

One for the birds

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Asylum

‘How are you feeling today, Emily?’

Evan was facing forward and had his arms folded across his chest. The girl was sitting in the comfortable armchair opposite the large window. The community hall was silent, as not all patients were in yet. Then she looked up at him and smiled. With a trembling hand she brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. She liked Evan. His white uniform was immaculate.

‘It’s quiet here in the morning. I like that. I don’t like the sounds and the noises. They make me nervous.’

He nodded sympathetically and smiled.

‘I know, Emily.’ He crouched down next to her. ‘How are your appointments with doctor Wilbury going?’

She shrugged.

‘You have promised to take your medicine from now on, didn’t you?’ His voice was soft.

She looked at him in despair.

‘But I do. No one believes me, but I honestly do.’ She paused for a second or two. ‘I don’t need medication. They are real. They are real and no medication is going to change that.’

Evan smiled, he pitied her.

She sighed.

‘You believe me, Evan, don’t you?’

With the flow of words she clutched herself to his arm.

He bowed his head.

‘Everything is going to be fine.’

He tapped her trembling hands.

‘Don’t you worry.’

Then he rose to his feet.

She looked up again.

‘You have to go. They don’t like me talking to you.’

In a helpless gesture he raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

‘See you later, Emily,’ he said with a soft friendly voice.

She nodded and turned to face the window.

With his eyes fixed on the ground as he left the community hall, Evan almost bumped into the head nurse. She was sturdy looking, but a good person overall and a very good nurse indeed. She folded her arms over her gigantic bust and gave him a sharp look.

‘Nurse Peters,’ he stammered.

‘Could you spare me a minute Evan?’

He bowed his head.

‘Of course.’

As he followed her, he glanced over his shoulder one more time. Emily was still sitting in the armchair gazing outside very concentrated.

When they reached the end of the hall, the head nurse stopped and turned abruptly.

‘Evan,’ she said, ‘you know you are one of the best nurses we have here. I don’t have to remind you of that fact, do I?’

He felt a lump in his throat.

‘No, nurse Peters, thank you.’

Her voice softened.

‘Don’t get too involved with our patients. See to it that you don’t. It’s not good for the patient, nor for you.’

He nodded as she continued.

‘Emily is a very disturbed young woman. She’s not well. Remember that.’

He nodded dutifully again. She patted him on the shoulder.

‘I know you know,’ she said. ‘Just a reminder.’

She winked motherly and left him to his work. Evan sighed. She was right of course, but there was something about Emily. She wasn't like the other patients. He could not yet put his finger on it.

He prepared himself for the night shift. One by one, each of his colleagues and the patients visitors made their way home, until eventually there was no one left but him and Harvey. Harvey was the night watchman. The guard, so to speak. Evan stayed in the office at the end of the corridor close to the patient rooms. The small office had nothing in it but a bed and a desk. If there were no calamities, he would be lucky and get some sleep. Harvey did nothing but sit in his chair at the main entrance. Every hour, he would make his surveillance rounds. He would also meet up with Evan or, if he was asleep, pass the small office as quiet as a mouse.

It was near 01:00 am and Evan's eyelids were heavy. His head was heavy too. It began to droop, but before his forehead touched the computer keyboard he sat up, startled. He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hand and listened.

'Harvey?'

There was no answer. He listened carefully. He didn't know what he had heard but obviously something had drawn his attention. He rose to his feet when he heard a very distinctive sound. He rushed to the door and peered into the hallway. There was nothing to see. Then he heard it again. No. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe his ears. The fluorescent light made the hallway look even more desolate than the daylight. Everything was silent. All the patients were asleep.

Slowly he walked through the hallway. As he reached the end, he turned around quite taken aback. There it was again. Now it seemed to come from the office instead of the hallway. A muffled sound of laughter. With a quick pass he turned at the corner and descended the stairs. The night

watchman's seat was empty. He heard the eerie sound again. It echoed through the entrance hall, but he still couldn't make out the direction it came from. His heart skipped a beat and he was breathing heavily. There was the laughter again and it became louder and louder. He turned on the spot. The sound seemed to come from all over the place. He covered his ears with his hands. The haunting noise penetrated everything and became even louder and louder still. He couldn't bear it anymore. He swung around as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Are you alright?' he heard Harvey say. Evan observed the ceiling like the noise came from up there. It was gone. So was the extremely suffocating atmosphere.

