

splint

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1.

There wasn't much that Jillian wouldn't do for Amir, so when she was about to draw the line at house-sitting, he was understandably confused. He had no way to understand without a proper explanation, of course, but she did not have one; having been for him during times when others would vanish like the smoke from her cigarette, refusing to spend a night in his home seemed rather arbitrary.

The truth was that Jillian hated the house.

It was an old and large state off Farron Road, in Kent County, less than two hours away from Baltimore. There weren't many other houses there, certainly none near Amir's, and that was a problem in itself. Something about it, a rather intangible aura, made her feel unsafe within its old wooden walls. It was a feeling that was impossible to explain unless one was already familiar with it, and Amir certainly wasn't.

It was a house from the old days, one that his family had not bothered to bring to the twenty first century. And she knew he could easily do it, too, because money was not something Amir had ever needed in his life. He had never shared the details of where his family got the seemingly endless amounts of money and resources, but he paid rent in a luxury apartment in downtown Baltimore while Jillian, working the same job, could barely afford something one-fifth the size.

She suspected Amir worked only to fill his days, and not for sustenance.

But it didn't bother Jillian; Amir had never allowed his family's wealth to determine even the most subtle aspects of his personality, and she loved him for it.

As a friend.

Which is why she had grown worried when, instead of enjoying his luxury downtown apartment, a venue to innumerable and memorable parties, Amir had chosen to spend weeks in the isolated shithole off Farron Road.

The sudden death of a sister does things to one's judgment and reason, she thought.

Jill followed her phone's directions out of Baltimore on a bleak Friday night in early December, and traffic caused by a gruesome accident had added an hour to her journey. She took the MD-213 when the sun was setting, and it was night when she, at the mercy of a suddenly shitty phone reception, pulled into Farron Road.

The beams of her Jeep's headlights were barely enough for Jillian to feel like she was not in danger of falling into a ditch; it was like the whole area was still waiting for the industrial revolution. To her relief, the Jeep proved powerful enough to make it through the dirt road and up the hill, where the house waited for her.

From the spot where she parked (a nice flat patch of land beneath a large tree that would provide shade during the day) Jillian could see Amir's GM pickup truck just outside the dimly lit porch and deck; its headlights were on, engine purring, but she could not see him.

“Hussy!” she yelled as she left the car and hung her bag's strap on her shoulder.
“Yo, Amir!”

She heard rustling in the grass behind the pickup truck, so she froze.

“Amir? I swear to *Christ* if you jump out at me, I'm leaving.”

“Coming,” she finally heard his voice.

From *inside* the house.

She turned back to the pickup, and where she had only seen darkness a second before, now stood a woman. Jillian yelped a word she immediately regretted saying when she saw a child appear behind the woman.

“*Wifey*,” Amir said, walking out of the house to meet her on the porch.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” she said to the woman, who looked at her with empty eyes that looked wet, like she had just been crying, or like she was about to start. There was genuine distress in there.

“Thank you so much for coming,” said Amir, taking her bag from her shoulder. “Jillian, this is Esther, don’t think you’ve met, and that’s Wesley, her son, whom you definitely haven’t met. Say hello, Wes!”

The kid said nothing. He looked no older than eleven years old, but had the painfully shy eyes of someone much younger.

“I’m sorry about that. You startled me,” Jill said, and shook the woman’s hand. When she tried shaking the kid’s, she noticed he was holding his left arm with his right hand, hiding a wound; she could see traces of blood clinging to the sleeve of his gray cardigan. “Are you all right, buddy?”

“Welcome, and thank you for coming,” the woman said in a voice that belonged to someone much older, and in a very strange accent Jillian didn’t recognize. “He is all right.”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said, turning to Amir and finally giving him a hug—one that lasted longer than usual, as it was the first time he saw him after his sister’s funeral. “There was trouble on the way out.”

“Baltimore,” he said, and smiled. “For a moment I thought you weren’t coming. I tried to call or text, but, well, you’ve probably noticed we don’t get full bars around here.”

“Don’t get full anything,” she said, looking around at the cold and bleak December night. Mist was beginning to roll down from the taller hills, and the idea of spending the weekend alone in the house began to feel more and more terrifying.

She hated this house even on beautiful days.

