

A Ghost Of A Corpse

There was this roly-poly wall at my elementary school. It was on the back of one of the concrete boxes we called a classroom. All the students would pass this wall on the way to the playground, and there would be hundreds of them crawling around. All of them going in different directions, like a mouse on a tightrope they went up into the universe, far above our heads. Of course this was only the roof where we couldn't yet see.

But there were hundreds, which felt like thousands as a kid, and most of us would tip-toe past, careful not to step on any. Some stopped to play with the little creatures before putting them back gently on a leaf. At least *I* would put them back on a leaf. A soft plant felt like a nice stop for them, but they would all still crawl back to their own little tightroped universe. Most kids were overtly kind to the roly-polys, but of course, there were the few that would carry on nonchalantly and unbothered by a crunch or two under their foot—no one liked those kids.

Worse than my apathetic peers were Eric and Cory. They were the two boys that everyone in my class didn't just dislike, but were maybe even a little bit scared of. Eric was a big kid, yeah maybe a little overweight, but I don't mean big in that sense, he had a whole foot over the second tallest in our fourth grade class. I think he may have actually been over five feet, and he was ginger. Bright red hair, covered in freckles, he looked like a proper Scottish warrior. Cory, his partner in crime, was the shortest in the class, though he never said anything, everyone knew that he was embarrassed about it. Imagine that, caring about something so trivial at 9 years old.

Someone once called him Eric's 'minion.' The movie had just come out and he made the mistake of wearing overalls to school. Standing next to Eric, Cory looked significantly smaller

and he had *very* blonde hair, almost yellow. So, suffice to say, the nickname stuck around all month.

Only those brave enough to say it would, which after Emily, mainly only consisted of Eric who started referring to his friend as his minion.

Emily, I think that was her name, or maybe it was Ellie, but she had been the one to prescribe the nickname. Was it mean? Yes. But so were the pair, except they weren't just mean, they were also violent and scary at times. Cory, upset about the nickname, started occasionally stepping on her heels when walking. She would screech and jump around to see him and his bigger half standing there.

Holding his hands up in feign defense Cory would say something like, "oh *sorry* did that hurt?" and Eric would laugh as though it was the funniest joke he's ever heard before joining in. Spongebob bandaids did nothing to protect Ellie in the days following with both boys now after her heels. Eventually they moved on to any unfortunate person walking in front of them—sometimes even teachers would be victimized.

The stakes went up when Cory started to kick in the back of her knees. He would watch her buckle down, but he wasn't laughing anymore, instead his face twisted in a way that only the insignificant anger of a child can. The worst part; Eric stopped participating and it was only Emily being targeted. It became more intimate and personal in the abuse. Bruises collected on the back of Emily's knees as the tension climaxed. At the end of the month, in class, Cory grabbed a handful of her hair.

I didn't know any of this. For the entirety of the month I had been running ahead of everyone else, too petrified of what will happen if I don't and too focused on being the hero to

see Emily. It was on the same day Cory had worn overalls to school and like many times before they had started their ravage of the village. With flat palms and flat smiles, they slammed down on the wall, the insects' thin shelter crashing in on them, guts and blood squeezing out in small pools on the culprits' hands.

“Ewww, groth!” Eric would yell and laugh.

“Gross!” Cory would agree before they both did it again.

“How high can you jump?”

Smack

“Dang! Lemme try, ready?”

Smack

“Oh! Get that one!”

Smack

I cried, I remember that. I was sobbing so hard as I reached both arms out as far as possible trying to block them from hurting the roly-polys. But *I* was the second shortest in the class and my arms didn't reach far enough, instead Eric would easily go over me, slapping above while Cory ducked under. I would hear the dull thuds all around. *Thump, thump, thump* as little pieces of shell and limbs sprinkled down. Flimsy sharp pieces covered my hair like old dandruff.

On the wall there were tens, which felt like hundreds, of guts smeared. It was red and I was surprised. There was so much red smeared across I remember thinking, “this is real blood, like *our* blood.” I think I was expecting something else, I'm not sure why, but I thought it would be clear, or maybe nothing, just the outer bits rearranged like smeared ink. I wasn't expecting anything inside. The blood made me first drop my hands, limp and heavy, until my nose burned at the tip, my head throbbed, and my stomach felt hollow. I then cried even harder.

