulled out her keys and almost lost her Starbuck’s. Thank goodness for plastic lids on paper cups. June led them inside, but Michael walked by her, through the breakfast area, as she retrieved her key from the lock. The shopping bag from the hardware store with its sole, small item swung pendular beside him and whacked her thigh as he passed. He didn’t notice; he dropped his wallet, keys, and cellphone on the kitchen counter. She closed the garage entrance and set her purse on a different countertop. Leaning against the sink, she watched him take

his *part* from the hardware bag and examine it. "So that's the cure, huh?"

"Yeah," he said without looking at her. "The new lid switch for the washing machine."

"And it'll solve all our problems?"

He looked at her askance. "Yes."

June put on a faint smile. "I don't recall you becoming a handyman."

"I did what everybody else with any sense does these days. I watched a how-to video on YouVids. It looks pretty simple. I can handle it if you'll hold the flashlight." Michael's smile might have been sincere.

"We could hire a real repairman," June said.

"We're trying to save money."

"That's why a stranger lives in our basement." She looked away from him, toward the hall with the basement door.

"I've known him since high school. Okay, I knew him during high school, but not since." Michael took his *part* out of its packaging. "I thought you liked Frank."

June sucked liquid from her latte, which had achieved room temperature. "You like Frank." She sighed. "I'd like a better way to solve our money problems."

"Like maybe cutting Starbuck's out of the budget?"

"Very funny."

"I wasn't joking."

"Okay." June stopped leaning and moved toward the basement door. "Let's be people with sense. *Landlords* with sense. Let's go repair the washing machine like the handy people we are."

The creaking of basement stairs underlined the quiet in the house's remainder, the absence of noise from Rachel—probably on her computer upstairs with fellow fourteen-year-old socialites—and from Anson—probably

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on his PlayStation upstairs with other eight-year-olds who understood today's technology better than June ever would—as well as from Frank, who either wasn't home or slept behind the closed bedroom door they passed as they tiptoed down the basement hallway. After slipping inside, they closed the door to the basement's unfinished section where they kept the washer and dryer. The room featured bare cinderblock walls, exposed pipes, and the oversized water heater they probably should have replaced five years ago. June didn't scrub the mildew from the damp corners, and she was pretty sure Michael didn't, and she was damned sure the kids didn't, so this room always smelled bad—

—but *this* bad?

June coughed. “Oh, Michael. Oh God.” She eyed the water heater. “Could it be gas?”

Her husband crouched by the water heater and sniffed to his lungs' full capacity. “It's not... coming from here... doesn't smell like gas, anyway. It's *rancid*.”

“Like maybe something died?” June asked. *Then why could we smell it long before we got home?*

Taking shorter whiffs, Michael explored the room. “Maybe the plumbing?” He sniffed along a low-hanging pipe. “No. It's... diffuse.”

Watching Michael's quick breaths, the sick air he pumped in and out of his body, made her dizzy. “Careful,” she said, and her voice sounded far away. “You'll hyperventilate.” In her head, her voice sounded like static.

“Wha—?” Michael fell on his knees, then toppled. June blacked out.



When they'd gone shopping, he'd left his toolbox in the kitchen. He hadn't thought of it before, but he was sure now that it hadn't been there when they'd come home, when they'd come downstairs—

"June," Michael said. "June, come on, wake up. You need to get off the floor."

She roused with a snort and a grimace. "Uh! What's—"

He extended a hand to help her up.

"What's going on?"

"Take my hand. The smell is stronger lower down. Stand up, or at least try." His hand remained extended. His wife didn't seem to have grasped any urgency in their situation.

She did grasp his hand, though, and got to her feet. "We... passed out?"

Impatience wracked his nerves, but he didn't think he could catch her up any faster than she would assess the situation on her own.

"The smell," she said. "Your face!"

Michael's right hand went to his left cheek, where he'd felt the bumps already. He assumed they looked like the bumps on June's neck and right forearm. He assumed the discolored splotches on his own right arm meant bumps would rise there soon, too. The bumps were small, bigger and rounder than most pimples but small. They might have been... pustules. He didn't feel anxious to find out. He and his wife had other problems. "My face, your neck, your arm, whatever it is," he said, "it's spreading, and it's got to have something to do with the smell, right? The fumes?"

"An allergic reaction?" June said.

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"Maybe," Michael said. His brain said *toxin*. It elaborated, *biotoxin*, but he didn't know what the elaboration got him.

