

The Porcine Eye
by Eric Cecil

There was a noise downstairs. A banging at the back door. It woke Jenkins. He rolled over and looked at the clock. It was 3:00 a.m. Diane asked what time it was. He told her to go back to bed. What is that noise? she said. He didn't say anything. He pushed aside his pillow. Got out of bed and into his robe, his slippers. Lumbered past his bureau. Framed photos slanted on its surface. Some were pictures of Jenkins and Diane. Others were photos of friends, of distant and long-dead relatives.

The banging.

Jenkins sank down the stairs and into the kitchen. He paused at the dining table and looked at the interior door. It was thick, wooden. Oak. There was a small window in its upper half. There were blinds drawn over the window. Beyond them, outside, the exterior screen door jarred and clanged, resounded with obscene noise. No doubt it's dented by now, he thought to himself. No doubt it's ruined. He tightened his robe and cautiously walked to the small window. He parted the blinds. He couldn't see much. Just movement. Just shadows. The shadows began to scream. They hollered in a voice Jenkins couldn't recognize.

He released the blinds and went to the phone. He dialed the police. The line trilled. The person outside wailed. It was a feral sound. Wild. Mostly vowels. Jenkins could hear spit and phlegm in the consonants. They formed vague curses, desperate imprecations. He heard a stirring upstairs, too, and knew Diane would be down any moment. Asking. Complicating everything. He would've been perfectly content to stand there in the kitchen, to weather this on his own. He would've been fine just listening to this person screaming, denting the screen door, tearing the screen itself with fists like small stones, or large hammers, or whatever metaphor might've fit the unknown assailant's hands that rapped so feverishly.

The operator answered. Jenkins told her there was someone trying to break into his house. Trying to break down the door, he clarified. She asked for his address. He calmly relayed it to her. Then she told him, in a pinched and nasal voice, that the police would be there soon. He thanked her and hung up the phone.

He pulled one of the chairs from the table and sat in it. Crossed his legs. Looked at his slippers. They were worn. One of them was losing its plastic sole. Sloughing it away. Jenkins thought of the nasal operator, of work, of a greater sloughing. The banging interrupted him. Go away, he said weakly. He didn't know if he was talking to the figure, or Diane, or the police. Maybe he was talking to himself. I could go away, he thought. I could sneak out the front door and into the

truck. It was parked at the curb. The figure at the back door would never even see him. Diane wouldn't realize he was gone until she got to the kitchen. The police probably wouldn't even care. Maybe, he considered, maybe I could back the truck into the driveway and roll down the window. Offer the stranger a ride. Where to? I'd ask. Gas, grass or ass. We'd both laugh. They'd get in. We'd tear away from the house, end up at a bar somewhere. Whiskeys. Two. A pretty woman would turn to me, would spin toward me on her barstool and smile, offer a couple pills. I'd ask what they were. She'd tell me not to worry about it. If you're cool, she'd say, you'll find out yourself. I'd take one and pass the other to the stranger. They'd look at it without expression. Without a face.

Jenkins couldn't see the stranger's face at all. The woman laid a warm hand on his arm. I like you, she said. I have a friend who could meet me here. Should I go call her? Jenkins told her to do whatever she'd like. She stood and pulled her skirt down to cover her thighs and walked to a payphone. Jenkins watched her walk. She had a nice walk. The bartender leaned over the bar and said something about a backroom. For hanky panky, he said. Hanky panky? Jenkins asked. You know what I mean, said the bartender. Jenkins ignored this. He asked about the woman: Do you know her? The bartender shook his head.

Diane was standing in the kitchen when he looked up. She stared at the door. Her eyes were wide and upturned. Jenkins stood and walked to her. Tenderly reached for her shoulder. I already called the cops, he said. As he said this, the banging and hollering perforated his statement: I bang all bang ready bang called the cops. Bang. She looked from him to the door and back to him again. Her eyes dewed. Her lower lip trembled. She held her robe tightly at the throat, as if it was cold in the kitchen. And it was. It was cold in the kitchen. It's always too cold in this house, Jenkins thought to himself. The damned heating. He felt something turn inside him, something brittle that bent and snapped, and asked her, rudely, to go back upstairs. She looked past him, glaring at the door again. Go, he said. The cops will be here soon. Finally she lowered her head and padded out of the kitchen and back up the stairs. Jenkins stood there, his back to the door, and thought: She could've at least put up a fight. She bang could bang've bang at least put up a fight. Slam.

For Chrissakes. He was mad now. He went to the door again. Parted the blinds. Caught the blur of a shadow. He seized on the flash of an eye. The eye was wild, terrible. Porcine. It fell into the darkness again and was gone. Go away, he said absently. He let the blinds fall and backed away from the door, listening. Didn't hear anything. Just Diane. She was quietly sobbing upstairs. The sound ruffled him. The ruffles fell limp and sloughed away, exposing the raw red of guilt: something like a popped blister, a bedsore.