“Ha! What? Are you *thcared* of thome little guths?” Eric said through his missing front teeth. He had a wide smile.

I shook my head no, but I felt the turn in my stomach and the rush of my jittery bones.
“No I-”

“Then why are you crying? Huh? Aren’t you a boy? Or are you a girl? You’re crying like you’re a girl!” With each word I felt myself becoming more defensive than I needed to, ready to stand up, fight, and yell. I wanted to somehow expel my masculinity like an explosion so that no one could ever question my position again. Maybe I would have, in my head I would have, but it was Cory who yelled first.

“Look dude!” Cory laughed, turning his palm away from himself and out to Eric and I. His hand looked sticky. A concoction of the roly-poly insides and dirt picked up from the wall. A grey and brown sludge caked on, permanent as though it had been glued onto him.

“Ugh groth” he looked down at his own hands.

I see the moment an idea pops into Eric's mind, his eyes nearly light up. “I dare you to lick it.” My chest caves in and my heart drops. I wanted to run. Eric wasn’t looking at me though.

Cory laughs, genuine at first, but when the towering warrior doesn’t budge the laugh turns awkward. “No way! That’s naaasty!” Cory yells out, still light-hearted, but I see his quick glance at me.

“Double-dog-dare.” Fighting words, but Cory doesn’t budge. Eric squints his eyes, the seriousness of an ignored double-dog-dare weighing in on them. Triple-dog-dare is the obvious next step, typically the final step as most kids don’t know what comes after triple, but instead Eric’s red hair tips back, lighting like a fire in the sun as he looks up and sighs.

“Minion!” The word startled Cory, in overalls for the first and last time. The only person who had called him that was Emily earlier that day. Unknowingly she had set a power imbalance between the two. “Lithen to your Gru, I am your both!”

“What?” he replies and I realize that I *could* leave.

Sigh “thith ith why I am in charge and you’re the minion”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I’m not going to thay it again! I am your both!” Cory looks to me again, so quick, but his eyes, widened like a vast ocean, blue and sinking, have stuck to me. “Lick it! Lick it! Lick it!” Eric begins to chant. Over a foot taller than us both and what felt like half a foot wider too, he grabs onto his *friend’s* hand, shoving it into his face “Lick it.”

I can leave, I’ve been forgotten and could slip away, but now I *can’t*.

Slowly I watch what I shouldn’t be watching. Cory peaks his tongue out, only slightly, and just barely touches the edge of his caked hand. Eric, not feeling like it’s enough, pushes his head in further until his whole mouth is pressed against the thickened palm. Cory doesn’t cry and my own tears have dried, but he gags, running away. Unaware of the atrocity of what he’s done, Eric laughs and chases after him, hand outstretched with his own grotesque sticky slop.

After that I started leaving class early, the moment the shrill bell rang out I was already throwing open the door. At the wall I collected as many as I could, stuffing them in pockets to hide them. I refused for them to end up on the hands and tongues of the two bullies. Dried pieces were still splattered against the wall and I was beginning to sweat in a panic over the hundreds, that felt like thousands, of bugs that I couldn’t get, but I saved as many as I could.

The entire month that I was doing this, not once did I notice the cleanliness of the concrete, the absence of guts, or the increase of spongebob bandaids. I was too focused on doing what I thought needed to be done, what was seemingly important.

As Emily-Ellie's hair grew over that month, so did her pride. She was so excited, her coils had finally exceeded her shoulders and she was always wearing it down, trying to show off. At the end of class with her, I was about to make my usual escape when Ellie started screaming. A fistfull of her hair was tangled in knots around Cory's fingers. He grabbed as much as he could, all the way up the roots. It wasn't slow motion, but everything seemed to go on for so long I didn't understand how no one did anything, *I* didn't do anything. With a pair of scissors he had cut as much as he could. The metal kept bending and nearly snapping, not wanting to go through. He just kept opening and closing the dull blades until eventually it seemed more like he was ripping her hair rather than cutting it. Emily was screaming and crying, trying to pull away, but with his tight, vengeful grip on her, the pulling only made it worse.