"Well fuck the goddamned washing machine! We've got to get out of here! Find the kids, put some distance between us and... whatever this is... call for help... what? What is wrong with you?"

June edged toward the door back to the finished part of the basement that had become Frank's apartment, but Michael looked at neither her nor the exit. He sensed her frustration with his stillness and waited for her to get a clearer look at the door.

He'd left his toolbox in the kitchen.

"Are those... *nails*?" June asked.

"Yes," Michael said. He couldn't be sure the nails had come from the supply in his toolbox. Maybe someone had come with their own supply of nails. Whoever had done the job hadn't made the door very secure. The hinges swung into the room, so whoever had hammered the nails into the doorframe had pinned the door to it at awkward angles with shallow penetration. A few good pulls might open the door no matter how many nails pinned it. The problem was—

"Who would nail us in?" June asked.

The problem was what might wait on the other side of the door.

"Do you think it was Frank?" June asked.

"I don't know," Michael said. "Maybe." Ruling anything out right now seemed hasty.

"This is absurd," June said. "Do you think Frank's responsible for the smell, too? Whatever it is?"

Rot. Rot and something more. Something chemical.
"I don't know," Michael said. "I doubt it. Do you remember—"

“Because I told you I didn’t want him living here. He has *guns*. I know he served in the military, but I don’t like guns in my house.” June sounded as if renewing this particular argument couldn’t have had better timing.

Being honest, Michael would have to admit that Frank’s guns had occurred to him as things on the other side of the door to be concerned about. However, he had another specter to raise. “Do you remember that white truck we saw, by the sewer access, that had those tubes—”

“What does that have to do with Frank?”

“I’m not talking about Frank,” Michael said, failing to hide his annoyance. “I’m talking about the truck that I at least assumed was cleaning something out, but *maybe* it was pumping something *in*. Under the house. Under the whole neighborhood, I don’t know.”

June’s jaw shook, and her voice quavered when she said, “We’ve got to get out of here.” She coughed.

Michael looked at his arm, the splotches, splotches where bumps were forming. The peripheries of his senses fuzzed, the horrid smell dulling the edges of consciousness. June was right. Whatever waited on the other side of the door—guns, men from white trucks—here, they would collapse, and they might not get up again. With giant steps, he attacked the door, grabbing its knob and jerking it inward, daring it not to splinter against the nails that did such a poor job of gripping it.

CRACK!

The door jiggled but didn’t open. Michael wrapped both hands around the knob, braced a foot against the frame, and yanked.

POP!

The doorknob felt loose in his hands, as if it might separate from the door, but the door’s cheap particle

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boards were giving up, letting go of nails, might come free with one more puuuuuuuuuuIIIIIIIIII—

The doorknob broke free in Michael's hand, and he fell backward, ass hitting concrete floor as the door swung inward with him.

"You got it!" June exclaimed. She paused. She looked at him. "Are you okay?"

"A hand up would be lovely."

"You're okay," she said.

As June peeked out the door, Michael got up on his own. He could see what she saw, which wasn't much: the hall passed a closet on the left and a bathroom on the right before it turned left, making the doorways to the remaining two rooms invisible. But he did see—

Did it mean—?

His toolbox sat on the hallway's thin, tan carpet, pushed against the wall by the bathroom door.

Men from white trucks would have their own tools. Frank, on the other hand—

Why would Frank try to trap them in the unfinished part of the basement?

Why would he do such a shitty job?

"Maybe...."

"What?" June asked.

"Hang back here a minute," Michael said.

"Are you crazy?"

"Let me scope out the rest of the basement," Michael said.

June seemed to calculate. "Okay," she said. She stepped away from the door.

Michael launched into the hall. His toolbox was closed, and as he passed it, he saw himself bending over, opening the lid, and taking out the hammer. What would he do with the hammer? The hammer felt good in his

hand, but he wasn't sure he remembered doing anything more than *thinking* about retrieving it. Nevertheless, his grip was tight, low, and ready. He turned the corner into the long section of the hallway, passed the open doorway to the bonus room that served as Frank's living room, and passed the closed door to Frank's bedroom. The hall turned again, and he stood before the stairs to the main level. Nothing would stop them from getting to higher ground, but his grip on the hammer didn't loosen.