Jenkins looked at the clock on the stove. It was 3:17. He had to be up for work in, what, two hours? Maybe three? He tried to imagine his workday, tried to picture the exhaustion and irritation that would accompany him there. He couldn't. Not nearly as well as he could imagine the trip to the bar with the stranger. He was tired. He was tired of everything. Everything frustrated or confused him. He blinked. Rapidly. It was a succession of blinks. He closed his eyes and rubbed them for a long time. When he opened them, he was sitting again.

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In the driver's seat of a pick-up truck. It smells like oil. The dash is worn, dusty. Brown. The upholstery, too, is brown: and black, and beige, and some other colors, like white and tan. It's braided to look like an ornate mosaic. The pattern reminds him of Arizona. I've never been to Arizona, he thinks to himself. He's studying the upholstery, thinking about Arizona, deserts, cacti when he hears something directly behind him. Something loud, cacophonous, explosive. A banging. He looks away from the upholstery and over the dash. The road is furrowing before him. The road and a car. Instinctively, Jenkins pulls the wheel, narrowly missing the car: a black sedan. The driver of the black sedan is seemingly unaware anything has happened. They continue ahead, unhindered. Behind Jenkins, meanwhile, the commotion continues. He glances in the rearview, sees a red coupe: swerving, honking, flashing its brights. Jesus, he says to himself. Jesus Christ. He yells this. His hands grip the wheel, eyes slipping over the road, which is passing by at an alarming rate. He checks the speedometer. The needle trembles somewhere around 68 miles per hour. The black sedan ahead is now easing toward an exit on the right. Behind him, the red coupe is a mad bee. It's still honking, veering between lanes, its lights strobing in Jenkins's rearview. Though it's sunny, maybe even afternoon, Jenkins can still see the lights. He follows them as the car charges ahead, backfiring, and veers into the right lane. Jenkins curses and steadies the wheel. He reaches out to the headrest of the passenger's seat, preparing to hazard a look behind his truck. His fingers tangle in something soft and warm.

He pulls his hand away and looks to the side. There's someone in the passenger's seat. A stranger. The stranger's hair is black or brown, is unkempt and wild. It hangs over the stranger's face. Most of it. Jenkins can see only one of the stranger's eyes. Eye. One. It's a wild and porcine eye. The eye regards Jenkins with cold indifference. The high collar of an old overcoat obscures the lower portion of the face. The hair drapes over it in horrible tangles.

Jenkins panics when he sees the stranger. Outwardly, he's silent. But his coordination betrays his panic. His right foot slips on the gas. His hands blunder over the wheel, the wheel he'd taken such great pains to steady, and the car edges into the right lane. The red coupe, attempting to pass, swerves wildly a second time, and begins its protests anew: the lights, the backfiring, the honking.

I'm sorry, he says to his unidentified passenger. I must be exhausted.

The stranger doesn't say anything.

Okay, Jenkins tells himself. First things first. Let this car pass. He straightens out the truck and eases up on the gas. He rests his foot just above the brake, tensing his leg, preparing to engage it at any moment. There's no telling what might happen, he says to himself. He realizes, as the thought subsides, that he's said this aloud.

He apologizes again: Sorry.

The passing car is no longer a bee. It's now a mad hornet. It emits a succession of loud pops and minor bursts, backfiring again, then hums and rockets forward, nearly swiping the right rear end of Jenkins's truck. Jenkins curses. He keeps his foot over the brake and watches the car pass. Behind the glass of its windshield, he can sense, rather than see, the silhouetted fog of movement.

As the car nears the side of his truck, Jenkins leans toward the passenger's side, cautious of the stranger next to him. He peers through the side window.

He can see the driver now. It's a woman. She's shaking her fist at him. Just as she might, Jenkins thinks to himself, in a movie. The gesture is an embarrassment to him. As the car pulls alongside his truck, he sinks back into his seat, averting his eyes. But the temptation is too great. He can't help himself. He looks directly at her.

It's Diane.

Again, he keeps his silence. He can't say anything aloud. He doesn't want to startle his passenger. Most of all, though, he doesn't want to give life to his inner thoughts. It'll only validate them, he tells himself. It'll only mean I'm crazy. His mind races. Diane passes him in the small coupe, in her little red four-door affair, and shears away to another exit ramp on the right. He can see her mouth moving. Fucking asshole, she's saying. She's probably yelling it, he tells himself. Yelling is a good way to blow off steam. He says this aloud, to his passenger, the stranger: Yelling is a good way to blow off steam. The stranger continues regarding him coldly with the porcine eye. Then they open their coat, slowly, preparing to reveal something to Jenkins.

What? Jenkins asks. I'm driving, he says feverishly. What are you doing?

The stranger suddenly stops and closes the coat. Tightly, this time, clasping it to their neck, as if for security.

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Jenkins is sick of the security detail. He's sick of the hotel. Most of the guests are tourists. Tourists are the worst. Jenkins has always known that. He's always known that tourists are not only the worst but are also, in light of everything, wholly representative of humanity.