He cut her too.

The scissors wouldn't go through hair, but it went through the skin. It moved through cartilage like butter. The top part of her ear was cut off. And her scalp... There were scrapes all over. I think her whole head had to be shaved to check for injuries, you know, for the report. Cory was immediately expelled and sent to some behavior school. Eric didn't follow, instead he just grew quiet. It was all too much, even for him.

Emily went somewhere, like the roly polys tightroped universe, she disappeared.

As sorry as I felt about Ellie, I think everyone was a little relieved that something bad enough had finally happened. I should have felt worse, but instead all I could think about was that the roly-polys would be safe now. My job was done, I was an honoured hero.

A decade later, in my later teens or maybe it was early twenties, my mom would tell us childhood stories. She told my, at the time, fiancé, I can't remember her name now, about washing my clothes when I was a kid. How she would find handfuls of dead roly-polys in my pockets. She had to start checking my clothes and shaking them out. The first time, before she knew to check, she had to pick the little carcasses out of the washing machine and dryer. Soggy on one side, dehydrated on the other. The memory was lighthearted, and my fiancé had laughed.

That Laugh. It was soft and a higher octave than her normal voice. It sounded as though she was giving you some sort of approval, a 'congratulations' on being funny. It got confusing though, because she would laugh the same when she was mad, like really seriously mad. It's weird because it wasn't deep inside her, like how people say, "it was a deep chuckle," it wasn't like that for her. Her laugh was like magic, a miraculous creation at the base of her neck.

The story, the one about the dead bugs in my pocket, was supposed to be lighthearted, something silly, to pass the time and to help imagine me in a different form, but I couldn't bring myself to laugh along. I forgot about them.

Every day for a month, I would save them only to be the one driving forth the genocide. I put the little pebbles in my pocket, went to play with the other kids, forgot they were there, and in turn suffocated them. The thoughts kept racing through my head the rest of the night, questions of what it felt like to have your life snuffed out like that. The insignificance of it, was what had felt so consequential to me. It bothered me for a long time after that. I think I cried later

that night. I hid myself away from my fiancé and thought of the hundreds, or maybe it was thousands, and broke into hysterics. It was choking, at one point I thought I was going to die, it felt like I was suffocating because now I remembered, now it was significant.

Lying here in my coffin, it's all I can remember now. I don't know her name, and only a blurred vision of her face appears behind my eyes. Yet, somehow it's Eric's giant shadow and the weight of a girl's hair in Cory's hand that has stuck itself into my memory. A tangled mess of coils and trivial bugs, everything done and not done *by us all*.

That's not true, I lied—or maybe I already forgot—her laugh. In serendipity, melancholy, and wrath there was the same gentle sound.

I proposed to her that same night, the night with the stories about dead bugs. I remember the feeling of the world crushing in on my turned down knee, dissociation reflected in the vacancy of her forgotten eyes, and she *laughed*.

It was a month-long plan. We visited her family first, then mine, then we went on a hike where there was a photographer and a picnic, but there was no big speech or declaration of love because all I could think was, "I need to check my pockets." It was a crucial anxiety, a wrong needing to be made right. Except there she was, waiting, and then she laughed before she said yes.

It was my greatest mistake, more than the roly-polys, the thought falls besides me as I possibly lay next to her. Two burial plots side by side for eternity. A room that I built up, a house that I could truly call my own, as it became an extension from my hands.

I *need* to go home.

The thought startles my mind awake, dry and crispy breath chipping at my teeth, begging to escape my lips. The wood below splinters up my arms, nailing me down like a reverse wood-chipper.

My eyes are shut, and all I can see is the replay of the bug wall through a blurred version of tears and guilt. I want her and her laugh of approval, not distance and disappointment, but the way *we* should be remembered. I want her face and her name.

A name dances on the tip of my tongue and I can almost feel her. My right hand grazed upon her leg, arm, and neck. It used to get tangled in her hair, thick and long because she refused to cut it. Strands would fall all around us, pulling us closer together.

I *want* to go home.