“Mister Amir,” said Esther in the bizarre accent that only warped her timbre, but not her handle of English. “I’m sorry to keep bothered you with this, but you must understand—”

“I understand it’s very important for you, I do, I appreciate that,” he said in a way that was more impolite than Amir usually was; it sounded exasperated. “I wish I could do more, Esther, but I need to get going. Do what you need to do, just please be careful. It’s getting cold; Wesley shouldn’t be out at night, or he’ll get sick.”

Jill followed Amir into the house listening to the wooden floors creak beneath her feet, and when Esther was out of earshot, she asked: “Is everything all right with her?”

“I never know, honestly. Right now she’s looking for something that apparently disappeared from her house. Come on,” Amir said, walking up the stairs. She had learned years before not to slide her hand on the banister as she climbed the stairs unless she wanted to spend the night picking out splinters from her hands.

“Did you notice the kid’s arm was bleeding?” she asked. “Who is she again?”

“She’s . . . I guess you could say she’s family, in a way. She’s the groundskeeper’s widow.”

“Widow—oh shit, Gordo died?”

“He did, last year,” he said, and opened a huge heavy door to a room in which she had slept before. “It was . . . not pretty.”

“What happened?”

“The weirdest thing—an accident. Something no one really wants to talk about because of how . . . violent it was, how the body was found. It was some horror movie shit. You probably don’t want to hear about it now.”

“I don’t,” she said, hitting the light switch. The bedroom smelled of wood and humidity, but at least it was warm. “But now I kinda have to.”

“Well . . . no one really knows what happened, but my parents told us it was probably an accident at the mill, with the equipment. Something really messed up.” He looked outside, looking for Esther. “Fadjen found pieces of him; he was only recognized because a piece of skin had a tattoo.”

“Jesus,” she said, and sat on the bed.

“Told you you wouldn’t want to hear,” he said. “You sure this room is okay?”

“Yes, thank you. How come I never saw her before?”

“They moved with Gordo a few months before he died. When was the last time you were here, anyway?”

“Three, no, four years ago. New year’s,” she said, remembering the long weekend which she had spent in varying degrees of substance induced stupidity. “Gordo was around. So was—”

“Cheryl,” he said. “Yeah. That was fun.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and hugged him again. “That was stupid of me. I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s okay,” he said, and smiled. It seemed honest. Maybe he was doing better. “Speaking of, and just to ask too much of you: my mom asked me to move all of Cheryl’s stuff back to Baltimore. I’m taking what I can right now but I’ll need another trip. I already rounded up most of it but if you find something that belonged to her, please just put it with the rest—it’s the big pile on the pool table in the game room.”

“Yes, sure. So, what was she looking for, anyway? Esther, I mean,” Jill asked as he walked outside. “Can I help? As long as it doesn’t involve walking around outside in the dark.”

“I think that’s exactly what it would involve,” he said, laughing. “It’s nothing important, great scheme of things. It’s probably just something, uh . . . how to put it without sounding like an asshole?”

“Religious?” she asked.

“Thank you,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. Hey, listen, Jill. I know you don’t like this place, and you don’t like it even when there were a bunch of us here, so it really means a lot to me that you’d do this for me.”

“It’s my pleasure. I won’t even ask why you needed a house-sitter when Esther and the kid are around,” she said, and he laughed.

“She hates this house more than you do,” he said, picking up his own luggage. “You know I would never ask if I had a choice, but I promise it’s safe; I wouldn’t invite you if it wasn’t. Fadjen can sleep inside the house, take him into the room with you, even the bed, if you want. I promise he’ll make you feel safe. It’s like having a big lion friend looking after you.”

“Where is Fadjen, anyway?”

Amir stepped outside and pushed his lips with his index and middle fingers in a way only he could, giving his whistle uncanny power. The sound echoed across the grassy plain, and there was no response. Amir called the dog’s name and whistled again, even stronger this time.

At first Jill thought what she heard was just a gust of wind rustling the high grass, then felt a twinge of panic when she saw a shadow moving in the twilight landscape, just beyond the corner of her eye. Then, when the shadow was close enough, she finally recognized Fadjen.

“Jesus, he’s huge,” she said as the bear-like Newfie finally showed up.

“Right?” Amir said, falling to one knee and hugging the black dog’s massive neck. “He was a puppy last time you saw him, but he’s a *big* boy now, isn’t he? Aren’t you? Fadjen! Say hi to Jill. Remember Jill?”