'Evan?'

The guard regarded him with uneasiness. Evan knew he had to pull himself together and tried to clear his throat. His heart was still beating like a mad man, but he managed to force a smile upon his face.

'I thought I heard something.'

The guard looked around the main hall and shrugged.

'Didn't hear a thing.' He folded his arms over his chest. 'What did you think you heard?'

Evan wove the remark aside.

'Nothing. I dozed off for a bit and it was probably the wind or maybe a dream. I'm so sorry. I better return to the office now.'

Harvey nodded slowly.

'Take it easy, Evan.'

But Evan didn't sleep at all that night and he was really out of it when he was replaced the following morning. He mumbled something to his colleague and made his way through the hallway. He jumped aside when he heard a pounding on the other side of Emily's door.

'Evan?' she whispered frantically.

He sighed.

'Emily, it's not time to get up yet. You've got another hour to spare. Go back to bed.'

'Evan?' she whispered again.

He looked both ways. There was no one in sight. He put his forehead against the cold steel of the door.

'Evan?'

'Yes, I'm here.' He could hear tears through her words.

'You heard it, didn't you?'

He took a step back.

'You heard them, didn't you? I know you did.'

He opened his mouth and looked both ways again.

'Emily, I don't know what you are talking about. I didn't hear anything.'

There was a deafening silence.

'Emily?'

'You heard them, Evan. I know you did. They told me so. They wouldn't lie to me.'

His mouth felt dry, his heart began to race and he suddenly realised how tired he was.

'Go back to bed Emily please.'

He turned around and took off. From behind the steel closed door he heard her voice still whispering and repeating his name over and over again.

'Evan? Evan? Evan?'

With some reluctance he returned to work two days later. The events of the other day had been on his mind continuously. He wondered if he had really heard what he had heard, just for the sake of argument. But he knew what he had heard. And so did she. He changed into his uniform and made his way to the recreational area. He looked around, but she was no where to be seen. Then he rushed down to her room,

where she was sitting in a plain chair facing the window and gazing outside. He approached her with caution.

'Hello,' she said. Her voice sounded aloof.

He crouched down at her side.

'Tell me what happened the other day, Emily. I heard something, but I didn't believe it at first.' He waited patiently.

She was staring out of the window and didn't respond straight away. Then she turned her head to face him. Her eyes were blank.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' she said.

Evan frowned.

'But you spoke to me two days ago. Who are 'they', Emily? I know what I heard.'

She turned her head and gazed out of the window again.

'I don't know what you are talking about. I think doctor Wilbury is right. It's all in my head.'

He shook his head and rose to his feet, blocking her view to the outside world.

'You don't have to lie to me. Now tell me.'

She looked up. Her voice sounded flat.

'You are frightening me. Please, go away.'

He put his hands around her upper arms and took hold of them with minor force.

'Tell me.'

Her eyes filled up with tears.

'Let me go. Let me go. I don't know anything.'

He began to lose his temper. His grip on her arms intensified.

'Emily, please. Tell me I'm not seeing ghosts!'

She closed her eyes in horror.

'No, please!'

He straightened himself up when he heard an all too familiar voice. He closed his eyes and he knew he was in deep trouble.

'Evan!'

It was the head nurse. He looked at his hands, still clutched to her arms. For some reason he looked around the room. His breath stopped when he saw something in the far corner. He turned his head abruptly to nurse Peters, and immediately turned his head back again. It was gone. Whatever he thought he'd seen, it was definitely gone now. He blinked a few times to make sure, but there was nothing there. The room was empty. He shut his eyes and began to reason with himself. He heard her commanding voice.

'Let her go, Evan.'

He opened his eyes and stared deep into Emily's.

'Now!'

Slowly and a bit reluctantly he let go.

'Come with me,' the head nurse ordered him. The words sounded very sharp.

She sat up straight in her arm chair.