I think I feel my right hand move, gripping the floor with my nails dug into the wood. A few of them pop and chip into daggers. Like a wolf, I mark the floor in three long lines. I can feel the curling of thick splinters under my fingertips, the coffin bending like smooth ice cream in a scooper. I think I killed myself. It doesn't hurt, the nails that came apart, but I can still feel the small thud and the cold beneath it, like cheap plastic popping off.

My hand pulls harder at my side—only my right hand, as I think my left has left long ago—and suddenly I want it to stop. I'm scared to lose what seems to be my only friend in this torturous hellscape. My mind can't keep me company for eternity; I need my body. Over time, I have felt parts of me melt off. I wonder if that's how snakes feel, a slimy shedding of skin, but I've never had something try to leave me before.

The hand pulls harder.

What will I become if I am nothing?

Would I go with the hand wherever it went? Would my perception be fragmented into two? I didn't follow the decayed parts of me that caved in or fell off into the void of deterioration... At least I don't *think* I did.

I think I killed myself, I'm not exactly sure because I don't remember dying, but I remember driving. I remember feeling incomplete, like half of a person, and driving. The world turned around me like a flip book, it went so fast that the picture came out in chunks, missing parts. One second I was driving too fast, wondering what significance I have in my own life, typical mid-life crisis stuff, then the medium.

Something pops in my wrist, and I wish I could look down; there would be no blood anymore, just the outside crust of an insect, but I feel the need to check.

The skin pulls apart like wet paper.

With each pop of an artery and vein, plucking like a guitar string, waves of distorted images come crashing down. Raindrops falling behind my eyelids. Pop, pop, pop.

Green, red, brown.

Fingers break and readjust, but they keep pulling. The wood has rotted, making it easy for the hand to grip through holes. "Please don't leave," he begs, unable to stop the slip of his mind, his essence. He thinks of her dimples last; she had two on her right cheek that would only show up when she smiled. It was the first thing he had fallen in love with.

"You know your right side stole your dimple." He was sweating from the exercise of his knee, bouncing to the same beat of his racing heart. Sitting next to this girl, it was the first semester of college, first class even and he couldn't pay attention. He had been so excited to be

studying what he wanted, something he cared more about than science or math. Struggling with all the choices though, he bounced back and forth between what he wanted to do, or what he felt he needed to do. Something in politics, to help people and change the world, or maybe architecture, art, something where he can *make* an impact. He would have a legacy and be remembered, and exist in the memory of it forever.

But, he didn't pay any attention to the lecture because of the girl next to him. He only saw the profile, her right side with two dimples smiling at him, and he thought, "how could anyone be so lucky?" His eyes hurt from the strain of trying to sneak a peak at her out of the corner of his sight all of class—it was an hour and a half long. At the end, after the professor dismissed them, she turned over to grab her things, her aggressively long hair falling like a curtain. He finally saw her other side. The left side of her face was smooth and plain.

"You know your right side stole your dimple." He said it before he could help himself, a stupid pick-up line that she had probably heard hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. But she laughed and the dimples grew deeper in them both. How could anyone forget them?

"Really? That's what you're goin' with?" Her eyebrows scrunched as she rolled her green eyes.

She kissed him later that day, but he would always say that it was him that made the first move. She marked his lips with a deep red, velvet and soft from her lipstick. As he pulls away from the kiss to see her in her entirety, he can almost make out more details of her skin. See past the glass eyes masquerading as her—not green, but hazel...

The hand pulls free.

The hand, alone, roams the ancestral halls of the uncanny home. Fingers graze the rough edges, like the familiar touch of an old lover; it feels traveled. It has crawled through the trenches of this life for what seemed like an eternity in faded memory. Everything has been a dark amnesia; the entire world has been put into feeling. No memory of colors, bright, suffocating smells, or the thundering sounds of the world. The hand can feel the rumple of a step, the cool breeze of an open window, but cannot fathom the blue of the sky past the glass or the dark underside of a foot.

It finds its way to the dusty chaos of a garage, hiding from the monstrous footsteps of the uncanny friend in the corners of rooms, like a roach. Fingers slip across frozen lakes of paint and a cool mechanic toolbox. The cool surface, reminding it of a desired purpose lost in death; it's held just beneath the thin calcium of tin.