We're the worst, he says. We are. People. We only care about ourselves, he says. Turn here.

The new hire follows Jenkins as he turns down one of the hotel's clinical halls. It smells like chlorine. Jenkins mentions this to his new partner. This hall, he says, always smells like the pool. Know why? The partner doesn't say anything. He doesn't even shrug. He just regards Jenkins with a cold and porcine eye. Because that's the pump room over there, Jenkins says. He points to an unmarked door with a bronze handle unlike the others. The handle's outfitted with a heavy lock. Jenkins tells his new partner that he'll get keys for this lock at some point. But not yet, he says, smiling. We have to pass you through orientation first.

They pass the pump room and continue ahead. The hall is silent. So is the new hire. Jenkins hazards occasional glances at him. He needs a haircut, Jenkins thinks to himself. A new coat. His posture is bad. Everything is bad. Everyone. Tourists are the worst. He turns another corner. They both do. They pass an open door. Inside, an ice machine thrums agreeably. Jenkins halts, doubles back. So does the new partner. The porcine eye watches Jenkins walk into the small room with the ice machine, sees Jenkins dutifully reach for its lid and lower it to cover the reserve of ice. A guest must have left it open, he says. Damned tourists. Jenkins surveys the little alcove for a moment. He looks at the new hire and holds his upper arms and rubs them vigorously. Cold in here, he says, forcing a laugh. The new hire says nothing.

Nothing much in particular happens. Jenkins leads the new hire through the halls, pointing out different landmarks: a maintenance closet, a supply area, an electrical room, a lounge where staff can rest, or eat, or hide from guests. The porcine eye roams freely, shuddering over the pale blue carpet, trawling over its brown and tan and white and beige tangles, its multicolored mosaic. The eye moves about the length of the hallway at an incredible speed: roughly 68 miles per hour. Jenkins continues talking all the while. Tourists, he says, are the worst. Do you know why? He tells the new hire some choice stories. A few are his own. Most are not. One is about a woman who security once found naked in the hall. Locked out of her room, Jenkins says. Can you believe it? He laughs to himself. He doesn't notice that he's no longer leading their leisurely walk through the halls of the hotel. Nor does he notice that their walk is no longer leisurely.

They're moving briskly now, nearly jogging, the new hire at least two paces ahead. Hey, Jenkins finally says, slow down. Jesus. Jesus Christ. Where are you going?

The new hire peels away and takes off running. He takes the corners very quickly. Jenkins trails behind him by at least ten feet. The new hire is losing him. Has lost him. Will keep him lost. Corner by corner, the new hire extends his lead. They pad past door after door, running the empty halls, Jenkins occasionally issuing warnings or low threats. Sweating, too. Jenkins is sweating. He can't remember the last time he's run like this. Where the hell do they find these new hires? he asks himself. And where the hell is he going?

He turns yet another corner and nearly skids to a stop. He sees the new hire standing before a door in the middle of the hall. Jenkins watches him. The new hire isn't moving. He's impossibly still, his porcine eye studying the door. Hey, Jenkins hisses at him from the corner. What are you doing? The porcine eye gradually swings in his direction. It unsettles Jenkins. He doesn't like it. He looks away, preparing to retreat. But no. He's in charge here. He'll have to sort this out. He gathers his reserves and charges ahead.

Jenkins is prepared to let the new hire have it. To really give him a piece of his mind. But as he approaches, his anger subsides. He's distracted by the noise. It's a terrible commotion behind the door. It's a loud and inappropriate racket. There's a feral sound, a snarling: wild, bubbling with guttural vowels, punctuated by clipped consonants. There's a crashing, too, occasionally, or a banging of some sort.

He stands there, listening. He's never heard anything like it in all his years at the hotel. He looks at the new hire. He whispers. What is that? he says. The new hire blinks his porcine eye and turns away from Jenkins. He looks at the door. Without warning, he reaches out a small, pale hand, curls his yellow nails into a tight fist. He knocks.

Hey, Jenkins says sharply.

The ruckus behind the door stops. There's a moment of pure silence, then a shuffling in the room, and a curse. It's a violent word. Vulgar. Jenkins's eyes are wide now. He stares at the brown facade of the door. He's at a loss. He doesn't have a gun. He doesn't have any weapons. He's never needed one in this hotel. The tourists have always been fairly peaceful. They're not so bad, the tourists. We've all been one, he muses. Awkwardly, he moves his hands around his beltline. He doesn't know what else to do with his hands. The new hire has no such concerns. His arms are hanging listlessly at his sides, his hands swaying imperceptibly just above his knees. Jenkins decides to cross his arms over his chest.

The racket just starts again. It's louder this time. And it's unhinged. Jenkins hears what sounds like a lamp breaking. Or maybe a TV. He hears water, he thinks, some kind of liquid splashing against tile. Is it the bathroom? He can't take it anymore. Okay, he says aloud. That's it. He's no longer whispering. He balls his right hand into a fist and bangs its meat into the door.

