

## Beyond the Curtain

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I know it is a dream. For what reason I do not know, as the dream is the same as the memory—the only memory I am able to recall—and though I can with certainty recognize it as a dream, it disorients me more than if I were ignorant to whether I was awake or dreaming.

My dream and further my memory, play out this way:

My girlfriend, her face buried in my shoulder, weeps black lines of mascara onto the straps of my white summer dress. Her head of thin blonde hair, tied as it is in a frizzy ponytail, falls onto my neck, tickling me with its bristly tips. Her breasts quiver against my stomach. Her whole-body rattles, causing the bed beneath us to creak and shiver. I lay unmoving, one arm curled around her to grasp the hot skin of her shoulder, the other trapped underneath her weight. My arm throbs from the pressure of her form, but I do not move it; I do not dare attempt to disturb her sorrow. Kneading my fingers into her arm, I tilt my chin down into my chest, but cannot, no matter how I angle myself, see a hint of my girlfriend's face. There is only the rippled skin of her forehead falling further down her face than it should. I lay there for a time, looking at the top of her skull, seeing the long line of flesh uncovered by blonde hair cutting across the top of her head.

We both lay, wordless. The only sounds are her muffled sobs and the keening of the bed as she convulses atop me.

Then, the room is silent and the heat I felt from my girlfriend's breath—from her whole-body vanishes, though, somehow, I feel her weight upon me. In a moment, she lifts herself, swiveling her head as she does, so I never see her face.

I watch the back of her head as she moves away from the bed towards the green dresser standing against the slanted walls of our attic apartment and retrieves something. She turns around, but her head does not follow. I stare as she stands, her head twisted to face the wall behind her. Her short ponytail bounces where her face should be. The knife in her hand gleams from the white light streaming through the

sole window in the room. As she approaches, I am paralyzed. Somehow, as if there is some discrepancy between my eyes and my body, her weight is still upon me.

Faceless, she kneels beside the bed and takes the knife to my throat. As I breathe, I feel the pressure of sharp steel against my neck. Through the thin strands of blonde hair, eyeless tears strike the bed beside me.

I feel a hot lash of fire as she drags the knife across my throat. I feel the hot pulse of blood rushing down my neck and the ghost of her body crushing me, until her faceless form vanishes into darkness, and I wake.

As my eyes struggle with the harsh flare of light above me, I remain immobilized, though it is not the same pressure I felt in the dream restraining me. No, there is a tightness bundling my legs and gripping my waist. An unseen restraint binds my wrist and I feel the grip of something across my neck, but my chest rises without obstruction as I breathe.

Once the light dims into white streaking artifacts imprinted on my vision, my eyes focus. To my left is a turquoise curtain drawn all the way across the room to the stained wall in front of me. On my right, beyond the small filing cabinet-like table, is the door's open threshold. I see the left half of a uniformed police officer slouched in a folding chair outside the door frame.

Why are the police outside my room? Do they think my girlfriend will come back when she realizes she has in fact not killed me? Why can I not remember anything beyond my dream?

I open my mouth to call out to him, but find myself incapable of speech, only able to push out a near silent sigh. Clutching at my throat with my free hand, I feel the thick overlapping layers of gauze wrapped around my neck. There is, I see now, a tube inserted in my hand snaking up my unrestrained arm to a fluid bag filled with a clear liquid; one which reminds me of a plastic bag a child would receive a goldfish in.

Looking down at my other hand, I see that I am handcuffed to the hospital bed's plastic frame. In my restrained hand, I am clutching a joystick with a faded red button atop it.

Panicking, I press the button over and over.

Even as the nurse rushes into the room, I cannot stop myself from clicking my thumb on the button over and over, until I am heaving rapid wheezing breaths, and the room around me dissolves.

When I wake, the doctor, an East-Indian man in a white coat, hovers over me. His cold hands work at the bandages around my neck, adjusting them until he is satisfied.

Righting himself, he stands, appraising me. His tentative gaze lands just below my eyes, staring, no doubt, at the bandages around my neck.

“Awake, are we?” he says, moving to the foot of the bed. “Rhetorical question. I know you cannot answer, do not worry. Rest for now, worry later.”

And then, with a nod to the slouching cop, he is gone.

There has been no sound from beyond the turquoise curtain dividing the room since I woke; no indication at all in fact that anyone resides there. I have seen no nurses, doctors, or family members move from my side of the room to the side hidden behind the curtain. Why though, would the room be divided if no one else is in here with me? Is there a reason, beyond the privacy of another patient, for a curtain to be draped across the room? Looking at it I saw how it soaked up the light from a window I had never seen.

Perhaps, I thought, they simply wish to keep me from the light—from viewing the outside world. But why would they do that? I cannot find a reasonable answer to this question. So, for now, I continue to believe there is a silent patient, perhaps comatose, at my side, split off from me by the turquoise curtain. A patient who requires no extra care, with no relatives to visit. But then again, since I have been here, I too have had no visitors.

As I lay reclined with my lower half tucked under the papery sheets of my hospital bed, my wrist bound, the curtain drawn, and the cop slouched in the same position outside my door, I attempt to recollect anything beyond that night, but every memory curls away as I pluck at it. Each time I graze an image or sensation from the past, it hollows out and becomes formless. Only silhouettes of memory remain. So hollow are these hazy reproductions in my brain that I cannot determine if they are my own memories or the memories of another imparted to me.