'What's wrong with you? I'm sure I don't have to tell you that you've just crossed a line back there.'

He nodded and felt ashamed.

'Care to tell me what's wrong?'

He shook his head and forced a clumsy smile on his face.

'I think I'm just overworked.'

The head nurse frowned unwillingly.

'Harvey tells me you were acting strangely two nights ago.'

Evan swallowed, he didn't feel too well.

'It must have been the wind.'

She reacted to that immediately.

'There was no wind.'

He swallowed again.

'My mind played tricks on me. I haven't been sleeping well lately.'

She tapped the desk with her index finger and gave him a sharp look.

'I can't spare you. You are very important to us here but I think you can have next week off.'

He jumped up.

'Please, I don't think that will be necessary. A few nights of good rest and I will be alright. I'm sure.'

She pursed her lips.

'We'll see,' she said. 'But I'm keeping an eye on you, you hear?'

He made some sort of clumsy bow.

'Yes, I understand. May I go now?'

She waved about.

'Off you go.'

He stumbled into the bathroom sweating like a pig. He turned on the tap and threw lots of cold water in his face. Like his thoughts his heart was racing. He had no idea what was going on. He clutched his hands around both sides of the sink. Maybe he was having a mental breakdown. That wasn't uncommon. Yes. He convinced himself it had to be a lack of sleep and hard work. He had to go to the head nurse and ask to be excused for the time being. But as he faced himself in the mirror his eyes opened wide.

The atmosphere had become thick and the sounds of the outside world disappeared. His knuckles turned even more white. Then he heard two voices behind him. Two squeaky voices that spoke simultaneously. He was trembling all over and didn't dare to look. They were still there. Slowly he turned around. He kept clutching to the sink. The voices spoke again. Repeating those eerie words. They were smiling.

'Hello Evan. At last we found you. Can you see us now?'

A few minutes later nurse Peters, together with Harvey and a few fellow colleagues, rushed to a nearby bathroom, because they heard the most haunted scream they had ever heard in their lives.

A week later

She shook Emily's hand with much affection.

'I'm so glad you're alright now. You'll be fine. I'm sure.'

Emily returned the smile.

'Thank you for everything. I am in your debt. You have freed me from my demons.'

The head nurse sighed and Emily pressed her lips together.

'I would like to see him, please. To say goodbye.'

The ever so sturdy looking nurse nodded sadly.

'Of course.'

They walked up to the isolation cell and stopped at the door.

'I'll leave you here then.'

She looked at the door.

'It's a shame,' she said softly.

Emily nodded.

'Yes, it is.'

The nurse straightened her face trying to hold back her tears. She turned around and left.

Emily entered the room. It was stuffy and damp. Slowly she walked up to Evan. He was sitting on the floor.

'Evan?' she whispered.

Disorientated he looked around the room. His eyes were red and hazy.

'Wake up,' she said.

'I can't move,' he muttered.

She shook her head.

'No, you can't, that's a real disadvantage of a straitjacket.'

His sight became somewhat clearer.

Her expression turned cold and distant.

'You know, I was so sure you'd recognise them if they showed themselves to you. But you didn't, did you? At first I thought maybe you'd recognise me too, but we didn't actual-

ly know each other in the past so I thought that was very unlikely to happen.'

He frowned and Emily smiled.

'You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?'

He slowly shook his head.

She crouched down in front of him.

'Let me refresh your memory. It was twelve years ago. You were eighteen, I think. I was fourteen. They were eight at the time. It was a day like any other day. The sun shone brightly. Spring was coming and everything was fine. Until that afternoon. If I hadn't taken a different route from school that day I would have never known. And until this day I wish I hadn't known. It ruined my life.'

He gasped for air and shook his head.

'I don't understand.'

She snapped.

'Shut up. I'm not finished yet.'

She smiled dreamily.

'They came to me one day. They came and drove me almost to the point of insanity. I didn't know what they wanted from me. I swear I didn't. But one day I knew. They wanted me to find you.'

Her eyes wandered off to the corner of the room.

He followed her gaze and immediately backed away. Or at least he tried. He could hardly move. She nodded.

'You can see them now, can't you? They're fading from me now, so I'm leaving them in your care.'

