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Pizza (Novel Excerpt)

Chapter 7

The delivery bag felt hot against his back, yet the environment around him didn't share the same sentiments. He stood at the gates, hesitating to step in. The house in front of him did nothing to convince him, what with the unlit appearance and the overgrown plants peppering the front. His bike was right there; he could just get on it and... no, they'll probably find out. With the heavy rain beating down on him, he sighed. Squaring his shoulders, he stepped inside.

The house, honestly, wasn't that much at odds with the rest of the bungalows around it, other than the fact that it just looked like a place where dreams perished, but that wasn't that big of a deal. And -

A sudden quiet took over the surroundings just as he stepped onto the porch. The drop in volume was immediately discernible; his ears popped upon registering it. All foremost thoughts were suddenly blanked over, leaving his mind empty. He felt as if he was in a daze, a stupor induced by silence. What was happening?

And just as suddenly as it had transpired, it disappeared.

Shaking his head, his finger wavered before the doorbell, debating if it should press it or not.

BOOM!

Thunder crashed, rolling over the roofs of adjacent houses. Bolts of shivers shot up his spine, and his finger jerked.

One singular 'ding' rang out throughout the house, echoing.

A beat.

Two.

Gradually, a faint light permeated through one of the windows. So, someone *was* inside the house. Uncomfortable moments were spent waiting outside, the delivery slowly cooling. He rubbed his hands, subconsciously noting the bossa nova the rain was beating against the porch and roof. Quite a catchy beat.

The door opened.

"Ah, you must be the delivery boy! I'm so sorry for having you wait outside, come in, come in!"

Michael turned around to see a little old woman standing at the doorway, holding a candle. The darkness around her was so thick it threatened to envelope the feeble, flickering light the candle was determinedly postulating out. Hands on autopilot, he handed out the pizza and ice cream before following her into the house.

The door closed.

Muttering apologies, the woman bustled around, looking for her purse. The house, other than that, was silent, save for some static radio music. Michael stood awkwardly a few feet away from the door, the cold suffusing into the house as well. He decided to move further into the house, if for no reason but to feebly get away from the cold.

Pictures adorned the walls, mostly depicting 3 people: the woman, her husband, and a little girl that could only be presumed as their granddaughter. The bungalow was sparse, with the living room only comprising of a television, two large sofas position to form a triangle with observed television, and a small table.

Other than that, nothing much to look at.

The noisy clang of a fruit bowl announced the woman's discovery of her purse. Michael sighed, only too happy to get out of the house and look for his bike. He stretched his hand out, only for the woman to tsk agitatedly.

"Oh dear, I don't have change with me," she muttered. Michael couldn't help the sigh that slipped out, his agitation evident.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please wait for a few more minutes, I'll go up and get it. Oh, and give me the pizza and ice cream, I'll take it," she apologized.

Michael put his delivery bag on the floor as she went up with the food. He looked at his watch. *8.39 p.m.*

Great. 15 minutes had been wasted inside this bungalow. Granted, it was better than waiting out in the rain. Perhaps the deluge from the storm had ceased. He checked his phone.

Strange, no bars.

Groaning, he sat down on the sofa before shooting back up, remembering where he was. Then, he sat back down. She wasn't here, so what she didn't know wouldn't hurt now. Nothing else to do, he looked around again. There also seemed to be some dolls adorning the mantle the television rested upon. Upon closer observation, however, they didn't seem to be dolls. They were more like figurines, each in different positions and with different facial expressions. What he couldn't place a finger on were the expressions; they seemed to evocate a mixture of... fear? Anxiety? He moved closer, only to shiver - once again, he felt the slender fingers of unease caress his nape, quavering.

Just as he had made that observation, a dull clunk came from the upper floor, followed by quiet. Michael looked up. Should he go and investigate? She was an old woman; chances were that she had fallen down somewhere. A crash of thunder rolled, as if confirming his suspicions. He stood up, but as if something was advising him against to, he hesitated.

Then he shrugged it off.

He switched on his cell flashlight, and trooped upwards.

