

There was a pause when he told me. A beat too long, like he expected a certain reaction and wasn't sure how to proceed without it. I think I mumbled something. Asked how. Asked *why*. He said they didn't know.

That was the beginning of it.

I requested an autopsy, though I had to push harder than I expected. The coroner didn't seem ... enthusiastic about it. That should've been my first real clue. People don't usually *resist* an autopsy when the cause of death is "unknown." They push *for* one.

A few days later, I got a call from the county morgue. I still remember the walk up to the building, how the concrete steps seemed to stretch longer than they were, how the air felt humid and metallic, like the inside of a shut-down machine. The building looked clinical from the outside, but inside it was old. Not in the charming vintage way, but in the forgotten way, like something built for efficiency – a place made to function, not to feel. The fluorescents overhead buzzed with a constant insectile hum. Everything smelled sharp of bleach and something older beneath it, the heavy, putrid stink of old blood and forgotten things.

The medical examiner was a tall, wiry man with thin features and gloves he never took off, even when shaking hands. Except, he didn't shake mine. When he saw me, he froze. Not dramatically, and not enough to alarm anyone who wasn't paying attention. But I was paying attention. His face, pale to begin with, drained a shade lighter. His eyes flicked once to the side, then back to me, and I saw something in them that I didn't like: Recognition.

Not just the kind you give someone you've been told is coming. The kind that says: *I've seen something I wish I hadn't. And now I have to talk about it.* He motioned sharply for me to follow and led me down a series of cold, sterile corridors.

From somewhere deep in the building came the dull scraping of metal against bone, rhythmic and relentless. A faint, sorrowful wail echoed softly from the waiting room, weaving through the silence like a ghost's lament, making the whole place feel less like a medical office and more like a mausoleum.

He stopped at a heavy door marked "Dr. Venin" and pushed it open. Inside, the small office was sparse: dull gray walls, a scratched metal filing cabinet shoved into one corner, and a large metal desk cluttered with papers, lit by a buzzing fluorescent bulb that fought to stay steady.

Without a word, he slid the worn office chair back with a scrape against the tile and sat down stiffly, his eyes briefly catching mine before falling to the paperwork. He cleared his throat, gesturing for me to sit.

He shuffled through the papers until he came across a pale yellow folder labeled "Diana Hansen" scribbled on an orange post-it note. He opened it slowly, and as his mouth parted to speak, the words fell out unnaturally, like he were reading a foreign language. "Cause of death: natural."

That was it. I waited. Nothing more came.

I asked him to clarify. Natural *what*? Heart failure? Aneurysm? Seizure?

He looked at me, and for a moment, I saw something flicker behind his eyes. It wasn't confusion, no. It was calculation. Like he was trying to decide how much to say.

"No abnormalities were found," he said. "No signs of trauma. No evidence of poisoning. No cardiac irregularities. Everything was... within limits."

"But she's dead," I said. He nodded. Slowly. Like that was the strangest part.

Then came the silence. The kind that thickens the air in a room. I noticed how his hands wouldn't stop moving, resting, fidgeting, folding again. His lips pressed into a tight, bloodless line. You can tell when someone's lying. You can *feel* it in the pauses between their words, the way their eyes shift just before they speak. He was trying too hard to seem calm. His expression was composed, his jaw locked tight, but his eyes betrayed him. They were wide and glassy, like a man who's seen something he doesn't know how to unsee.

And there was something else. A smell.

Not in the room, but on *him*. Barely noticeable at first, but once I caught it, I couldn't ignore it. A dry, metallic odor, just beneath the surface of the bleach. Like the smell of old coins. Like something that had died behind a wall and been left to rot. I could feel it in the back of my throat. I could taste it.

He answered the rest of my questions with machine precision. No pauses. No elaborations. It was like reading a script. But he wouldn't meet my eyes anymore. I thanked him eventually, because I didn't know what else to do. I stood and offered my hand. It was a reflex. A habit. A formality.

He flinched.

Not subtly. He actually jumped. His eyes went wide and he took half a step back, knocking his chair into the wall behind him. Then, without a word, he turned and walked - no, *bolted* - out of the door. I heard his footsteps echo down the corridor, rapid and uneven. He was muttering something as he went. It might've been a name. Or a prayer. I couldn't tell. And I just stood there, frozen in that cold, sterile office, with my hand still outstretched like an idiot.