By now, Evan had a terrified look on his face.

'Emily, please. Help me.' His voice was no more than a whisper. One side of his face began to burn. She had struck him hard.

'Help you? Are you kidding me? Like you helped them?'

She rose to her feet, not able to control her anger anymore.

‘How could you do it? How could you murder and rape two eight-year-old girls? I saw you. I saw the whole thing that day, but I was too scared to do anything. And you got away with it. I didn’t dare to go to the police or my parents. I thought you’d come after me too. A rather foolish thing, because you never saw me, did you? I could have saved them maybe, if I hadn’t been such a coward. Were they the only two? Or have there been more over the years? If there were, their blood is on my hands. But they will find you eventually, Evan. I’m sure they will.’

He cleared his throat.

‘Look at them.’ She had regained her calm and a sad expression appeared on her face. ‘Their little faces, all white. Their lips blue.’

He was breathing heavily and trembling all over.

‘This is not my concern anymore. Finally I’m free. In a way, that is.’

‘Emily, please,’ he whispered.

She sighed and made her way to the door.

‘Emily?’

His voice sounded desperate. Horrified, he saw the two tiny figures approaching him slowly.

‘No, stay away from me!’

She turned around to face him one last time.

‘You can’t walk away from this. Not anymore. They were my two twin sisters. In the end, I’m as guilty as you are.’

She smiled sadly watching the two tiny figures. They looked up and gave her a smile.

‘I’ll leave you to it then.’ She nodded. ‘Goodbye.’

The door closed and the two little white faces with blue lips smiled at him as everything faded into blackness.

The voices sounded soft and sweet.

‘At last we found you, Evan. At last we found you.’

'Well, doctor?'

The inspector made no attempt to move. He clutched the poker and seemed tense. Doctor Wells, still affected by the death of Judy, didn't know what to say. The inspector gave him a fierce look. The silence was interrupted by a pounding on the door. Miss Van Gorder got up from her chair, but the doctor urged her to sit down. He moved slowly towards the door. The pounding continued. He glanced over his shoulder and waited. The inspector nodded. Then the doctor yanked the door open. A frightened, almost hysterical young woman, stumbled in.

'Help me, please!' she pleaded.

The doctor took her by the arm and gently patted her hand and made a gesture. The inspector hurried towards the door and closed it.

'There, there my dear,' the doctor said friendly. 'Sit down over here. Miss Van Gorder, do you have a brandy for this young lady?'

She nodded and hurried away. The doctor took a seat next to the young woman, shielding her off so she couldn't see the dead body of Judy lying on the stairs. Lizzy was holding the lifeless body like it was a baby. Dale was still sobbing. Miss Van Gorder came back with a brandy.

'Now, tell me my dear, what happened to you?' she asked as she put the glass with the brandy in her hand.

The young woman took a sip and visibly loosened up. The inspector and Warner stood silently.

The young woman first looked up to Miss Van Gorder and then looked at doctor Wells.

'Thank you for letting me in. I was so frightened.'

The doctor tapped her hand again.

'Tell me what happened, dear,' he urged her.

The young woman sat up straight.

'I'm a bit confused,' she began. 'Maybe I have had an accident. What was I was doing in the woods?'

Miss Van Gorder wanted to interrupt her but the doctor put his index finger to his lips. She gave him a disgruntled look.

'Go on, my dear,' he said.

The young woman continued.

'I was sure someone was following me. I heard strange noises behind me. I was scared, so I started running. I'm not familiar with this area, so I didn't know where to go. I was exhausted and could feel the frightening presence right behind me. Then I saw the house. I ran up to the door and started pounding on it.' The inspector approached her. He put his hand on the back of her neck. There was blood on it. He put his hand in front of the womans face.

'How did this happen, Miss?'

The young woman was intimidated by the inspector. She just shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. The doctor got up. 'Inspector, please. You do not suggest this young woman had anything to do with all of this?'

The inspector wasn't impressed by the doctors words.

'It could have been anyone.'

Miss Van Gorder sighed dramatically.

The young woman leaned forward and addressed Dale with a trembling voice.