“Ma’am? Ma’am!” he shouted. His voice reverberated throughout the empty house. Walking upwards, he waited for her reply, or at least an indication of her reply. Hell, this house could transform a whisper into a roar. He reached a corridor of closed doors, the pathway leading to one opened door. Again, that same clutch of reluctance pulled at his navel. This time, he did remain, debating whether to go in or not. His brain was beginning to pull memories of horror movies with similar settings to his situation, and the corridor was reminding him eerily of that one scene from *The Shining*, with that boy Danny on his Big Wheel facing that one lone room.

Shaking his head furiously, he trooped onwards. His foot hovered over the entrance of the room, the feeling bombarding him from all angles. He stepped away from the room, and was about to turn when his foot snagged the carpet.

Heads over heels on the floor, he looked up.

He was in the room.

Well, that saved him the time of decision-making. He stood up. It was an average bedroom, with the usual components. The pizza box was open; a slice was missing out of the four.

His hand slowly panned to the left, the flashlight illuminating a round portion of his periphery. It came to a stop as the adjacent wall came into the light.

That was when he saw her.

The world around him felt as if it had silently yet imploded, caving inwards and entrapping his brain within the sight he now faced. His ears popped, and his mind temporarily drew a blank. He was dimly aware of the slight change in altitude as he tripped once, hands shaking furiously as his legs eased away from the wall and against the bed. Clutching his head, he tried closing his eyes, but it was as if the image was burnt into his corneas.

The flashlight illuminated the wall, tremblingly traveling upwards to the body hanging against the wall. It was almost akin to a crucifixion, yet the woman still seemed to have some semblance of life within her. She slowly raised her head, eyelids drooped.

His breath caught in his throat.

“Ma... Ma’a...Ma’am?”

The head dropped.

She was dead.

Michael gave a shout, half-stuttering as he dropped the phone, falling down haphazardly onto the floor. His hands scabbarded away wildly as he pushed himself as far away as he could from the body and against the bed.

His senses fled his body as instinct took over. Legs propelled his body up as he ran, ran away from that room, from that body, from that pizza. His flashlight bounced from one wall to another as he sprinted through the corridor and into somewhere. He just had to get out, get away from there. Rooms flashed in and out of view as he bolted down the stairs, skipping steps by the double.

Racing through the hall, he made for the door, hands frisking hurriedly around the door in an attempt to find the latch. He jimmied it furiously, the clank of metal against wood emanating through the house.

It was locked.

He twisted the knob, threw his weight against the door, and pulled at the knob again, eyes darting wildly around.

It was locked.

He frantically looked around the house for other modes of exit, but none were presented to him.

Shivering, he sank down, moist back against the hard door. His hands quaked, his heart the unfortunate partner in its tango.

He was stuck.

Stuck in a house.

A house, with a dead body.

A house, with a dead body and a deliveryman.

A house, with a dead body, a deliveryman, and 3 more slices of pizza.

Chapter 8

He didn't know how long it had been. All he remembered was sitting in the corner, hands cupping his face. His heart throbbed at levels unsurmountable by human standards; he was in a house, a house with a murdered woman, and there was a possibility that the murderer could be anywhere within.

Why, why, why him? He closed his eyes, the eyelids moist against the rim of tears. And then he got it.

It was with the odd, peculiar galvanization that people in tremendous shock experience that he stood. His head stopped pulsating, and his limbs loosened. The clarity was akin to an aimed focus; he knew exactly what to do.

The house was locked from the inside. There seemed to be no other modes of exit, and cell reception was down. If he wanted to have the barest inkling of survival, he would have to do it by himself.

He was currently in the hall; the main entrance of the house. Judging by the upper level, the closed rooms provided ample opportunities to hide wherever he wanted, giving him the element of surprise. He knew that a third party was currently circulating within the house, so their cognitive senses would be on the lookout for any noise or sounds.

Slowly slipping off his shoes, he placed them beside the bag. His padded socks would, with luck, mask the dull thrum of his feet. He scanned his surroundings; the tables were devoid of cutlery, with the only accessories being a few large, soft dolls, obviously meant for cushion decorum.

That should suffice as a mediocre defense against knives.

