

THE SCRATCHING

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The scratching started again last night.

It always starts the same way. Soft. Teasing. Like fingernails dragged gently across the inside of a coffin lid. Slow. Patient. Like it's waiting for me to notice. Like it wants me to listen.

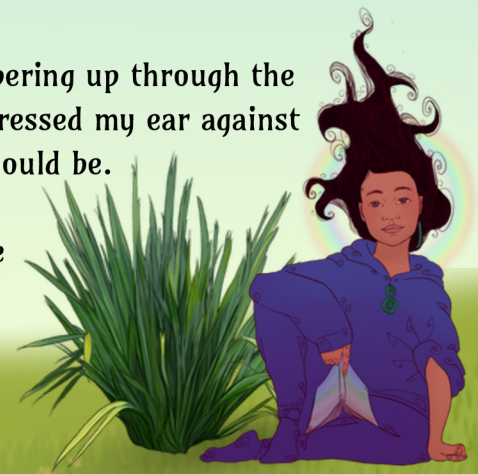
I lie perfectly still, muscles buzzing like wires stripped raw, eyes stapled to the flaking hole in the ceiling, jagged and yellowed at the edges, like a sore that's been picked at for years. The plaster hangs in brittle curls, soft underneath, like meat left too long in the sun. And the dark up there... It breathes. I can smell it sometimes, and it's wet, like breathing through rotten teeth. And then sound comes crawling, dragging itself around the room, soft as spider legs tiptoeing through old hair. It's clever, whatever's in the walls. Clever like a knife behind a smile. Smarter than rats or birds... smarter than me, probably. Smarter and hungrier. I can feel it thinking. Curling itself around the shape of me. Learning my cracks.

It waits until the hour slides past midnight, until the world outside turns into that hollow kind of silence where you can hear your own blood moving behind your eyes. Even the moon feels brittle. Fragile. Like if I looked at it too long, it might crack. But the scratching isn't the worst part anymore.

Now... now it whispers.

Not words, not really. more like the ghosts of words. breath curling into shapes that almost mean something, like mouths trying to form syllables underwater, bloated and slow. They slide apart before they're born, dissolving into wet clicks and throat noises, slipping through the cracks in the walls like fingernails falling out one by one in a dream you can't wake up from. Sometimes... sometimes I swear I hear my name tangled in it. Not spoken; strangled. Twisted backward, dragged across the grain of the world like rusty wire being pulled through raw meat. Wrong. Familiar in the way a corpse's face is familiar—you know it, but it's not right anymore.

They rise from the empty spaces behind the light switches, whispering up through the floorboards like steam. Sewer grate Once... I fucking swear... I pressed my ear against the wall, and something pressed back. Soft. Cold, like the wall should be. Warm. Like something breathing just on the other side of a paper-thin layer of skin. Like it wanted me to hear it. Wanted me to listen. I haven't slept properly in weeks.



I tried telling people. Of course I did. But they just gave me that look. That soft, careful look people give roadkill they haven't quite decided to pity or ignore. "Old houses make funny noises," they say. "Pipes, wiring, wood settling."

Idiots. Pipes don't whisper. Settling wood doesn't breathe.

This house is alive. And it knows me.

Sometimes I see things in the corners of the room. Not shapes. Not shadows. but folds. Like the air itself is creasing wrong, like reality's been stuffed into a shirt two sizes too small and something underneath is twitching to get out. The world hiccups, stutters, bending the way heat rises off tar on a dead road in summer... but wet. Greasy. Gone before I can catch them with both eyes. But they're there. I know they're there.

Shapes that shimmer like heat rising off tar. Quick. Gone before I can trust catching them with my eyes.

I feel their eyes, wet and shining in the dark, watching me as I sit in the kitchen with the lights on, hands trembling around a chipped coffee mug, pretending I don't notice the faint pulsing in the wallpaper like veins beneath skin.

Last night... Last night was worse.

I woke up to the scratching not at the walls but under my bed. It scraped slow circles beneath the mattress, nails carving lazy spirals into the wood. I was too afraid to move, breathing shallowly through my nose, cold sweat gluing my shirt to my crack. And then, just as the first grey fingers of dawn touched the curtains, I heard it speak for the first time.

Not a whisper,
a voice.

My voice.

"Let me out!"

It sounded wrong. Like a recording of myself played backward through teeth, melting over itself, syllables tangled, breaking apart. And... and I don't know why—I almost moved. I almost slipped off the mattress, almost lifted the covers, and almost looked.

But I didn't.

I'm not that stupid.

I can't let it out. Not again.



That's why I stopped taking the pills. They blur everything, make it soft around the edges, and make me forget. And if I forget—it wins. It'll crawl out through the cracks, wearing my skin, walking in my clothes, smiling my smile with my teeth at the people on the street while I'm stuffed behind the drywall like old insulation, whispering until my throat rots.

I see how they look at me. Like I'm broken. Like I've lost something important.

But I haven't lost anything.

I've remembered.

And this time....

I'm ready.