'Why are you crying? What's wrong?'

Dale didn't answer as she was still overwhelmed by Judy's death. She just shook her head. Then the staircase caught the young woman's eye. She slowly rose from her chair and approached it. She fixed her gaze upon Judy's dead body. She turned and faced the doctor.

'What happened?'

'It's a long story, my dear, but the inspector here has everything under control. Don't you, inspector?'

The inspector gave the doctor a provoking look. The doctor gave him a conceited smile in return. The young woman became even more terrified.

'What is happening?' she stammered.

Miss Van Gorder approached her with caution.

'We don't know either, my dear. It's been a strange night for all of us. Come sit down and have some more brandy.'

The young woman looked at the strangers in front of her with suspicion.

'It's not safe here.'

Immediately the doctor tried to calm her down.

'My dear, if we all stay together we will be fine.'

The young woman backed away.

'No, don't touch me!'

'She's hysterical. We must help her,' Miss Van Gorder said.

'Yes, you're quite right, Miss Van Gorder,' the doctor said as he turned to the table to get his bag. The young woman moved towards the door.

'No, I have to leave.'

'But you can't leave, Miss. It's not safe out there,' Warner said.

The doctor opened his bag and took out a syringe.

'Come now,' he said. 'This won't hurt a bit.'

The young woman's eyes were wide open. She put one hand to her forehead. She had her back against the front door now.

'You can't leave,' Miss Van Gorder tried to persuade her.

The young woman shook her head and grabbed the doorknob.

'Wait!'

The doctor tried to grab hold of her, but he was too late. She pulled the door open and ran off into the night. He looked puzzled.

'Should I go after her?'

Miss Van Gorder came up beside him.

'Very noble of you, doctor,' she answered, 'but it wouldn't do anybody any good, I think.'

He closed the door, sighed and returned to the table to put the syringe back in the bag. He walked up to the staircase and shook his head while looking down on the lifeless body of Judy. 'We have yet another case for the county's coroner,' the inspector said, still clutching the poker.

The tour guide turned the sound off as soon as the credits appeared on the big screen.

'And with this wonderful film the tour ends. I hope you all enjoyed yourselves. Thank you for visiting the Golden Age Horror Museum. Feel free to look around some more and have a safe trip home.'

The small audience applauded and most people rose to their feet.

Jack and Chase sat on the last but one row. They looked around for a bit in admiration of the scenery. The house they were in, was an exact copy of the house featured in the film they had just seen. Or at least it seemed to be. It was just a part of it. The living room had the same hidden space behind the grandfather clock, and even the staircase was identical to the one in the film. If you walked out of the front door, however, you didn't walk into the dark forest, but onto the terrace of the restaurant. After you had passed it you reached the exit. That was the end of a great tour through the world of twentieth century early horror films.

'Wow,' said Jack mesmerised. 'I love Vincent Price films. This one was great. I've seen it a few times already and it remains one of my favourites.'

'Hear, hear!' Chase said approvingly. 'This museum is great, by the way. I don't think they've left out any good horror films from the early days. Thank God they didn't put the spotlight only on the mainstream stuff.'

Jack nodded. They startled when they heard a voice behind them.

'I think you're quite right.'

They both looked over their shoulder and saw a young woman sitting right behind them. Chase chuckled.

'You gave me quite a scare!'

The young woman smiled.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you. I just wanted to see the film again.'

'An admirer of old scary films too?' Jack asked.

She nodded enthusiastically and smoothed her polka dot dress.

'You look smart,' he said. 'You like the fifties, Miss...?'

'It's Leah, Leah Benedict.' The young woman kept on nodding and smiling. 'It's my favourite.' Again she smoothed her dress.

Jack sighed.

'I would like to have met Vincent Price. Seems like he was a very nice man.'

'O yes, he was!' she exclaimed.

Chase raised his eyebrows and chuckled again.

'Sounds like you've met him.'

She looked embarrassed and stammered: 'No, no, it's just that I've heard that too, about Mr. Price.'

The two boys looked at each other and Jack raised an eyebrow. There was a brief silence.

'You know,' she continued hastily, 'there was an out-take from this film.'