He padded his bag with a few of those. Standing up from his squatted position, he strode over to the platform kitchen.

Thump.

Freeze.

Every iota of his body went rigid, his senses on par with the environment. His eyes frisked around, darting and jumping around every point in the ceiling, attempting to decipher the point of origin.

He waited.

Quietly, he released the tension from his taut limbs. Skulking around the chaise sofa, he lithely stepped into the kitchen.

The drawers were already drawn open, cutlery strewn haphazardly over the hardtop. Drawing them open required some effort, regarding the fact that the old woman hadn't bothered to properly oil the mechanisms.

A cleaver. Perfect.

He checked his cell again. No bars.

The gathered receptacles seemed enough to hold out in a fight. Holding out his cell phone as a torch, he gently went up the stairs.

The same corridors, with the corresponding rows of doors. Traipsing through the aisle, he peeked into the few doors left ajar.

He was coming closer.

It drew nearer.

4.

3.

2.

1.

The door to the woman's body lay wide open, as if beckoning him inside. The yawning chasm gaped ahead of him, pulling him into it. Edging towards it almost imperceptibly, his brain a dim voice at the back of his mind.

And he was inside. This time, he knew what he was about to see. Right wall... empty. Middle wall... empty. Left wall... empty.

The final...

He turned around hurriedly, involuntarily squeezing his eyes shut.

Slowly, he opened them, willing himself not to scream upon seeing her.

She wasn't there.

SHE WASN'T THERE!

Her blood, her knives... none were there. The wall was... exactly... a replica of the other walls... as if it was mirroring the other placid, pastel walls.

But... but she was there. Impossible. She was there. He had seen her. Her eyes closing, her chest heaving... no, no, NO!

The sound reverberated through the bare house, the voices testimony to his denial. He clapped his hands to his mouth.

A beat.

Another.

Exhaling, he dropped his hands, now white and veined from clutching the cleaver. He was barely aware of blood trailing down his nose. How was it even feasible to achieve such a feat? To completely obliterate any traces of the body, to utterly extinguish any evidence, any slight giveaway?

He stumbled away from the room, dazed and enervated. He could have sworn... wait.

He walked back into the room.

The pizza box on the bedside. It was missing.

How...

“Ding,”

Chapter 9

The doorbell.

Someone was at the door.

SOMEONE -

Sprinting down, taking the steps thrice at a time, he sprinted. Hell, he almost tripped, but that didn't matter. Someone was at the door. Someone was outside.

“Hello... HELLO! HELLO! CAN YOU HEAR ME, HELLO!” he shouted into the door, pounding it. The door vibrated under his assault, but he couldn't care less. He squashed his eye at the peephole, careening his eye at both directions to find the person. His retina could nebulously make out the silhouette of a jeep at the gate. The rain had stopped, reduced to a light drizzle. His eye lolled around.

The man came into view.

It was the man from the photo; the old man - the woman's husband.

“HELLO! SIR! SIR! I'M INSIDE! HELP, SIR! PLEASE!”

He could see him step back, obviously perturbed by the rattling of the door. Taking out his phone, he dialed a number.

Michael was aware of a phone ringing. His phone.

“H... He... Hello...” he tremulously whispered, voice raw and hoarse.

“Hello, who is this?” the man at the other end asked, his voice clear and crisp.

“Sir, sir, please sir, please sir, help me sir, help...”

“I'm sorry, may I know who is speaking?”

“Sir!” Michael composed himself. “Sir, I'm a delivery man, I came here to give a pizza and some ice cream to... your wife. She... she went up to get some change... and

then... then she was dead. Someone stabbed her, sir, knives all over her body. She was hanging in a bedroom and then she wasn't there, sir. Knives all over..." he broke down again.

"I'm sorry, whoever you are, get out of the house now. Who the hell are you? Did you come to rob the house?" the man asked, his tone rising.

"Please, sir. Tell me how to get out. Please sir,"

There was a pause at the other end.

"Alright. Which bedroom did you say she was... *murdered*?" His tone was derisive, as if he was merely humoring him.