Security, Jenkins says. He uses an officious tone, deep and resonant. He can't remember the last time he's had to use this tone. Can't recall the last time he's had to bang like this on a door at the hotel, the hotel filled with so many tourists.

He keeps knocking. He uses greater force. His banging is louder than ever. So, too, is the commotion inside. He hears a terrible crash followed by a tumbling sound: something like plaster falling, maybe, stucco crumbling away from the wall, the ceiling. The growling is now screaming. Jenkins screams as well: Let me in, he hollers. Let me in, goddamnit. He shouts it at the top of his lungs. He hammers both hands on the door, pounding so hard that it hurts his fists. Let me in.

He bangs away until breathless. His chest heaving, his brow streaming sweat, he suddenly remembers: Keys. I have keys. He fumbles with the keyring at his belt and pulls it toward the door handle. The new hire watches Jenkins, his hands trembling, the keys chiming comically as he attempts to find the one that matches the room number: 317. The porcine eye regards Jenkins as he finds it. The key is a thin and reflective sliver, jagged and slick and severe in his clammy hands.

Jenkins pauses for a moment, collecting himself. He realizes that it's quiet again. There's nothing happening inside.

I have a key, he says plainly. I'm coming in. He nearly sings the latter part.

There's a small scraping noise. It sounds like something dragging. Then there's a rattling. Jenkins recognizes it: the chain sliding away from the frame. He returns the keyring to his belt and braces himself as the door opens.

It doesn't open all the way. Just slightly. Maybe six inches. A face appears. It's a woman. Sweat shines her forehead, her upper lip, the corners of her mouth. Both her mouth and forehead are puckered with irritation. Her platinum hair is slicked back. One of her hands steadies the door in place. Jenkins can see red fingernails playing over its surface. Her other hand holds a robe tightly at her throat.

Yes? she says.

Jenkins stares at her. He isn't sure what to say. He looks at the new hire. The new hire doesn't say anything. He's just looking at the woman. He slowly turns his porcine eye, again, to Jenkins, as if saying: Well?

Jenkins speaks.

Hotel security, ma'am, he says.

She looks at him with something like consternation. Something akin to irritable boredom.

Yes? she says again.

Jenkins stammers. He experiences a moment of confusion, of hesitation. He still doesn't quite know what to say. It's all there, he thinks. She knows why we're here. She knows. Finally, he speaks: Is everything okay in there? he asks.

Everything's fine.

Ma'am. He crosses his arms again. We had a complaint about noise coming from your room. We heard screaming.

The woman stands erect, frowning at him. Sir, I am a guest of this hotel. Am I not?

Ma'am?

Am I not a guest in this hotel?

Well, yes, Jenkins begins.

As a guest at your hotel, she says, I'm afforded a certain level of privacy and comfort. Am I not?

Jenkins just looks at her. He turns, again, to the new hire. The new hire is no help at all. His porcine eye is trained on the woman. Jesus, Jenkins thinks to himself. He looks at the floor and slowly rubs his temple again, then rubs his right eye. He stands upright, blinking. Ma'am, he says.

Don't call me ma'am. I have a name. It's Ms. Diane.

Diane, he says.

Ms. Diane, she says. Mizz. Now I don't know what you heard. And I don't know what you thought you heard. But if you don't mind, she says, I would like to return to my relaxing evening in your hotel.

It's not my hotel, ma'am, but: and that's as far as Jenkins gets before she shuts the door on him.

He's as confused as he's ever been. And shaken. He's never been so shaken. Jenkins just doesn't understand it. He's hotel security. That should be enough. It usually is. Should be now. He looks up and down the hallway, expecting to see other guests poking out of their rooms. But there's just one person looking at him. It's the new hire. He's studying Jenkins with his porcine eye.

Jenkins nods to him. It's, he says. He pauses. He's at a loss. He changes gears and says, Seems fine here. Good work. Good ear. He taps his right ear to emphasize this, then points to the brown door.

They continue walking the halls for a while. There's not much else to say. Not much else to see. He thinks about taking the new hire up to the roof. Then he considers the perils of the roof, the heights, all those exhaust fans. Eventually Jenkins leads him back to the pump room, smirking. You know, he says, I wasn't gonna show you this. But what the hell. He moves toward the big door, the bronze doorknob, the complicated locks. He unhooks the big ring of keys from his belt and inserts one of the larger keys, then another, then another still. The locks spring open. All of them. Ready? he says. The new hire doesn't say anything. Jenkins whisks the door open. Inside, the sound of the pump is thunderous, nearly explosive. Jenkins squints, as if this will soften the noise, and motions to the new hire, who slinks through the open door. Jenkins follows closely behind. He closes the door and, still smiling, removes a clipboard from the side wall, revealing a perfectly round hole. He holds a finger to his lips. Looks into the ladies' changing room, he says confidentially. He urges the new hire to use his porcine eye to peer inside.