Rough callouses, sprinkled like a spray of fresh wet dirt, cover the entire palm, but the hand itches for more. Instead the skin has curdled like spoiled milk, remnants of its past leaking out from these folds of skin, whispering into the unheard echo of the house.

The frozen metal box doesn't feel harsh; it feels good, as though it has created an ice age of fantasy. A dream of a purpose, one that is encoded into bones; if only they could have pulled their fingers back, past their ribboned wrist and their vacant arms, past shoulders, and built down each rib to find the soul of the long forgotten. Instead, it is only the deep-rooted intuition of something missing, something the hand aches to grab and hold onto, that has awoken the monster like a spark of science.

The creation stays there, in its fantasy, testing the lock and hiding away like the dust of forgotten memories that collect in the corners of minds. Stayed and stayed, a portrait lost in the labyrinth of lineage halls.

The hand doesn't feel the lock of fingers entwining into its own, carrying it away from all of its deepest regrets and abandonments. The warmth of the embrace melts the creature out of its ice age. Finding reality once again, the fingertips struggle to stay afloat in the bedsheets the stranger had taken them. Laying side by side, the chest of a person slowly rises and falls, occasionally shaking like the dangers of an earthquake. They find themselves dancing amongst hills of eyes and caves of sunken cheeks—all that remains of the uncanny lover. Two deep divots make the dancing fingers stumble, tripping onto a mouth, a smile dripping into a frown. As it feels the face fall, like the decayed wallpaper around them, something seeped into their broken, open veins. Thick and choking, the fear of strangers living in a home it knew was missing, sent the hand into a violent frenzy.

Mother, friend, lover—stranger, stranger, stranger.

Islands rose from the winding sheets like spells of paradise. Breasts, knees, a long, monstrous neck and head, small sanctuaries from the vast ocean of sleep. The swimming fingers, peeling back from brittle bones, are sharp against the frail skin of a throat. They cut and scrape.

Hair wraps around it in a tangled curtain, thin strands fighting around the base of each finger like a wire noose. The hand struggles to escape, but as they grasp for solid ground, the strands tangle more, tightening. Finally, in a blind rage, the hand slams down upon a thick and pulsing neck and grips close.

Razor bones tighten around the stranger's throat, choking their breath, and yet the pulse doesn't change. No vibration or gasps of air to stumble and shake them awake; instead, all that could be felt was the still soft waves of slumber. A chest that slowly rises and falls.

The hand yearned for more than steady vibrations; it wanted an earthquake, a true, piercing sound. The name called out by a mother, friend, or lover. They wanted more... the heat

and rush of reality, to be surrounded and drowning in it. It didn't realize the soft caress of the thumb, sliding back and forth along an edged jaw above. No longer was the creature struggling to impress violence, but now softly embracing the uncanny lover as it had done with the beloved toolbox. Just like the cold surface, this stranger is merely a thin shell holding answers and purpose just beneath. Something was in there, behind the throat, waiting to be heard. The hand felt it, the closed-off memory enriched its peaking bones, embroidered into the core of its existence. Gripping down harder, the bones-turned-daggers began to dig.

Hollow blood gushed around like strong pulls of wind, it opened the neck like a blooming glass rose. Forcing limbs into the tight rupture of skin, they felt nothing but velvet and hot air engrossing every crevice. Wiggling and forcing themselves down in a swallow, it felt as though they were traveling back home to their rotted grave. Everything was still dripping down, just like the mouths and wallpaper. Further and further down into the sickly, sticky, sweet darkness of an esophagus. The hand searched, each finger sliding in different directions against the plush of flesh and saliva. They wanted to find something, a voice, a memory, a sense of self and purpose, but none of it was there.

As the vast darkness of a stranger's home expanded into a universe encasing its lost life, the hand began to fall. Fast and never-ending into the pit of darkened darkness, insignificance consuming them in an empty void. As the stranger above takes her last breath, a final death of his memory takes its toll.

As the world tilted away and the lonely hand of a forgotten man fell deep into the subconscious pit of a stranger, they might have felt the answer to the significance in their own existence.