"It was like... it had a big wardrobe, a king-sized bed and a small washroom, it had..."

"Okay, okay. That's our bedroom, that's my wife's room. Go there,"

Michael froze. Go back up there?

"Sir, how can I..."

"Do you want to get out or not?"

Calming his trembling hands, he grabbed his cell and the cleaver.

"Sir... sir... could... could you please hum a song... or something so that I know you're out there?"

"What?!"

"Please, sir,"

The man, disgruntled, did so.

The staircase felt unfamiliar, as if each step concealed a monster waiting to pull him down.

Within minutes, he was at the door.

"Sir... I'm in,"

"Good. Go to the chest of drawers beside the bed."

His flashlight bouncing weakly from one surface to another, he located the chest.

"Open the third drawer."

He drew open the drawer.

A slim, grey metal instrument was inside. Shaped like an L, he felt it. Textured, ridged, he shone some light on it.

It was a gun.

"G... gun, sir."

"Good. Take that. In the left corner, there should be the key."

His hand rooted around fervently, sifting through the miscellaneous debris.

Latching on something sharp, he drew it out. The keys.

“F... found it, sir.”

“Come down.”

Michael didn't have to be told twice. Stampeded down the steps, he ran for the door.

“Sir... sir!”

He looked into the peephole.

The man wasn't there.

“SIR! SIR, SIR!” he yelled, pummeling the hardwood.

Thump.

He stood stock still. Had he continued thumping the door, it would have been indiscernible.

“Sir...?”

The house seemed to be... alive. Thrumming with a sort of... intensity now. Every piece of furniture seemed to throb dully, pulsating a gentle, dooming vibration.

He looked up at the ceiling.

He was back at the room.

Squinting one eye shut, he stepped inside.

The body was not there.

He relaxed, knotted muscles popping.

As he turned to step out from the room, he heard a creak.

Slowly, he turned back.

Nothing.

Sighing, he took a step out, reaching out to close the door behind him.

It didn't budge.

He pulled at it.

A drip.

He touched his cheek, swabbing his finger across it.

Red. Claret red.

His head slowly angled upwards. Two shoes, suede and crisp, hung down from the ceiling, mellowly hitting the roof of the door. A dagger's handle protruded from the old man's foot.

The last thing he remembered before blacking out was the box. The pizza box was on the bedside table, open.

Two slices remained. (2908)

Reflection #1:

My source of inspiration in penning this story down was the movie *Pizza*, an Indian mystery-horror picture that was often heralded as a pioneer of the “haunted house” genre in Indian cinematography. As a young boy, watching how a movie with the majority of its scenes revolving around a man, his flashlight and the house strike such fear into my heart both scared and captivated me. How is it that something with such simplicity could evocate such disproportionate fright and trepidation? And thus it was with this question held as an ideal did I attempt to novelize one of the key moments of the film: when Michael discovers the first body in the house.

Now, while it may not have been apparent as to how the situation of the house transitioned from a murderer within the abode to supernatural presences causing such deaths, bear with me. This was only an excerpt; chapters dictating one moment of the complete book. For example, would you have been surprised to discover that the narration and experiences Michael was going through was merely an extremely elaborate hoax concocted by him and his fiancé in a bid to to profit off the store manager whose daughter was possessed? In the film, the store manager had, before the beginning of the account, placed a large amount of money concealed within a box of sweets as payment for an exorcist, and had instructed Michael to drop it off at the manager’s house. Michael, however, had discovered the money beforehand, and had thus devised this scheme to swindle it all. Small hints are slipped in for the observant reader, such as how the old woman’s husband was able to call Michael’s number correctly despite not knowing what it was, and Michael never having said it out to him.

If one were to reread the story, one would notice that after Michael discovers the woman’s body, the structure of the story transitions from full paragraphs to one sentence dictating the proceedings. I employed such a transition to gradually phase the reader’s mood from discovery to fear; the thrill and terror of being discovered is effectively evocated through the usage of one-sentence paragraphs, with the short descriptions serving to heighten and dramatize each moment, allowing immersion within the story.

Well, that may have been quite the ride for you, so what say we move on to Jim?