'That's not unusual,' Chase said.

Then she leaned forward a bit.

'No, it isn't, but there's something eerie about it.'

She looked at the both of them.

'Well?' Jack whispered in anticipation.

'There was a young promising actress in the out-take. It was her first role ever. It would have been her big break. On the

night, when she drove back after shooting this particular scene, she died. Ironic isn't it? Your first role. You shoot it. You die. Your part is taken out. No one hears about you ever again. You pass into oblivion.'

'That actually is very eerie,' Jack said.

Suddenly Chase made a strange move.

'What's that?' Jack asked.

'I don't know,' Chase said. 'I think I've got the shivers all of a sudden.'

Jack gave him a peculiar look.

'It's not cold in here,' Jack said. 'Do you think it's cold in here, Miss...?'

They turned to face her, but the young woman was gone.

Three weeks later

Chase picked up his phone. Jack's voice sounded tense and excited.

'Come over to the library at once!'

Chase frowned.

'What? I'm in the middle of something. Can't this wait?'

Jack was very clear.

'No, it can't. Get over here now!'

Chase sighed, took his coat and got himself to the library.

'What is it? Are you alright?'

Jack let Chase into a small, private room. He was sitting next to a big old-fashioned thing. A machine that enabled one to go through old newspapers and things like that real quick. Impatiently Jack gestured at the seat next to him.

'What is it?'

Something in Jack's manner worried Chase. Jack leaned toward him.

'Do you remember the day we visited the Golden Age Horror Museum?'

Chase nodded.

'Of course.'

'Do you remember the young woman who told us about the film and the out-take and the strange death of the actress?'

Chase nodded again.

'I thought the whole thing through and it didn't make sense,' Jack said.

Chase shrugged.

'In what way?'

Jack glanced at him with excitement.

'I asked myself how it was possible I didn't know about the out-take the girl was talking about.'

'Well, you can't know everything, can you?' Chase said but Jack shook his head.

'I ought to know such a ghostly story. It's basically my hobby.'

Chase raised his eyebrows.

'That's true.'

'Well,' Jack continued, 'I phoned the tour guide who showed us the film and who did the tour in the museum that day. I told him about the out-take and the death of the young actress, and here comes the strange part.'

Chase waited.

'Well?'

Jack smiled and put his hands in the air.

'There was no out-take! There never was that particular out-take from that film.'

Chase leaned back in his chair.

'There wasn't?'

Jack bounced up and down in his chair.

'Listen, the out-take exists, but only on paper. The scene was never shot.'

Chase opened his mouth and closed it again.

'I don't think I understand.'

‘Neither did I at first,’ Jack said excitedly. ‘The scene was planned on a certain day at the house we were in at the museum. Of course not that house, but the original house which does not exist anymore. The scene was to be shot around the time the girl Judy was killed in the film. Do you remember that part?’

Chase looked up, thought for a moment and nodded.

‘The actress was late that day. Can you imagine being late for your first part in a big film? She’d probably been in a hurry. Before she reached the filming location she parked her car against a large oak tree and died of a massive haemorrhage on the back of her head.’

Chase looked dazzled and Jack continued.

‘Ironic isn’t it? Your first role. You shoot it. You die. Your part is taken out. No one hears about you ever again. You pass into oblivion. But she never shot it, Chase, she never did!’

Chase frowned.

‘She? You just lost me completely.’

‘Look at what I found,’ said Jack while he searched through some papers. ‘Here it is.’

He handed Chase a printout. At first Chase didn’t see it, but suddenly he sat up straight.

‘But...’ he stammered. ‘It cannot be!’

Jack enhanced the photo because it was a bit blurred.

‘Let me see the rest,’ Chase said excitedly.

Jack handed him another printout. The news article and the photo belonged together. It was an article about a young actress who died in a car crash, just hours before she was due for a scene for a major film. Chase gazed at the picture. The polka dot dress was immaculate, her smile soft and gentle. He shook his head and stared at Jack in disbelief.

‘It can’t be.’

‘It can’t?’ Jack said. ‘Look at the caption under the picture.’

Chase glanced over the picture and he saw it. It said “Leah Benedict”.