That's when it began.

That gnawing, clawing thing in my gut. The feeling that something was looking back at me from behind the facts. A shape behind the curtain. The sense that none of this was over, and worse, that it only just began. The feeling that whatever *this* was went deeper than I could even imagine.

Back then, I told myself I was tired. Grief does that to you. But even then, through the fog, I felt it. That something had cracked open. Something that had been buried was trying to claw its way to the surface. And I wasn't sure I wanted to see what it looked like when it arrived.

I made my way through the sterile hallways of the coroner's office, my mind swimming with a thousand different thoughts. The building was ice cold despite it being July and I remember thinking that I wished that I had brought a jacket. As I moved through the halls, I noticed that they were remarkably ... empty. Not a metaphorical soul in sight.

I turned the corner toward the entrance, my footsteps were sharp against the linoleum, but quieter than they should've been, as if the floor was swallowing the sound. The overhead lights buzzed faintly, but one by one, they seemed to dim behind me as I moved. I passed a bulletin board I'd seen on the way in, only now the papers were all blank. Not torn, not defaced—just... empty. As if the ink had been drained clean off.

A drinking fountain gurgled to life as I passed, though no one was near it. The sound was too deep, too visceral, like it wasn't pulling from a water line at all but rather choking on an unending wave. The exit sign ahead flickered, then stilled, glowing a dull, unnatural red, not LED red, but something *wet*, like the color of freshly opened meat.

The hallway seemed longer now. Or maybe I was slower. Doors I didn't remember were on either side now closed, but just barely. Not enough to see inside, but enough to know they'd once been *opened*. And every handle had something smeared on it, fingerprints, I think, too many and too small, going the wrong direction.

That's when I realized: I hadn't passed another person since I left that office. And yet, I wasn't alone.

A soft scraping sound echoed faintly behind me, like nails dragging slowly across tile, then stopped as soon as I turned my head. The air grew colder, heavier, thick with a dampness that clung to my skin. My breath came out ragged, misting in front of me as if the temperature had dropped several degrees. Shadows stretched longer, pooling in the corners of my vision. I could almost feel something watching, something patient, waiting just beyond the edge of the light.

I forced down the lump in my throat and quickened my pace, the soft, relentless skittering of countless tiny legs echoing behind me, like a swarm of insects, or something far worse, crawling just beyond sight. Each step felt heavier, the silence pressing in until it was a living thing. Then, a whisper, barely audible, brushed my ear like a slow exhale, so faint I questioned if it was real.

But just as my panic was about to swallow me whole, my terror came to a sudden stop as I stepped into the waiting room. Everything was exactly as it had been when I walked in, every chair in place, the stack of magazines still neat, the fluorescent lights still humming steady and bright. The distant murmur of voices drifted softly through the walls, just like always. Behind me, the hallway stretched out empty and ordinary, with no sign of cracked doors, no skittering insects, no shadows moving where none should be. It was as if the darkness, the cold, the watching presence had all been swallowed up, erased by the sterile light. And yet, deep down, I knew it hadn't gone anywhere at all.

I gathered myself quickly. The woman at the desk either didn't notice my flustered condition or didn't acknowledge it as I approached.

She was small, with dark eyes and tidy blonde hair streaked with strands of auburn and copper. She didn't look up, her narrow face angled toward an open book on her desk, a hardcover medical ethics textbook, ironically enough. I cleared my throat. After a few seconds, she glanced upward with a practiced smile, one that flickered and vanished the moment she saw my face.

I didn't mention the medical examiner's strange behavior, his twitchy nerves, the way his hand trembled slightly when I asked my questions. I kept it

simple. Told her I'd spoken with him, that I was just trying to piece things together. Said I wanted to see the full report "to fill in the gaps," I claimed. She shook her head before I even finished, lips pressed into a polite frown.

"That kind of documentation is classified," she said, with the same tone someone might use to explain a closed road or a vending machine that eats your dollar. "Only authorized personnel can access it. Family or not."

Her eyes never settled. Always drifting. Past me. Around me. Behind me. Never on me.

No amount of pleading worked, believe me, I tried. I tried logic. I tried empathy. Hell, I even tried a veiled threat, something vague about hiring a lawyer and going to the press. She didn't budge. In the end, I thanked her, expressed disappointment, and told her I'd return in a few days with a funeral director to collect the body.

