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DEATH IMPRESSIONS

A NOVEL

J L REHMAN



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a tight fit

HAUNTING THE HOUSE in her bare feet, Dee Dee moves from room to room as if there's nothing to do. She denies the condition of her home, the condition of herself, the depression she's spiraling into. She's almost finished her old bottle of Zanax. Doesn't think she can sleep or function without it.

Holding the new bottle, the thought of taking larger doses visits her more often now. One pill, two pills, three. Six pills, seven, an even dozen.

She stands at the kitchen sink annoyed there are no clean dishes or drinking glasses, looks out the window where fog threads through the back yard, and the moon appears as if it's sitting on the fence by the Salas's shed, illuminating the door. But it's not the moon that's backlighting the shed. The light's on.

After collecting the Food Saver machine and a roll of the large size bags, Joe roots through the refrigerator for leftovers. Hasn't eaten since before he killed Ricky and he's famished.

A hunk of roast beef with a few potatoes sits on a plate covered by plastic wrap. Can't be more than a few days old. He doesn't remember eating it whenever. Realizes Pop's cooked

again. Can't blame the old guy. He hasn't been home much to supervise him, either. Grateful, Joe pulls the wrapping off the plate, and despite the lack of silverware, stands at the sink to eat. He sets the empty plate in the sink, goes back to the fridge, and retrieves a bottle of beer. Takes it and the Food Saver to the shed, and closes the door.

Joe pops the cap off the beer and swallows a third of it. Ricky's head stares out with slackened mouth, tongue pushed against the side of the cheek, the tip protruding between the teeth. Joe plugs in the Food Saver, notices how Ricky's eyes seem fixed on the door as if waiting for company to start the party.

Duct Tape seems to be holding.

Joe takes the roll of Food Saver bags and holds it next to the severed head. Looks like it'll fit. He measures by eye and cuts a section off the roll with scissors. Takes one end of the cut section, sticks it in the Food Saver, locks it in place. Presses the button and the machine purrs to life. Light goes out so Joe opens the lid, removes the bag and checks the end seal.

"What do you think?" Joe takes the bag and struggles to stretch the open end over Ricky's head. It's a tight fit. Like trying to squeeze a sticky bowling ball into one leg of a pair of pantyhose. Makes Ricky look like a cartoon armed robber—face disfigured and wrinkled, nose pushed to one side. Joe wonders if this is how Ricky looked when he was jumping bank counters and shoving a gun in the faces of terrified tellers, poor Betty sitting in the car humming along with the radio while he was making, what she thought, was a deposit. She said she didn't know Ricky was actually making a forced withdrawal. Cops didn't buy it, couldn't imagine anyone that stupid.

"Feel familiar? You deserved to be arrested for criminal ugliness. Probably like it. Gives you comfort. Well, get used to it, you're gonna be in it awhile," Joe says. He lays the head in front of the Food Saver and shuts the lid on the open seam. Clamps the lid and presses the button. Motor strains and strains. At first the plastic bag begins to cling nicely around the face, but can't hold the seal and puffs back open.

Another failure. Bag's too small and they just don't come any bigger. He grabs his beer and sits on the bench next to the severed head crammed in the Food Saver bag. Must be something else he can use.

Joe checks his watch. Sun will be up in an hour or so. He finishes the beer and walks back to the house.

Pop's in the kitchen making coffee. He gives Joe a faded smile, plugs in the pot, looks out the window. "Foggy out there."

"What are you doin' up so early? Not even sunup yet."

"Slept enough. Whatcha doin' up?"

"Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd take some of Betty's things and store them in the shed there. Plenty of room," Joe lies. Sort of. He's gonna store her stuff in there, but he's got bigger priorities. Doesn't think Pop needs to know what.

"You take out the things you want to keep in the house?"

Pop sits at the table in his underwear waiting for the coffee to finish. "Some on the table out there. Pictures mostly. Maybe clear a spot on the book shelves for 'em. Cute little guy." It's all Pop wants to say.

Joe doesn't pursue it. Doesn't want conversation at the moment while Ricky's head heats up and starts to rot on the bench. Has to freeze it as soon as possible.

"You got stuff for a breakfast?"

"Yeah, got my bran flakes."

"Any prunes?"

"Plenty of prunes. Want me to stab a few in a bowl for you?"

"I'll pass. Got a lot to do. Know where that bag storage sealer thing is?" Joe asks rummaging through the pantry.

"Food Saver?" Pop asks watching.

"Naw, the other thing. That thing we got Mom one Christmas. You know, where you plug in the vacuum cleaner there and it sucks all the air out? For blankets and that."

Joe's mildly aggravated Pop's not catching on. Bends at the waist and gestures as if it will explain it better. "The things that squish the air out and make 'em real small so's you can store things in half the space?"

Pop draws a blank. Peers up at Joe like a dog caught crapping the floor. “Don’t know, JoJo. Might check the hall closet.”

Exasperated, Joe throws his hands up.

Dee Dee stands at the sliding glass door for a good half hour sipping Pepto-Bismol from the bottle, trying to talk herself into unlocking the door. An argument rages in her head. One side insists she see what Joe’s up to, the other rebuts to keep her nose out of it. A statement, “It’ll just cause trouble,” bobs to the surface like a channel marker. Then she thinks about the dog, sees the bowl of rotted food, and rage boils beneath the skin. Her face flushes at the thought of her dog slaughtered in that shed, of how her neighbor’s been able to make a mockery of her life.