She could have asked him to whistle, should have asked him to because the moment he turned the corner out of her sightline the basement was dead silent. The gas—smoke, fog, whatever it was—had filled the room up beyond her ankles, yellow wisps, substantial from some angles and evanescent from others, and seemed as deep in the hall. She pushed the broken door as close to closed as it would go. The nails that had ineffectively tacked it into the doorframe now kept it from shutting. June paced, and she listened.

What if Michael abandoned her?

She was supposed to be able to trust him. Did she? In a matter of life or death....

Was this... matter... a matter of life or death?

Despite the attempt at listening, the pop of the door swinging open still made her jump and shout, "Oh!"

Michael rushed in. He gripped a hammer in his right hand.

She felt dour. "Did you *scope it out*? Reconnaissance complete?"

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He regarded her with expressionlessness that made her spine rigid. “No,” he said. “You’ll have to stay here.” The hammer remained upright in his hand.

June tried to smile. “You can’t be serious.” Pause. “I don’t know what’s out there, but I can’t simply *stay* here in this—”

“I’ll take the kids to safety,” he said. He looked over his shoulder at nothing June could discern. “You won’t need to worry.”

His lips stretched in a sneer that blended into reddish, greenish-gray monstrosity as the corner of his mouth pushed back the rash of bumps that dominated his cheek. The hammer by his side tapped at the questionable air.

“I will worry,” June said, and she had less voice than she anticipated. She cleared her throat and continued: “You’re not leaving me here and taking the—”

“With your history of mental *problems*,” he moved closer, “your little ‘quirks,’ no one will be on your side. The kids are mine. You’ll be *alone*.”

“What—what—” June saw through the moment’s madness and broke for the room’s only door. With a sliding sidestep, he blocked her, the sneer on his lips twisting maniacally, the hammer in his hand rising. She gasped and stumbled back.

He stepped forward, hammer tapping the questionable air. As he backed her across the room, toward the mundane appliances that had somehow set this situation in motion, she said, “Stop. Stop. Stop it!”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Michael said. “I mean it.” His twisted lips curled so that his teeth shone between them, orthodontically perfect and never so predatory.

“You’re crazy!” June yelled. “You’re crazy!”

Her backside pressed against the washing machine in need of a *part*. Nowhere left to go. With her mind on saying something to deflect him, she didn't see the hammer swing until too late, and he hit her shoulder with a mighty *whoomp*. Her knees buckled, but she didn't fall. She blinked away tears, choked down protests of pain, and hoped her feet would carry her away from the next swing.

"Maybe I'll break you into a thousand pieces," Michael said.

What the fuck was going on?

June howled in his face as he leered at her. She fainted in one direction then dashed in the other, headed for the door. Michael hooked her in the elbow of his right arm and threw her to the concrete floor. She landed and rolled, dodging his kicking foot.

PANIC. *Do not panic*. PANIC. *Do not panic*.

June kept rolling through yellow fog. Her head spun faster than she did. Michael stomped after her, each planting of his foot a threat not only to stop her but to crush her. Too dizzy to roll, scurrying, she screamed, "MICHAEL, STOP!"

"Stop moving," he said.

His foot smashed her thigh, and she stopped moving, flat on her back, and shrieked.

With the hammer in both hands, he aligned the head with her face and prepared a downward swing.

Her legs throbbed, dead weight, but she could use them. She swung them, combined like a log, and swept Michael's feet, disconnecting his shoes' soles from concrete and knocking him to the floor. The hammer flew from his hands and clattered a short distance from both of them. June got up first and, favoring her injured leg, limped toward the hammer.

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Michael grabbed her foot, and she fell. They both sprawled on concrete, and regaining senses, they both half-crawled, half-slithered toward the hammer. June's fingers reached the handle first. Feeling it firmly in her palm, she turned the claw out and swung toward Michael.

The claw sunk into his skull and stuck. Red seeped around its edges. Wide-eyed, Michael reached for her, straining upward from the floor with needy arms, then collapsed face-down on the concrete.

"Michael?" June said.

He didn't move. She crawled closer to him, grabbed the hammer, and pulled. The claw broke free and took a section of Michael's head with it, prying off hair, scalp, and skull. Blood welled, and June thought she saw brain.

"What did I do?"



Knuckles white, hammer tapping on empty air, Michael lifted his foot for the first step up.

Something touched his shoulder.

He spun around, back toward the basement hall, and almost brought the hammer down in the direction he confronted, on whatever had touched his tense shoulder.