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The hole was the perfect size for his eye. The rest of the kids knew this would be the case. They all watched from across the sidewalk: the new kid with his strange eye at the top, and Jenkins, anxious and irritable, wobbling at the bottom. They had never done this before. Any of them. It had been Jenkins's idea. He'd always wanted to look into the hole in the fence and report back to the rest of the guys, to the rest of the class, even, about what he'd seen. He couldn't. He was afraid of heights. He was afraid of everything. So now the weird new kid was looking there.

What do you see? Jenkins asked. He was trembling and breathing laboriously. The new kid didn't weigh very much. But Jenkins wasn't very strong, either, and the two of them swayed against the fence. The fence was really just a rough wall of cheap plywood that the city had erected. The city had painted it brown, too, but other kids in the neighborhood, the older and scarier kids, had vandalized it with heavy duty markers, knives, hammers, stickers, cans of spraypaint. It was now an argyle of strange colors, a patchwork of intersecting lines. It was now brown, yes, and white, and ochre, and tan, and other colors besides. Jenkins looked it at, watched the wild mosaic pattern of the wall dance snakelike as he balanced the new kid on his shoulders. Well? he said. The new kid didn't say anything.

The new kid had never talked, now that Jenkins thought about it, and everyone thought he was weird. The teachers all seemed to disdain him, and the girls in class, even the nice ones who came from good but humble families: even they seemed to shun him. It might've been his hygiene, Jenkins thought to himself. But it was probably his eye. It must've been. It was a dark and strange eye, something like a pig's, angling out of the dark and greasy hair that matted over his brow.

He was using that eye now to look through the window in the wall. Just what the hell did he see? Jenkins asked again. And again, silence.

He grew impatient. It was rough work, holding the kid up there. And it was too intimate. The new kid smelled funny. His shabby pants, his stained socks, his filthy legs, his creased and worn boots. Jenkins worried that his scent would rub off on him, that it would linger on his clothes and hair after they were done with their caper. He wasn't sure it was worth it. And anyway, if the new kid wasn't going to tell him what he saw with his weird eye, his pig eye, his porcine eye, then there was no point to this whole thing.

I'm gonna put you down, Jenkins said.

The kid was still silent as Jenkins lowered to his haunches and leaned onto his knees. He let go of the pale and spindly legs and felt his burden lighten as the new kid, in his fragrant and tattered clothes, stepped over Jenkins's head and walked to the side of the building. There was a commotion among the rest of the kids who watched. What did he see? one of them asked. Jenkins shot him a dirty look. Hell if I know, he said. He's not talkin'.

There was a small uproar, a cry for knowledge. C'mon, one of them said. Spill it. Others echoed the sentiment. One of them spat in frustration. Another called the new kid's sexual orientation into question. The new kid didn't seem to notice. He was already shuffling away from the fence. They all watched as he walked to the side of the building and turned the corner.

Little Jenkins grew incensed then. Jesus, he said. Jesus Christ. He became fairly enraged. The nerve of this new kid, he thought to himself. We didn't have to take him in. But we did. And he could've become something. He could've been popular. Both of us, he thought. It was my idea, and I didn't even get to see anything. I'm the one who held the smelly sonofabitch on my shoulders.

So Jenkins, his heart pounding, broke into a light jog. He had plans for the new kid. He would make him talk. Or he would make him pay. He ran to the corner and took it sharp and short, cutting off a couple of teens who happened to be passing. One of them cursed at Jenkins. The other shouted: Whoah. That's as much as Jenkins heard. He was already rushing through the crosswalk. He didn't bother to look for traffic in either direction. He didn't see the red coupe that sped toward him.

Most of the kids ran to the scene of the accident. All but one. It was the one who questioned the new kid's sexual orientation. He ran in the opposite direction. He tore through an adjacent parking lot, huffed through backyards and sideyards crawling with pines, scurried over ornate gardens, trampling colorful flowers. He beelined for his home. He had dolls hidden under his bed there. The dolls were a source of great comfort to him. They once belonged to his older sister, Diane. She was constantly calling his sexuality into question.

Diane wouldn't hear about the accident until later that night. Not until the police would visit the house. Her father would answer the door. What's this all about, officer? he'd say. She'd hear the officer grumble something unintelligible as he entered. She crept to the landing and waited there, in the shadow of the railing, listening to the news: the Jenkins kid. Dead. Drunk driver, 68 miles per hour. Time of death, 3:17 p.m.

Diane was appalled to hear this. She was dazed. She walked, bug-eyed, down the rest of the stairs and wandered into the living room. The cop flashed her a weak smile and tipped his cap. Her father asked the cop where it happened. The cop mentioned the kids, her brother, the construction site. It was at an intersection just off the main strip, he said, on the edge of downtown.

I know exactly where that is, Diane said forlornly. It's right where they're building the new mall.

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It was coming out wrong, all wrong. But there was no way to get it right. The plans were too elusive. The blueprints seemed to change every time Jenkins looked at them. Sometimes he

thought maybe he was holding them sideways, or backwards, or upside down. He had nightmares about them. Sometimes he dreamt they'd finished building the mall, and the financier would come to look at it, screaming: You'll never work in this town again. You're an absolute disgrace. How have you managed to stay in business this long?