I didn't tell her that I've always been... economical with the truth.

Something wasn't right. The examiner's unease. The secretary's evasiveness. The locked-down records. It didn't make sense, and the not-knowing was eating through me like acid. I was sure they were hiding something, and I didn't care what I had to do to drag it into the light.

If they wanted to hide behind their walls of protocol, I was ready to drive straight through them.

I'm not proud of what I did later that night. I parked across the street just before midnight and waited. Watched the last few cars trickle out of the lot, headlights sweeping the lot in slow arcs before disappearing into the dark. Then I waited another hour—just to be sure.

The street was dead. Not a soul in sight. No headlights. No voices. Just the hum of a distant transformer and the wind kicking dust down the pavement. It was around 2am when I stepped out of the car. The warm summer air pressed close, thick and stagnant.

I crept around to the side entrance I'd scoped earlier. A cracked window above a storage room, probably never meant to open, but old buildings have their weaknesses. A little boost from a dumpster and a careful wiggle, and I was inside.

The halls were worse in the dark. Too sterile, too still, and filled with the kind of silence that presses into your ears until you start hearing things: your own heartbeat, the rasp of your breath, the faint tick of cooling metal.

The overhead fluorescents were off, but low emergency strips ran along the base of the walls, casting a dull amber glow across the floor like dying embers. Every surface gleamed dully beneath it: waxed tile, brushed steel, laminated signs. No shadows. Just flat, colorless and silent.

Then I heard something.

A faint clatter. Metallic. Far off, somewhere deeper inside the facility. I stopped, breath held. The sound came again. It sounded like a tray falling, or a surgical tool dropped on tile. Too clean. Too specific. But I forced myself to believe it was just the ventilation system groaning, or something shifting in a storage room.

I kept moving. My shoes making the faintest squeaks as I crept slowly towards through the halls. The medical examiner's office was just where I remembered it — fourth door on the left, past the autopsy theatre. It felt

smaller in the dark, as if the shadows themselves were pressing against the walls.

The door handle gave under my hand with a gentle push. Not locked. Perhaps either carelessness or confidence, or perhaps he was in too much of a hurry to leave that the thought never crossed his mind that I'd be back. Inside, the room was cold. The kind of cold that didn't come from the AC but from something older, less mechanical. It smelled faintly of latex gloves, printer ink, and something sharp, like alcohol wipes and disinfectant.

And there it was.

That same dull gray filing cabinet in the corner, sitting squat and unbothered like it hadn't just been the source of hours of my obsession. This time, I noticed something I'd missed earlier during my conversation: an electronic keypad, small and discreet, embedded into the top drawer's edge. It blinked with a steady green light, waiting for a code I didn't have.

My stomach sank.

The computer on the desk was powered down, but a dim orange light blinked at the base of the monitor. Password protected, obviously. No sticky notes on the screen. No conveniently left-open folders. Nothing.

I hadn't thought that far ahead. My plan hadn't gone beyond *get in, get the file, get out*. I had no tools for bypassing locks. No stolen login. Just the blind confidence of someone angry enough to believe the rules didn't apply anymore.

I was still staring at the keypad when I noticed it. A small red light, glowing from the upper corner of the room. A Motion sensor. A bead of sweat rolled from my temple. My chest tightened. I turned around slowly, trying not to panic, trying not to breathe too loud, too fast. But it was too late.

Somewhere behind the walls, a silent alarm must have tripped. The red light pulsed faster now. It wasn't just detecting movement. It was communicating.

I didn't run. I couldn't. There was no way out that didn't lead straight past that blinking eye in the ceiling. So I did the only thing I could, I opened the nearest drawer, dug through it with shaking hands, and tried to look like I still had control over the situation.

Minutes passed, or maybe just seconds. Time stretched like wire about to snap. Then came the noise.

Tires on gravel. Doors slamming. Boots on concrete, quick and synchronized. I heard keys. Radios. Voices. Flashlights swept, the hallway lit up with white beams of light.

They found me crouched beside the cabinet, files halfway pulled out, eyes wild. I didn't resist. I just raised my hands, slowly, palms out. There wasn't much point. I wasn't a thief. I wasn't a threat. I was just a man too desperate to stay polite. They didn't ask questions. They didn't need to. I'd already answered all of them the moment I broke in.

