The Demons Will Charm You

By Duke Sullivan

September 2012: Present Day

I find the diversity of noises in the city fascinating: car alarms, sirens, the gears clicking on bicycles, the tick of the crosswalks, espresso machines pouring shots over ice as soymilk bubbles onto the counter... noises overlap and build. But, never from the people. People are quiet -- plugged into their iPods and carefully avoiding eye contact. What I find most interesting is that here I feel completely invisible. I can blend into the environment and get lost within the people and actions around me; let the city of Seattle cover me in its sounds and shroud myself in a jarring silence.

However, as I sit beside the small tombstone in Lakeview Cemetery looking back on my life, there are no sounds. But there’s something tangible about this silence that I cling to. The way it fills your ears just the way music or voices do, the way you peel away layers of quietness to get at sounds beneath it. Layers that suffocate the senses; a heart beating on the eardrum – the same ominous tone with no decipherable pitch. I suppose I like it because I am always searching for noise — sitting up at three in the morning; the creak of the house and the metallic clack of a dog’s tags outside as his owner takes him for a pre-dawn walk and the wind against the glass of my window. It is interesting though because we never actually reach it. Silence is like being in the dark: we find shapes and sounds when we expect nothing. And silence means much more when you can never have it.

As a child I searched for that silent place. I found it, if only for seconds at a time. Silence was there in the moments when I pulled the sheets over my head. Under them I could listen past the owl perched on the branches as they swayed together in the night. I could get inside myself, and nothing else mattered. This silence could block her voice from pouring onto my skin when she would rage. Under them I was untouchable.

I recall those nights. Ever since I can remember, their arguments would envelop the house. They would tear into me, lingering even after they stopped. Yet, like with the city’s noises, in their screams I found comfort. As long as there was screaming, it meant that my mother would not be bothering me. As long as there was screaming, I felt safe. Covered by sounds, I was invisible. Waiting in silence, I was prey.

Some ideas remain branded in my skin like scars that no one can see. I feel them everyday, scratching underneath the dermis and clawing at my intestines. All I could do was suppress them: tame my ghouls before they devoured me. But there came a moment when they broke through. And I had to think about what happened to everything I was and where I went wrong along the way; but I didn’t understand it – I couldn’t. I was engulfed in her shadows. I’m changed now, like everyone else exposed to her madness. The manipulation that lingers in my mind will always be present but I finally understand that it doesn’t have to be inescapable... An idea that can never be erased, only accepted.

Through it all, I almost lost the ability to breathe. Yet through it all, I now understand that it’s okay.

March 1995: 11 years old

The door to my bedroom was cracked allowing a sliver of light through – the blankets stifled my breath. Wide-awake I laid there listening, careful not to make any movements and hoping that...
all remained calm. I did not trust the darkness because I could not trust her. But then it came as it always did. The screaming progressed quickly. Whispers traced the hallways, building as it crawled across the carpet gaining momentum with each fiber it consumed until it echoed throughout the walls and down my spine.

And when my father screamed out in the middle of the night, I often wished that I didn’t understand what it was that haunted him. His cries were broken and shrill like old piano strings that played much higher than they should have been. Out of tune against the softness of his face, but accentuated by the liquor in his blood. Alcoholism plagued him and he succumbed to it. Over the years, he used spirits to drown out Thena. I guess I couldn’t blame him.

“AHHHHHHHHH!” Thena’s screams burst through the halls in the middle of the night. Her words were incomprehensible, the vibrations escaping her throat too powerful for diction.

“Thena, you have to stop this! What do you expect me to do? You blame everyone else, ask everyone else to change, why can’t you see that it’s you…” Jon trailed off as he started crying. I crawled down the hallway to listen.

“I have done nothing. I’m here for this family! Where are you?!! You’re never home, and when you are, you’re not here. Always screaming in your sleep like a child.” Thena raged and punched the wall. “See what you made me do?” She cried, trying to make Jon out to be the bad guy, “This is domestic abuse.”

“You don’t have to.” The way she said it, I knew she was smiling. The corners of her lips raised just enough as if she were devising a plan to make it look as if she had. I heard her footsteps heading toward the door. I didn’t want her to find me listening, so I sprinted back down the hall. But as I turned the corner, I collided with Natalia.

“Damen, come on.” My sister hurried me to her room. We went to escape it, like most nights, in the hump of pillows and blankets that we piled in her closet. We closed the doors, and let the darkness take us.

“I can’t take this anymore.” I whispered.

“It’ll be okay.” Natalia gave me a soft smile. I could see her sadness too, even if she was trying to be strong for both of us. “We can get through this, Damen. I’ll get us out of here.” Before our breath could settle, the closet doors erupted.

“What are you two doing?!” Thena yelled at us. Enraged, spit flew from her lips. Her round face loomed above us and color spread over her like poison as if the remnant of the stretched out moon tattooed on her neck seeped into her veins. “Get your asses in bed, now!” She grabbed my arm and dragged me from my corner. Rug burns swelled across my knees – they hurt but I didn’t cry, I would not give her the satisfaction. “You both know better to be up this late.”

“You woke us up!” Natalia yelled back. Thena’s eyes pinched at their tear ducts. I couldn’t help but be scared for her. Thena reached for Natalia and lifted her from the floor.

“You do not talk back to me.” She said as Jon ran into Natalia’s bedroom.

“Thena, what are you doing? You do not touch her!” Yet again they left us on the sidelines; unnoticed, my sister and I huddled together back into her closet, their screams looming in the walls.

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