Jenkins wasn't really sure. Even in waking life, as he went about his day, he had to admit that he wasn't sure how he'd developed his own construction company. He'd never bothered to learn much about construction. He'd never really cared. He was smart enough to hire experienced and capable employees, but he lacked the confidence and discipline required to manage them. And he was bad with money. He'd squandered most of his savings on nonsense like embroidered caps, t-shirts, premium business cards, fancy neon signage. He wasn't even sure where he'd gotten the money for these things in the first place. Rich relative? The lottery? Bank heist? No idea. It had just worked out some which way, and he had followed the money directly into Jenkins Construction, LLC.

Jenkins Construction, LLC, had been running on fumes for some days or months or years when the financier approached him. She entered his office, a long trailer flooded with natural sunlight, and sat primly before his desk. She hadn't begged him to take the job. Actually, she'd warned him against it. This is a difficult project, she'd said. Frankly, I don't understand the architect's methods. In fact, she said, no one does. I've shown this to a number of developers, several construction companies. All have passed. Each said it was impossible. But all, she went on to tell Jenkins, all have professed to admire the work. He's a genius, she added.

I'm sure, Jenkins replied. He thumbed through the blueprints, looking without looking, seeing without seeing, and nodded. He didn't care about the blueprints. Nor did he care about the mall. He really only cared about the money. He needed it. He needed the financier. Tell you what, he said. Not only will I take the job, but I'll do it for much less than you expect to pay. She shrugged and pushed contracts across his ornate desk. He skimmed them, pausing at the timeline of the project. He noticed that the financier gave him twelve months to complete the new mall. Tell you what, Jenkins said again. Make it nine.

Nine? she said.

Jenkins confirmed: Nine. All he asked in return was that she leave him and his men to work in peace, without interruption. She could check in with them only once, at the end of the project.

She shrugged again. She had nothing to lose. This would be a tax write-off to her. At worst, it would be a loss of millions of dollars. That was nothing to her. None of this was. She'd crushed

far more talented men than Jenkins. And Jenkins had no talent at all. He had no idea how to build a mall. He had no idea what the hell hubris was.

It revealed itself to him, slowly but surely. And in the interim, he'd had all those bad dreams.

They hadn't amounted to much. Nine months later, Jenkins was on the job, haphazardly mixing cement in a large bucket. Most of his men stood around, drinking coffee and smoking. A couple kicked rocks into the massive pit that middled their worksite. The massive pit marked their only significant accomplishment thus far. The team had dug it out with brand new equipment that Jenkins had purchased with his financier's money. Once they'd done that, Jenkins had told them to hang tight. That was eight months ago. They were still holding tight. They held tighter when they saw the financier and a stranger fin through the gap in the chainlink fence and head toward them and their massive pit.

Jenkins looked up from his bucket of cement. He saw Diane wobbling on her heels, her red pumps, attempting ungainly steps over rough and ugly terrain. Ah, he said to himself. It was a pained sound, something like air escaping an inflatable raft, something approximating a groan or a sigh. Diane didn't hear it. She was too busy wending her way between large yellow cranes, darting through the bulldozers and long trailers that her money had secured for Jenkins.

Jenkins noticed a second figure behind her. This one was dark, shadowy. It managed the ground much more confidently than Diane, the financier of the massive pit, and remained a few paces behind her. Jenkins squinted at them both and drew his shovel close as they arrived.

Welcome, he said, affecting a confident smile. We're just getting underway today. He outstretched his arms, as if to indicate the whole of the construction site, as if to indicate a towering or sprawling structure that simply wasn't there.

Mr. Jenkins, Diane said shortly.

He leaned in, still smiling.

What the hell is this? she asked.

Jenkins didn't have much to say to that. He raised his eyebrows and blew out another large sigh. Then he looked to his men: all 317 of them. None of them were any help. Many of them did their best to look busy. Others fled so quickly from the periphery of the worksite that they tripped, or spilled their coffees, or left behind helmets and vests. Jenkins would probably never see them again. He hoped not, anyway. He found their surrender pathetic, aggravating. And after all I did

for them, he thought to himself. It never occurred to Jenkins that he hadn't done much for them at all.

It didn't occur to Jenkins that he should have the blueprints handy, either. He gave up on them a long time ago. He had no idea where they were. Nonetheless, he jumped to mention them. The plans, he said. I—

Diane shook her head. I don't want to hear it, she said. She began to yell. You were going to build this mall cheaply. You were going to finish it in record time. And all I see here, she said, is a massive pit.

I can't figure out the plans, Jenkins sniveled.

The plans? she said. She was incredulous now. She took two steps back, still wagging her head. Her glamorous haircut swung platinum in the sun. I don't even see them anywhere, she screamed.

