

*Tap.*

Fingernails dig into his knees to quell the tremor rising up from his heels.

*Tap.*

His mind suppresses the thing's face, instead recalling the countless droplets of moisture that bloomed from its hot breath on the outside of his bathroom window.

*Tap.*

He doesn't remember why he can't run. Is it fear that keeps him seated, the meat of his thighs going numb on the thin plastic rim? Yes, he's terrified; but of the thing outside or of his pants throwing him to the tile like a deer caught in a denim bola?

*Tap.*

He could call for help, but couldn't face the social pressure, not of showing his bare ass to a monster outside his fifteenth-floor apartment bathroom or the neighbours if they came. He wonders, is it floating above the alley like a fetid balloon or clinging to the windowsill like an eldritch version of a back-window Garfield?

*Tap tap.*

His brother's obsession with cheap Indian food put him here. If he could reach his phone... Oh, he would unleash an extraordinary fury through his thumbs. To his brother, he would hammer that tiny keyboard with:

*You've killed me, you son of a bitch! You and your God damned tikka masala!*

Auto-corrected to:

*You've killed men yoga son a butch! You and your goddamn TikTok lasagna!*

... and thus, his last words. His phone was currently on the floor outside the bathroom, hastily tossed to the ground as he waddled with clenched cheeks to the porcelain throne. His keys were still in the door.

*Tap.*

In spite of everything that lead to this moment, his body had not stopped reacting to what was the worst case of food poisoning in his life. This wasn't like the time he had bad Japanese when visiting his mom in the hospital in the grand city. Only in Cullowhee, North Carolina would

Japanese be distinguished from Chinese cuisine by the inclusion of boiled carrot slices. There was also the time he ate weekend-old shrimp that he'd left on the stove after a particularly vehement case of drunken hunger. No, this was the bowel movement to end them all, the prophesied flooding of the old world to bring in the new, the complete evacuation of his freshly liquefied insides. He was certain that if the thing outside didn't kill him, a combination of dehydration and the swamp stench coming from below his numb thighs would.

*Tap.*

He could see the responding officers now, their bodies encased in the glowing orange of their disposable hazmat suits. Their electronically distorted voices wouldn't comment on the blood dripping from the ceiling or severed head in the tub, but whatever blasphemy was coming from the toilet.

*Tap.*

If it wasn't for the thing's teeth, too many for the weeping slit of raw flesh in its face to be considered a 'mouth', or the way its dead eyes dangled limply from empty, rotting sockets by strands of putrid optic nerve, he would have assumed it to be benevolent. As he hit the toilet and felt the first rush of diseased fluid leave him, he knew he was in a bad situation made worse by his own procrastination. To his left, on a lonely plastic roller, was a simple cardboard tube bare of paper except for a single frayed square glued to the seam. As he sat, pondering if he could fling himself into the shower before any drops hit the mostly clean bathroom tile, he heard the first *tap*. A soft, almost timid rap against his window, like a pebble thrown by a forlorn lover without a boombox to summon their beloved. The tap came again and he looked and saw the rotting thing outside the window as if summoned by the scent of waste emanating from his own body. In the thing's gnarled grasp, with fingernails like rusty claw hammers protruding from knuckles the size of clementines, was a wad of fresh toilet paper.

*Silence.*

With the sound of blood pounding in his ears he almost misses the quiet. With his breath quickening and his nails digging so deep into his knees a bead of blood seeps from the depressions they leave in his flesh, he turns toward the window, screaming from the rush of adrenaline smashing into his mind.

*Nothing.*

The moisture on the window was all that was left of the thing outside.

*Tap.*

His body stiffened. Blood pounds in his ears.

*Tap..*

Oh, God.

*Tap tap tap.*

It was coming from in the bowl.