They booked me for unlawful entry and tampering with public records. Held me overnight in a cell that smelled like vomit and desperation. By morning, someone higher up had intervened. Charges dropped. Just like that. No questions. No follow-up. No file, either because I'd never even laid eyes on it. It was like someone wanted me scared, but not silenced. Like they wanted me warned.

There was no funeral.

The funeral director called me two days after my release. Said the body was "unviewable," and that she recommended a closed-casket funeral if that was something my family was considering. I thanked her, but declined. It was far too much money and she didn't have many people to invite anyway. I know how it sounds, but I think Diana would have understood. She was always... separate. Private. She lived three cities away, and even then, we only saw each other every couple months. Still, we stayed close in our own way.

She always said the world felt like it was watching her. I used to laugh that off. I don't anymore. Now I think maybe she was right. And maybe whatever she saw coming - whatever killed her - is still out there. Watching me now. Waiting.

Since she had no next of kin, I was put as the sole inheritor of her estate. Suffice to say, I've had a difficult time recently, dealing with her death, my brief arrest, and the seemingly infinite boxes of her things that keep showing up at my door. God, I feel like I'm living in some sort of nightmare or maybe some f- up sitcom.

Regardless, I've gotten off track. The reason I told you this was to give you some background information for what I'm about to tell you. Recently I've been having these weird experiences at home. Umm, one moment.

I've actually been keeping a journal of everything, in case I was to, you know, bring it to someone someday. Here, I'll read you the list:

- July 8th, 10:11 PM: I was in the upstairs hallway down the hall from my grandson's room since he was staying the night with us at the time. I called his name, but he never answered. I tried a few more times, but still no response. I eventually walked into his room, to see if he had his headphones in or if he was just ignoring me. But, he was just reading. When I asked, he said I didn't say anything.
- July 12th, 8:46 AM, 11:02 AM, 1:31 PM, 7:39 PM: My phone kept shutting off as soon as I walked upstairs.
- July 13-Present: I cannot take a phone call or call anyone from inside the house, it's only ever static. I have already bought a new phone and called my phone provider. Nothing has helped.
- July 18th, 5:23 PM: Shadow moved in the upstairs hallway, moving toward the office. Looked, female, I think? Solid black, short and very thin. I checked the doors and windows but they were all locked and the alarm hadn't been set off. I checked the office, but there was no one there.
- July 23rd, 11:44 PM: Saw the shadow again, definitely female. Still solid black, but it was in the upstairs bedroom this time. When I got closer, it disappeared.
- July 24th, 10:21 AM: Something whispered in my ear while I was washing the dishes after breakfast.
- July 24th, 2:45 PM: The whispers are getting more intense. They seem to follow me everywhere.

- July 24th, 9:06 PM: The whispers have stopped suddenly.
- July 28th, 4:32 AM: Something brushed past my shoulder while I was walking in the living room. It felt like ice-cold fingers.
- August 2nd: Whispers again. I think they're saying different things, and in different voices. It sounds like dozens of them, at least. I'll keep a list of what they say.
 - "The bones remember what the mouth forgets."
 - "You're soft. I'll get in."
 - "There's mold where your soul should be."
 - "I lick the wounds you hide."
 - "You'll rot so sweetly."
 - "They dream of you like a fever."
 - "Your blood has turned."
 - "You're burning from the inside out."
 - "I rot what touches me."
 - "There's mold in your marrow."
- August 9th: I saw her again. She was staring at me in the mirror. She was wearing my sister's face. I can't take this anymore.

Yeah, that last part is why I, uh, came here. I can take creepy whispers and disappearing objects, but not ... that. I know I'm an old man, but my eyes and my ears still work. I know what I saw. I saw my dead sister standing in the mirror behind me. But it wasn't her at all. She was ... wrong in a way that I can't explain, like looking at an inverted picture of yourself.

Diana was always tan and paunchy and several inches shorter than me. Her skin held a kind of sun-warmed glow that never fully faded, even in winter, like she was always just back from a hike or sitting too close to a window. She had thick, dark eyebrows that never matched her silver hair; hair she dyed every few months with stubborn determination, even when the roots crept back in faster than she could manage. Her teeth were slightly crooked, one front tooth pushed forward just enough to give her smile a bit of character. There was something soft about her, physically and otherwise. A kind of untended comfort. She never bothered with makeup. She hated mirrors. She used to say her reflection always looked like someone else. And sometimes, when she laughed too hard or stared too long, I knew exactly what she meant.