There are memories of a woman in a white dress; of her wide smile passing through the veil of hair fallen over her face, of her twirling, sending the flounce of her dress up to her knees, exposing her smooth, waxen legs, and of her crouched, paintbrush in hand, eyes intense, biting her lip as she smooths green paint over a white dresser.

However, her face changes each time I sift through the memories. I cannot be sure if I am witnessing the same woman or two women.

Neither of these women are people I recognize.

The doctor has not returned since his initial visit.

When the nurse arrives, she is unresponsive to any attempt at communication I make. I tap my bound wrist with my free hand in a bid to have her tell me the time, but she only tightens the handcuffs, telling me, “This is for your own protection.” I motion to the curtain with my eyes, but the nurse pays me no attention. She replaces

my bandages, studies the bag of fluid, adjusts my sheets, and leaves.

Outside the door, the cop has exchanged his face for another, but sits as he did when he possessed his other face; slouching with one leg stretched into the door's aperture.

I reach over my body with my unrestrained hand, attempting to draw back the curtain, but find I can only skim the thin blue fabric with my fingertips. It yields at my touch; the furrowed curtain wavers back and forth, but it stays upright, keeping me ignorant to what lies beyond.

At night I face the same dream. It occurs exactly as it did before, except, this time I find I am watching from outside my own body; an observer nestled in the wall as the harrowing events unfold.

My own face, I see, as my girlfriend sobs into my shoulder, is not there. My own curly black hair is draped over my face, obscuring any feature from sight. I watch as, supine on the bed, the two entangled figures without faces enact the same scene.

One shifts from sobbing into the other's shoulder, to wielding the knife, its face glinting the white light from a small square window. The other, eyeless and still, watches as I do, as her companion moves from mourning to violence, drawing the silvery knife up to her throat, and dashing it open in one smooth motion. Blood runs down my neck onto my breasts, staining my white summer dress; concealing the strips of mascara palpitated onto its straps moments ago.

This time however, the dream continues past the fissuring of my neck, where it splits open like a second mouth and pours out the contents of my body. Past this I see my girlfriend, knelt on the ground, her head angled down.

I know she is watching me die. Though I cannot see her eyes, I know she watches the life pour from my throat, and I can sense the wonder in her absent eyes as she does so.

She runs her hand across my neck to feel the outpour; the warmth of my body as it leaves me. Without hesitation she brings the knife up to her own throat and dashes it open. She stays upright for as long as she can then falls on top of me, pressing the sputtering wound in her neck against my chest.

Each night I lay in my hospital bed, I experience this same dream over and over, with some subtle variation. Sometimes, I see it as I did the first time, watching through my own eyes, seeing only the back of my girlfriend's head as she sobs, then slits my throat. Other times, I watch from the wall, a faceless confrontation between two women, one of whom is me, but as the dream repeats, I become less sure which of these two women I am. And more recently, in a disturbing variation, I experience the dream from the perspective of my girlfriend; sobbing violently into my own chest, anxiety swirling about my whole body.

My life is over, I say over and over, within the head of my girlfriend. I've ruined it all. I nuzzle my face deeper into her shoulder, wishing she felt the way I feel about her. I could smother myself with her beautiful body. I wish for nothing else but to press myself so deep into her that I strangle myself and die in her embrace.

But I know this is not what will happen. I know it cannot and will not end in these romantics I fantasize.

I quiet my sniveling and raise myself from her bosom. I know how it must end and somewhere deep down, I am sure she does too. I plod my way over to the dresser—the one I painted for her, the one we built together, and I retrieve the knife I had set there. As I walk back, she does not move; does not waver or struggle as I approach her with what she must know will kill her.

Perhaps, she does love me the way I love her.

Kneeling, I take the blade to her throat, watch as it rises against it, her skin folding against the blade. In one swift motion, I drag it across her throat, catching some of the blood splatter in my open mouth.

Though it pains me to watch, I am in awe of her beauty, even in the throes of death. I stare as more and more blood rushes down her body, staining the white dress we shared. It takes little time before I find this too excruciating to witness.

I take the blade to my own throat, let it bring me closer to her, and slice. Toppling over, I return to my love.

This is as far as the dream goes, and as a consequence, as far as my memory of my girlfriend's attempt on my life goes.

I am waiting, as I reconstruct what has happened to me, for my voice to return so I may notify the policeman who guards my door of what transpired. Perhaps he can elucidate the events that led to my hospital stay; tell me what has become of my girlfriend; if she survived her attempt at suicide and is right now plotting how best to ensure my death. Or, if perhaps she lays comatose on the other side of the turquoise curtain that divides my room in two, waiting to build up her strength to try and end my life again.

It is also possible, I imagine, she did not survive. Where the blade took only my voice, it took all of her.

I ponder these possibilities and yet, I cannot shake the feeling, as I watch the dream evince itself time and again, I may not want to know the truth. Perhaps it is best my voice stays withdrawn from me, and I never discuss how I came to be in this hospital bed. Lest I learn something which cannot be forgotten, and find myself on the other side, beyond the curtain, as the other woman, unable to live with what she has done.