She slams the Pepto-Bismol on the counter and throws open the lock.

The moon, setting in the distance, cuts through an onyx sky. Dee Dee creeps through the back yard and peers between the slats in the fence. The shed door is slightly ajar. She thinks she might find evidence of the dog, perhaps the collar and tags, maybe something else incriminating. Drugs. A Meth lab. Heard on the news there were lots of white people operating meth labs in old neighborhoods like this, buying all the cold meds off the shelves and setting up little family kitchen pharmaceutical companies. She could sneak into the shed, take a look see and be out before Joe knew she’d been there.

There’s enough light to pick her way through the two yards to the shed. She watches the Salas’s back door as she creeps across the yard, rehearses under her breath what to say if caught. Nothing she comes up with makes any sense. Might say she’s sleepwalking, but doesn’t think he’ll buy it.

Weird croaking and the harsh note clucking of a coot calls from the pond as she moves through the fog, raising the hair on the back of her neck.

Pop pours coffee, bends over, and inhales the aroma. Takes the cup and a small bowl to the table, and pours in bran flakes. Twists the loose lid off the prunes and starts to sit.

Forgot his paper. Turns for the door, realizes he's in his underwear. It's mostly still dark. Decides he can make it to the driveway and back before anyone sees him. He takes the walkin' stick propped by the back door and slips into the early morning dew.

Lamp light reflects the fog around the shed door, a pulsing mist that moves and shifts with the slightest disruption. Dee Dee's hand pulls on the handle ever so slowly to muffle any squeak or groan that might escape the hinges. It pivots silently. A moth flutters in the doorway, smacks her forehead and escapes into the mist. She bites her lip to suppress the squeal.

Another moth assaults the lantern burning on the bench and bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, slamming into them time and time again until fine particles of dust disperse in the still air, the moth circling the room for a way out.

Dee Dee tiptoes in, swatting the moth, surveys the room, the boxes along the wall, the garden tools posted on the pegboard, the art materials. She sees the plastic bag next to the Food Saver. Moves closer. Not sure what it is. She stretches to touch it, tilts her head. Leans over to inspect exactly what it is she's looking at. The moment she feels the plastic, she slaps her hand to her mouth and stumbles backward toward the door, fighting the eruption of a scream pushing through her fingers.

Pop scuttles across the foggy driveway with the newspaper in one hand, walkin' stick in the other, ready to beat the shit out of anything that might come at him in the dark. Feels cool air circulate the bottom of his droopy drawers, his boys swayin' free in the breeze. Opens the gate and steps through.

Like a ghost out of the mist, Dee Dee's in a dead run from the shed, the scream replaced with a deep throated gurgling. Pop sees her coming at him and isn't sure what to do. Lifts his walkin' stick in the air just in case. About the time she hits the gate, he can tell she doesn't even notice him standing there. Blows past him and disappears in the dark.

“God, Almighty,” he says. Hears her sliding glass door slam shut. Thinks he can hear her scream. Could be mistaken.

Joe steps out the back door with the Hoover Mighty Mite and a box of storage bags from the hall closet.

“You see that?” Pop asks lookin’ back at the gate.

Joe stops, “See what?”

“Dee Dee. Come from the shed I think. Flew past me like her ass is on fire.”

“Shit.”

“What’s that? Whatcha suppose she’s doing back here in the damn dark?”

“Like I said before, Pop, woman’s nuts.”

“Yeah, but now she’s creepin’ ’round the yard. Think she’s dangerous?”

“Who knows. Don’t worry about it, Pop. Eat your breakfast.”

“Gonna get a shower, clean up some after I eat. Fix you somethin’?”

“Ate already. I gotta go back to work.” Joe fades in the fog, leaves Pop to his paper and prunes.

Joe drops the Mighty Mite and storage bags on the floor of the shed. Starts to sweat despite the coolness of the air. He knows she’s seen Ricky, thinks of what to do about it. Probably on the phone right now with the cops.

Gotta get rid of Ricky. He opens the freezer.

The string of heavy breathing, guttural groans, and stifled screams that come into 911, at first, sounds more like a pervert masturbating to a phone sex site than someone wanting to report a homicide. At least that’s what the dispatcher thinks. It wouldn’t be the first time. And not until the words, ‘severed head in the shed’ does the dispatcher check her CAD screen to see what units are available to take the call. Waves to the supervisor to pick up on the other line. Not gonna handle this one alone.

The scream that Dee Dee’s manages to control finally makes its way to the outside world, and what’s recorded on the 911 line forces the dispatcher to yank the headset off and sling it to the console. Dee Dee’s voice can still be heard through its

ear piece by the next call-taker over. Now everyone in communications is awake.

It takes fifteen minutes to dissect Dee Dee's complaint, instructions to calm down, pick through the rambling hysteria of her earlier complaints. Dispatcher types in Dee Dee's address and up pops the previous calls to the residence, all concluded with "unfounded." Sub-note to report: Complainant signal twenty. Loosely translated means she's nuts. Policy demands a unit respond nonetheless, and one begrudgingly responds ten minutes before the end of shift.

Dee Dee swallows two Zanax at the kitchen sink and sucks water straight from the faucet. She trembles uncontrollably. Briefly considers she may be going insane. Might be the pills.