The figure looming behind me in the mirror was impossibly tall and bone-thin, its pallid skin stretched so tight over its frame it looked ready to tear. Its eyes were bottomless black pits, and its smile, wide and unblinking, revealed endless rows of yellowed needle-like teeth. It stood utterly still, grinning with an unnatural glee as chunks of decayed flesh sloughed from its face – her face– my sister's face – riddled with pits and crawling with maggots that writhed from exposed muscle and jutting bone.

Its flesh was a sickly grey-green, the color of rancid meat and curdled milk, drawn taut over the warped body like overstretched leather. Beneath, its bones jutted out in places they shouldn't – shoulder blades hung like broken wings, with ribs sharp enough to tear straight through, and hips cocked at mangled, unnatural angles. Where the flesh split, gaping lesions oozed with

rot, and from these wounds poured swarms of glistening, engorged insects. They moved in waves, tumbling from bone and sinew like offspring birthed from nutrient-rich decay.

Its smile stretched wider, far too wide, the skin of its cheeks splitting with soft, elastic snaps. *Pop. Pop. Pop.* The sound etched itself into my brain: sharp and wet, like rubber bands snapping against the skin. With each pop, the grin crept farther up its face, and nausea rose in my throat. Its neck twisted then – slow, creaking, unnatural – elongating as it tilted its head from side to side, a grotesque mimicry of curiosity.

It never took a step. It only *swayed*, and watched. Its arms hung low and motionless, freakishly long, tipped in clawed fingers that drummed a slow, deliberate beat on the tile below. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* It never blinked. Never spoke. Just smiled, and waited.

I wanted to scream but my body held me in place. It began whispering, and as the noise turned to a low, wet clicking, like teeth chattering through blood, I realized it wasn't speaking to me. It was *praying*. Muttering something old and broken, its jaw trembling with every guttural syllable as if trying to summon something worse. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I don't know how long I stood there, trapped in that mirror's reflection, but when I finally blinked, it was gone. Not gone like it had vanished. Gone like it had *stepped out* for a cigarette.

Please. I don't care what it costs or what you have to do. Just tell me I'm not insane. Tell me it's real. And if it is, *stop it* before it comes back.

I don't think it was finished. I don't think it came to scare me, I think it came to *test* me. To see if I'd break. And I almost did. Every night since, I've felt it watching from the corners of mirrors, from puddles, from glass darkened just enough that I can't be sure what's on the other side. My sister's voice comes through the static when the TV's off. The sound of dripping water carries whispers I can't unhear.

I've sealed the mirrors. Covered every reflective surface. But it doesn't matter. It's inside the house now. Sometimes, I hear it tapping slow and steady on the bathroom tile. And sometimes... sometimes I find myself *tapping back*.

I'm begging you, all of you, whatever experience you have, whatever you've seen, *help me*. Before I let it in again. Before it finishes whatever it started. Before it decides I'm soft enough to split open and stretch into a new smile.

Addendum – September 19th, 2018

This statement is the only recorded account from David Hansen, as on August 23rd, 2018, he was found dead in his home at 126 Valley View Road, Carrollton, GA. The coroner ruled the cause as natural, a cardiac arrest, though there were no signs of prior health conditions.

According to the police report, he was discovered seated in front of a large mirror that had been covered in duct-taped black fabric and at least two layers of nailed wooden planks. Every other reflective surface in the house, including picture frames, windows, even the glass on his oven, had been painted over or shattered. The bathroom door was barricaded from the inside and the police had to pry the door open with a crowbar. A voice recorder was still running beside him, though the tape had long since ended. I will have a listen to the tape recording later to see if there is anything of interest on it.

Oddly, despite the house being locked from within, a trail of small, symmetrical indentations, elongated, almost finger-like, were found pressed into the dust along the tile floor, leading from the mirror to where Hansen sat. And though the mirror was completely covered, several long, curved teeth were discovered beneath the cloth, pale, sharp, and still wet. They were sent for forensic analysis but were found to match no known species – human or animal. The lab report simply labeled them: *Unknown origin. Organic.*

I will attempt to gather further information.