Jenkins nodded. She was right. Wherever the blueprints were, they weren't anywhere handy. They were nowhere near the massive pit that she'd financed, nor were they inside any of the expensive equipment he'd bought with her money. Probably, he considered, they were in one of the trailers he'd installed on the premises. He glared at them now. Specifically, he focused on the middle trailer. It was the newest and most expensive of them all. It was his.

Diane, he said humbly. She glared at him. Her face was red, pinched with anger. Diane, he said, you're right. The plans aren't out here. They're in my trailer. If you'll wait here, he went on, I'll head into the trailer and get it.

Not so fast, she said. She stepped away from Jenkins, turning toward the dark stranger at her side. She hadn't yet referred to him. She did now. Do you know who this is? she said.

Jenkins had a vague idea. The architect? he said.

Diane nodded. It was an aggressive nodding. Very good, she said sarcastically. The architect. The man who designed the brilliant shopping mall that you've so completely failed to build. I brought him here, she said, her voice rising again, I brought him all the way here to observe your work, to see how you might've given life to his art. And what do you give me? she said.

I'm sorry, Jenkins replied.

Shit, she yelled. You give me shit.

They were at an impasse. All of them. Jenkins looked at the architect. Jenkins thought he looked like a lunatic. But great artists, he mused, sometimes did. He wasn't sure where he'd developed that idea. But he pursued it now. He considered all the lunatics he'd known in his life. His mother, for one. She wasn't much of an artist. But she was a lunatic. She was often disheveled, unkempt, sometimes with lipstick on her teeth or on the underside of her nose. She would occasionally burst into song at inappropriate times, like during fights at little league baseball games, or in the middle of a sermon at church, maybe slipping down the freezer aisle of a grocery store. Those trips to the store. Jenkins used to fear those trips. Mostly it was the ride there, carting around in her red coupe. She could really work herself into a frenzy behind the wheel. Especially, Jenkins recalled, if she was in one of her moods. She would scream at him about something or other, maybe an inconsequential transgression, often something totally invented, like a caper that Jenkins had pulled at school (it was summer, school was out) or the time he tripped a cop (he would never). Once he'd looked at her speedometer as she screamed at him. She was going 68 miles per hour. They raced past a sign that restricted traffic to 30. Many pedestrians ran to avoid them. Others stared from the sidewalk, hands over mouths. Mom, he'd said warily. She'd just chewed on her tongue. He recalled that she'd taken an insane turn onto the ramp leading to the expressway, two wheels thundering over the curb on the right, the car itself nearly flipping over on its side. Somehow this completely calmed his mother, who then slowed and eased onto the highway with relative compunction. Jenkins now recalled, ironically, that she'd been on her way to the mall. She was taking him there to meet his friends.

He looked away from the trailers. I apologize, he said. He didn't say it to anyone in particular.

Do you know how much money I've put into this project? said Diane, the financier.

Jenkins didn't answer. He studied the architect again. Or rather, to Jenkins's surprise, the architect studied him. He looked out from the nest of his stringy, unkempt hair with a dark and cloudy eye, a porcine eye that seemed to regard Jenkins so significantly that it ventured through him, beyond him, to a Jenkins that no longer existed. It seemed to plumb the depths of his memories. Jesus, Jenkins thought to himself. Jesus Christ. He imagined the porcine eye viewing the reckless screaming drives of his mother from some decades ago. Then he imagined the stranger in the backseat, steadily looking on as his mom jumped curbs, as she flashed her brights at oncoming traffic, or yelled at old women retrieving their morning papers. He felt a mix of shame, surprise, revulsion. Guilt, even. He wasn't sure why. He wasn't sure why the architect's eye was so dark. It was like a void. It was far deeper than the massive pit Jenkins and his men had triumphantly excavated some several months ago.

He turned and looked at the pit, Diane still yelling behind him, and considered walking to it and throwing himself over its edge. No, he told himself. That wouldn't do. He wasn't ready for that yet. He had a better idea. He would walk to his new trailer and let himself in. He would lock the door and lower the blinds. He'd hide there until Diane and the architect left. Once they'd gone, he'd really get down to business. He'd decipher the strange blueprints and gather his men. They would then begin to build the fantastic mall in earnest.

Excuse me, he said.

Where are you going? Diane hollered. He ignored her and trudged toward the trailer, her shouts and protests barking at his heels, the shadow of the architect looming somewhere nearby. Jenkins cut a perfectly direct pathway to the trailer. As Diane continued yelling, he then performed his greatest feat of construction yet: he fortified his path with imaginary walls. These were soundproof walls. They wouldn't allow any interference. They were somewhat opaque, though, and he could still see Diane in his periphery as he unlocked the door and shouldered his way inside, slamming it behind him. Once inside, he dismantled the mental structure and began to search for the blueprints.

Diane pounded on the door. She screamed. I want answers, goddamnit, she yelled. And she banged on the trailer, rattling the tin of the screen door, threatening to tear the screen itself with the hammers of her small fists.