The dog dropped a thick wooden stick he had brought from the darkness and lunged at Jill. Had she not known the black beast was friendly, she might have shit herself. Fadjen had to be at least 150 pounds—heavier than both Jill and Amir—so when he jumped at her, she had to take a step back not to fall.

Content with his greeting, the dog grabbed the thick piece of wood with its jaws and put it in Amir’s hand. Amir tossed it into the grass, and Fadjen ran for it.

“He’ll take care of you. You really have nothing to worry about. He just likes taking shit with his mouth, so better keep your valuables out of his reach. Like I said, he can sleep—”

A shrill scream echoed from the darkness and Jill felt her heart stop for a moment. A film of cold sweat was suddenly covering her skin. “What the fuck was that, Amir?”

“Wesley, probably,” he said, looking at the darkness just as Fadjen returned with his wooden toy, which Amir threw again. “He was hurt; Esther is probably taking care of the wound? I don’t know, but it’s probably nothing. I have to go, Jill. Thank you again.”

She looked at the darkness and, behind a line of trees, saw some lights. She remembered Gordo’s place—a smaller cottage separate from the house. Wesley screamed again.

“No, Amir, wait.”

“What is it?” he said, walking to his truck.

In a span of just a few seconds, she wondered if it would be truly horrible of her to back out on her promise. The scream, the story—it was not something she needed to hear.

“Again, Jill. Thank you. So much.”

As though he could read her mind, Amir got in his truck, thanked her again, and drove away before she could speak, trapping her in her commitment.

2.

Every light in the house was on when she slid into the bed.

It was a huge bed, and even then she felt like there was barely enough room; Fadjen took so much space. Jill didn't mind, however; the big dog did make her feel a lot safer. He almost looked harmless as he lay curled into a huge hairball, heavy head right next to her thigh. His eyes looked sad and tired.

She had feared it wouldn't be easy to bring him to the room, but when he came back with the thick piece of wood he loved so much, bringing it into the room with her was enough to make him follow.

He was still looking at it, as though he expected her to play fetch all night. Jill took it and looked at it for a moment. It was a log, carved by the dog's teeth; she could see two deep indentations at the top.

Hoping it would keep him near, she dropped the stick in his reach. Fadjen grabbed it and bit down, peeling bark like the skin off prey.

The words in the pages were becoming blurry, and she knew it was time to sleep, glad that it had come so easily. Lights still on, hand making contact with Fadjen's paw, she slid deeper into the bed and her head sank into the huge feather pillow.

She didn't know how much time passed before the sound of footsteps downstairs made her spring up so quickly she felt whiplash. Jill would have been less scared, had Fadjen not turned towards the door, growling.

Jill sat on the bed, breathing heavily, praying the noise wouldn't repeat itself.

It did. Fadjen barked loudly and jumped off the bed, barking at the door.

She was frozen.

Fadjen scratched at the door, and Jill finally left the bed, slowly walking towards the dog. “What’s down there?” she asked, voice trembling.

When the dog mewled weakly, she mustered the courage to open the door. The dog ran out, barking, and Jill almost felt bad for whatever it was that was making that noise.

“No! Faj-jen! It’s me!”

The sound of the voice made her legs so weak she did grab on to the banister, but a wave of cold relief came when she saw Esther in the hall downstairs, hands up, as Fadjen circled around her as if confused by the woman’s.

“Esther?” she cried out, and the woman looked up. “Jesus Christ, you scared me.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said as Jill walked down the stairs, almost tripping on her legs, and the muscles that felt like cold water. “I’m just—”

“What happened?” Jill said, horror growing in her again when she saw blood on Esther’s dress and hands, all the way to her forearms. “Is that your son’s?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, really,” the woman said; there were tears in her eyes, desperation in her voice. “My son isn’t feeling well. I’m looking for the doll of my son; it will make him feel better if I find it. I shouldn’t be here, but—”

Despite still being inside a whole other house, Wesley screamed so loudly, both heard him. Jill saw Esther’s eyes water in desperation before she quickly ran away, lifting her long dress so she wouldn’t trip on it.

Esther disappeared into the darkness, and Jill swore this was the last night she would spend in this house. Ever.

3.

Of course she would get no sleep.