"Oh Michael!" Frank sputtered, holding up defensive hands. "I'm so sorry!" The man only had a couple of years on Michael but had lost almost all the hair on top, leaving bushy tufts above his ears to frame his typically pale and sullen face. His face at the moment, however, defied typicality: animated with anxiety, it twitched, and the pale cheeks, nose, and extended forehead were splotchy, not red-splotchy like Michael had seen on his own skin but purple-splotchy. Frank's eyes were yellow.

"No worries, man," Michael said. He didn't loosen his grip on the hammer, which somehow caught Frank's attention.

"I didn't want you out here," Frank said. "Didn't want them to see you, so I—"

"Them?" Michael didn't like the idea of Frank, or anyone, having a *them* right now. Or if someone had a them, their them had better come with an explanation. "Who's them?"

"I thought if I made the door stick, they'd leave you alone," Frank said with a hushed voiced suitable for someone evading antecedents.

"Who, Frank? Who?" The same people responsible for the smell? The gas?

Frank inched back. "What are you doing with that hammer?"

Michael held up the hammer and made a face like he was surprised to find it in his hand. "Holding it, I guess?" He lowered the tool, holding it just as tightly, and said, "Who's they?"

The bumps on Frank's cheeks and forehead moved, rising and falling out of sync with one another. The arms exposed beyond the short sleeves of his t-shirt had dark bumpy splotches, too. Dark movement speckled him. His eyes looked wild. "Government agents," he said. "Deep State. I don't know what agency. Could be any of them. Probably one the public doesn't know about. They did shit like this to us when we were overseas."

"What's going on?" *This is conspiracy bullshit. But something is going on.* "What do you know?"

More and more of Frank's face became splotted, covered with the rising and falling bumps, rising and falling, rising and falling, a breathing multitude. Michael's fingers jumped to his own face. The nerves in his fingertips

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reported that his own bumps, with their irregular shapes, were spreading.

Frank shook his shoulder, snapping him to attention. "They'll be back, understand! To collect their specimens! Chemical and biological warfare. They test in the suburbs, make it look like freak gas leaks, other accidents."

Gas. The smell. The... fog at their feet... rising.
Skin, breathing.

"We've got to get out of here," Michael said.

"It's too late for me!" Frank yelled. "Go! Go now! Get your childr—"

Frank's body spasmed, convulsed, and lunging from the waist, he spat a bloody wad on the wall before ramming his bald forehead into it, twisted, lunged, and spat a bloody wad on Michael, who recoiled, horrified, and dropped the hammer.

"It hurts! I'm sorry!" Frank stumbled in a tight circle, groaning. His bumps, in places, burst, small whitish-yellow eruptions. One of his movements brought him close to Michael, and Michael, without thinking, pushed him away. Frank fell to his knees and, wobbling, looked up at Michael with vacant, searching eyes. "You've got to," he said. His skin oozed.

Through nausea and lightheadedness, Michael said, "What can I do?"

"Chemicals," Frank said. "Flesh-eating bacteria, clouds of madness—"

"Clouds?" Michael said. He looked at the rising fog.

"Take your wife and children and get out before they come back! But first...." Everywhere, Frank dripped.

Michael wanted to scratch himself but felt afraid.

As if reading Michael's mind, Frank dragged a hand over his own face, tearing off most of his left cheek, which

he held out to Michael along with his other, empty hand, pleading. "Help me end it!" The empty hand retrieved the hammer and made it an alternative offer.

"What?" Michael knew *what*, but he couldn't believe Frank would expect him to—

"A solid hit between the eyes, maybe two for good measure. Please!"

"I can't!"

"END IT!"

Frank lunged at Michael. Michael shielded his corroding face with corroding arms, braced for collision.

No collision. Michael lowered his arms.

No Frank. Michael looked around the basement hallway, up the stairs. No sign.

No blood on the wall, on the floor, on Michael himself.

It hadn't happened. What hadn't happened? He had the hammer in his hand. The whole... encounter... with Frank. Hadn't happened?

It had felt *real*.



The door to the unfinished part of the basement, where June paced back and forth through a broad blood puddle on the concrete floor near her dead husband's body, burst open, and her husband stood in the doorway, paler than usual but not as pale as a corpse should be.

But he was lying on the concrete in a puddle of—

His body was gone. The *blood* was gone.

But parts of his scalp and strands of his hair still clung to the hammer she clutched in her—

The hammer wasn't in her hand. It was in his.