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Jenkins was still in the chair at the kitchen table when it started again. He raised his head from his hands and looked at the window in the door, studying the blinds that covered it. The shadow was back. The screaming, the banging. He wondered if it had ever ceased. He stood, stumbled, caught himself on the edge of the nearest cabinet. Its shelves rattled with each slam of the screen door outside. With every pounding report, he winced.

His head was also pounding. He didn't feel very well. Didn't feel right. He couldn't really say why. He looked at the clock: 3:17 a.m. Ah, he said. It was a pained sound, something like weak lungs inflating a poky raft, something approximating a groan or a sigh. He massaged his forehead with his left hand. With the right, he clasped the robe against his throat, holding it tight.

Diane was still sobbing upstairs. He could hear her there now, rolling in bed, crying so hard she gasped. Jenkins felt terrible about how he'd spoken to her earlier. He felt terrible about everything, really: the commotion at the door, the lack of sleep, the indulgent fantasias at the

kitchen table. And Diane. Why did he tell her to go upstairs like that? Why did he take her for granted? Who the hell was he?

These questions plagued Jenkins as he mounted the stairs. He walked slowly, forlornly, calling Diane's name. She just continued sobbing. Jenkins had to hatch a plan. Something to say. Something sweet, but believable. And not too vulnerable. He'd often made promises that he couldn't keep under these conditions: he'd offered to take her out to dinner, to plan a trip of some sort, to visit her mother. Not this time. He'd need to say something sincere, but firm. It was difficult to think. It was hard to devise a speech with all that racket in the house. Aside from the pounding downstairs, which he could still hear on the second-floor landing, and in addition to the pounding in his head, Diane's lamentations were now reaching a fevered pitch, a terrible crescendo, and he was edging toward it.

He paused before the door. Breathed. Knocked. Diane? he said.

The crying stopped abruptly. There was a shuffling inside. Sheets, maybe, or the curtains. Jenkins exhaled and gingerly opened the door.

It was dark. He could see Diane's shadow. She lay in bed, the covers gathered to her throat. Her eyes were wide. Her forehead glistened.

It's dark in here, Jenkins said. He opened the door wider, allowing more light from the hallway, and walked into the room. He stopped suddenly. There was something in the corner. He squinted and leaned toward it. It was a person. They were stark naked.

Diane? Jenkins said.

She hesitated for a moment. I didn't know you were home, she said weakly. I didn't. She pushed the sheets away and brought her hands to her eyes, tenting them over her face. Sobs wracked her body. It sounded nothing like the noise Jenkins had heard from the kitchen, from the stairs. These were real tears.

Jenkins looked from her to the figure in the corner. The figure returned his gaze. It studied him with its eyes. With its eye. One. It was a dark and porcine eye. The eye was just barely visible in the haze of the room. The room itself was a cramped morass. It was hard to see anything. Someone, Jenkins thought to himself, had to turn on a light. Jenkins looked at the curtain, wishing someone would open it. Anyone. No one did. He stepped away from the lightswitch. He didn't dare touch it. Diane continued crying. She turned over, her back to Jenkins, and moaned: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The figure in the corner went on staring. Jenkins stared back. It didn't

bother to cover itself. Thick and mossy hair swirled over its chest, its small belly, its groin. The hair tangled up to its throat, circled around perfunctory nipples, leapt over its shoulders. Its shoulders hunched under dark and unkempt hair. Jenkins could see the shoulders moving with every breath.

Jesus, Diane, he said. Jesus Christ. He wasn't even angry. Just shocked, confused. Maybe a bit disgusted. Oh, god, he said. He looked around the room. Desperately, as if searching for an answer. There was nothing. Just his bureau. Framed photos stood proudly on its surface. Some were pictures of him and Diane. Others were of friends, of distant and long-dead relatives. There was some cologne. A lamp. He swept it all on the floor with a stiff forearm. It clattered absurdly. Something broke. He sank to the floor and leaned against the jamb of the door, shaking his head.

I'm sorry, Diane said again.

They remained there like that for a while: Diane sobbing in shame, Jenkins crying in exasperation, the obscure figure hunching in the corner. The banging continued at the back door. Jenkins could hear it, however distantly. He wondered who it might be. It didn't seem to matter anymore.

There's someone trying to get into the house, he said to no one in particular.

It was quiet for a moment. Diane's sobbing, her real sobbing, subsided. Please, she said.

Jenkins wasn't sure what she was asking of him. He wasn't sure who was at the back door. It couldn't be Diane. Couldn't be the stranger with the porcine eye. Maybe, he thought, it was the police. Maybe he'd called them.

To prevent myself from doing something awful, he said aloud. It was nearly a question.

Please, Diane said.

Jenkins continued. I bet they sped here, he said. He spoke placidly, as if in a daze. I bet they raced here at 68 miles per hour. Lights flashing, siren wailing. He swallowed and shifted his foot to the side. Broken glass chimed. They only want inside, he said. He began to weep.

In the corner, the figure stirred, looking on with its porcine eye.