Even with Fadjen keeping the bed warm and the room safe, Jill knew there was no chance she would sleep. The idea of hearing something around her, downstairs, outside the window—anything, at any moment—was too terrifying.

But she was exhausted. So much so that she could already feel her mind playing tricks on her, making her things that were neither reasonable nor safe. She thought of the blood on Esther’s dress, thought of Cheryl’s death.

She thought of Gordo’s body, mangled, torn up, hacked to pieces.

She thought of Gordo’s living smile, of how he had once helped Amir and his friends with their luggage, to build fires, and even carry the ones who had too much to drink to bed. She remembered how the man had always reminded him of Lou Ferrigno in his *Hulk* days. Gordo had been at least 220 pounds, maybe more. What could have possibly happened to him, and why did an accident seem so improbable now?

Jill tried to read, but was too tired to focus, so she decided to be brave one more time.

“Fadjen,” she whispered, and the dog interrupted his violent make-out session with the stick to look up at her. “Come with me to the kitchen? I’ll get you something yummier to eat.”

She left the bed, and the dog didn’t follow, so she grabbed his stick, and that was enough for the Newfoundland to get off the bed and tail Jill downstairs and into the kitchen.

Searching through every drawer and pantry in the kitchen, she found no traces of coffee—not even a mug, or sugar. That’s when she remembered the game room. There was a bar there, and a coffee maker that would make her night marginally easier.

The house was a maze, but guided by memory, Jill walked into the game room and immediately spotted the machine on the bar, as though Amir had left it for her to use. For the first time smiling, Jill plugged the coffee maker, filled it with water from

the bar, and started it. As the water boiled and the pot began to fill, Jill looked at the pile of random shit on the pool table.

Lying on top of a pile of neatly folded pleaded skirts, there was a rag doll.

As she came closer to it, Fadjen barked loudly, making her jump and drop the doll. Fadjen barked again and she picked it up.

“Shut the hell up!” she snapped at the dog.

The doll was hideous, old and dirty, but she felt a bit of relief in finding it. It was definitely not something that a girl of Cheryl’s money would own, so it had to be Esther’s—or rather, Wesley’s.

Jill took the doll and walked back to the hall, and looked out the window. Fadjen barked loudly, following her. Jill looked at the darkness. Somehow, closer to dawn, it was even darker than before, and walking the space between her and Esther’s house was extremely uninviting.

“Godammit,” she said, and Fadjen barked again. “Shut up!”

The dog wouldn’t shut up; something about his barking horrified her.

Jill ran back to the kitchen, grabbed the stick and put it in the dog’s mouth. “Shut up!”

The dog did shut up, its jaws suddenly busy, so Jill returned to the porch with the doll and once more wondered if she was brave enough to be noble. She took one step on the grassy floor and, as though the night was challenging her, she heard Wesley scream in pain. It somehow sounded closer.

Jill decided she was neither brave nor noble, so she returned inside, where it was warm and Fadjen could protect her.

She didn’t understand the screams. Other than the blood on his arm, the kid seemed fine when Jill saw him. She had read of rare and painful diseases that could cause agonizing pain, but they were all immediately evident in the patients.

Was it *Esther* hurting him?

. . . *Fadjen found pieces of him; he was only recognized because a piece of skin. . .*

She wanted to throw up.

Jill left the doll on the porch, hoping Esther would see it immediately should she choose to return.

Forgetting about her pot of coffee—and knowing she no longer needed it—Jill went into the kitchen, where Fadjen waited for her, quietly nibbling at his stick. “Are you hungry? Will you stick around if I feed you something?”

Hoping to keep the dog close, she opened the fridge, and Fadjen immediately dropped stick, expecting to be fed something more nutritious than splintered wood. Jill patted his large head and looked inside. There was a lot of food, and a large note in Amir’s handwriting:

Help yourself!

In a drawer, she saw a big juicy T-bone steak. She grabbed the thick piece of meat and, with a trembling hand, removed the plastic cover that kept it fresh. As soon as she did, she heard Fadjen licking his lips.

“Here you go,” she said. Fadjen caught it in mid-air with his sharp teeth and began to eat.

4.

A few minutes after finishing the steak, when Jill was halfway through a cup of coffee, Fadjen began to heave. Though she hated the sound, it didn’t worry her much at first. Then, when she noticed that the dog had eaten the whole thing, bone and all, a new type of fear began to set in.

