

Decayed Etchings



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SLEDGEHAMMER

I liked the new apartment. It was only a single bedroom, but I was definitely pleased. The walls were a little yellowed with age, but even still, I saw no reason to complain. The windows provided good light, there was plenty of room, and the landlord said there was only one other tenant on the same floor. She was all the way at the end of the hall. Quiet was what I sought and I was promised quiet was what I'd receive.

But it was like I spoke too soon. Not my mouth, but my thoughts, because out of nowhere came the pounding. The heavy, thrashing blows. And the collapse that followed. One loud, *hard* smash after another. Sounded like a sledgehammer.

I opened the door and stepped out into the hall. The strong, blinding glow of the early-morning sun lit the way.

From where I stood, I could see the door to the other apartment open wide, as though the tenant welcomed an audience. I'd never seen or spoken to her, so what could've waited beyond that threshold remained a mystery—a mystery I suddenly felt a strong urge to solve.

The thrashing continued. The hard, heavy pounding. The closer I got, the *louder* it got. Both the walls and the floor beneath my feet vibrated with every crash. I could hear the sounds of falling dust, rocks, and debris within the walls. It felt as though the entire building was literally a stone's throw from crumbling down. *All* of it, with me dead center.

As I neared, the sound became almost too much to take and just to listen became painful. It hurt to *hear*.

Standing in the doorway, the first thing I noticed was the radio. Tuned to a local rock station, it hummed softly, the volume turned down. I found it comical that *this* was the sound my very loud neighbor thought might disturb others. Sure, tear down the walls, but for God's sake, keep the music down. Fucking hilarious.

When I saw her, she had both arms raised as she brandished the sledge. As she prepared another swing, she caught my eye, I caught hers, and her full, pouting lips of deep red smiled.

She looked like an artist, at least to me. I don't know the first thing about that kind of crap, but that's what I would've guessed. A painter or a sculptor, maybe. I drew these conclusions from her attire. Black jeans covered with dust. Army boots. A sloppy, unbuttoned flannel, tank top underneath it. The sleeves were folded up to the elbow.

What struck me most about her was her hair. Perfectly straight, down to her shoulders, and a silky, shimmering black. I could think of nothing but running my fingers through it and smelling its sweet scent.

She lowered the sledge and leaned on it like a cane. Raising an eyebrow, she wiped the sweat from her right palm along the seat of her pants, like she expected we'd shake hands.

"Good morning, neighbor," she said in a deep, throaty voice—a voice so sensual, it curled my toes.

"It's kinda loud in here," I said. It was the first thing that came to me.

She blinked and her thin, arched eyebrows came together, as though my words confused her. "Oh," she said. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't wake you."

"You didn't wake me. I was just... concerned."

"I'm trying to tear this wall down," she said. "I promise I'll finish as fast as I can." She motioned to the wall about a foot and a half from the door, where I found a large, gaping hole, a pile of rocks and broken drywall beneath it. A gaping hole that led out into the hall.

I took a step closer, confused. "But this..." I said, my tone uncertain, "...this wall is..."

I leaned towards the opening and peered through. Saw the open door to my own apartment.

“Oh, it’s fine,” she said, her tone just as casual as casual could be. “I have permission. From the landlord.”

Permission to tear the whole place down?

Straightening, I turned to face her once more. Though my confusion was great, I remained enchanted by her. “Permission...? Permission for *what?*”

She blinked twice. “To knock the wall down.” She said it as though this was something I should know.

“Why?”

“Space. To make the apartment bigger.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense...”

She laughed. “Sure, it does,” she said.

I turned, leaning towards the hole for another look and the moment my back was to her, I heard the sledgehammer crash. A rumble. More falling rocks.

Startled, I jumped, feeling a lump form in my throat. I thought this was it for me. I thought it was over. I really did.

But when I whirled to face her, she was standing completely still, the sledgehammer at her feet. The same smile on her face. The same look in her eyes. She hadn’t budged. Hadn’t been the one to take that hit.

And then I watched her disappear.

Before my very eyes, she vanished, along with the sledge, the hole, the apartment, the radio, the *everything*. Gone. And when I opened my eyes, I realized that wasn’t me anymore. I wasn’t young. I wasn’t healthy. I wasn’t happy. There was no new apartment to imagine settling into. There was only... this. My 62 year old body growing weaker by the month. My warped mind twisting by the day. This congested apartment. This restless early morning. *This goddamned thrashing.*

Oh, the pounding hammer was real. It was *very* real. But it wasn’t down the hall. It was outside my window. The neighbors’ backyard.

DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!

I heard the sounds of breaking concrete. Falling rocks inside the walls. Just like in the dream. The pounding was so hard and heavy, *my own* walls were rattling.

For a while I just continued to lie there, wishing it would stop, praying for peace, begging for silence. But no. No, it wouldn’t stop. No, I couldn’t *sleep*.

I’d never sleep again.

I tore away the sweat-soaked sheets. With a trembling hand, I snatched my pills from the nightstand. Threw back four and swallowed them dry. My heart raced and the beads of perspiration slid from every pore.

I couldn’t breathe.

To the window I stormed. With two fingers I pried apart the Venetian blinds. I saw them. *Two* of them. Mexican, probably. Sounded like Spanish they were speaking.

DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!

The concrete broke like glass under the heavy throws of the hammer.

And I could take no more.

So help me God, I could take not another second.

When I opened the nightstand drawer, it was as though the .38 found my hand magnetically. And in my hand, it was already warm. I didn’t have to check if it was loaded. I knew that it was. It *always* was.

With one swift hand-pull of the cord, the blinds shot open. And with one hand, I tore open the window. The screen followed.

The one holding the hammer was too busy wiping the sweat from his brow with a soiled handkerchief to notice me. The other saw me instantly. He smiled warmly and lifted his hand, a touch of sorrow on his face. As though he genuinely felt bad for waking me.

He opened his mouth—probably to holler some bullshit apology for the noise and to promise they'd be done soon.

But I didn't give him the time for that. Or for anything else.

I lifted the .38, took aim, and fired.

The bullet hit that fucker square in the face and just like that, his head exploded. It was a second or two before he fell, but when he did, it was onto a pile of busted rock. Limp. Lifeless. And the blood ran like a steady river.

His friend noticed immediately and rushed towards him. For what, who the hell knows. But he didn't get more than two steps before I fired again. Got that one from behind and half his damn head broke right off. Just like the goddamn concrete.

And then he slumped on top of his friend. And I laughed to myself. I couldn't help it. It was all so much like Nam.

And I was glad to see that I was still a damn good shot. Still a good soldier.

As if there was ever any doubt.

I put the gun back in its drawer and climbed into bed.

Maybe *now* I'll get some fucking sleep.