“Are you okay?” she said, getting up from the kitchen table, and towards the dog. Fadjen heaved and mewled, whining. He wasn’t breathing.

“Jesus, Fadjen! Fadjen! Spit it out!”

She hit Fadjen in the back of the neck as the dog almost convulsed. Fadjen fell, its legs suddenly not stable enough to hold him up. She hit him repeatedly, adding strength with each slam of her hand that seemed minute against the dog’s bull-like neck.

As she began to feel that weakness in the muscles of her own legs, that sting in the back of her throat, and began to imagine having to explain to Amir that she had killed his dog—

Fadjen expelled a huge piece of meat. The piece of steak was barely chewed, and still had a small piece of bone. Her pulse settled and the dog looked up at her with confused, innocent eyes, as though he didn’t know it had almost died.

“You eat like a fucking duck.”

Fadjen’s eyes went from Jill to the disgusting meat on the kitchen floor, and when she saw him going in for round two, she yelled: “No!”

Jill managed to grab the piece of meat with a thick napkin before Fadjen. It was hot and disgusting, even through the tissue. Meat in hand, she went to the sink and dropped it in the drain; the garbage disposal would take care of it.

Seeing half his meal fall into the drain to be crushed, Fadjen lay on the floor and began working on his stick again; the splintered, broken thing wouldn’t hold much longer.

Jill turned on the disposal unit and she heard the blades whir, taking care of the problem—

Until they didn’t.

She looked down into the drain. Pieces of meat refused to go down. She pressed the button again, and the machinery made a tortured noise. Something was lodged in the blades.

It was the piece of bone.

“Goddammit,” she said, knowing she would never speak to Amir again after the night was over. “God-*fucking*-dammit!”

Fadjen looked up at her, stick in mouth.

“Give me that.” She reached for the thick piece of wood and grabbed it. Fadjen pulled back playfully with his great strength. “No, fuck you, Fadken, give it to me! Fadjen! Drop it!”

The dog didn’t let go.

From Esther’s house, Wesley screamed. Fadjen growled.

The acid in her stomach boiled all the way to her throat.

Jill yanked so hard she almost felt as though she had ripped some of Fadjen’s teeth out, and almost tore the drool-soaked piece of wood in half lengthwise. She took the stick and pushed it down the drain, trying to dislodge the piece of bone in the garbage disposal.

In her desperation, she pressed the button too fast with a shaking hand. The bone was no longer a problem, but the blades now caught the stick. Jill cursed as she saw the stick dance and jump around, caught in the blades. She turned it off, tried to pull the stick out, and now it was stuck.

I’m out of here, she thought. In a few hours I’ll be sleeping in my own bed in my own place in Baltimore and God help Amir if he has anything to say.

She pressed the button again, hoping the blades would at least break the stick in half, but when she tried pulling it out, she just ended up feeding it farther. Blades finally working, the stick disappeared into the drain, leaving only splinters and pieces of bark on the steel sink.

Fadjen mewed.

“I’m done with this,” Jill told the dog.

“This is not it,” Jill heard a voice behind her, and she screamed.

It was Esther again, standing on the doorway between the kitchen and the hall. There was more blood on her dress, and her blood-soaked hands held the doll Jill had left for her.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” she yelled.

“This is not the doll of my son,” Esther said, the voice of a woman on the verge of madness.

“I don’t care. I’m leaving,” she said, walking past Esther and into the hall.

The woman followed her. “My doll of my son—you had it. You hurt it!”

“That’s the only goddamn doll I saw,” Jill said.

Esther grabbed her, putting Wesley’s blood in Jill’s hands. “My son’s life depends on it! Where is the doll? The *wooden* doll!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“A wooden doll! A wooden figure! I know you had it, because my son is in pain! That doll is my son. If something happens to the doll of my son, it will happen to my son! My son is in pain! He’s been in pain since I lost the doll!”

Jill’s throat tightened in horror. “What?”

“Wounds are appearing on his flesh, his skin is being peeled off, his bones are breaking. Please let it end!” Esther yelled and dropped to her knees, crying, barely able to talk anymore. Fadjen walked up to her and licked her face with canine empathy. “It can’t happen again. I beg you, tell me where it is so I can keep it safe.”

Shaking, Jill turned her head towards the kitchen drain—

—where she had reduced the wooden effigy to hundreds of splinters.

end